

“Please Don’t Forget”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

Before being written down, the rabbinic tradition of Judaism, the “oral law,” was preserved by professional memorizers. These “reciters” could repeat page after and page of text without a second thought. Indeed, second thoughts were dangerous; reciters should not be inventive, lest they alter the tradition. Reliable memories are characterized by fidelity, not creativity.

But memory is a leaky bucket. In one of his marvelous books of collected essays, *The Middle of My Tether*, Joseph Epstein points out that *Ad Herennium*, (c. 86-82 BCE) the most influential book ever written on how to improve memory, was written by an author whose name is lost to us. Both the Bible and the Talmud refer to lost books and forgotten traditions.

Computers have perfect memories, but they also, at the unfortunate touch of a button, have perfect forgetfulness. Nonetheless the Bible exhorts us to *z’chor* — remember. How do we, with memories as surprisingly light and porous as colanders, manage to remember the vastness of our history?

The answer, before and after Google, is that what we cherished will be remembered. Rabbinic tradition survives, not through a trick of recollection, or even the skills of reciters, but through the devotion of its adherents. The key to memory is love, and perhaps that is why in our tradition God is called *zochair kol hanishkachot* — the One who remembers everything forgotten. The One who loves is the One who remembers.