

Questions and Questioning

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As a longtime Beth El member and a longtime family physician, I was thinking on this, the last day of Passover, all the possibilities to discuss. After all, the themes of Passover are indeed unlimited. The Passover story spans slavery to freedom, action to advocacy, plaques to policies. So, to decide on a theme, I did what every wise Jew would do- I asked my Facebook friends for suggestions to the following question: What question would *you* choose to address if you had the chance to talk with the congregation?

I received many great suggestions:

Can we do more to assist those struggling with Immigration?

How do we advocate more for our LGBTQ brothers and sisters?

How do we speak out with a strong voice against anti-Semitism?

Why don't we talk more about positive things happening?

What is our personal and intestinal integrity in the 21st century?

Maybe talk about active listening?

What about empathy, courage, advocacy, engagement or compassion?

These suggestions were excellent (though one congregant sardonically suggested that I remember Mark Twain's advice that no matter what I talked about, make sure it had a good beginning, a good end, and nothing in between), and while I know I would want to have the *answers* to such inquiries, I am not sure that I would know more than any of you about any of these; but what I did notice was that the suggestions shared one common denominator. They were excellent questions that made me think more than I would have otherwise, not just about the issue, but about the people suggesting the topics. I also think these questions, thoughtfully proposed on Facebook and at the Shabbat dinner table over several weeks, were better than any answer I could give, as they sought a spirit of open, personal engagement with one another.

Questions are truly powerful. As a doctor, I know the power of asking questions, as I never know the cause of a symptom before I start talking with a patient. The old adage that I was taught in medical school about making a diagnosis was to take a history with lots of questions. If the diagnosis was still in doubt, then perform a physical exam. If it was still in doubt, then I should go back and take a better history- asking more questions. The Harvard Business review states that research on asking questions shows they improve our emotional intelligence, unlock learning and improve interpersonal bonding.

Can there be too many questions? Some think so. When I was a student in elementary school, every year at parent conferences, my teachers would say to my parents: "Adam is a good student but he asks *too* many questions". Recently, I asked two people I was playing golf- somewhere around the 13th hole, what did they want to do differently in

their lives in the next 12 months- and they said “Why would you ask such a question in a perfectly good round of golf”?

What I would like to share with you briefly are some thoughts about questions, questions that involve Pesach, today’s Parsha, and Jewish ritual. My punchline is simple: asking questions is quintessentially Jewish, but asking good questions is a Jewish path to learning, a Jewish path to creating stronger bonds between ourselves, our families and our faith, and a Jewish path to living a more purposeful life.

We have all heard the story of the Nobel Prize-winning physicist Isidore Rabi who explained how he became a scientist. When he would come home from school, his mother did not ask him, “What did you learn today?” but, rather, “Izzy, did you ask a good question today?” Edgar Bronfman, a Canadian/American businessman and philanthropist, who contributed mightily to the rebirth of Jewish life in the last 40 years, once said that “To be Jewish is to ask questions.” Many Jewish books involve questions, including: *Why bad things happen to good people*; *The Jewish book of questions*; *Tough questions Jews ask*; *The Jewish book of why*; *Why be Jewish*; and perhaps my two favorites- *What is a Jew and Jew, Got questions?*

The Hebrew word for questions is ‘She-ela’, the root of which are the Hebrew letters of Shin, Aleph and Lamed. This same word is the root letters for the Hebrew words ‘Hashe’ela’ or borrowing, and ‘Letash’el’ or to interrogate, to question. Thus, asking questions Jewishly is both a legal imperative and yet it can be as difficult as it is to ask others to make a loan.

On most Shabbat mornings, our Mishnah Class studies Talmudic text, where we raise a series of questions as we try to understand the full meaning. ‘What did the Rabbis’ or author of the text intend to say?’ ‘Who was the author?’ ‘Is this a general principle we are studying or a specific one?’ ‘What relevance does it have for us today?’ I have studied with fellow members and Rabbi Sager for many years, and I know that nothing makes Rabbi Sager more animated than when he says: “Wow, what a great question” as he begins to expound on multiple possibilities.

One Talmudic discussion about questions occurs in Bava Metziah, the second of three Talmudic tractates on property law and ‘Damages’. In Chapter 3, the text says “Now it is obvious that if he [the bailee] declared, ‘I will not pay,’ and then said, ‘I will pay’ — then he has said, ‘I will pay’. But what if he [first] declared, ‘I will pay.’ and then declared, ‘I will not pay’: do we say, he has retracted; or perhaps, he intended keeping his word, and was merely repulsing him [the bailor]? [Again,] if he declared, ‘I will pay,’ and died, whilst his sons declared, ‘We will not pay,’ what then? Do we keep to their father’s word, but merely repulsed him?”

Rabbi Yaakove Jaffe, in discussion of essential questions of Talmudic study, says that the “Essential core or structure of Talmud study relates to the philosophical basics and fundamental principles, values, and questions of Jewish law” and that “best practices of Talmud instruction would suggest a focus on essential questions; yet, I would disagree

... on what those essential questions are.” Thus, is it better to ask questions that lead to understanding outcomes or to ask questions that lead to understanding processes? The short answer is certainly ‘yes’. If you really want to know any of the answers to Talmudic questions, you are invited to join us on intimate Shabbat mornings for coffee, fellowship and discussion.

In today’s Torah reading, from Re’eh, a certain word appears multiple times, ‘makom’ or place. For instance, we read that we can only slaughter the Passover sacrifice at the ‘place’ where G-d will choose to establish his name; and we shall rejoice before the Lord our G-d at the ‘place’ where the Lord our G-d will choose to establish his name. Where is this place that G-d chooses to establish his name? Jerusalem? Our synagogue? Our homes? In Trinity Presbyterian? When Rabbis think about answers to Torah text, they often will quote from Rashi, usually by initially asking “what would Rashi say”? Some say that Rashi’s comments are answers to questions, but that the question is, ‘what is his question’.

