Every year around this time, someone inevitably suggests to me that I keep my beard well after Lag Ba-Omer has passed. And it always triggers the same calculus in my head. My first thought is: For generations, rabbis and beards have gone together like Matzo and cream cheese. Maybe it’s time. And then I quickly come to my senses and remember that on this question there’s really only one person whose opinion is relevant. And she does not equivocate.

I’ve actually been brushing up on my Yiddish recently and I discovered something I hadn’t known. The word for Priest in Yiddish is Galach. What’s the origin? מַכְשַׁר in Hebrew means to shave. Whereas as rabbis traditionally sported beards, their non-Jewish counterparts were typically clean-shaven. Hence – מַכְשַׁר.

What’s fascinating is that this distinction predates the evolution of Yiddish by a couple thousand years. In describing the Ancient Egyptians, Herodotus wrote that “The priests of gods in other lands wear long hair, but in Egypt they shave their heads.” And you’ll notice this right away if you take even a cursory look at the Egyptology section of the Met.

What Leon Kass and others have begun to appreciate is that this is really part of a much larger phenomenon. Egyptians are perpetually trying to freeze time – which is a different way of saying that they attempt to defy the passage of time – they refuse to see the past as past. The length of one’s hair – or the length of one’s beard – conveys incontrovertibly the passage of time. But the Egyptians prefer not see the world this way.

Embalmimg their dead is another example of the very same phenomenon.

Seen from a slightly different angle, one could say that Ancient Egypt was obsessed with the present and was unwilling to engage the past.

And I would submit to you that this understanding makes the book of Exodus immanently more readable.

A new king arose in Egypt who didn’t know Joseph.

Really? That’s like saying a new President came to power but he had never heard of Abraham Lincoln. It’s not possible. Yosef was a national hero; an icon of Biblical proportions.

But read in light of the ethos we’re describing, the pasuk is not the least bit surprising. Surely the new king had heard the history; surely he knew the story of the Hebrew viceroy who had turned Egypt into a regional superpower. But that story was largely irrelevant, because in Ancient Egypt history was largely irrelevant.
It’s with this in mind that I want to share with you a radical re-interpretation of the Yam Suf narrative that forms the centerpiece of the last days of Pesach.

Perhaps the most enigmatic part of the text is the seemingly arbitrary insertion of Yosef.

When the Jewish people leave Mitzrayim, the Torah goes out of its way to tell us that Moshe takes with him the bones of Yosef.

Even if one could justify the inclusion of Yosef at some point in the story, why here? Why now?

What I’d like to suggest is that the juxtaposition of Pharaoh and his dogged chariots on the one hand and the Jewish people schlepping Yosef’s coffin on the other throws into relief two entirely opposing world views. The Egyptians can’t forget yesterday quickly enough. Pharaoh suffers from the same self-made delusion after every plague – the delusion that today will somehow be different from yesterday. “Yes,” he says to himself, “it’s true that my recalcitrance was met with intolerable retribution; but this time will be different.”

How quickly he’s able to forget the most recent plague to decimate his land his people. It’s only possible to chase the Israelites in the hope of recapturing them if one is able to utterly erase from memory everything that’s happened leading up to this moment.

At the very same time the Egyptians are so easily able to erase the memory of their recent past, here are the Jewish people – whom we would have expected to be all-too-eager to erase their national memory – holding tight to the bones of a man they never knew!

What’s more, Yosef himself is the very symbol of memory. He’s the very first person in the Torah to remember:

He remembered the visage of his father and he ran outside.

It’s not just a cute word play. The event that we’re reminded of is almost synonymous with memory. What caused Yosef to flee? What prevented him from succumbing to the advances of

He remembered the visage of his father and he ran outside.

Yosef is memory personified.

It’s so beautiful and so poetic. The story comes full circle. Yosef who never forgot his roots – even after hundreds of years – is remembered – by people who never knew him.
At this charged moment, Yosef’s bones are a national treasure. And it’s not just extraordinary – it’s revolutionary.

As Prof. Yosef Haym Yerushalmi wrote in Zachor: “It was ancient Israel that first assigned a decisive significance to history and thus forged a new world-view... Only in Israel and nowhere else is the injunction to remember felt as a religious imperative to an entire people. Its reverberations are everywhere.”

And against the backdrop of an Egyptian culture entirely divorced from memory, the Torah’s radical insistence on זכר becomes even more pronounced. To the extent the Ancient Egyptians are committed to disregarding the past, the Jews are committed to according it the highest regard.

What’s so important to recognize, however – and Prof. Ari Bergmann brought this point to light in his exceptional talk here last week – is that history for history’s sake isn’t that interesting to us. What matters is our capacity to engage memory so that it comes to life.

As David Brooks wrote very recently on the related topic of home-coming:

“Going back is a creative process. The events of childhood are like the Hebrew alphabet; the vowels are missing, and the older self has to make sense of them... The person going back home has to invent a coherent tradition out of discrete moments and tease out future implications. He has to see the world with two sets of eyes: the eyes of his own childhood self and the eyes of his current adult self. He has to circle back deeper inside and see parts of himself that were more exposed then than now. No wonder the process of going home again can be so catalyzing.”

For eight days we’ve been focused on the beautiful themes of the Haggadah:
- On history and memory;
- On nation-building and family-building;
- On seeing ourselves as part of the Jewish story.

Now we have to do the work of transforming memory into a force that animates the present.

Many of us have been remembering Yaakov Birnbaum just as we’re marking the 50th anniversary of the Soviet Jewry movement. For years, thousands of Jews set an extra place setting at their Seder tables every Pesach. The empty chair became a metaphor for those who could not be with us. We remembered the plight of our brethren – not out of wistfulness or nostalgia – but out of a sense of solidarity, connection and promise. The act of remembering came to life and added meaning to our lives.

In just a moment we’re going to recite Yizkor. It’s not just an exercise in reminiscence. Our memories need to move us.

If you’ll permit me to share something personal: Every Pesach I reserve a private moment where in my mind’s eye I imagine my mother sitting at our Seder table. I transpose the past onto the
present. I think about how she might react or what she might say to the grandchildren she never knew. And in that moment she is with us – and we are not the same as we were without her.

Whether in thinking about the martyrs of the Shoah or our fallen soldiers – or whether Yizkor strikes a more personal chord – let us allow the living images of those who came before us – to be our guides and our inspiration.