

Conclusion

What Moses Forgot

I opened this book with Moses's last speech, in which he repeatedly exhorts the Israelites never to forget God and his commandments while professing the pessimistic conviction that the Israelites will, undoubtedly, forget what they ought to remember. Moses appears in his last speech as the paragon of memory. Within him are contained all the events that unfolded from the exodus from Egypt on, all the laws that were received in the wilderness, all the promises that were made to God and by God, and all the detailed rituals and recitations that have to be undertaken regularly so that these memories are kept for posterity. To some extent, the image of Moses as the keeper of memory persists in rabbinic texts as well. A Midrashic account describes how upon his death Moses invites everyone for a "refresher" course in case they forgot what he had taught: "[Moses] told them, I am already near death, whoever heard one verse and forgot it—let him come and repeat it, one portion—let him come and repeat it, one chapter—let him come and repeat it."¹ But in several rabbinic texts we find a diametrically opposed image of Moses: he appears not as the paragon of memory, but rather as a paragon of forgetfulness. A brief examination of the trope of Moses's forgetfulness serves well to tie this book's arguments together and to bring it to its conclusion.

One relatively mild example of Moses's forgetfulness in rabbinic texts is his difficulty to grasp God's instructions for making the sanctuary's lampstand. In the biblical descriptions of the sanctuary's furnishings, the golden lampstand is described as *miqshah* no fewer than six times.² This word is usually understood as referring to hammered or beaten metal, but Tannaitic homilists extracted the root *q-sh-h*, which means "hard," from the word and interpreted that the

1. Sifre on Deuteronomy 4 (ed. Finkelstein 13).

2. Ex. 25:31, 36; Ex. 37:17, 22; Num. 8:4 (twice).

lampstand was particularly hard for Moses to handle.³ Midrash Sifre zutta on Numbers narrativizes the “hardness” of making the lampstand by relating how Moses struggled to remember the instructions he was given, relying on the recurring mentions of the fact that the lampstand was *shown* to Moses. Admittedly, all the vessels of the sanctuary were shown to him, but the verb “to show” appears four times specifically in regard to the lampstand.⁴ From these recurring references to “showing” the homilist concludes that Moses had to be shown the lamp multiple times because initially he forgot what he saw:

According to the vision of the pattern that YHWH has shown (Num. 8:4). This teaches you that [God] showed [the lampstand to Moses] four times. [Moses] saw it with all the other furnishings and forgot it, and he saw it a second time when [the angel] Michael was standing and measuring it,⁵ and again he saw it being made, and again he saw it fully made.⁶

Whereas other Tannaitic traditions relate that the lampstand was especially complicated in its design and therefore Moses had to be shown it directly, Sifre zutta makes the point that it was difficult for Moses to *remember* what the lamp should look like, and therefore he had to be shown it more than once. In later (probably early medieval) Midrashic compilations the motif of Moses’s forgetfulness is significantly magnified:

When the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses, “You shall make a lampstand of pure gold” (Ex. 25:31), he told him, “How shall we make it?” [God] said to him, “The lampstand shall be hammered work (*miqshah*).” Even so, Moses had difficulty (*nitqashah*), and he went down and forgot how to make it. He came back up and said, “My Master, how shall we make it?” [God] said to him, “The lampstand shall be hammered work.” Even so, Moses had difficulty. He went down and forgot it. He went back up and said, “Master, I forgot it.” [God] showed [the lampstand] to Moses, but he still had difficulty with it. [God] said to him, “See and follow the pattern that you are shown” (Ex. 25:40), and he took a lampstand of fire and showed him how it is made, and even so Moses had difficulty with it. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, “Go to Bezalel, and he will make it.” [Moses] told Bezalel, and he made it right away. [Moses] was then amazed, and said, “How many times the Holy One, blessed be He, showed it to me, and I had difficulty making it, and you, who did not see it,

3. See Sifre on Numbers 61 (ed. Kahana 1:152–53). This trope appears also in Mekhilta deRabbi Ishmael Pisha 2 (ed. Horovitz-Rabin 6); Baraita de-melekhet ha-mishkan 10 (ed. Kirschner 196); BT Menahot 29a. See an elaborate discussion in Kahana, *Sifre on Numbers*, 3:413–15.

