

QUESTIONS WE MUST ASK

INTRODUCTION

Rodney Dangerfield arrives at the Heavenly Gates and is asked:

"Tell me what you did in life that makes you worthy of coming in."

Rodney says, "That's easy. I made people laugh."

The Angel responds, "God gave you your looks, I want to know what YOU did."

We've all heard jokes like these about the afterlife. Let me share one more:

Three nurses appeared at the pearly gates. The first one is asked, "What did you do on earth to deserve admittance."

She answered, "I was a birthing room nurse. I helped bring hundreds of precious babies into the world."

"Enter!" she was told.

The second nurse is asked the same question.

She replied, "I was a trauma unit nurse. I helped save hundreds of lives of people involved in terrible accidents."

"Enter!" she is told. And now it is time for the third nurse.

"I worked for an HMO," she admitted. "Over the years I saved my company hundreds of thousands of dollars by refusing extended care to people who were trying to bilk the system."

"You may enter!" she is told.

"You really mean it?" asked the nurse incredulously.

"Yes," came the answer. "You've been pre-approved for a three day stay"

There are many jokes about the questions that we will be asked as a test for entrance to heaven. By the way, as I did a search on the internet I was surprised how many of the punch lines involve lawyers. And since I made a promise many years ago not to tell lawyer jokes I wasn't left with too many choices.

Many of you already know, that most humor deals with issues that are so serious that by their nature we must make jokes about them. We must find laughter because we don't want to deal seriously with them. What is our ultimate fate? What is the true meaning of our lives? How do we find true fulfillment?

On Rosh Hashanah we begin to ask the big questions. Like:

Did my behavior during the past year reflect the kind of person I want to be?

Am I using my God-given gift of time appropriately?

Have I wronged people either intentionally or unintentionally?

JEWISH QUESTIONS

Many years ago a non-Jewish person called me who was interested in converting to Judaism. I felt like Hillel in the famous Talmudic story when the pagan asked him to explain all of the Torah while standing on one foot. Many of you know Hillel's answer, "that which is hateful to you don't do unto others." But this caller was asking me to explain about Judaism and how does one distill a four thousand year old tradition into one sentence or even one paragraph? So I told him the following: "if you want THE answers, those are hard to come by, but if you like to ask questions and will enjoy the process of searching for the answers then we have a religion for you." You're probably

wondering what happened to the caller. Well, he began attending services here and eventually converted... and then a couple of years later started rabbinical school and now Rabbi John Crites-Borak is an ordained rabbi working in the Jewish community.

I love the fact that we are a tradition that asks questions. There are religious traditions that discourage questions, believing that questioning religion undermines faith. But we have always been a “People of the Question.” After all it was God who asked the first question of the Torah when Adam and Eve hid after eating of the fruit and God called out “Ayeka”- “Where are you?” And from this logistical question of location, the rabbis turned it into an existential question of the soul. On Rosh Hashanah we ask ourselves the very first question phrased in the first person, “Where am I?”

Questions have become such an important part of our tradition that we are famous for answering a question with another question.

“How are you today? is answered with “how do you think I feel?”

What did your doctor say?” is answered with “do you think she would be honest with me?”

The second question asked by God is answered with a question. After Cain kills Abel, God comes to Cain and questions him, “where is your brother?” What does Cain answer, “am I my brother’s keeper?”

Cain avoids the truth with a question. But we often do that as well. When we ask ourselves, “Is this the right thing to do?” sometimes we answer with another question like “doesn’t everyone else do the same thing?”

Questions are good if we are willing to answer them honestly. But if we hide behind another question, then we have a problem. There can be no introspection, there can be no self-evaluation when we answer a question with another question.

ULTIMATE QUESTIONS

More than fifteen hundred years ago the rabbis came up with a set of ultimate questions to evaluate our lives. Recorded in the Talmud, Raba said, When man is led in for judgment he is asked five questions:

1. Were you honest in your business dealings?
2. Did you fix times for learning?
3. Were you dedicated to family?
4. Did you believe in redemption? Namely did you have hope in life?
5. Did you use your wisdom for a purpose?

These are great questions to evaluate our lives.

HONEST DEALINGS

Were you honest in your business dealings? The rabbis knew that a true test of character was how people handled themselves in business. At one level, there was an understanding that the well being of society hinged on the trust people had in business transactions. Imagine if we were constantly suspicious of the people we were doing business with. Honest business dealings are essential for social order. In the diamond world, multi-million dollar deals are conducted on a hand shake. Being dishonest in business is the first way for our lives to be judged unworthy.

DID YOU FIX TIMES FOR LEARNING

Did you fix times for learning? Too often adults conclude their studying when they finish college or graduate school. Too few adults continue to take classes or read books that deal with real learning. The rabbis knew that studying, in particular Torah study, was an important part of our personal journey. Throughout the millennia many rabbis were also physicians or noted scholars in astronomy and mathematics, because they understood that knowledge was a key to understanding the ways of the world. When we study our minds continue to develop and so do we.

