

## **Four Ancient Questions for the New Year**

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Gut yon tov. Rabbi Jeremy Schneider tells the story which I'll use the folk process here to adapt a bit.

A woman, tired of the daily grind in the city, buys a cottage in the country for her family to spend the weekends. She learns to pilot a plane so they can get there without sitting in a car for hours. Eventually, to avoid the long commute from the airport to her country home, she equips her plane with pontoons so she can land on the lake in front of the cottage. However, on her family's first trip with her newly equipped plane, she heads for the airport as she had always done before. As she goes in for the landing her terrified partner yells, "What are you doing? You can't land on the runway ... you don't have any wheels!"

Fortunately, she is able to swing his plane around and head for the lake. After she lands safely on the water, she heaves a big sigh of relief, turns to her partner, and says, "That's about the dumbest thing I've ever done!" Then she opens the door, steps out of the plane -- and falls directly into the lake!

Most of us don't have private planes to fly to our lake homes in the country, but I venture to say that we all know what it is like to be on "auto-pilot" with our lives. The hectic pace of each week – toggling between real world obligations and on-line selves and distractions – only to wake up and do it all again and again, can leave little time for self-reflection. And yet, with each day that we rush through, we are building the truth of our lives.

I remember as a rabbinical student working with an adult bat mitzvah student. She was rediscovering Judaism in her 60's and wanted to have the Bat Mitzvah that had not been available to her when she was young. As a Bat Mitzvah student, she was striking in her diligence and intensity. One day she told me the reason for her sense of urgency: She had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. Learning to read Torah and having a Bat Mitzvah was something she wanted to achieve with the time she had left. I remember feeling deep sadness to learn her diagnosis, and was humbled by the responsibility of helping her. And then it hit me – with each day that passed, I, too, had one less day left. We all have limited time. How do we want to use our remaining days?

This, of course is the central question that our Yom Kippur fasting and prayers are meant to help us ask. But it can be overwhelming. Even though traditionally we start the process of introspection in Elul, the month before Rosh Hashanah, we may find ourselves only having the ability to focus now, as the gift of the day clears away other distractions. Where to begin? How to begin? In the Talmud, we have one answer – and it's a series of questions. A cosmic entry quiz, so to speak, that the rabbis imagine will be asked of us when we have departed this life and stand at the threshold of the time to come. There are 7 questions, I want to share the first 4 with you today....I want to share them with you now to help us use this time to examine our lives:

You will be asked by the heavenly tribunal:

The first question – Did you deal honestly or faithfully in business? The Torah commands in Leviticus that one must use fair weights and measures, so that when people buy something from you, you give the correct amount. Deuteronomy goes further, saying you shouldn't walk around with alternate stones in your pocket - essentially waiting to switch out and use whichever one benefits you, either large or small. And the Torah instructs us to pay a worker on time, the rabbis elaborating that their very lives depend on it.

Why would how we conduct ourselves in this aspect of our lives be the first question by which to reflect on and judge our lives? Wouldn't it be something more from the spiritual, not material realm? But ultimately how we conduct ourselves in the most mundane aspects of our lives can be at the heart of spirituality. When no one is looking, does Judaism still guide what you do? A small example: As many of you will know, when you bring your own bags to carry your groceries at Trader Joe's, you can put your name and phone number on a ticket at the cash register, and drop it in a box near the door. Each month, two tickets are drawn, and the winners get a \$25 gift card. Ben - who does most of the grocery shopping for our home - was once joking with one of the cashiers about never having won. "If you really want to improve your odds," the cashier said, "When you go to put your ticket in? *Take a handful out first.*" Ben says that he hasn't looked at the ticket box quite the same way since. He also says that each time he resists that fairly trivial temptation, it feels like an intentional, ethical choice that's connected to the Jewish values he grew up with, and that it strengthens his resolve in other, more consequential situations.

Judaism is clear, too, that all that we have is a blessing – and all of it really just on loan, none of it truly our possession. In Torah, every seven years debts are forgiven and every fiftieth year land returns to its originally assigned owner. Moreover, with profit from our earnings comes responsibility. The Torah commands that the corners of the field being left

for the poor, and any stalks that are missed during the harvest be left for them to gather. So we ask: Have you used your profit to help others? Did you understand that we are stewards of wealth to bring justice and compassion into the world? Or did you take only for yourself?

The second question: Did you set times for studying Torah? Notice the turn of phrase here, not did you study Torah, but did you set aside time?

For the rabbis, engaging in, wrestling with our sacred texts, our Torah writ large, was of highest value. I like the way Rabbi Eddie Feinstein expands on the notion of Torah "Torah is not a book, a scroll held in the ark. Torah is a process: Torah is an eternal conversation among hundreds of generations of Jewish men and women, hearing their perceptions of life's meaning and purpose, of God's presence in their lives, of the lessons and messages of life, of what they learned from life. When we study Torah, we join the process, we join the conversation. [The Adult Education section in your High Holy Days brochure offers lots of opportunities to be a part of it all!]

At its most basic, of course, this question asks not only about study: Are we using our time to do what we most value?

We live, now, in an attention economy -- or in the words of Rebecca Itzkoff, a surveillance economy. So many things on social media and gaming platforms are engineered to hook us, to gather our data and then influence how we spend future time, attention and dollars. The average American adult spends 23.6 hours online each week. That's up from 9.7 in 2000. Lest you think I am above the fray on this one – in the process of finding that information I got sidetracked and spent 40 minutes on Facebook and two other websites!

