

# The Memory of the Beginning: At the Source of Identity...

**Piotr Petrykowski**

Nicolas Copernicus University, Faculty of Educational Sciences  
Mikalojaus Koperniko universitetas, Ugdymo mokslų fakultetas  
1 Lwowska Str., 87-100 Toruń, Poland  
Mobile +48 695 341 900  
ppet@umk.pl

**Abstract.** This article discusses the relationship between the development of individual identity and the culture of social memory. The starting point of the analysis is the hermeneutics of biblical texts referencing the postulate to remember and commemorate specific events in the history of the people of Israel. Such remembrance, however, is not understood solely as a memory of the past, but instead becomes the point of reference for the present and the future. The results of the analysis of the biblical texts are then referenced to education in contemporary social and cultural settings. The author points out that breaking with the past causes confusion and disorientation with regard to the reference points in the future and ultimately affects the meaning of the present, which – deprived of perspective – acquires its own autotelic value. The lack of the culture of memory also results in reducing the past to an idyllic form, illusionary rather than authentic, thus becoming a mere object of longing. It also reduces the future to the merely incidental, uprooted from the past events and thoughtlessly independent of the human being.

**Keywords:** memory, time, culture of memory, tradition, identity, freedom.

## Pradžios prisiminimas: prie tapatybės ištakų...

**Santrauka.** Straipsnyje aptariamas santykis tarp individo tapatybės vystymosi ir socialinės atminties kultūros. Analizės išeities taškas – bibliinių tekstų hermeneutika, perduodanti postulatą prisiminti ir minėti specifinius Izraelio tautos istorijos įvykius. Tačiau tokia atmintis suprastina ne tik kaip praeities prisiminimas, ji tampa atramos tašku dabarčiai ir ateičiai. Bibliinių tekstų analizės rezultatais remiamasi nagrinėjant ugdymą šiuolaikinėje socialinėje ir kultūrinėje situacijoje. Autorius nurodo, kad ryšių su praeitimi nutraukimas lemia painiavą ir dezorientaciją kalbant apie atramos taškus ateityje ir galiausiai paveikia dabarties prasmę, kuri, netekusi perspektyvos, įgyja savitikslių vertę. Atminties kultūros stoka suteikia praeičiai idilinę formą, veikia iliuzinę nei autentišką, tampančią ilgesio objektu. O ateitis redukuojama į tik atsitiktinę, nuo praeities įvykių atplėštą ir beatodairišką žmogiškosios būtybės laisvę.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** atmintis, laikas, atminties kultūra, tradicija, tapatybė, laisvė.

Received: 21/1/2019. Accepted: 02/2/2019

Copyright © 2019 Piotr Petrykowski. Published by Vilnius University Press

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

The name of the *Wailing Wall* – the *Western Wall* in Jerusalem – comes from the Jewish “habit” of mourning the ruined temple of which it was part, a temple that still awaits reconstruction. This name seems to signal some important feature of memory cultivation.

Memory and the command to remember, the word “Remember,” is one of the most common invocations in Jewish religion. And it is precisely from this tradition that Jesus of Nazareth had emerged.

“Remember” – recorded in the famous verses of the Book of Deuteronomy and the Book of Exodus. It is not in reference to one’s own experience that this command is uttered, but to a shared memory meant to constitute a particular foundation that underlies the formation of the community. In this sense, the tradition of remembering concerns not only one’s roots in the past, but certain community obligations in the present, which are a unique and vital bedrock for the future.

How often does one find in the Torah or in the Old Testament references to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, or Solomon? This is a special kind of symbolism of tradition, which is simultaneously an ongoing living source.

Yet, we also find these appeals in the New Testament. If I were to confine myself to the Torah, I would consider it legitimate to say that this beginning is the essence of Jewish identity. But it was this text that gave rise to Jesus of Nazareth. The tradition that created the foundations of contemporary Western culture is rooted in the Christian tradition, which itself grows out of the Judaic tradition.

