

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 10/5/18

Shemini Atzeret Yizkor 2018

If people remember anything of what I said this past High Holidays, the phrase most folks are likely to remember is, "It Is What It Is." In that sermon on Rosh Ha-Shannah I spoke about how easy it is to fall into familiar patterns, even self-destructive ones, and simply dismiss them as, "It Is What It Is." It is human nature to fall back on what we know, to accept the world as it is, even when we know in our hearts it could - AND WE COULD be better.

And you might, also, remember that I made the case that the founding of the Jewish People came about from our challenging "It Is What It Is." The Jewish People had been enslaved for hundreds of years in Egypt and no one thought it could ever change. Even Moses himself could not fathom it. History proves how hard it is to change, to break away from well-trodden paths we have made for ourselves, or others have put us on. History proves this to be true, and as it turns out, science does as well.

Neuroscience sheds some light on the Exodus drama and the tension between change/no change. Humans are actually physically wired for habit. Our habits are reflected in circuits of neurons in the brain that become associated with one another. As neurologists will tell you, "neurons that fire together wire together." Habits are the result of neuro-circuits that strengthen each other the more they are fired; the more you do something, the more likely you are to do it in the future. Therefore, everything you do changes the brain: you are what you do. This is rather sobering. If you regularly become impatient, angry, or anxious, you are more likely to do so in the future. If you repeatedly close off your heart in arrogance, like Pharaoh did, you too will become an arrogant, closed-off person. One of the strong but underlying messages of the Exodus story is that if you maintain a slave-like victim mentality, you will remain a slave-to your habits. We, too, are prone to clinging to the familiar, much like the characters in the Exodus story.

But, the good news is that we are not only wired for habit, we are wired for change as well. Neuroplasticity-the capacity of the brain to change-can continue throughout life. The bad news is that neuroplasticity isn't easy in adulthood. But do not despair, research shows that it can be fostered through physical exercise, paying closer attention to what we are doing, and learning new things. The alternative is what psychologists calls "hardening of the categories"-the stuck stories that trapped Pharaoh and the Israelites.

The fact of the matter is that our neuron activity shaped us into the people we are today. And all of this begins when we are very, very young. Our neurobiology is literally shaped by the people who raised us. Each baby is born with a brain that is alive and has not assumed its final formation. And the parents who lovingly raise that child help certain neurons to be strengthened because they fire more often, and certain neurons to atrophy because they aren't put to use. This means that by the time the child is two or three, they have a brain that has never existed in the history of humanity before. No two people have the same mind and our minds have literally been sculpted by the people who touch our lives. Parents, grandparents, friends, neighbors, teachers, spouses, children, these people literally craft our brains. This means, then, that after a while there is no way for them NOT to be with us even if their physical presence is no more. If you are using your brain then those who shaped it continue to exert influence on you.

And while this has tremendous importance for our Early Childhood teachers, (and for young parents whose kid's brains are more open to being shaped in this way) it is also true for all of us at every stage of our lives. We may not consciously recognize who taught us this emotion or who modelled that particular way of thinking, or coping, of celebrating, of relaxing, of arguing, of loving, but someone shaped your way of thinking. And those who shaped our brains were, of course, the people you let deep inside your heart and mind. Chances are those are the very people you remember here today at Yizkor. In recalling them now you are reigniting the very neurons in your brain that they themselves may well have shaped in the first place. Their stories, their instruction, their guidance throughout your life has made you who you are. It is as if you are rediscovering the part of yourself that they put there in the first place. In recalling them, in re-firing those neurons, you are, in essence, bringing them back into this world. And so, by stepping back in thoughtful reflection at Yizkor time; in reconsidering how you became who you are today, you allow the presence of those who gave your life meaning and definition to live once again through you.