

Rabbi David Wolpe's

# *Off The Pulpit*

July 10, 2014

## **Escaping Oblivion**

Sending his son Adam some stamps, Saul Bellow wrote in the accompanying note, "Countries sometimes disappear leaving nothing behind but postage stamps." Anyone who has studied history must indeed be mystified at what endures — the shopping lists of ancient Sumer or obscure graffiti scratched on a prehistoric cave. As in Shelley's "Ozymandias," what we think will survive often disappears with barely a trace.

After the destruction of the Temple, the Rabbis, fearing that the law would be forgotten as sages were killed and people scattered, began the long process of committing our oral tradition to writing. Assembling spoken traditions and scattered notes, the Mishnah and then the Gemara were composed in order to preserve what would otherwise be lost.

Thousands of years have passed and we can but marvel at the success of the strategy. The fluidity of the spoken word loses something in being fixed on the page. But our sages wished to ensure that we were left with more than scraps and fragments. Their foresight is vindicated in every school and study hall where the words of Hillel, Akiba and Rava still resound.

Our prayers and thoughts and hearts are with Israel.