4. Ex. 25:9 states that God showed Moses “the pattern of the sanctuary and the pattern of all its furnishings.” Immediately after the instructions are given regarding the lamp, Ex. 25:40 repeats, “See this (*re’eh*), and follow the pattern that you are being shown (*mar’eh*) on the mountain.” In Num. 8:4, in which Moses is instructed to light the lamp, the readers are reminded that the lampstand was made “according to the vision of the pattern that YHWH has shown Moses” (*ka-mar’eh ’asher her’ah*).

5. The Hebrew is *mamshiah*, an otherwise unattested word. Since the verb *m-sh-h* can mean “to measure,” I tentatively translated it as “measuring.” Cf. BT Menahot 29a.

6. Sifre zutta on Numbers 8:4 (ed. Horovitz 256); see also Kahana, *Sifre on Numbers*, 3:423.

made it of your own mind. Bezalel, surely you were standing by the shadow of God (*be-zel 'el*) when the Holy One, blessed be He, showed me its making.”⁷

In this later Midrashic iteration, Moses’s forgetfulness is not incidental, but almost pathological. He forgets God’s verbal instructions once, asks him to repeat them, forgets them a second time, is then given a visual explanation rather than merely a verbal one, cannot grasp it, is given it again in greater detail, and eventually is told to delegate the task to someone else. Late Midrashic compilations are known for their tendency to further dramatize and narrativize earlier traditions,⁸ but the crafters of this passage were probably influenced not only by the aforementioned homily on Moses’s difficulty with the lampstand, but also by a number of other references to Moses’s forgetfulness in earlier Midrashic texts. For the sake of brevity, I will only summarize these references rather than present the texts in full.⁹

In one Midrashic account, the homilist resorts to Moses’s forgetfulness in order to exculpate the Israelites from direct responsibility for their transgression. According to the biblical story, when the Israelites were given the manna in the wilderness Moses told them to keep half of the double portion given on the sixth day for the Sabbath, because they will not find any manna on the Sabbath itself. Nonetheless, some people went out on the Sabbath and looked for manna, thereby incurring the wrath of God (Ex. 16:17–30). In the Midrash, the blame for the transgression is laid on Moses, who forgot to instruct the Israelites that it is actually prohibited to leave one’s place on the Sabbath.¹⁰ The Israelites’ failure is thereby attributed to ignorance, not defiance of God, and their ignorance is the result of Moses’s failure to teach them. In another Midrashic account, Moses’s forgetfulness is used to explain why a different biblical character takes on the role of instructor usually reserved for Moses. In the Israelites’ war against the Midianites, it is the priest Eleazar rather than Moses who instructs the soldiers how to purify the metal

7. Tanhuma (Warsaw print) *Be-ha'alotkha* 6; Numbers Rabbah *Be-ha'alotkha* 15.10. A similar explanation of the name Bezalel appears also in BT *Berakhot* 55a, but in a different context.

8. On the literary characteristics of later Midrashic compilations, see Jacob Elbaum, “On the Character of the Late Midrashic Literature” (in Hebrew), *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies* 9, vol. C (1985): 57–62. On increased narrativization as characterizing the development of rabbinic exegetical narratives, see Joshua Levinson, “The Exegetical Narrative: Between Reception and Transformation” (in Hebrew), *Dappim: Research in Literature* 16–17 (2009): 56–73.

9. One additional Midrashic tradition that presents Moses as forgetful pertains to the story of the Ba'al Pe'or worship and subsequent plague in Numbers 25. In BT *Sanhedrin* 82b Moses is said to have forgotten the law that one who has intercourse with a foreign woman is attacked by zealots, and when the young priest Phineas was reminded of this law he acted accordingly. In this story, however, Moses’s forgetfulness has a clear underlying cause, as he himself is married to a Midianite woman and is taken to task for it.