WERE YOU DEDICATED TO FAMILY?

Were you dedicated to family? We all know the importance of family. We also know how easy it is to take family for granted. There is of course, the famous quote that at the end of life no will say "I should have spent more time at the office," but many will say they should have spent more time with their family. According to Jewish tradition our lives will be judged, in part, by our dedication to our family.

DID YOU BELIEVE IN REDEMPTION? NAMELY DID YOU HAVE HOPE IN LIFE?

Did you believe in redemption? In the Talmud and later sources this is understood to be a belief in the messiah, but in a larger context the messiah is really about a sense of hope for the future. The messianic era is portrayed as a better world. I believe this question is asking us about our desire to make the world a better place. In our society it is easy to be a consumer, but what about being a contributor? In what ways do we strive to make a difference in the world? Tomorrow I will be speaking a bit more about whether we can really make a difference in the world.

DID YOU USE YOUR WISDOM FOR A PURPOSE?

Finally, did you use your wisdom for a purpose? As mentioned earlier wisdom is not for its own sake. The Jewish question has always been how we use our knowledge to make a difference. Knowledge of science, mathematics, economics, even poetry can be used for a purpose. Whether it is a cure for cancer or inspiring someone through poetry, when we use our wisdom for a tangible good, we remind ourselves that we are made in the image of God.

OTHER QUESTIONS

Rabbi Rafael of Barshad (19th century Europe) had a different concern about the questions he would be asked. He said: "When I get to Heaven, they'll ask me, why didn't you learn more Torah? And I'll tell them that I'm slow-witted. Then they'll ask me, why didn't you do more kindness for others? And I'll tell them that I'm physically weak. Then they'll ask me, why didn't you give more tzedakah? And I'll tell them that I didn't have enough money. But then they'll ask me: If you were so stupid, weak and poor, why were you so arrogant? And for that I won't have an answer."

APPRECIATION

In another attempt to understand how we will be judged in this world we are told that God will hold us accountable for all the permitted pleasures of this world that we did not avail ourselves of.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, one of the great rabbinic leaders of Germany in the 19th century was in frail health understood one question to be “did you take advantage of all the beauty and goodness that I put into the world and that life has to offer?” Toward the end of his life, he decided to go on vacation in the Swiss Alps. This seemed like a somewhat strange and impulsive thing for such an eminent rabbi to do. So his students asked him - why are you making this trip? His response was: I have this feeling that after I die, and I am called in before God, I'm sure one of the questions that God will ask me is: So nu, Shimshon - you lived in Germany, so close... did you ever get a chance to see my Alps? Did you take advantage of all the beauty and goodness I put into the world? Did you have a chance to see my Alps!

Did we fully appreciate the God-given gifts of this world during the past year? As you know I constantly deal with the most difficult issues of congregants lives. This past year I officiated at the funerals of two women who left behind eleven year old children and a twenty-three year old congregant who was the only fatality in a car driven by a friend who is now being charged with a crime

Every day is a blessing. Every breath is a blessing. Do we fully appreciate these blessings?

YOM KIPPUR AS DEATH

The philosopher, Franz Rosensweig taught that on Yom Kippur, we actually rehearse death. We don't eat or drink, nor do we partake of the bodily pleasures of bathing and sex. At the end of Neilah dressed in our kittel- the burial shroud, we recite the words of the vidui- the death confessional. Understanding the unpredictable nature of illnesses and accidents and the uncertainties of life, we are prepared for death. But the power and beauty of Yom Kippur is that we survive. When the shofar blows at the very end of the service we realize that we have survived. We are alive.

In Rosensweig's model we live out an entire life from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur. After all, on Rosh Hashanah we celebrate our creation. In ten days we live a mini-life asking ourselves those most important questions.

Have we lived our life with purpose?

Do we deserve to live another year?

CONCLUSION

Tonight we begin to ask the questions, the most difficult questions about what our lives are about.

The curse of being human, rather than any other animal on earth, is the obligation to consider whether we are proud of what our lives look like. We must deal with issues of satisfaction and fulfillment. This is what makes us different than the other animals. When we don't ask questions we fail to live up to our human potential.

The Yamim Noraim are a profound time of our personal development and evolution. The Yamim Noraim are designed to create conflict where no conflict yet exists. Most of us are so busy living our lives that we don't have the luxury of evaluating it. And even when conflict does arise we often ignore it, hoping that it will go away. On Yom Kippur we look for the answers to our searching questions. But there are no answers without questions. Tonight we begin asking the questions that we fear most, but we know we must ask.

May these Aseret Yemai Teshuvah- these Ten Days of Repentance be filled with the most important questions that will help you find the answers and find the life you desire.