

מְזוּזוֹת

Mezuzot / Reminders

What purpose do reminders serve?

The Multipurpose Mezuzah

Mychal Copeland

A reminder contains the power to make us feel as though we are transported from one time and place to another. But how do we know when we need a reminder to bring us to the present moment, immerse us in the past, or ensure that we think ahead?

I am a planner, always thinking about what comes next. Ever productive, I pay the price of living in a fairly constant state of unrest. Even my Jewish practice has evolved into a set of regular reminders to linger in the current moment, fighting my inner nature. As I bless the food I am about to eat, I am reminded to honor the cycle of life and death. Sounding the shofar each morning during the month of Elul focuses my attention on time and the subtle shifts in the rhythm of life, as does counting the days during the omer — a period of seven weeks between Pesach and Shavuot. These practices — reminders amidst my perpetual forward momentum — help me to take notice so that my life doesn't fly by devoid of purpose and meaning. As the psalmist writes, "Teach me to number my days so that I may attain a heart of wisdom." (Psalms 90:12)

We pass by a mezuzah as we transition from one space — through a doorpost — to another. In one instant, that tiny symbol housing the words of the *Sh'ma* transports us back to Sinai, brings us an awareness of the present moment of transition, and instructs us to carry our ethics and values with us as we navigate our world. It is the ultimate reminder.

With such a focus in my ritual life on paying attention to the moment, it strikes me as ironic that in my role as a parent, I often feel my purpose is to pull my children out of their natural state of living in the present, to teach them the art of focusing on the next thing, the next challenge, the

next day on the calendar. Reminders hang throughout our house: A note taped to a doorknob reminds one child to bring his homework to school; a calendar on the wall calls at us to remember upcoming plans. Generally, children live gleefully in the moment and, if we allow it, they pull us into that place where the most important thing we do is whatever we are doing right then. How do we reconcile these pulls? What are we doing to our children that will cause them, over time, to seek out yoga poses, mindful meditation, or a Jewish healing practice to slow them down?

Some reminders are a rope, mooring us to the present. Other reminders pull us toward the future or ground us in the past. Memory can be a deeply weighted reminder, and each corner of Judaism recalls something that is at the core of our tradition and values.

Essentially, reminders are built into every moment of the day. The *V'ahavta* prayer, which sits scrolled up in the mezuzah, instructs us to live the words of the *Sh'ma* from the moment we rise in the morning to the moment we lie down at night. Some prayers acknowledge the specificity of the moment we're in, such as the *Shehechiyanu* prayer. Other liturgies, like retelling the story of the Exodus in the Passover haggadah, compel us to think about our past. Still others ask us to envision an ideal future, such as the hope of peace in *Oseh Shalom*. These reminders are embedded in our texts, our liturgy, our sacred objects, and even such ritual foods as challah and matzah.

These ritual reminders help us understand that time is fluid, and our past, present, and future are deeply connected. The present moment is intricately linked to our histories and it informs our vision of the future.

Rabbi **Mychal Copeland** is the spiritual leader at Congregation Sha'ar Zahav in San Francisco, and co-editor, with Rabbi D'vorah Rose, of *Struggling in Good Faith: LGBTQI Inclusion from 13 American Religious Perspectives*.

NiSh'ma

On this page, we offer three takes on a midrash about compassion and cruelty. Our commentators explore how memories are imprinted, and then interpreted and invested with meaning. Our online version is interactive, and we welcome your comments. —S.B.



Elana Stein Hain: Jewish tradition associates both retribution and mercy with memory. Memories of past actions and relationships, and of our covenant, can motivate reprisal or compassion: “Remember what Amalek did to you...that you shall blot out its memory from the

earth.” (Deuteronomy 25:17-19) Likewise, “God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark, and God caused a wind to blow across the earth, and the waters subsided.” (Genesis 8:1)

This rabbinic aphorism details the corruption of the relationships among memory, vengeance, and mercy. In context, it references King Saul’s regressive choices: He saved an Amalekite leader (and his nation’s livestock), but he massacred Jewish priests who had (unknowingly) provided food for his enemy. Saul chose to “forget” the cruelty of Amalek and his requirement to avenge it*; in the same way, he also chose to forget his commitment to his compassionate co-religionists.

Saul privileged the advantages of the present over his obligation to the past. The Amalekite king and his wealth offered Saul power and access, while (even accidentally) disloyal priests threatened to subvert his power. This was not an instance of mercy, but one of ambition cloaked in values language.