In the Jewish tradition, memory is not an end in and of itself. It is a particular means of shaping the present. As *Abraham Joshua* Heschel, a Polish-born American rabbi and one of the leading Jewish theologians, writes, “the riches of a soul are stored up in its memory [...]. When we want to understand ourselves, to find out what is most precious in our lives, we search our memory. Memory is the soul’s witness to the capricious mind” (Heschel 1976: 162).

Memory in tradition has one more dimension – the dimension of the future. In Jewish liturgy (Krajewski 2004: 248 and n.), the sense of personal experience, so clearly defined during the Seder, is not just empty rhetoric. In their time, each participant ought to feel as if they were just about to leave Egypt. And yet, captivity is not a modern condition. Here, after all, the issue does not concern certain ritual reproductions, but the feeling of identifying with the beginning. This particular spiritual reality is important in the context of the future. As found in one of the midrashim, when Israel was about to receive the Torah, God demanded a guarantee that it would be respected. Mere promises and references to ancestors did not help. God only agreed when, instead of Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, the Israelites offered their own children as guarantors. Its future generations (Krajewski 2004: 250).

Another piece of context – during the Passover, Jews above all should remember not only the escape from Egypt, but the goal, too – the Promised Land. It happened in the past, but it has a dimension of the future, because it is associated with a long journey to a destination that was promised but difficult to reach.

How eloquent was Stefan Czarnowski, Polish sociologist and cultural historian, when he wrote that the present does not surrender its rights in the most traditionalist group. We are constantly changing our attitudes toward antiquity, still working on its transformation, on its becoming present. For antiquity endures solely as the present, while the present is a transformed, an updated antiquity, and a nascent future (Czarnowski 1948: 197).

Contemporary humanity seems to live simultaneously in a number of different times. On the one hand, thanks to memory, we exist in the past; in the present, too, since we experience the actuality of events taking place and thanks to an unceasing modification of “collective” memory. Finally, we live in the future, thanks to an ongoing perspective filled with visions and projections.

Time: omnipresent and integrally associated with place and space, with the whole of human life, both in the dimensions of the individual and of the species. Societies and their cultures, as well as individuals, differ not only in their conception of space, but also of time. This temporal caesura – past, present, and future. The past and the present are known to us; the future might cause anxiety and remains unrecognizable.

Time cannot be undone – this concept of a time machine allowing one to go back in time or to discover the unknown, it is a reflection of our longing for the passage of time, for the past, as well as our fear of the future.

Meanwhile, the present “is our experiential reality, the feeling point of existence, with its inchoate mixture of joy and sorrow. The future, in contrast, is a vision” (Tuan 2001: 197).

Is it not justified, this anxiety caused by a noticeable abatement in the present of the past – of tradition – in the shaping of the present and the future? Hence, should we not direct our thoughts especially toward the question of how we convey the past (tradition) to future generations? Is that not the result of this domination of faith in the power of knowledge and intellectual effort?

The past, time lived through and personally experienced, is internalized through a reconstruction of past events, thus preserving what was. The present, marked by the actuality of the moment, the freshness of sensations, works to preserve the status quo. The future, a journey into the unknown, wipes out existing arrangements, forces us to project a new reality (Kwiatkowska 2001: 58).

The future, associated with space understood as freedom and the unknown. Unless it is a vision of a promised land, a land “[which] will give you cities great and rich, cities you did not build, houses full of good you did not collect, wells you did not dig, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant” (Deut. 6, 10–11).

The ferocity of change against a return, a longing for the past. This rapidity of changes that underlie the concept of the human gap (Botkin et al. 1982: 48) – a distance between the complexity of the world and our ability to meet it. As human problems hidden in the complexity of global problems, they reflect all of our weaknesses and possibilities. Regardless of progress, of advancement in various fields, humans are incapable of fully understanding the environmental and personal changes of which they themselves are the cause, in consequence moving further and further away from the real world. The

ferocity of change, the possibility of nearly instantaneous movement in space – all these mechanisms and processes result in modern humans lacking the time necessary to establish roots; their experience and feeling of space becomes superficial. The modern human has less and less time for this process. The youth all the more so, particularly in relation to the perceived inevitability of moving in space for various, including economic, reasons.