10. Leviticus Rabbah 13 (ed. Margulies 2:269–70); cf. Tanhuma (ed. Buber) *Be-shalah* 24. In Exodus Rabbah 25 there are two subsequent episodes of forgetfulness: first, Moses forgets to tell the people to collect a double portion on the sixth day (25.10), and then he forgets to instruct them about the Sabbath (25.12).

artifacts they will take as loot (Num. 31:21–24). According to the Midrash, this is because Moses was supposed to tell them that himself but forgot.¹¹

Yet another account portrays Moses as forgetful to explain a biblical episode in which he clearly errs in judgment. After the death of Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu, Moses berates Aaron and his surviving sons because they did not eat the meat of the inaugural sin offering as they should have. In response, Aaron says that they cannot be expected to eat the sacrificial meat after such a catastrophe had taken place, and Moses accepts his reasoning (Lev. 10:16–20). In the Sifra, Moses concedes that he has not heard the rule that a mourner may not eat sacred meat,¹² but in both the Babylonian Talmud and Midrash Leviticus Rabbah it is explained that he had heard this rule but had forgotten it until Aaron reminded him.¹³ Finally, perhaps the most striking tradition about Moses's forgetfulness is that he needed to spend forty days on Mount Sinai because he kept forgetting what God was teaching him. At the end of forty days he had no better grasp of the Torah than he did in the beginning, but in recognition of his efforts God gave him the Torah as a gift.¹⁴ I will return to this intriguing anecdote shortly.

What stands behind this trope of Moses's flawed memory, so flawed that he appears almost dim-witted in some traditions? Several answers come to mind. First, as Yair Furstenberg observed, the rabbis' relation to the literary figure of Moses had a strong agonistic element.¹⁵ In a sense, the rabbis made a concerted effort to diminish Moses in order to make more room for themselves: since they recognized that their own interpretations went well beyond what Moses could have imagined, at times they depicted Moses as one who delivered the Torah but never truly understood it.¹⁶ Second, it seems that at least some rabbis were not comfortable with the Pentateuchal picture of the Israelites as a rebellious, disobedient, and ungrateful people who would have perished many times in God's anger if it had not been for Moses's merit. The Christian utilization of this paradigm against the Jews in particular may have led the rabbis to highlight Moses's flaws and weaknesses, and in some cases—as in the manna story mentioned above—to lay the blame for Israel's failures directly on him.¹⁷ Third, it could be argued that

11. Leviticus Rabbah 13 (ed. Margulies 2:270); cf. Avot de-Rabbi Nathan 1 (in both A and B versions; ed. Schechter 2–3). In both traditions, Moses's forgetfulness is associated specifically with his anger.

12. Sifra Shemini 1.2.12 (ed. Weiss 47d).

13. Leviticus Rabbah 13 (ed. Margulies 2:271); a much more elaborate account of this incident appears in BT Zevahim 101a–b.

14. PT Horayot 3, 5, 48b. Cf. Exodus Rabbah 41.6; Tanhuma (Warsaw print) Ki tisa 16; Tanhuma (ed. Buber) Ki tisa 12.

15. Yair Furstenberg, "The Agon with Moses and Homer: Rabbinic Midrash and the Second Sophistic," in *Homer and the Bible in the Eyes of Ancient Interpreters*, ed. Maren R. Niehoff (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 299–328.

16. The *locus classicus* of this trope is the story of Moses's ascent to heaven in BT Menahot 29b.

17. See Richard Kalmin, *The Sage in Jewish Society of Late Antiquity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 98–100; Michael Graves, "Scholar and Advocate: The Stories of Moses in Midrash

the rabbis' motivation was a pious one: in order to emphasize that the origin of the Torah was divine, they had to underscore that its messenger was only human, and even an unremarkable and fallible human at that.¹⁸ While all these explanations are convincing (and not mutually exclusive), I would like to propose that these traditions about Moses reveal to us something fundamental not only about the rabbis' relation to Moses, but also about their relation to forgetfulness.