This ancient illustration touches on perennial human questions: How often do we forsake past commitments in favor of practical gains in the present? How quickly do yesterday’s memories fade when they compromise the opportunities of today? What reminders can orient us toward these questions in more thoughtful ways?

Dr. **Elana Stein Hain** is the director of leadership education at the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. She earned her doctorate in religion from Columbia University with a dissertation on the topic of legal loopholes in rabbinic literature. She is a board member of the online resource Sefaria: A Living Library of Jewish Texts, sefaria.org.

*Note: The ethical implications of the commandment to destroy Amalek are not uncomplicated, but they are beyond the scope of this brief commentary.



Gila Lyons: I’m thinking about the photo that circulated after the protests in Charlottesville, Virginia. In it, white supremacists wearing Ku Klux Klan hoods, waving Confederate flags, and thrusting their arms out in the Nazi salute are being protected by a black police officer from the protesters who are rallying against them. By protecting the white supremacists’ right of assembly and free speech, the black officer was showing compassion to the cruel. But white supremacists hurling hateful epithets at the black man who was protecting them was an act of cruelty to the compassionate.

When I first saw the photo, I wished that the officer would step aside to allow the angry crowd to break through the crime scene tape and pummel the Klansmen. But I know that the path to change is through compassion — fostering communication, nurturing understanding, and building bridges — not through violence or hate.

While I might be tempted to wish for cruelty toward those I see acting cruelly to others, the fact remains: Violence has never changed any political situation for the better. Perhaps the questions we should be asking are these: How can we feel compassionate toward those who act with cruelty? How can we use compassion, rather than cruelty, to effect change?

I hope that we, as Jews, can evolve beyond a binary way of thinking — of believing that we are either compassionate or cruel, good or evil — and come to an understanding that we, individually and collectively, often flip-flop between being the oppressor and being the victim, between acting with compassion and acting with cruelty.

Gila Lyons writes about the intersection of feminism, mental health, and social justice. Her essays, reviews, and journalism, which can be found at gilalyons.com, have appeared in the *Forward*, the *Huffington Post*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Tablet*, and other publications.



Herzl Hefter: I prefer to read King Saul as a tragic figure rather than as a cynical politician employing moralistic arguments to further a selfish agenda. Saul is not evil; his fatal flaw is that he lacks self-awareness, and this makes him relevant to us.

The Torah bids us to remember many things — among them, the Sabbath, the Exodus, the commandments, and the transformative moment of standing at Sinai. Memory is the impression that has been imprinted upon our consciousness by past experience. By interpreting these impressions, we invest them with meaning. Hence, Jewish tradition is an interpretive tradition. We continually re-encounter our ancient texts, simultaneously breathing new meaning into them while drawing guidance from them.

Both the biblical narrative and the rabbinic aphorism indicate that Saul felt compassion toward the Amalekite king. But how does Saul interpret this felt compassion? We have a right to expect that Saul would exercise self-analysis and introspection. Is Saul’s compassion appropriate? Or do self-interest and cowardice cloud his judgment and condition his emotional response? Saul’s failure at self-scrutiny is his Achilles heel.

At times, we are all King Saul. I would rephrase Elana Stein Hain’s last question. How can we know that we are interpreting ourselves and the circumstances around us honestly?

The truth is, that we cannot know, but we can try. The first step is self-scrutiny. Next, is to surround ourselves with external reminders, such as a mezuzah and *tzitzit*, as the Torah prescribes. Third, is to collaborate with others we trust and respect who will help keep us honest. Finally, as the biblical narrative of King Saul demonstrates, what is true for the individual is also true of governmental authority. Therefore, on the level of governance, we need to contraposition institutions that keep power in check.

Rabbi **Herzl Hefter** is the founder and dean of the Jerusalem-based Har-el Beit Midrash (har-el.org), a center for advanced rabbinic studies for men and women that was established in memory of Belda Kaufman Lindenbaum, *z”l*, an Orthodox feminist activist. Hefter studied with Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, *z”l*, and received *smikhah* from Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, *z”l*, an authority on halakhah.

“Whoever is compassionate to those who are cruel ends up being cruel to those who are compassionate.”