Such ferocity of change – leading as it does to the perception that it happens too quickly, to the experience of losing control – often brings about the emergence of a longing for an idyllic past. At the same time, the cult of the past more and more often refers to illusion rather than authenticity. Defining the core of tradition as a memory of the past allows us to refer to Hannah Arendt's ideas, who noted that the problem of modern education consists in its natural resistance toward authority and tradition. Yet, this education takes place in a world “that is neither structured by authority nor held together by tradition” (Arendt 1961: 195). It is not difficult to see that the present does not create the conditions for maintaining fidelity to memory, for reproducing the psychological truth and the authenticity of the experience of time.

Probably unlike ever before, one can see in the processes of globalization and under its influence on the changing world a strong pressure from diverse interests (political, religious, ethnic, cosmopolitan) on the memory of individuals and of social communities. In consequence, we are dealing with a degradation of human memory, and we can clearly notice “the shaky proportions between real memory – faithful yet distorted – and memory that is unreal, fictitious, often false” (Kwiatkowska 2001: 59). The phenomenon of memory destruction is so powerful that today we even speak of a typology of false memory: sentimental (“whitewashing”) memory, traumatic (“obfuscating”) memory, as well as deliberate oblivion, or forced amnesia. Finally, there is also an intentional forgetting of something uncomfortable, deployed with the intention of erasing uncomfortable events.

Or perhaps the youth giving themselves over to globalization, to superficiality – a point so frequently raised and critiqued – is not, on the other hand, an attempt to conceal the most intimate place possible: one's own self? For the modern world of adults has forced them to publicize matters both important and trivial, personal and intimate. Perhaps there is not enough time for many young people to establish roots? Hence, this place which is especially protected and most closely guarded as intimate, private, becomes the self, its own place “within itself.”

Perhaps this is how a young person wants to protect these treasured rarities, as Polish philosopher Barbara Skarga writes: “the most precious, most valuable, or the most terrifying memories, reluctantly shared, as if only with me. To me, they are unforgettable, something that deeply binds me to the past” (Skarga 1997: 231). A young person, unlike an adult, no longer has the time or opportunity to experience such intimate places without the danger of subjecting them to public exposure. Thus, as noted by Polish educator Henryka Kwiatkowska, all the more fervently will he or she protect and hide from the world this place within oneself, in which the self can be true and honest (Kwiatkowska 2001: 60).

Perhaps then the memory of the beginning, of time that has passed, is especially meaningful. Is this not why the call is repeated in such a special way: "Remember"? Particular things and events that one "should remember."

"So that you may remember the day of your departure from Egypt for all the days of your life" (Deut. 16, 3). It is a reference to a difficult experience, but above all an underscoring of an extremely important moment, an important breakthrough. Yes, you were a slave, you were in a difficult position, you were entangled in a series of difficult and painful moments. But here you can – you should – believe that a day is possible when you will escape slavery, at which time this experience will become merely a thing of the past. Merely? No, because in your memory you ought to keep the facts of your release, the fact of leaving. This fact happened a long time ago, yet it endures, its consequences existing in the present (Krajewski 2004: 259).

An exodus is, after all, a kind of archetype of regaining, or rather obtaining, freedom, despite the enormous resistance by earthly powers. Egypt was undoubtedly a world power, a mighty supremacy. How many trials, marked by the plagues, did Moses undertake to convince and to persuade the pharaoh. Terrible and severe trials, yet ultimately ineffective – such was the pharaoh's power, so great was the addiction embedded in captivity. Thus, the memory of leaving is the memory of regaining freedom. At the same time, in our modern pronouncement, this exodus from Egypt can also signify the possibility of coming to terms with limitations, blockages, including psychological ones, limiting our view of the world, restricting our perception. "Remember the day of the exodus" is also a call to free oneself from these restrictions. Contained in it might also be this call: "Yes, it is possible. You were a slave, and yet you regained your freedom."