By depicting Moses's engagement with the Torah as riddled with forgetfulness, the rabbis make the point that there has never been a time in which forgetfulness was not an immanent part of the attempt to study the Torah and live by it. Encapsulated within the Torah from the beginning, like an invisible mechanism of self-destruction, is the possibility of it being forgotten, partially or wholly. When the Torah was given to humans—Moses being the paradigmatic human in this case, not one who exceeds human capabilities—it became dependent on human memory, with all its imperfections and distractions, foreseeable limitations and unforeseeable short circuits. Forgetfulness, then, is not a sign of decline, neglect, divine abandonment, or cosmic crisis: it is an inescapable facet of life in accordance with the Torah. My argument in this book is that the normalization of forgetfulness, and the building of forgetfulness into the fabric of Jewish observance, play a key part in the making of rabbinic culture.

I have attempted to show that forgetfulness of past actions, of future tasks, of laws and of teachings, is a prominent and generative theme in Tannaitic literature and beyond it. I have argued that the extensive rabbinic engagement with forgetfulness is novel in essence, and that it cannot be understood as deriving strictly from halakhic necessity or from abstract scholastic curiosity. Rather, forgetfulness emerges in Tannaitic texts as a newly created problem in order to foreground the rabbis' enterprise as a solution. Various rulings, decrees, alternative halakhic paths, practices, and routines are presented in rabbinic texts specifically as ways to rectify or preempt forgetfulness, and in some contexts the rabbinic project as a whole is heralded as a heroic effort to prevent the Torah from being forgotten. The rabbis' preoccupation with the prospect of forgetfulness in both practice and study effectively builds forgetfulness *into* the rabbinic system. In turning forgetfulness into a contingency that has to be reckoned with, and into a predictable occurrence for which solutions are readily available, the rabbis generated a new vision of life in accordance with the Torah in which fallibility and memory lapses are part of the

Exodus Rabbah," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 21, no. 1 (2011): 1–22. See also Furstenberg, "The Agon with Moses," 316–25.

18. The idea that Moses's agency had to be downplayed in order to emphasize God's actions is the common explanation for Moses's absence from the Passover Haggadah; see David Henshke, "The Lord Brought Us Forth from Egypt: On the Absence of Moses in the Passover Haggadah," *AJS Review* 31, no. 1 (2007): 61–73. Henshke focuses on Moses's role in the redemption from Egypt and explicitly says that no such downplaying of Moses can be traced in regard to the giving of the Torah, but the traditions I mentioned may suggest otherwise.

norm, rather than deviating from the norm. In other words, the rabbis put forth a model in which dealing with the vicissitudes of memory—which is by definition imperfect and unruly—is a central and integral element of religious devotion.

The integration of forgetfulness into the rabbinic vision of Jewish practice and devotion created a new model of an idealized practitioner. This practitioner forgets facts or commitments critical to correct rabbinic practice, but avidly seeks rabbinic instruction and guidance in order to counteract or correct his forgetfulness, even at great cost or inconvenience. As I emphasized, this idealized practitioner is a literary construct that does not necessarily correspond with any real-life Jews with whom the rabbis were familiar. But as a literary construct, this practitioner is immensely important for the rabbinic vision insofar as he presents a paradigm for the desired relations between rabbis and their constituents. The rabbinic enterprise is not geared toward one who does not forget at all, but rather toward one who closely follows the rabbis' guidelines either in order to counteract forgetfulness or to rectify it once it has taken place. Moreover, forgetfulness functions in rabbinic discourse as a marker of membership, since forgetfulness of one detail ultimately affirms one's overall commitment to and immersion in the system as a whole. The one notable exception to this rule is forgetfulness of recited teachings: in that context forgetfulness is rhetorically construed as a sign of carelessness and neglect, which attests to insufficient devotion. I have argued, however, that the issue there is not memory but memorization. While the rabbis insist that memorization of texts as a *practice* should be rigorous and flawless, they accept that memory as a *human capacity* is limited and flawed.