Midrash Tanhuma Metzora

Jewish sensibilities are approaches to living and learning that permeate Jewish culture. The ideas, values, emotions, and behaviors they express — emanating from Jewish history, stories, and sources — provide inspiration and guidance that help us to respond creatively and thoughtfully to life's challenges and opportunities. Sensibilities are culturally informed senses or memes. Picking up on last month's theme, this issue of *Sh'ma Now* explores the sensibility embodied by "mezuzot," the markers that many Jews affix to the doorposts of their homes. This month, our writers examine how *mezuzot* serve as reminders in our daily lives.

Monumental Problems

Jeffrey Shandler

I've had mixed feelings about recent calls to take down Confederate statues located throughout the United States. While I certainly don't admire the Confederacy, it is precisely because of the Confederacy's legacy of racial injustices over the century and a half since its defeat — a legacy that includes erecting most of these monuments either to validate Jim Crow laws at the turn of the 20th century or to flout the civil rights movement — that I question the wisdom of simply removing these memorials. My discomfort was echoed by a VC Rogers cartoon that appeared originally in the *Indy Weekly Durham* in mid-August, 2017. The cartoon depicts young people removing a Confederate monument. After toppling the statue of a rebel soldier, they start digging up its pedestal only to discover it had grown thick, deep roots, like a tree. The cartoon's caption reads, "The Hard Part." In addition to being skeptical of the idea that taking down these statues will remove the problems they represent, I also fear that removing the statues might inspire other people to demand the removal of monuments they object to. Imagine, say, white supremacists insisting that statues of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. be taken down.

Established to remind the public of a notable person or event of the past, monuments not only become sites of forgetting, as has often been noted. They can also become touchstones for new, contested understandings of the past, which call for new approaches to remembrance. If leaving Confederate monuments in place is untenable, what else is possible? Consider European practices regarding monuments that address the two World Wars, the Holocaust, the Cold War, and Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. Germany provides an unrivaled array of responses

to some of the most disturbing episodes of 20th-century history. Counter-monuments critique Nazi-era memorials, while reminders of the Holocaust have been placed in empty spaces between buildings, on street signs, and in sidewalks, thereby transforming quotidian environments into daily reminders of genocide. These projects, the work of politically engaged artists collaborating with governments and communities, recall abject moments in Germany's history and interrogate conventionalized memorial practices generally.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, hundreds of communist-era monuments were removed from public places and transported to a site in Moscow, unofficially known as the Fallen Monuments Park. It boasts hundreds of sculptures, now bereft of pedestals or lying sideways on the ground. Part of a larger outdoor art museum, these monuments no longer represent the governing regime but have been historicized and re-contextualized as Soviet-era artworks. The park, which some have described as a monument "graveyard," can be a site to recall the past with contempt, fondness, or perhaps ambivalence.

For every monument that has been removed, repositioned, or repurposed, there is at least one other relic that is — at least for some — a reminder of an unsettling past. Sculptures of Ecclesia and Synagoga, allegorical figures representing the "triumph" of Christianity over Judaism, adorn many gothic cathedrals (a pair stand at the entrance to Paris's Notre Dame). A statue of Bogdan Chmelnytski astride a rampant horse is prominently positioned on a main thoroughfare in Kiev, honoring a man recalled as an intrepid freedom fighter by Ukrainians but regarded as a ruthless murderer by Jews and Poles. What sort of interventions with these monuments might galvanize the non-Jewish public's awareness of the long history of European antisemitism and help Jews understand, in its fullest complexity, the position of Jews and Judaism in Christian Europeans' consciousness and conduct? Or, closer to home: New York City is debating the removal of memorials to Christopher Columbus, and what response might we have to a statue of Moses with horns in a courthouse in Washington D.C.?

Even the most thoughtful strategies for addressing controversial memorials do not "solve" the problem of the hurtful chapters of history and the disturbing, protracted legacy that these monuments represent to some but not to others. Yet such efforts can invite people to confront the problem, and to come to the difficult realization that the

past can't be erased. There is not one right approach to the challenges posed by monuments that recall an abhorrent episode of history. As these are localized phenomena, engaging local publics in addressing the challenge is key. Doing so obligates members of communities to embrace their responsibility to grapple with a past both shared and disputed — and, moreover, to build their future together as neighbors.

Jeffrey Shandler is Professor of Jewish Studies at Rutgers University. His most recent book is *Holocaust Memory in the Digital Age: Survivors' Stories and New Media Practices*, Stanford University Press, 2017.

