Memory

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Every day each of us grows one day older. That should not be a cause of concern. On the contrary, that's good news. Particularly when we consider the alternative.

But it's also a little scary, at least for me, as I approach age 71.

I will tell you what worries me the most these days about getting older. I worry most about my memory. Worrying that we are losing our ability to remember is a worry of many others my age and older.

In fact, even younger people share this worry. Researchers say that a primary concern of people in their 40's and 50's is whether or when they will start to lose their ability to remember, or indeed whether that's already started.

This topic has been on my mind for some time. How long have I been thinking about this? I can't remember.

What I do remember is this. I noticed recently that I can't remember what happens in some of the episodes of a British TV show called "MI-5." That's a show I'm watching each morning while I walk on my treadmill in our TV room. Some years ago I watched every episode of this five-season show. Now I decided I'd like to watch the whole show again, starting with the first episode. But as I watch, I find something disturbing. I find that I don't remember episodes that I watched before. I may remember a little bit about an episode, but then I couldn't tell you what's going to happen next. Some of the scenes are so dramatic that I'm truly surprised I don't recall them.

Just as I was thinking about this, I came across three very recent articles about memory loss. So I figured this is *beshert.* I need to tell you what I've learned about the subject that's bothering me.

The first article was in The New York Times ten days ago. The headline caught my eye and scared me. It said, "Dementia's Signs May Come Early."

Scientists who study memory loss have known for a long time about people who will complain of memory problems but then will score perfectly well on memory tests. Patients like this are called "the worried well."

The National Institute on Aging has a branch called "Dementias of Aging." The acting chief of that branch said the following about "the worried well." "People would complain, and we didn't really think it was very valid to take that into account."

But now, scientists are finding that some people with such complaints may in fact be detecting early indications of Alzheimer's.

Recent studies indicate that people with some types of cognitive concerns were more likely to have Alzheimer's pathology in their brains, and to develop dementia later. People with more concerns about memory and organizing ability, for example, were more likely to have amyloid, a key Alzheimer's-related protein, in their brains.

And, in a significant shift in the attitude to this problem, researchers are identifying a new category of patients experiencing so-called "subjective cognitive decline." These are people who sense that their memory and thinking skills are slipping even before others have noticed.

"The whole field now is moving to this area, and saying 'Hey, maybe there is something to this, and maybe we should pay attention to these people,' " said Dr. Ronald Petersen, chairman of the advisory panel to the federal government's new National Alzheimer's Project.

"These people are sensing something, and there are some biological signals that correlate," Dr. Petersen said. "I think it's real."

That did not sound like any kind of good news to me. I was relieved to read, however, that the experts also said that many people with such complaints will not develop dementia. Some memory decline reflects normal aging, they say. People who forget what they wanted in the kitchen or the names of relatively unfamiliar people are probably aging normally. That sounds like me.

People who forget important details of recent events, however, or get lost in familiar places, may not be simply aging normally. This is of particular concern if they have more problems of this kind than others their age.

That article in the Times was pretty sobering for me. In general, I think my memory remains pretty good, despite my concerns about the MI 5 episodes. Still, I was concerned. I wondered what I might do about it.

As if reading my mind, the current issue of The New Yorker also has an article about memory. This one, written by Patricia Marx, is called "Mentally Fit: Workouts at the brain gym." Marx decided to investigate various methods of strengthening memory available to people who have concerns about memory loss.

The article included a useful summary of what we know about the brain.

First, the bad news: our brains atrophy as we get older, a process that begins at about age twenty. Our brain cells are dying from that age onward and are not being replenished as fast as they die. By the age of twenty there is a very good chance that our prefrontal cortex (the area responsible for problem-solving, decision-making, and complex thought) has begun to shrink. By age twenty!

As recently as a few decades ago, most biologists thought that the brain was fully formed before the age of twenty. After that, they believed the brain was doomed to degrade, with neurons fading until we succumb to senility.

Today, however, we regard Alzheimer's and other dementias as diseases, rather than a consequence of normal aging. Moreover, we now consider the brain to be far more plastic and adaptable than we used to believe.

Each brain contains about a hundred billion neurons. Each neuron can hook up with up to ten thousand other neurons. This means that each brain has about one hundred trillion possible neural connections or pathways.

The brain's capacity to store new information is therefore practically endless. Fresh neural trails are generated whenever we experience something new. Repeat the activity and the pathway will be reinforced, creating memory.

