



## Faithful Memory

This meditation features the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel as a guide to memory and the experience of God.

## OVERVIEW

This lesson explores the role of memory in faith through the lens of Abraham Joshua Heschel. The meditation uses imaginative tools to re-experience a moment from our own lives in which we experienced the presence of God.

## Scripture

### DEUTERONOMY 6:2-23

When your children ask you in time to come, “What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?” then you shall say to your children, “We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors.

### PSALM 77:7-20

“Will the Lord reject forever?  
Will he never show his favor again?  
Has his unfailing love vanished forever?  
Has his promise failed for all time?  
Has God forgotten to be merciful?  
Has he in anger withheld his compassion?”  
Then I thought, “To this I will appeal:  
the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand.  
I will remember the deeds of the Lord;  
yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.  
I will consider all your works  
and meditate on all your mighty deeds.”  
Your ways, God, are holy.  
What god is as great as our God?

You are the God who performs miracles;  
you display your power among the peoples.  
With your mighty arm you redeemed your people,  
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.  
The waters saw you, God,  
the waters saw you and writhed;  
the very depths were convulsed.  
The clouds poured down water,  
the heavens resounded with thunder;  
your arrows flashed back and forth.  
Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind,  
your lightning lit up the world;  
the earth trembled and quaked.  
Your path led through the sea,  
your way through the mighty waters,  
though your footprints were not seen.  
You led your people like a flock  
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

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## Quotations

Belief likewise depends on memory. "I believe" means: "I remember." For what is belief? Every one of us, at least once in our lifetime, has been able to perceive the existence of the Creator. Every one of us, at least once, has merited a glimpse of the beauty, the serenity, and the strength which flow from the souls of those who have walked with God. However, such feelings and inspirations are not common occurrences. In the lives of most people they are as meteors which flare up for a moment and then disappear from sight. There are, however, people for whom these flashes ignite with them a light which will never be extinguished. Faith means: If you ever once merit that the Hidden One

appears to you, be faithful to Him all the days of your life. Faith means: To guard forever the echo which once burst upon the deep recesses of your soul.

— *Abraham Joshua Heschel*

To us, recollection is a holy act; we sanctify the present by remembering the past. To us Jews, the essence of faith is memory. To believe is to remember.

— *Abraham Joshua Heschel*

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## Introducing the Practice

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) was a Jewish rabbi, theologian, and philosopher. Heschel was born in Poland, and he pursued rabbinic ordination and a doctorate in Germany. Following the rise of the Nazi Party, Heschel was deported back to Poland in 1938, fled to London in 1939, and moved to New York City in 1940. Much of his family was not able to escape Europe and died at the hands of the Nazis. Despite witnessing the horrors of the holocaust and World War 2, Heschel persevered in faith and continued to be a leading teacher of Jewish spirituality and mysticism. Heschel's impact reached far beyond the bounds of his own Jewish tradition, and his wisdom has influenced adherents of many different world religions. Heschel befriended Martin Luther King Jr. and marched alongside him in Selma in 1965. He also attended the Catholic Vatican II Council as a Jewish representative. Heschel's writings beautifully explore faith, prayer, time, and the place of religion in the modern world.

In his exploration of the sanctity of time and the nature of faith, Heschel promoted the importance of memory in faith. For Heschel, faith was the continued faithfulness one had to past experiences of awe and wonder at the divine. Memory has always played an important role in the Jewish tradition, as it was the memory of God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt that sustained hope in subsequent times of hardship and oppression. Remembering past experiences of God and past moments of God's goodness sustains us in our present times. Memories shape our lives and provide us with a story of how we came to be who we are today (both individually and as larger traditions), and the memories that we give the

greatest importance to have the greatest affects on our current lives. In our meditation today, we are going to use memories of past moments as a way to become more aware of God's presence in the current moment. By using our imaginations to re-experience these memories, we can invite the hope, peace, and joy of God's presence to transform life in the present moment.

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## Preparing for the Practice

Have everyone spread out to find a comfortable place to sit where they can still hear the voice of the person guiding the practice.

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## The Spiritual Practice

As we begin our time of prayer, gently close your eyes and allow your breathing to slow down. Settle into the present moment, and open your heart to the silent presence of God.

(1 min. of silence)

Bring to mind a time in your life when you clearly experienced God. This may be any type of experience of God that was meaningful to you. Maybe it was a moment when you were out in nature. Maybe it was a moment in prayer or during a worship service. Maybe it was a moment with friends or family. If you find that you have trouble thinking of an experience, think of a time when you clearly felt the power of love. When you knew you were completely loved and accepted, or perhaps when you were moved to feel an overwhelming love for another person or aspect of creation.

Use all of your senses to place yourself back in that moment. Use your imagination to recreate that experience. What colors, people, sights, or objects did you see in that moment? What sounds and whose voices did you hear? Slowly recapture every detail of the place - the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and feels. As you are doing so, notice all the emotions and feelings of that moment.

(5 min. of silence)

Now bring yourself back to the present moment. Use your senses to notice all the details of this place you are in now... Notice how you feel in your heart right now and how the memory

of your experience with God is affecting your experience of this present moment.

(3 min. of silence)

Now return to your remembered place and experience of God. Settle back into that experience, once again recreating it with your imagination. As you do so, notice how you feel back in that moment. Is there any change in the place or in your feelings this time?

(3 min. of silence)

Once again return to the present moment here. Notice all your sensations and the details of the place around you. How are you feeling now?

(2 min. of silence)

Continue to go back and forth between the present moment and your chosen memory at your own pace. See if you are able to bring anything from that experience of God into this present moment. See if any of the spiritual wisdom you gained in that moment can affect the way you are experiencing this moment now.

(5 min. of silence)

Amen.

*Duration: 15-20 minutes*

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## Discussion Questions

1. What was this meditation like for you? Were you able to choose a memory and move back and forth smoothly between your memory and the present moment?
2. How did the act of recreating a memory change the way that you experienced the present moment?
3. How do you think this practice can inform our faith lives going forward?