Although the rabbis utilize forgetfulness to make the case for themselves—for their rulings, for their scholastic debates, and for their idea of Torah study as a vocation—it is important to stress that the case they make is not for lowercase rabbis, but for uppercase Rabbis. The texts we have seen indicate that rabbis as individuals are not immune to forgetfulness, but the Rabbis or “the Sages” as a collective are the power that counteracts it. One rabbi may forget a teaching, sometimes even a firsthand experience, but there is bound to be another rabbi who remembers it. One rabbi may slip in his halakhic practice because of forgetfulness, but the Sages have put in place rules meant to preempt such slippage. And while rabbis in one generation may lose or forget a cluster of laws, rabbis in future generations will be able to recover these laws. Forgetfulness, then, serves to build the image of the Sages as a stable, continuous, multigenerational collective that secures the Torah and its practice and is much greater than the sum of individual rabbis. In a sense, some of the Midrashic traditions about Moses's forgetfulness point in a similar direction: Aaron asserts a halakhic teaching that Moses forgot, Eleazar teaches the soldiers what Moses forgot to tell them, and Bezalel is able to make the lamp the instructions for which Moses kept forgetting. The memory of the Torah thus does not depend on Moses alone, who is prone to memory failures like anyone else, but on a community of learners and knowers.

All this is not to say, of course, that the rabbis did not think that good memory was a virtue in individuals and did not look down upon people who had trouble remembering things. Their halakhic and homiletic discussions certainly construe forgetfulness as undesirable and implicitly encourage their subjects to take on demanding cognitive regimes to prevent forgetfulness, such as attentional monitoring of one's activities and incessant repetition of teachings. The rabbis also prescribe some superfluous practices for correcting forgetfulness, which seem to serve educational or even mildly punitive purposes. Forgetfulness is always suspected as an exit from the rabbinic order, and therefore one who experiences it must be reintegrated—sometimes through an externalized, performative process—back into the rabbinic order. It is clear that as far as the rabbis were concerned the best thing was never to forget anything. How, then, does this emphasis on the quintessential importance of memory and attention and on the merits of unceasing mental preoccupation with the Torah correspond with the normalization and normativization of forgetfulness? I have argued that the rabbis' discussions of forgetfulness put forth an ideology that I term *inclusive elitism*: they present their system of practice and devotion as extremely demanding and exerting, requiring immense cognitive resources, and yet insist that this demanding system is suitable and appropriate for everyone. The accommodations and solutions offered to forgetful individuals demonstrate how the rabbis can help imperfect humans navigate the challenging system, while at the same time setting up an ideal of perfection for these imperfect humans to aspire to.

This dual movement—using forgetfulness to set an extremely high standard while at the same time insisting that no one is excluded from the system defined by this standard—is especially evident in one of the traditions regarding Moses's forgetfulness. I paraphrased this tradition briefly above, but now I wish to take a closer look at one iteration of the tradition in its textual context. These few lines offer, in their terse way, the most effective summary for this book.

The anecdote about Moses forgetting the Torah throughout the forty days in which he was on the mountain appears in tractate Horayot of the Palestinian Talmud, in a unit that responds to the Mishnah's ruling about communal hierarchies in Israel. According to the Mishnah, even though a *mamzer* (one born from forbidden sexual union) is located very low in the communal hierarchy, and is inferior to priests, Levites, and Israelites, if a *mamzer* is a disciple of the Sages he is superior to even a high priest.¹⁹ In the Palestinian Talmud we find a baraita that expresses a similar sentiment, followed by the anecdote about Moses's forgetfulness:

A sage precedes a king, [because] when a sage dies, we have none other like him. When a king dies, all of Israel are worthy of kingship.²⁰

19. M. Horayot 3.8 (3.9 in the Mishnah's manuscripts).

20. This baraita also appears in T. Horayot 2.8 (ed. Zuckerman 476).

R. Yohanan said, “All those forty days that Moses spent on the Mountain he would study Torah and forget it, and eventually [God] gave it to him as a gift. And why so? So as to make the dull ones return (*le-hahazir 'et ha-tipshim*).”²¹