It is also a reference to the future, because, although it has not been said explicitly, it was, after all, not just a way out of Egypt. It was a way "out" but also a way "toward."

The memory of the beginning, the memory of the past – the treasury of tradition. Where am I in relation to it? Is there a place for rarities – treasures of intimacy, the greatest and most lasting foundation of my identity, my most deeply protected experiences? So profoundly strong, so deeply experienced, that words tremble in fear. "Be on guard and look after yourself, lest you forget the things that your eyes saw, so that they do not escape your heart for all the days of your life, but make them known to your children and your children's children" (Deut. 4, 9–10).

In our lives, in the life of each of us, of great importance is not only memory, but also the ability to forget – sometimes naturally, other times intentionally. It is understandable that if something ceases to matter to us, if something is "unnecessary" or unobtainable, it becomes forgotten. Yet, sometimes we forget on purpose, in a way described by Heidegger as an escape of a being prior to its proper existence (Heidegger 1977: 371). We suppress, we eject from our memory something that is – or sometimes seems to be – uncomfortable to us, something that torments and worries us.

Sometimes forgetfulness seems to be an enormous grace, a gift through which we can – or so it seems to us – regain our strength to be able to be, to continue to be. At other times, however, this intentional forgetting may lead to a degradation, a distortion

of ourselves. Intentional forgetting: the desire to erase from our life certain events that we define or perceive – whether rightly or not – as inconvenient. Our memory becomes unreliable then. We can “whitewash” certain events in sentimental memory. Then, those memories that have imprisoned us in patterns of behavior take on a sense of stability. As it sometimes happens, wrongly so.

There are many possible paths leading to the destruction of our human memory. One of them is a clash with a certain surge of external pressures, when, under the influence of many factors – social opinion, political correctness – our personal memory is suppressed. Yet, I do not know whether another path of memory destruction, one that is an expression of life’s conveniences, is becoming more dominant today. A particular kind of internal “pressure” granting us self-permission for a particular kind of rationalization of our own memory resources. We eliminate certain threads, we weaken others, still others are subject to demonization, and, finally, some acquire an altogether new meaning.

In a special way, these two paths of memory destruction can sometimes coalesce, and, through their synergetic effect, become simply overwhelming. Are we not justified in our fear that modern humanity can thus lead to self-degradation? For both of these mechanisms, both paths can lead to maximizing one’s own grievances while demonizing the alleged faults in others and vice versa. This is a mere semblance of constructing oneself, which may, however, turn against the person. Has not our age become an epoch of degraded memory (Petrykowski 2003: 136)? Are we not long overdue, therefore, to restore the meaning and proper importance of many crucial concepts: love, responsibility, honesty? We have devalued these, as well as many others, manipulating their meaning at will. The letter kills; the spirit enlivens.

One more thing: do these imperatives to remember not turn our attention to what, after all, is no longer revelatory? It is high time to reflect on the pedagogy of taming the experience of the past – of tradition – through the present, for the sake of the future.

It is becoming increasingly clear that there is a regression, an almost complete elimination of the influence of past experience on the entire balance of experience that is evident in contemporary generations. The past plays a less and less important role in shaping the image of the present, the form of life, and thus its participation in creating the image of a future world is smaller, almost negligible.

Do we not also, in bringing up our youth, face a new pedagogy of constructing new principles for a current, “correct” life, bypassing references to tradition as a source, as essential material? Does this not lead to the dominance of the principle of “living for the moment,” of eliminating the need for perspective? Where targeted, forward-looking activities are reduced in favor of reactionary ones?

Perhaps it is nevertheless worth it to take a moment to reflect on the rapid progress of civilization.

