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Memorial Day Memory

This weekend we celebrate our nation's Memorial Day. It is a day we set apart to honor those who have served our great nation, and particularly those who have died in offering their service. It is humbling, indeed, to recognize that so many have perished in defending, among other things, our right to spend this weekend in whatever ways we freely choose, whether it will be to sail our boats, have our barbecues, or attend the house of worship of our choice. Memorial Day asks us to acknowledge the human cost at which our freedom has been achieved. It asks us to appreciate the significance of the service that still undergirds freedom. And Memorial Day asks us never to forget these things.

Several verses from the Biblical book of Deuteronomy came to mind on this Memorial Day, because they, too, discourage forgetfulness. They point to the fundamental importance of memory. Deuteronomy chapter 26 lists various commands that God's people must follow and several tasks they should undertake. It then directs that when the people have completed the tasks, they should declare to the Lord that they have neither transgressed nor forgotten any of God's commandments. Doesn't that strike you as curious? Why, after declaring that the appointed tasks have been completed, would the people need to tell God that they have not forgotten any? Doesn't it seem obvious that if you have done something, then you have not forgotten it?

Well, not according to the Jewish sage, Yehuda Aryeh, who said that one can both fulfill and forget a commandment at the same time. You see, Aryeh taught that forgetting actually means more than letting something slip totally from mind. It also means doing things that matter, but without giving them their proper due. That, too, is forgetfulness. So, when God's people are instructed to fulfill the commandments and not to forget, they are not being asked just to undertake the right actions, but also to perform them intentionally, mindfully, and meaningfully.

As we celebrate Memorial Day this weekend, we hope that we will not only follow the outward forms of remembrance, but that all we do in remembrance of the day will be done intentionally, mindfully, meaningfully. Let us remember the soldiers of Valley Forge who were hungry and cold, but determined to stand in support of a brand new dream of freedom in a new land. Let us remember all the soldiers, sailors, and flyers across the years that have defended their trenches, or braved a treacherous beach landing, or flown a patrol that guarded and protected others. Let us remember the thousands of our young men and women today who serve us overseas, and put themselves in harm's way as a result.

We are free to choose just how we will celebrate the Memorial Day holiday. But, however we celebrate, let us avoid the forgetfulness that fails to rightly honor the day. Let us remember with gratitude all the noble and selfless acts, by brave men and women, that secured our freedoms this day.