

# Echoes of Eden

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## (Don't) Look Back

We live in the present, fantasize about the future, and distort the past. The mind, homo sapiens' greatest tool, can imagine a beautiful future and set in motion the plan to implement it. Alternatively, man can be weighed down by the past, unable to escape preconceptions, negative experiences, or abuses imagined or real. Both the positive and negative echoes of the past may be exaggerated, [distorted](#) or simply expunged from memory. In fact, it may be impossible to separate fact from interpretation when looking back; our personal memories are often colored by opinion and emotion, and so much of our collective memory has been shaped by the opinions and agendas of historians.

As opposed to previous generations, modern man is far more engrossed by the future than by the past. The past is seen as primitive and depressing, while the future is unlimited, a fascinating mosaic ready to be filled with dazzling colors.

The coming days are an ideal opportunity to consider Judaism's historical consciousness, our relationship with the past and our attitudes towards the future. The Jewish new year which we are now celebrating is commonly known as Rosh HaShanah, yet is referred to in the liturgy as Yom HaZikaron, the day of memory, based on the [verse](#) in Vayikra (23:24). On this day, God remembers our actions; on this day, we recall our own actions, review and reconsider our personal and collective behavior.

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Fittingly, the parasha that is read this Shabbat charges us to remember the past:

*Remember days long gone by. Ponder the years of each generation. Ask your father and let him tell you, and your grandfather, who will explain it. (Dvarim 32:7)*

We are enjoined to recall the great contributions of the past, to read the books penned by our ancestors, to open our hearts and minds to receive the orally transmitted wisdom of the ages, to become a living link in the chain of tradition. Indeed, a part of us still lives in the past.

And yet, we have an honest view of the past, not a deconstructionist “nostalgia isn’t what it used to be” attitude. Everything that we are taught about the past, from the biblical narrative through modern Jewish history, teaches us to see the roses as well as the thorns. Authentic Jewish scholarship aims to teach us to be inspired by the beauty while at the same time to learn from the mistakes. Unlike revisionist historians, we do not whitewash the past or obscure inconvenient truths. We acknowledge the mistakes, the sins, the lapses in our personal and collective biographies and own up to them.

But Judaism does not stop there. Beyond the realm of historical accuracy and the insight into the human condition that can be gained from the study of history, Judaism’s view of history concerns itself with the transcendent: Not only can we learn from the past, not only can we apply the lessons of the past to the future, but through historical consciousness, we can change the past. Thus, during the days leading up to Rosh Hashana through the end of Yom Kippur the liturgy repeats the seemingly strange formulation: “however we and our ancestors have sinned”.

The Jewish concept of confession before God is not unfamiliar, yet the additional phrase seems to do no more and no less than malign the dead. What good can come out of slandering our ancestors? Herein lies the key to the concept of teshuva: when we look honestly and sincerely at our own behavior and take responsibility, when we express remorse and make a

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commitment to change, we take our relationship with God to a higher level than it was even before the sin. The negative behavior becomes the basis of a new, more honest and loving relationship with God. This same dynamic holds true for sins committed by previous generations: When we take an honest

look at the negative behaviors of previous generations, when we see ourselves and our lives as part of the dynamic set in motion by those that preceded us, when we take responsibility as a living link in that chain, we can use the mistakes of our ancestors to forge a stronger relationship with God. We can change sins committed in the past to points of departure on a new path toward holiness. Sins of the past are elevated, re-formed.

The greatest expression of man's free will is not simply deciding what we will do as we move from the present toward the future. When we use our newfound understanding to give new meaning to past misdeeds, we re-cast negative behavior and change the past. This is Judaism's true historical consciousness: It is within our power to give form and meaning not only to the present, not only to the future, but to the past as well.

For a more in-depth analysis see: <http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/09/shiurim-and-essays-rosh-hashana.html>