In the Gospel of Luke, we read about a poor widow who had put into the temple treasury more than anyone else: two coins, or one penny. “Truly, I say to you: this poor widow has thrown in more than others [...] out of her poverty she put in all she had to live on” (Luke 21, 1–4). How do we face the ideal of the poor widow, sharing with

others our entire livelihood? Perhaps we should not try to measure up to this ideal at all. She put in two coins; one penny. Is the ideal widow not the content of one man's two baskets: memory and love? The ideal of the widow is the richness of experience, of tradition. Is this not the wealth of which it is said above? The ideal of the widow is also the wealth of one's own heart.

When it comes to loving with your whole heart, you can only love yourself, taking care of the glitter of everyday life, which it is even difficult to call "life." Yet it is possible to love with your whole heart also what is not you, and those who are not you: your neighbors, your Others.

Give your heart, give your everything. But why love? Why be sensitive to the neighbor, the Other? Besides, what does it mean to "be sensitive?" In interpersonal relations, we have used language to liken ourselves to the Biblical tower. Nothing is fashionable; it is trendy, on top. No one is good; if anything, "the best." Examples abound; here is one more. People are no longer emotional, affectionate; they are sensitive. The paradox is that sensitive are not only people, but also government documents, legal mandates, the latest model of a "cool" car. From man as subject to every object.

All that remains is the pain that people did not appreciate this love but fell in love only with themselves. In order to soothe this pain, we escape to parallel worlds. For example: how could one deprive oneself, on the eve of the Feast of Saint Andrew, of the pleasure of pouring wax? Jolly good fun, this tradition – in its own particular way, we will find a more or less reasonable explanation for the presence of this and other customs: wreaths on Midsummer's Eve, shoes on Saint Catherine's. From time immemorial, and since the patrons are saintly, consent is spiritual.

"With a grain of salt" – we will claim reading the horoscope, here or there, sending a text message with our birth date, we will call the medium. Does it not seem fascinating, to know your future? Finding the answers to those nagging questions: will I get a raise? Will I meet Prince Charming? Will I ...? Will I ...? Will I ...?

Although we shudder recalling the image of the dark cavern in which Macbeth speaks(?) to the witches, how tempting becomes his appeal:

I conjure you by that which you profess –  
 Howe'er you come to know it – answer me. ...  
 Answer me to what I ask you  
 (W. Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Act IV, Scene I).

The abundance of titles filling bookstores, the multitude of magazines, sometimes difficult to come by, the variety of media advertisements and internet sites confirm that, like the ancient Greeks, we would gladly visit the modern substitute for the Temple of Apollonia to find out what Pythia, sat in the adytum, had to tell us. We no longer have to travel for months through the Gorges of Parnassus to reach Delphi. Just around the corner, not on some rock in the shadow of an olive grove, but in the privacy of velvet curtains, filled with the fragrance of Sri Sai Baba's incense. And instead of gifts for the priest, all you need is a banknote, or even just a credit card.

Things can be even simpler than that. We are tempted by Australian television writer and producer Rhonda Byrne's *Secret*, thanks to which "you will understand, how to have everything, to be everything, and to do everything that you desire. You will learn who you really are. You will see the true magnificence that awaits you in life" (Byrne 2007).

Encouraging are motivational speaker Lisa Nichols's words: "Command the Universe. Let it know what you want. The universe will answer your thoughts" (Byrne 2007). Does that sound like a spell? Because, in fact, it is. On this spell rests magic. The request does not matter, only the act of will, a firm demand, an order. Magic is an ancient skill of supposedly mastering the forces of nature with the help of spells, gestures, and various other activities. Magic looks for ways to take over the supernatural forces and command them to act – that is its secret.

It is enough to focus on the acquisition of some part of the huge amount of information that we call knowledge. Or perhaps it happens differently. Perhaps knowledge, just like contemporary culture, is similar to life. Life, which is like Medea: all species, left without any restrictions, spontaneously increase their numbers beyond the limit determined by nutritional resources, which increases the rate of mortality...