Marx's article then goes on to describe in great detail the various brain exercises that she tried out, both on the computer and at centers for brain fitness. I didn't find that part of the article all that helpful.

What I did find helpful, though, was the third article I read. All of this happened this week, by the way. A wonderful coincidence.

The third article appeared in a monthly publication put out by Harvard Medical School called "Harvard Men's Health Watch." The lead article in the August issue has this headline: "Better memory: Use these simple tricks to help you remember."

The article summarizes the central suggestions in a new book by Dr. Aaron Nelson at Brigham and Women's Hospital. The book is called The Harvard Medical School Guide to Achieving Optimal Memory.

I found both the article and the book reassuring. The book says that some memory problems are simply a natural aspect of aging:

Just as your eyes don't see as clearly as they used to and your hearing isn't quite as sharp, your brain's memory operations decline somewhat as you age. Age-related memory loss isn't a disease but rather the result of normal changes in the structure and function of the brain that occur with age. These changes affect how well you concentrate, how quickly you process information, how effectively you store memories, and how easily you can recall them. These effects become particularly noticeable starting at around age fifty.

That's worth repeating. Dr. Nelson mentioned four mental processes that are key to memory: concentration; processing speed; storage; and recollection.

When we think of memory problems, we usually mean only that last one – the inability to recall a fact or name when we want to recall it. But Dr. Nelson's list reveals that there are three other stages in memory previous to recollection These three earlier stages are where we find most of the reasons for having a poorer memory than we'd like.

As Dr. Nelson says in the Health Watch newsletter, "simply paying more attention when you learn new information is a tried-and-true memory enhancer."

In order to encode information into the brain, you have to pay attention to the information in the first place. When you meet someone whose name you want to remember later, pay attention first of all to the name when it's spoken. If you didn't hear it, you won't remember it. If necessary, ask the person to repeat it, or even to spell the last name.

As we age we are not able to be as quick in hearing and understanding what others are saying as we used to be. So ask your new acquaintance to slow down if he or she is speaking too fast for you. If you are reading something you want to remember, take your time. Read it a second time if you need to.

Dr. Nelson's third tip has to do with storing the memory. The best way to do that is to use the information by repeating it or doing some task with it. In a conversation, use the person's name. Do that more than once if you need to.

As for recollection, be patient. If you can't recall what you want to recall, usually it will come to you if you relax and give it time.

The health newsletter has another tip that Alice and I have found helpful. For every day issues like recalling where you left your keys, the most helpful approach is not to use your memory at all, but instead to develop some other strategy that doesn't rely on your memory.

I spoke about our solution on Yom Kippur last year, in a sermon called "Lost and Found." What we did was to place a glass bowl on a table near the front door. We agreed we would always put our keys in that bowl when we came in the house. Whenever we leave the house, our keys are right there in the bowl. No more missed movies, or apologizing to hosts, or tearing our hair early in the morning because we might be late for school or work.

These three articles helped me with my memory worries both by showing me I am not alone in this concern and in suggesting some ways to cope. There is a larger comfort we can find, however, in our daily liturgy.

This morning we recited the *Birkot Hashachar*. In that prayer we express our gratitude for once again being able to open our eyes ["*pokeach ivrim*"] and rise from our beds ["*matir asurim*"] and have clothes to wear that we can put on ["*malbish arumim*"] and all the other daily morning activities that we usually take for granted. Just as with Dr. Nelson's advice about memory, that prayer calls us to pay attention to the daily blessings of our lives.

And there is even a more basic blessing that we enjoy while almost never noticing it. That is the very fact that we are conscious. When we open our eyes we know we are awake and we know that we know. That is truly amazing.

Our ancestors understood that this was not a gift to be treated lightly. In their understanding, when we go to sleep at night our soul departs from our body, as it does in death. In the morning, though, our soul, what we today might call our consciousness, returns to us. We have a prayer for that as well, recited every morning by observant Jews upon first returning to consciousness:

> *Modeh ani lifanecha melech chai v'kayyam shehechezarta bi nishmati b'chemlah, rabah emunatecha*.
>
> I offer thanks before you, living and eternal King, for You have mercifully restored my soul within me; Your faithfulness is great.

I hope that we may transform worry about memory into gratefulness for the gift of life and for the capacity to be fully aware of our lives each day.

Let us say, Amen.