As we all know, Passover makes asking questions perhaps the central element of the Passover Seder, for children are commanded to ask “what does this ceremony mean to you”. The Seder teaches us that we can ask *any* question that stimulates discussion and allows us to act as free people, starting with “*mah nishtanah*”—why is it different? Former Britain Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sachs says that it is our religious duty to teach our children to ask questions, to ask deep and difficult questions that “seem to shake the very foundations of faith itself”. Rabbi Benjamin Bleck at Yeshiva University says that one of the questions we can ask ourselves on Passover is were there times in our lives when it became clear that G-d intervened rather than coincidence. What a blessing it is to have a holiday that at its simplest element encourages us to ask questions that may help us lead a more meaningful life.

This year on Passover, we were fortunate, as were many here today, to have members of Trinity Presbyterian at our Seder, making the questions we asked sharing an interfaith Seder different and more meaningful than usual. Next year, on Passover, I have decided to focus the theme of women in Judaism at our Seder- what questions would you ask in such a Seder? Even the jokes on Passover start with a question, such as “How do you drive your mother completely insane on Passover? It’s really a piece of cake” or “What army base is off limits on Passover? Fort Leavenworth” or “What did the Teddy Bear say when he was offered the afikomen? No thanks, I’m stuffed”.

Questions in the Passover Seder are not always so easy. For instance, we think about anti-Semitism in the Seder, as well as the great increase seen today across the country, in our communities and on our campuses. We ourselves try to understand the hate that is not truly understandable, like the recent massacres at the Tree of Live synagogue in Pittsburgh. I struggled with these questions in a poem I wrote last year on Pesach:

Passover Questions for Brothers and Sisters

*Questions on the origins of
Anti-Semitism are as ancient as
The concept itself.*

*Did Sarah invite hate
By her jealousy or fear
That Ishmael would one day rise
Above Isaac's predetermined fate?*

*Or was it simply Abraham's
Rejection of idols, and ancestry,
Rebuking local customs
Simply to believe in one G-d?*

*When did my ancestors first
Know that many of their
Family would also die
Because of this inheritance
Regardless of whether they
Still believed in an Almighty?*

*Which family members on
Mothers descendants knew in Lithuania*

That the Day of Atonement

Applied to them in the coming year:

Who shall live and

Who shall die?

Who knew in father's perfect Polish shtetls

That pogrom after pogrom

Pointed at them

Pointed at their children

Eventually pointing at all Polish Jews?

Some days I wonder too

Why am I alive

When they are not.

Is that a coincidence,

When hate grows like a virus

Picking so randomly who shall

Survive the camps and

Who will not survive?

Today, they say it's Israel's fault.

As if Jacob's prophecy was not

Limited to fighting with an angel.

*Nor can we truly blame God
For the hatred that spews
Endlessly from some hearts
That only see evil in the other,*

*As souls languish
In unmarked graves,
No stones placed
To mark their time
On earth.*

*Answers actually
Not to be found
In feelings,
Rather in acts of courage.*

*The defiant act
The gesture of compassion
The willingness to acknowledge
The aspiration for Justice
The decision to speak up
The choice to keep being Jewish.*

Some have historically used questions to try and destroy us- the so-called 'Jewish question'. This coming week, when we remember through Yom HaShoa our fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, who were murdered just 80 years ago, it is natural for us to ask why? Elie Wiesel, in talking about the Holocaust says, "No answers, only questions".

We read the Yizkor service on Sukkot. 'Yizkor', meaning "Remember" is the first word of the prayer where we ask G-d to remember the souls of our relatives and friends that have passed. As a collection of short prayers, Yizkor is in one sense simple, as we pledge to remember our deceased loved ones as well as to perform tzedakah in their memory. But for me, Yizkor is also a time to contemplate questions without necessarily seeking answers. Who is Yizkor for, ourselves or our loved ones? What does it mean to be present in the lives where our loved ones are absent, where the memories may be painful? How do we talk to our loved ones and say things that need saying?

Rabbi John Rosove, the former chair of Reform Zionists of America, reminds us that the 7 questions we will be asked when we approach heaven are: "Were we honest in business; Did we make time for our spiritual life; Did we busy ourselves with creation; Were we hopeful; Did we seek wisdom and learn to discern what's true and what's false; and Have we been true to ourselves"?

One question to consider is how do *you* incorporate questioning practices into your weekly Jewish rituals? I'll share one of our family's 'question rituals'. At our family Shabbat Friday night meal, we have a tradition where we go around and ask each other to share two questions: What was a good part (perhaps the best part) and what were we grateful for in our previous week. Our 'rules' for this ritual are simple: take 10- 15 minutes total, done it right before or right after dessert is served, and everyone must share something positive. This simple ritual allows us all to listen, share, smile and respond with 'Yasher koach' when we hear wise words from our Shabbat guests and family members.

I know that when Rabbi Greyber gives a Dvar on the High Holidays, we always ask each other later on, what did you think of the teaching? This question, perhaps laden with some judgement, is one that I too readily have participated in for many years. While understandable, I think that it is not a good question really; a better question might be, what did I learn today that I did not think about already?

A blessing for the congregation is a hope that we continue to ask each other many Jewishly informed questions, ones that extend us from the sanctuary to the parking lot, from our homes to public events, from the golf course to the JCC. I pray that we use such questions to open ourselves up in conversations with one another, to expand the possibility to learn from each other, to commit in deeper community engagement, and to seek deeper relationships with each other and our faith.

Shabbat Shalom.