Is this human gap not visible also in relation to axiological transformations? It is becoming easier to notice the process of privatizing religions or new forms of religiosity, often oriented "therapeutically," aimed at "helping" in surviving the day-to-day reality, mitigating stress, anxiety, existential emptiness, aimed at giving us a sense of security and of regaining control. So what if Joseph Ratzinger warns us that the contemporary Tempter "merely suggests that we opt for the reasonable decision, that we choose to give priority to a planned and thoroughly organized world, where God may have his place as a private concern but must not interfere in our essential purposes" (Ratzinger 2007: 41).

This new religiosity, with its impression of being able to control the world, strengthens the sense of reality in the words of *The Secret's* ideologist, Joe Vitale: "The universe will begin to adapt, in order to achieve what you desire" (Byrne 2007). The Tempter is not so intrusive as to incite evil. He only persuades: "turn these stones into bread." Temptation does not lead us straight into evil. That would be too easy. "Temptation creates the impression of showing us something better: give up your illusions already and put all your energy into improving the world" (Byrne 2007: 37–38).

The individual approaches this under the pretext of authentic realism – reality is only that which is tangible: power and bread. Press "enter," enter your "pin," order your "cloned" descendant, fulfil your fantasies, "command the Universe."

How easy it is to be tempted – if you exist, jump off the rock, order the angels to save you. Save yourself. After all: click and all will be given to you. Log in and you will be heard. Simply: "I have talent. You can dance."

Perhaps ultimately it is worth taking a moment to reflect on the rapid progress of civilization? Perhaps it is the wealth of knowledge accumulated in the unmanageably vast amount of information that gives us the impression that we have found ourselves in a desert filled with an infinitely large number of grains of sand. The desert seems to be an infinite space, as in Newton's absolute space.

The “human gap” is the distance between the growing complexity of the world and our ability to confront it. It feels like a desert.

The word *desert* evokes associations with terrifying emptiness. For many of us, the view of the desert as emptiness is permanently embedded in our minds. It is hard to disagree that this image is not false. After all, the desert is not as vibrant with life as many other places we know (Skarga 2002: 162). Although the desert is not dead, either. Only our knowledge, or sometimes a lack thereof – a certain stereotype – causes us to miss all the different forms of life that really exist in the desert. The desert: a word associated with emptiness. It is a terrifying wasteland where people feel lost and terrified.

On the other hand, the desert is also a sanctuary for refugees and the persecuted; it is a place of spiritual renewal. Hagar, Moses, and Elijah all flee to the desert, where they meet God. Jesus of Nazareth also seeks loneliness in the desert. There, he also resists Satan’s temptations.

Is the desert just a wasteland through which the people of Israel wandered for forty years? A wasteland, where your possessions do not matter the least bit? Here, no plans make sense; nothing offers protection. You have no assurance that you will survive long enough to see another day. You are left alone in an expanse that terrifies and intimidates, left alone with your suffering and joy.

The most cruel thing about the desert are the traces leading to nowhere, alien signs that repeat themselves, creating mazes without an exit. “Nothing you see can serve as a signpost. Every dune, every bush that you seem to have remembered, that has been here just a short while ago, is now gone” (Skarga 2002: 162).

Traces encountered in the desert do not lead to nowhere; they often turn out to be the same ones seen before. There is no point of reference. These traces, these signs cannot even be situated in time. They do not refer to the past or to the future. There is only now. Is this the present? The present endures only when it refers to the past and aims toward the future. In the desert, time seems to have stopped (Levinas 1987: 48).

However, the desert does create one particular experience. It creates and shows something extremely important. It is in the desert that desire is born (Skarga 2002: 166), awakening our expectation that we will find the right way, that we will reach its end.

Is it not so that every morning, every day in the desert is spent gazing as if you were seeing the world for the first time?

Is the desert therefore a mere wasteland through which the “chosen people” wandered for forty years? Is it not also a place that requires openness to everything that surrounds you? Is it not also a place that demands from us absolute honesty, even at the price of anxiety that we are bound to pay (Kushner 1994: 22)?

