



## FROM THE DESK OF RABBI MOSHE HAUER

OU EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

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אגודת ישראל  
Enhancing Jewish Life

# Building A Positive Jewish Identity

Memory is identity. This was expressed beautifully by Rabbi Sacks z”l in his Haggadah commentary:

“There is a profound difference between history and memory. History is *his* story – an event that happened sometime else to someone else. Memory is *my* story – something that happened to me and is part of who I am. History is information. Memory, by contrast, is part of identity. I can study the history of other peoples, cultures, and civilizations. They deepen my knowledge and broaden my horizons. But they do not make a claim on me. They are the past as part. Memory

is the past as present, as it lives on in me. Without memory there can be no identity.”

The Rebbe of Slonim, author of *Nesivos Shalom*, similarly wrote (Kuntres Haharuga Al’echa)

“The essence of a Jew is not transient, limited to the time he spends on this earth, rather the Jew’s existence is eternal, embracing the past, the present, and the future... The connection we forge to the eternity inherent in our Jewish soul and to the world of Klal Yisrael is accomplished through the *Zechirot*, the core elements that comprise our national memory. When a Jew remembers Sinai, the Exodus, or the perpetual threat personified by *Amalek*, etc., this binds him to both his own eternal soul and to the world of Klal Yisrael, and the more we connect to that eternity the more we are nourished by it.”

Of the six critical elements of memory mandated by the Torah, the *Sheish Zechirot*, Parshat Ki Teitzei contains two, *Amalek* (25:17) and *Miriam* (24:9). Remembering the perpetual threat of *Amalek* is sadly core to our Jewish identity and perspective as we can never afford complacency relative to the ongoing threats to our body and spirit that are our harsh reality in each and every

**May the Torah learned in this issue  
be in the merit and memory of  
our dear Mother, Grandmother  
and Great Grandmother,  
an Auschwitz survivor:**

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generation, *b'chol dor vador* . But why is the same true of the memory of Miriam's leprosy that resulted from her speaking critically of Moshe? While we have come to understand the terrible damage caused by harmful speech and recognize the Mitzvah value of *Shemirat Halashon* (guarded speech), in what way does this memory and vigilance constitute a critical part of our identity?

*Magen Avraham* (OC 60:1) cites a fascinating passage from the Kabbalistic teachings (Shaar Hakavanot) of Rav Yitzchak Luria, the *Arizal*, where he suggests that we should explicitly recall each of those six core elements of memory around our recitation of the *Shema* every morning. With regard to remembering Miriam, he suggested that when we say "*v'keiravtanu l'Shimcha hagadol selah b'emet l'hodot lecha*," speaking of Hashem bringing us close to Him, "so that we can be grateful to (Him)", it is then that we should recall what happened to Miriam, as "we were created to be grateful rather than to speak negatively."

The opposite of slander is not silence but effusive positivity and gratitude. **A mindset of gratitude as opposed to one of cynicism is indeed a matter of identity.** There is no greater identifier than our name, and we are all named Jews, *Yehudim*, meaning – grateful people. That colors how we look at each other, at life, and at G-d.

It is not only historical events and experiences that forge identity. Fundamentally, our identity will be both a result and an expression of our attitude and perspective. Being grateful and positive must define who we are. ■

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