Toxic Stones

Aryeh Ben David

Experiences of pain, confusion, and depression are inescapable. Just as God created a world with light and darkness and day and night, we have times when we are open to hearing and feeling gratitude for the voice of the soul. We have other times when life seems confusing and bleak and the voice of the soul seems distant and mute. When we feel pain, we need to stop and deeply experience the pain. We need to delve into and embrace its emptiness — to hear it and to learn from it.

At times, this pain is caused by our previous experiences — our history. We have all had moments of disappointment and brokenness; we have all experienced moments of darkness in our past. But, sometimes, the source of this pain stems from our future. We are each brought into this world to fulfill a unique purpose. In our daily lives and in the course of a whole lifetime, only our soul can provide a particular "tikun," or "repair," that is needed in this world. This future is always calling to us. Listening to our inner voice, the voice of the soul, guides us toward this *tikkun*. Sometimes, the inner voice guides us gently, through our intuition or through a feeling. Sometimes, many competing voices — the voices of our ego, our fears, our insecurity, our loved ones, and our community — challenge this process.

But, sometimes, when we have not attended to these gentle messages from our inner voice for a while, we receive an unpleasant reminder. According to Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook, this reminder is our inner voice calling us to wake up, to listen, and to refocus. When we ignore the call of the soul, it intensifies its message and sends us "toxic stones." These

toxic stones are feelings of emptiness, or lethargy, or a lack of purpose, or hope. They gather “around one’s heart, [where] one feels because of them a malaise of spirit.” (*Olat HaRa’ayah, Introduction to the Siddur*)

Rav Kook suggests that the optimal way to hear our inner voice calling us is through “serious prayer” (not to be confused with the organized prayer we recite in a synagogue while using a siddur). This form of prayer is extremely personal, unscripted, and expressed through intense reflection and yearning. It demands that we look inward to our own soul, and that we pause and listen. Every person has a different soul; every person hears a different voice. This voice gives us clarity about why we were created and what our purpose in life may be. At times, we hear this voice as a series of small, daily reminders, and at other times, the voice hits us like a “spiritual lightning bolt,” stunning us with an inner truth that can be life-changing.

The pain, the toxic stones, can help to lead us back to our true inner voice (or soul). Our spiritual life functions in a similar way to our physical life. When a certain part of the body becomes unhealthy, the body sends a message, some form of pain, to help us to focus on a particular ailment; so, too, with our spiritual lives.

As we begin to respond to the messenger of spiritual pain and attend to our inner life, our hope is that a clearer spirit will emerge. Then, we may discover that we have greater clarity, purpose, and motivation. These painful reminders, these toxic stones, are to be reframed as gifts, as divine messengers, and as reminders of healing and hope.

Listening to one’s inner voice does not require theological clarity or even a belief in a watchful God. We need only to enter into our own deeply mysterious life experience, which may be hidden from our simple comprehension. We are perpetually confronted with the humbling awareness that we may be strangers to our own souls. The painful experience of feeling distant from oneself can become a reminder and a catalyst for self-awareness, clarity, and meaningful action.

After serving as a senior educator at the Pardes Institute, Rabbi **Aryeh Ben David** founded Ayeka: Center for Soulful Education in 2006 (ayeka.org.il). Ayeka gives Jewish educators strategies for helping Jews bring Jewish wisdom into their lives. Ben David is the author of *Becoming a Soulful Educator*, and can be reached at aryeh@ayeka.org.il.

When Rabbis Suffer Loss

Dan Goldblatt

I have been facilitating grief rituals for more than 25 years. As a rabbi, I have always felt privileged to do this sacred work. But I discovered that the rituals that have been so comforting to so many over the years were often problematic for me when Yael, z”l, my wife of 40 years, died in September of 2016.

Like other rabbis who have suffered loss, I was caught in a conundrum. I wanted and needed communal support, but so many of my congregants primarily experience me as a spiritual caregiver, and while they certainly intended to offer me consolation, the role reversal was difficult for them to navigate.



“O.C. Blue Amulet”
by Yona Verwer

Thankfully, the lay leadership of my community understood that what I needed most was space to grieve. They explicitly told me that I should return to work when I was ready and to take as

long as was needed. During the first month following my wife’s funeral, they invited people who wanted to bring me food to drop it off at the synagogue. A few people were designated to bring the food to my home, put it in the refrigerator in the garage, and leave without interacting with me.

