

Zakhor: A Pedagogy of Memory

OVERVIEW

In Hebrew, history is a modern etymological inclusion. Classically, the word used is *zakhor* — memory. This distinction is not merely linguistic. History is something that belongs to someone else, something we observe and absorb from a position of remove. Memory is inherently ours. We journey backward and forward across time as we recount our own stories and the stories we carry, whether or not we were corporeally present at their inception. *Zakhor* is a pedagogy that takes this distinction seriously, centering the personal memory of each learner as a building block of collective Jewish identity and Peoplehood.

The practice centers around the manifestations of nostalgia in contemporary Jewish experience and the ways through which the Jewish people tell stories and transmit the memories of the past to present generations. At this moment in the arc of Jewish history, young people are seeking new sources of meaning-making and belonging while feeling disconnected from a Jewish experience that can feel separate from the rest of their lives. *Zakhor* responds to this by inviting learners to place themselves inside the Jewish story — not as inheritors of someone else's history, but as text people whose own memories are part of the Jewish canon.

MEMORY AS THE FOUNDATION OF PEOPLEHOOD

To be part of the Jewish people is to be a component of a story that stretches across time and space. The Jewish people of today are the collective heirs of a legacy that goes back to our foundational texts, our collective origin story, and the multiple manifestations of our culture that have planted the seeds of the modern Jewish experience. While contemporary Jewish people may struggle to answer questions of who is inside and outside the tent of acceptance and belonging, looking back at our past through the personal lens of memory becomes a way to connect to a sense of self, a sense of purpose, and a sense of Peoplehood. In a world where the future of the Jewish people seems full of divergent pathways and points of view, memory and the shared stories that shape where we come from may also be what shapes our next steps.

If history is objective, memory is most surely not. Memory is personal — but in much of Jewish tradition, personal and collective are deeply intertwined. The kaddish, the prayer of mourning, requires a minyan (a quorum of ten): the individual must show up to be part of the whole. So too is the story of the Jewish people dependent on each memory being a building block of a shared history that can be told, shared, and passed on. As the late poet Yehuda Amichai wrote: “The Jews are not a historical people / And not even an archaeological people, the Jews / Are a geological people with rifts / And collapses and strata and fiery lava. / Their history must be measured / On a different scale.” This geological metaphor — layered, pressurised, eruptive — captures what a pedagogy of memory seeks to work with: not a clean narrative line, but a living, shifting accumulation of personal and collective experience.

REMEMBER AND DO NOT FORGET: THE JEWISH TRADITION OF ZAKHOR

To remember the story of the Jewish people is a commandment that appears multiple times in the Tanakh. In the Ten Commandments, as first recorded in Exodus 20:8, the instruction is to “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” In the second iteration in Deuteronomy 5:12, “remember” is replaced by “observe.” Memory, as embodied in the mitzvah of Shabbat, is therefore understood as an active rather than a passive process — not a mental state but a practice, a doing. Deuteronomy 25:17-19 presents an even more arresting formulation: we are commanded both to remember what Amalek did to us on our journey out of Egypt, and to blot out the memory of Amalek entirely. To intentionally blot out a memory, however, requires that one first have it. At this moment in much of Jewish education, learners do not have the baseline knowledge that allows them to know what to remember or forget. Forgetting through omission means the past is lost forever, rather than becoming a teaching tool that informs our current circumstances.

Jewish tradition also holds that all Jews — meaning all who would ever live throughout history — were present at Mount Sinai for the moment of revelation. The Torah, therefore, is not something each generation inherits anew, but something that has been ours all along. We don’t approach revelation from a place of remove; we were already there. The Passover seder enacts this most powerfully. The Mishnah (Pesachim 10:5) instructs that in every generation, each person must regard themselves as though they personally came out of Egypt. The seder is not a commemoration of history but an act of memory: placing oneself inside the story and passing that memory on to the next generation as their own. This is precisely the spirit that *Zakhor* as a pedagogy seeks to cultivate — embodying Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel’s insight that the Jewish people do not need more textbooks; they need text people.

THE PEDAGOGY OF PEOPLEHOOD

The pedagogy of *Zakhor* centers on the sacredness of placing the personal into conversation with the collective. In this practice, each person is the text, and each person's memories become part of the collective Jewish canon. The practice has three stages and is best enacted in a group setting that allows for both personal reflection and collective processing. The first stage, My Jewish Story – Creating the Framework, establishes the legitimacy of every learner's story as a building block of Jewish Peoplehood. Some learners may feel they lack a “real” Jewish story – this is precisely the moment to invoke the tradition of Mount Sinai and the idea that every Jew was present at the moment of collective revelation. Some learners may carry painful memories – the tradition of the shiva house, where the mourner initiates conversation if and when they choose, guides the facilitation here: sharing is only valuable when everyone is invited, not required. Whatever each learner is carrying, the first step is to validate, welcome, and include.

The second stage, My Jewish Story – Personal Reflection, is the core of the practice. Each learner draws a simple stick figure and responds to a series of guided prompts that map Jewish memory onto the body: on the eyes, how they see Judaism's role in their life; on the head, how Judaism has shaped their decision-making; on the mouth, a Jewish story important to them to tell; on the hands, a Jewish action they do; on the heart, someone they carry with them on their Jewish journey; on the stomach, a core Jewish food memory; on the legs, what grounds them in their relationship with Judaism; on the feet, a Jewish place that has shaped them; and in the background, a moment in Jewish history – personal or collective – that has formed them. The deliberate use of the body as the organising frame is not incidental: it enacts the central claim of *zakhor*, that memory is not only cognitive but physical, carried in the body as much as the mind. The third stage, My Jewish Story – Collective Reflection, invites learners to share their self-portraits in chevruta (paired learning), to surface commonalities and honour differences, and to create a group composite – a cookbook of food memories, a collective timeline of formative moments – that visibly becomes part of a shared Jewish story.



CONCLUSION

The Jewish people today are diverse, and with that diversity can often be divergent from one another. While there is an excitement to a future shaped by a multifaceted Jewish people, this diversity carries the risk that moving away from the common core will lead to multiple Jewish peoples rather than a large, pluralistic, united — though not uniform — nation. Looking backward may be the best way to build the foundation of a shared future. Memory is not nostalgia. It is an act of ownership: claiming the Jewish story as one's own and accepting the responsibility to carry it forward. When each learner sees their own memories as a genuine and irreplaceable piece of the collective Jewish experience, they cease to be observers of a history that belongs to others and become participants in a story that belongs to all of us.



To access the full practice guide, including the self-portrait prompts, facilitation notes, and collective reflection activities, scan the QR code or [click here](#).



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