Desire is an openness toward infinity, a challenge, a journey toward the future (Tischner 1990: 36). Desire arises from the present as an expression of a protest against it. Desire for the Promised Land arose from this protest against the present, against the suspended time of the desert. “Desire has no home, it never returns, it is doomed to abandon every past and every present” (Tischner 1990: 36). The same desert that gives rise to longing, just like desire grows out of the present as a conflict with it.

After all, longing calls for a return to places well-known, places already experienced, often in idealized memories. “It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert” (Exod. 14, 12).

This peculiar duality, Desire as a reversal of Longing; the former calls toward the future, the latter pulls toward the past.

Undoubtedly, Egypt at the time was a highly civilized country, giving a sense of stability and security “where we sat in front of pots of meat and ate bread until full” (Exod. 14, 12). However, one of the foundations of this civilization was enslavement. Does this fact not prompt us to ask a question, or rather to express doubt?

Of course, slavery was characteristically natural in that context. But is not freedom the first commandment? As Emmanuel Levinas points out, each one of our values is conditioned on freedom, an essential feature of mankind even when facing the sacred. Freedom cannot be taken even by a sacramental divine power. Such a power injures, inflicts pain and suffering.

Note that the Israelites did not fall into Egyptian slavery as a result of aggression on the part of the Pharaoh’s forces. The Israelites went to Egypt willingly. Yes, hunger and deprivation resulting from drought, a fear of hunger, forced them to relocate to Egypt. However, they could have simply stocked up and returned to their homeland, to survive. They accepted the Pharaoh’s invitation, Joseph’s invitation. Egypt, with its civilization, gave an impression of security, prosperity. Yet, at the same time, it became a kind of addiction, a kind of bondage. In the end, it was difficult to stave off. A longing for Egypt revealed itself time and again in dramatic ways. No one set out on this journey willingly (Kushner 1994: 25). Even Moses shuddered and resisted.

“The history of humankind can be a life story of a single person” (Kushner 1994: 98). Do not many of us – as groups, societies, but also as individuals – decide to go to Egypt, the land of prosperity and high civilization? And how often do we fall into slavery? Do not ask about the names of these lands or countries. You yourself could name a number of them. However, add to this institutions, corporations, concerns... Add to this the highly civilized “lands” that, for centuries or longer, have been dripping with wealth, including those that are concealed under the ideas of equality, of freedom. It is in the name these ideas, however, that they command conformity, submission, and enslavement.

What was – what could have been – the purpose of wondering the desert for so many years? Getting to the Promised Land? Then why did they not travel along the coast, straight toward Gaza? Look at the map; it’s the shortest path. What would – or could – have happened if the Israelites did not go toward the Sinai desert, but straight to Gaza? What if they had not experienced the desert? Was then Sinai necessary?

If they travelled along the coast, they would have encountered the Philistines, and perhaps retreated back to Egypt; the path was close and could have easily been used to return. Was there not a fear that after experiencing relative stability in Egypt, on the way toward the Promised Land – forgotten nevertheless for 430 years – the first defeat, the first obstacle that could have been a clash with the Philistines, might have caused the

Israelites to turn back (Krajewski 2004: 74)? How obvious it is to return via the easiest, shortest, or the most direct route.

“The history of humankind can be a life story of a single person” (Krajewski 2004: 98). Consequently, the life story of each person is simultaneously the history of humankind. Was then the purpose of the long journey through the desert the birth of a new generation, a generation of free people? People who will leave behind whatever they find unnecessary? Acquired customs, alien traditions? Wealth, also not needed in the desert? It is no secret, after all, that the Israelites set off from Egypt with tremendous riches, spoils even (Krajewski 2004: 71; Kushner 1994: 26).

Was this journey, this wandering through the desert also not an opportunity, a method of creating the possibility of finding one’s own way? To the Promised Land? On the other side of the desert?

The desert, among many desires, also gives rise to the desire for a community; a community with specific ties and relationships; a community whose essence is founded on heritage and tradition.

Because they wandered through the desert, they were never to share in whatever the tale of the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey, was meant to portend.