We conducted the nightly *shiva* minyan at the synagogue, and during the day only family and close friends came to our home to sit *shiva* with my two sons and me. I was grateful that my Jewish Renewal tradition offered me an elasticity in exploring rituals associated with *shiva*, *shloshim* (the first week and the first 30 days of mourning), and the first *yahrzeit* (anniversary of the death). While traditionally a spouse only mourns for 30 days, I participated in grieving rituals for the full year. These rituals reminded me that time was my ally in the mysterious path of mourning and grieving.

Reciting the mourner’s Kaddish proved the most difficult. Generally, when I lead the kaddish, I try to give mourners in our community the space to feel the power of this prayer by reciting it slowly and making eye contact with each mourner. But, as a mourner myself, I was concerned that my personal grief would overwhelm their needs. Reciting the kaddish brought me into a cocoon of grief, and I could never predict how intense the experience would be. It didn’t take me long to realize that I had no

control over whether, or how, my own grief would impact other mourners. I simply gave myself to the prayer and followed the journey to wherever it led me emotionally.

The truth is that I did not and do not need reminders of my loss. I am in close contact with the loss every day. However, the rituals of *shiva*, *shloshim*, and *yahrzeit* remind me that the way I hold and integrate the loss shifts with the passage of time. During *shiva*, I was not sure how I was going to survive. By *shloshim*, the surreal numbness began to dissipate. By the first *yahrzeit*, I knew that I could still live a life of meaning, albeit without Yael.

The framework of *avelut*, mourning, guided me to question whether any planned entertainment activities truly honored my emotional state. Following this directive, I shared the following caveat with anyone I made plans with during the first year of mourning: “Please understand that my grieving process is unpredictable. I may find that I need to spend some quiet time alone, so please do not be upset if I cancel at the last minute. If you are willing to live with this uncertainty, let’s plan to be together.” Every discretionary plan I made during that year was provisional, allowing me to walk the path of mourning and grieving with integrity. I honor Yael’s memory by respecting the feelings of loss that can sweep over me without warning or anticipation. I honor her memory by not turning away from the depth of my love and the ache of my loss.

Rabbi **Dan Goldblatt** has been the spiritual leader of Beth Chaim Congregation in Danville, Calif., for 24 years. He is the past president of OHALAH: Association of Rabbis for Jewish Renewal, and currently a board member of both OHALAH and ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal. He is launching a sacred storytelling training program and is writing a book about sacred stories.

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“Consider and Converse: Reminders” is a guide that walks you through this issue, inspires reflections, prompts questions, and provides ways to connect this reading with other meaningful experiences. It is found online at www.forward.com/shma-now.

Consider & Converse

A Guide to 'Mezuzot' —
Reminders

Introduction

Sh'ma Now curates conversations on a single theme rooted in Jewish tradition and the contemporary moment. At the heart of this issue of *Sh'ma Now* is the Jewish sensibility of *mezuzot* as reminders. Judaism is filled with reminders. Our daily ritual practice — from the moment we awaken until we return to sleep in the evening — provides reminders about eating, blessing and loving God, feeling gratitude, teaching and caring for one's children, thinking about the people around us who are ill and require assistance. The mezuzah is affixed not only to the outer doorpost of one's home, but to each doorway within one's home as well. Every step we take from one room to another can be a reminder to be our best selves, to carry our Jewish values with us on our trek through the day. Inside the mezuzah sits a parchment inscribed with the *Sh'ma* prayer — a few verses from the Torah (Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21) — that instructs Jews about the core principles of Judaism. This issue of *Sh'ma Now* focuses on the importance reminders play in our lives. The issue also raises questions about how to respond to questionable reminders — such as monuments to Confederate soldiers or other individuals who are no longer held in public esteem — that remind us of a sordid part of our history. How do we transform those monuments into learning experiences?

Sh'ma Now has never viewed learning or “meaning-making” as solely an individual activity. That's why we have included this guide, which is specifically designed to help you to consider the idea of going forth independently or with others, formally and informally.

How to Begin

This guide offers a variety of suggestions, including activities and prompts for individual contemplation and informal or more structured conversations. We suggest that you use this guide to share reflections and thoughts over a Shabbat meal, or, for those who are more adventurous, to lead a planned, structured conversation, inviting a small group of friends and family to your home or to a coffee shop. If you would like more information about ways in which this journal might be used, please contact Susan Berrin, *Sh'ma Now* editor-in-chief, at SBerrin@shma.com. You can also print out a PDF file of the entire issue at <http://forward.com/shma-now/>.