When think about our lives, how are we spending our time?

What gets in the way of our having time for what is most important? What keeps us away from dinner with our families? From showing up for a good friend in crisis? From contributing to and receiving the strength and warmth of community?

This year, will you set aside time for Torah, for the Torah of your life?

The Third question, "Asakta de friyah u'riviyah?" Literally, "Did you involve yourself in being fruitful and multiplying." In a modern context I understand this to be not a question about biology, but about legacy. Did you live your life in a way that was "generative" - did you have an impact on anyone? Did your life leave a legacy in other people's lives?

The answer here is not only about the grand achievements. After all, we do not all have the skill to find a cure for a disease, the intellectual acumen to invent a new technology or the charisma and organizing skills to lead a successful political reform movement -- although we are grateful for those that do! I think this is a question about something that is much more attainable and accessible to all of us.

Every year I have the humbling experience of sitting with families after a death and learning about the life of their beloved from multiple perspectives. My work is to see how that person's life is refracted through the prism of other people's souls and find the story, the cohesive narrative that will help the family to grieve.

I feel so privileged to learn about the amazing and inspiring lives of so many. Inevitably as we go through the conversation, people will list the person's academic or professional background and accomplishments. But when families open their hearts, when they speak about what really matters to them, what they will always carry with them, they talk about the person's love. How they were a good listener, or could always bring humor to make others feel better. How they delighted in grandchildren or having family to dinner. How they never forgot a birthday.

The writer and photographer, Carolin Catlin, wrote about the love and care she received when she was going through cancer treatments "..... in our most horrific of moments we are met with small pricks of bright light, piercing and strong. I carry my points of light with me every day — the I.C.U. nurse who helped me take my first shower after surgery, chemo care packages that have shown up at my doorstep for each round of poison, the abundance of groceries ordered for my family in the days after my diagnosis."

As we think about our lives and how we lead them, have we brought light to others?

Are our lives generative? Did we participate in creating a legacy of love?

The fourth and final question we'll cover this morning: Did you hope for redemption?

Judaism does not accept the world as it is but commands us to engage in creating the world as it should be. We understand that we are partners with God in the ongoing work of creation. In this context, the question, "Did you maintain your hope in redemption?" is a powerful one. In a broken world,

did you not give in to despair? Did you maintain hope and continue to work toward redemption?

Despair, in the words of my environmental and social activist friend, Rabbi Fred Dobb, is not a Jewish value. Here's the short version: The Talmud tells the story of Rabbi Akiva who with fellow sages walked past the ruins of where the Second Temple once stood – its most sacred precincts reduced to rubble. A fox came out of the very Holy of Holies. His colleagues were distraught and weeping, but Rabbi Akiva laughed. How could you laugh, they asked? Akiva replied that now that the prophecy of Jerusalem being laid waste and the Holy of Holies turned into a forest had come true, so too could the prophecies of rebuilding the city and the Temple.

Akiva saw the utter destruction of his world's sacred center and yet could imagine a hopeful future. How do we keep that capacity alive? We keep that alive when we continue to act in accordance with our most sacred values even when they are not reflected in our external circumstances; when we commit to working for what is just, compassionate and good in an unredeemed world.

Author Douglas Abrams brought Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama together for a series of conversations. In the resulting volume, *The Book of Joy*, Archbishop Tutu says, regarding hope,

Hope is quite different from optimism, which is more superficial and liable to become pessimism when the circumstances change. Hope is something much deeper.....I say to people that I'm not an optimist, because that, in a sense, is something that depends on feelings more than actual reality. We feel optimistic, or we feel pessimistic. Now, hope is different in that it is based not on ephemerality of feelings but on the firm ground of conviction. I believe with a steadfast faith that there can never be a situation that is utterly, totally hopeless. Hope is deeper and very, very close to unshakable. (p.122)

Abrams elaborates that "resignation and cynicism are easier, more self-soothing postures" than hope. Hope is difficult. How do we find it, and how do we maintain it, in circumstances that could so easily lead to despair?

Per Espen Stoknes, a psychologist, economist and member of the Norwegian Parliament, provides a way in. Confronting the great challenge of our time in his book, *What We Think About When We Try Not to Think About Global Warming*, he writes,

I have hope that is not dependent on what happens around me, but

is grounded in my inner values. I do this work because it's aligned with who I am. So, it's a matter of character and style, rather than waiting for or depending on short-term successes. Maybe this type of hope is darker, because I have to acknowledge I don't know how it will end. But, on the other hand, I'm not dependent on knowing how it will play out, because I want to be part of the transition anyway.

*Tzipita liyshuah* – Did you hope for redemption? For us, hope is grounded in action. It can be easy to feel overcome by the challenges around us, to want to retreat in cynicism and despair; and still, did you step forward, moved by our deepest Jewish values, toward action -- and hope?

As I said earlier, the rabbis ask seven questions in the Talmud story. I'll stop here for now --there's always next year.... So: as we reflect on the course of our lives we ask: Will I create space for Judaism to make a difference in my life? Do I set aside time for what really matters? What will be my legacy in the lives of others? Can I nurture hope?

May your reflection on these ancient questions help you to lead a life of meaning, purpose, and blessing in the year to come. G'mar chatimah tovah. A good sealing in the book of life. And for those who are able, may it be a meaningful fast.