Is the answer found in the farewell song of Moses, describing this and the future world, containing references to the past and to the future? In this song I discover an expression of trust and a call to trust in a better future, a future that does not exist without the experience of the present. The point, thus, concerns meaning and hope. Where are we to base our trust, our hope for a better world, this trust? Perhaps on what conjoins the community – on the tradition that co-created the image of the sense of the world and of history. Does not what we do make particular sense when it proliferates beyond our lands, our society?

Is everything that happens to us in our lives really just a sham, a trifle of no importance? Is this only a “vestibule” to the real world? But does not what is most important, most genuine happen right here and now? Is there a separate “other” world (Buber 1960: 30)?

The desert is thus a place filled with different meanings. It is a place of purification, of liberation; it is a way of life, a place where desire is born, and an expression of longing. It is also a place of temptation and bewilderment.

The experience of the desert becomes close to the experience of the anonymity of existence, to the existence “without existents” (Levinas 1987: 46). The present welded to the past is on the whole the heritage of this past; it renews nothing. What endures is still the same present or the same past. A memory of any kind would already be a liberation from this past. Here, time does not emerge from anywhere, does not push anything away, does not contain anything.

The life story of one person can be the history of all humankind.

And you? Why did you go to Egypt? Because after what seemed to you like years of prosperity, hunger began to set in? And in Egypt, not in your own land, you found a sense of stability and fullness?.. Until you became a slave to this sluggish stability, this sense of

security and lack of the future... But when you went out in the desert, because you had heard about Canaan, why did you simply travel along the coast only to turn back upon your first encounter with the Philistines? Why did you not last long enough to hear... Listen... Go to the land that I showed you, to the land of Canaan. To the Promised Land. And maybe then the world would become a better place? A mirage, this, or a desire...?

## References

- Arendt, H. 1961. *Between Past and Future. Six Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Viking Press.
- Botkin, J. W., Elmandjra, M., Malitza, M. 1982. *Uczyć się – bez granic. Jak zewrzeć “lukę ludzką”?* Raport Klubu Rzymkiego. Warszawa: PWN.
- Buber, M. 1960. *The Way of Man: According to the Teachings of Hasidism*. Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill Publications.
- Byrne, R. 2007. *The Secret / Sekret*. Translated by Jan Kobat. Warszawa: Nowa Proza.
- Tora. Pięcioksiąg Mojżesza*. 2009. Translated by Cyilkow. Warszawa: Austeria.
- Czarnowski, S. 1948. *Kultura*. Warszawa: Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza „Książka”.
- Heidegger, M. 1977. *Sein und Zeit*, in *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann.
- Heschel, A. J. 1976. *Man is not Alone. A Philosophy of Religion*. New York: Ferrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Krajewski, S. 2004. *54 komentarze do Tory dla nawet najmniej religijnych spośród nas*. Kraków: Austeria.
- Kwiatkowska, H. 2001. Czas, miejsce, przestrzeń – zaniedbane kategorie pedagogiczne, in A. Nalaskowski, K. Rubacha (Eds.). *Pedagogika u progu trzeciego tysiąclecia*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika.
- Kushner, L. 1994. *Miód ze skały*. Translated by Z. Wiese. Poznań: Rebis.
- Levinas, E. 1987. *Time and the Other, and Additional Essays*. Translated by R. A. Cohen. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press.
- Petrykowski, P. 2003. *Edukacja regionalna. Problemy podstawowe i otwarte*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika.
- Pismo Święte Starego i Nowego Testamentu. Biblia Tysiąclecia*. 2002. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Pallottinum.
- Ratzinger, J. 2007. *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*. Translated by A. J. Walker. New York: Doubleday.
- Tischner, J. 1990. *Filozofia dramatu. Wprowadzenie*. Paris: Editions Du Dialogue.
- Tuan, Y. F. 2001 [1977]. *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Skarga, B. 1997. *Tożsamość i różnica. Eseje metafizyczne*. Kraków: Znak.
- Skarga, B. 2009. *Ślad i obecność*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.