When we notice narratives in the Torah, which have no connection to the commandments, we are inclined to think they are entirely superfluous, or too lengthy... but this is only because we did not see these incidents with our own eyes... For miracles are only convincing to those who witnessed them; whilst for coming generations, who know them only from the account given by others, they become a story that might be denied. It is inconceivable that miracles would continue and last permanently for all generations. The greatest of the miracles described is the stay of the Israelites in the wilderness for 40 years... But G-d knew that in the future people might doubt the accuracy of the account of these miracles, in the same manner they doubt the accuracy of other narratives. They might think the Israelites stayed in the wilderness in a place not far from inhabited land... or that manna came down in those places naturally... To remove all these doubts and to firmly establish the accuracy of these miracles, Scripture enumerates all the stations, so that coming generations may see them, and learn the greatness of the miracles... For this very reason, Joshua cursed anyone who would ever build up Jericho... the effect of the miracle was to remain forever so anyone who would see the wall sunk in the ground would understand that it sank through a miracle.”

The problem the Rambam presents is very familiar. The initial astounding experience becomes a story, a tale to be repeated. And a story is an endangered species: it fades, it changes, it is forgotten and denied. Documentation and preservation doesn’t necessarily work. The billions of details, artifacts and names collected in places like Yad Vashem don’t prevent Holocaust deniers from persisting with their lies. The building that carries the verse from Isaiah (2:4) that comes immediately after “From Zion will the Torah come forth and the word of G-d from Jerusalem” (2:3), passed a resolution denying the historical connection between the Jews and Jerusalem.

Stories are vulnerable. Indeed, this is often a problem in courts: a testimony repeated and challenged can constantly change and lose credibility. Nevertheless, a serious problem for the judicial system might be the solution for us.

Let me explain. Here’s a story I heard from the Jewish educator Avraham Infeld. As a young man, Infeld came to the Hebrew University to study Physics, which was a family tradition. He spent two days at the Physics lab and on the third day he looked out of the window and saw a beautiful young lady going to the Jewish History department. “And so,” he says, “I got my BA in Jewish History instead of Physics.” The young lady eventually became the mother of his children, but at that point he needed to explain it to his very dominant father. He wrote a long aerogram and nervously awaited the response. When it finally arrived, he realized his father was very angry. Not at him though. His father was furious at the Hebrew University. He said: “Jews don’t have a history, Jews have a memory!”

I’m not sure the young Infeld understood this at the time. History might be a book on the shelf, Memory is the dynamic identity one deals with on a daily basis – identifying, debating, shaping who one is. (Infeld later said that his atheistic father used to say: “I’m not sure there is a G-d, I don’t know if we ever really were in Egypt, but the one thing I do remember clearly is that He took us out of there.”)

Remembering and retelling the story of Yetziat Mitzrayim is not only about telling the history. It’s about creating an identity. An identity that is dynamic and constantly relevant. “El Motziam miMitzrayim” is not in the past tense, ‘the G-d who redeemed them from Egypt;’ it is an ongoing present tense: the G-d who is continually redeeming them from Egypt. Every time we tell the story, it changes somewhat, integrating into our here and now, creating our current memory, shaping who we are.

1 Rambam, Guide for the Perplexed Part 3, 50.
2 A sheet of light paper folded and sealed to form a letter for sending by airmail.
3 Bamidbar 23:22.
4 Or HaChaim HaKadosh, Bamidbar 23:22.
Rabbanit Rachelle Fraenkel teaches Torah at midrashot in Israel