Guidelines for Discussion

If you wish to hold a structured conversation, the following guidelines may help you to create a space that allows for honest personal exploration through sharing:

- Create a sense of shared purpose that can foster the kind of internal reflection that happens through group conversation.
- Remind participants of simple ground rules for conversations. For example: Avoid commenting on and critiquing each other's comments. Make room for everyone to speak. Step into or away from the conversation appropriately. No one participant should dominate the conversation. Let silence sit, allowing participants to gather their thoughts.
- For each of the questions below, we recommend that you print out the article in question, or provide the link to it, and we ask that you take a moment to read it in print or on screen before the conversation begins.
- Allow people a few minutes to absorb the article, perhaps even to read it a second time, before moving into the discussion.

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Interpretive Questions

can focus the reader on the ideas in the articles.

- Rabbi **Mychal Copeland** [page 1] introduces readers to the way the mezuzah serves as a ritual marker of reminders. She writes: "A reminder contains the power to lift us out of one temporal plane and transport us to another. But how do we know when we need a reminder to bring us to the present moment, immerse us in the past, or ensure that we think ahead?" When are reminders helpful to you and when not? What is your favorite text that teaches you about remembering to be good? What is your favorite story that evokes the use of reminders? How are reminders built into your day—as blessings?
- **Jeffrey Shandler** [page 3] adds his astute voice to the conversation about the use of monuments as reminders of a shared history. He writes: "Established to remind the public of a notable person or event of the past, monuments not only become sites of forgetting, as has often been noted. They can also become touchstones for new, contested understandings of the past, which call for new approaches to remembrance. If leaving Confederate monuments in place is untenable, what else is possible?" What can Americans and Jews learn from post-Shoah Germany and how that country handled "monuments as reminders"? Rather than erase our distressing collective American history by dismantling certain monuments, might we create ways of addressing an ugly history? What purpose do monuments serve? As reminders of our past, are they still necessary, and how do we maintain their evolving pertinence?

Reflective Questions

can help one to integrate the ideas in these articles with one's own sense of self.

- Rabbi **Aryeh Ben David** [page 3] writes about how pain sometimes serves as a reminder or wake-up to be in touch with one's soul. He writes: "When we feel pain, we need to stop, deeply experience the pain, and delve into and embrace its emptiness; listen to and learn from it." Is pain necessary as a reminder? What role does it play? What is the difference between intentional remembering and unintentional remembering? What role do "toxic stones" play in your life?
- Rabbi **Dan Goldblatt** [page 4] writes about the Jewish framework and rituals of *avelut*, mourning. His candid reflections about having lost his wife of several decades offers a personal perspective on reminders and remembering. "The truth is that I did not and do not need reminders of my loss. I am in close contact with the loss every day. However, the rituals of *shiva*, *shloshim*, and *yahrzeit* remind me that the way I hold and integrate the loss shifts with the passage of time. During *shiva*, I was not sure how I was going to survive. By *shloshim*, the surreal numbness began to dissipate. By the first *yahrzeit*, I knew that I could still live a life of meaning albeit without Yael." What are the most significant reminders for an experience of loss? How do ritual and mitzvot function as reminders—and are they helpful? What reminders are not helpful?
- In *NiSh'ma*, [page 2], our simulated Talmud page, three writers explore a midrash about compassion and cruelty: "Whoever is compassionate to those who are cruel ends up being cruel to those who are compassionate." (Midrash Tanhuma Metzora) Our commentators explore how memories are imprinted, and then interpreted and invested with meaning. **Elana Stein Hain** writes that King Saul "privileged the advantages of the present over his obligation to the past." She asks: How often do we forsake past commitments in favor of practical gain in the present? How quickly do yesterday's memories fade when they compromise the opportunities of today? And what reminders can help orient us in more thoughtful ways toward these questions? Rabbi **Herzl Hefter** suggests reframing Stein Hain's last question: "How can we know

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that we are interpreting ourselves and the circumstances around us honestly?" Gila Lyons hopes that "the Jewish people could evolve beyond this dichotomous way of thinking — of compassion and cruelty, good and evil — to an understanding that we, individually and collectively, flip-flop constantly between being oppressors and victims, between acting with compassion and cruelty." She asks her own questions: "How can we be compassionate toward those who act with cruelty? How can we use compassion, rather than cruelty, as our means to effective change?" As you read through this page of contemporary Talmud, how do you understand the relationship between compassion and cruelty? How do you imagine responding to a contemporary Amalek?