The baraita makes a statement on the indispensability of sages to the community as a whole, insisting that a sage is greater and more important even than a king. It says plainly that any person in Israel can, at least in theory, be king, but only the exceptional few can be sages. The story about Moses’s forgetfulness serves as supporting evidence for this statement, as it demonstrates how difficult and strenuous the study of Torah actually is. The Torah was too much even for Moses, its first recipient, to handle—which only goes to show how absolutely vital the Sages are and how rare and precious their abilities are in maintaining the Torah, teaching it, and interpreting it. Moses appears here as the paradigmatic fallible human being, whose imperfect memory and limited cognitive capacities serve indirectly as justification for the rabbinic enterprise.

But the Palestinian Talmud also adds an explanatory comment immediately after the anecdote on Moses: “And why so? So as to make the dull ones return.” This comment, which may have been added by a different editorial hand, makes the point that Moses’s forgetfulness of the Torah was deliberate. It was not due to his inherent flaws, but to a strategic decision that such forgetfulness would be beneficial because it would encourage people who are not naturally talented in Torah study to pursue it. Whose plan was it to have Moses forget? One possible interpretation is that it was God’s plan, but we could also deduce that it was Moses’s plan. The verb used in this anecdote is *meshakeah*, which is a causative form of the root *sh-kh-h*, “to forget.” This is not the only case in Amoraic literature in which the causative (*piel*) participle form *meshakeah* is used where we would expect the simple (*qal*) form *shokheah*, and this could be simply a linguistic phenomenon of no special significance.²² But the causative form, here and elsewhere, does leave open the possibility—which I discussed in chapter 5—that allowing something to be forgotten was seen as an intentional or half-conscious process. It is possible, then, to conclude that it was Moses who chose to forget his teachings.

Whoever made the comment that the purpose of Moses’s forgetfulness was to encourage “dull ones” to return was probably concerned with the dignity of Moses and wished to make the point that Moses’s forgetfulness was not a manifestation of lack of ability but of gracious humility. Moses had to be an imperfect and flawed Torah learner so as to encourage similarly flawed learners to stay within the perimeter of the protorabbinic community. Having been rewarded by God for his efforts to study the Torah even though he did not accomplish much on his own,

21. PT Horayot 3.5, 48b.

22. See Wajsborg, “The Root שכח in Babylonian Aramaic,” 368; Yohanan Breuer, *The Hebrew in the Babylonian Talmud according to the Manuscripts of Tractate Pesahim* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2002), 189.

Moses demonstrates that the Torah belongs to everyone (although only the Sages are its trusted guardians). Moses's forgetfulness is said to be targeted specifically toward the "nonwise" (*tipshim*), a harsh word that I translated here as "dull ones" but could just as well be translated as "stupid ones." The voice behind this comment does not shy away from saying that some people are stupid, and some people are wise (the same word, *hakham*, is used in rabbinic literature for both "sage" and "wise"). By no means are all equal in the world of Torah and halakhic observance, but no one is excluded from this world. Since Moses is presumably not one of the dull ones, his forgetfulness should be understood as performative in essence, as a way of inviting people into the world of the Torah who would not be compelled to inhabit it otherwise. This, in a nutshell, is the ideology of inclusive elitism that the rabbis foster through their engagement with the theme of forgetfulness.

Ultimately, this book is about creativity and invention. On the face of it, the rabbinic concern with forgetfulness appears as a concern for salvage and preservation: how to save people from transgression, how to save Torah learners from irrecoverably falling behind, and how to save the Torah from being forgotten from Israel. But in designing and propagating a whole array of methods, solutions, and rhetorics of restoration and recovery, the rabbis were able to introduce widely innovative ideas about the things that were being restored and recovered. The prospect of forgetting, which the rabbis made so pervasive in their picture of halakhic observance and Torah study, allowed the rabbis to present their legislative and scholastic enterprises—and to some extent, their very existence—as a response to very acute needs of devout practitioners. As they crafted these responses, they were actively inventing both those devout practitioners and their needs, but above all they were inventing themselves.