

THE QUESTIONS WE ASK, THE ANSWERS WE SEEK
Rosh Hashanah Morning, 2016 / 5777

Once again, Shanah Tova!

One part of my rabbinate here in Montgomery that I enjoy is the opportunity to share something about Judaism with the non-Jewish community. Whether I speak to a civic group here in town like Rotary or Kiwanis, or a church study group or privately with individuals who visit because they're curious about Judaism, our Christian neighbors often comment at how open Judaism is to asking questions.

Apparently in many denominations that's just not the case – their religious leaders tell them what they must believe, or what the “true” meaning of a biblical passage might be according to their particular expression of faith. When I describe how even our most traditional biblical commentaries often contradict each other and lead only to more questions, our Jewish approach comes across – I'm told – as surprising and refreshing.

We are a questioning people. Time and time again I have heard from those who have chosen to be Jewish that our encouragement of “questioning” is one of the most significant things that attracted them to Judaism.

This morning we read the story of the Akedah, Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac as a test of faith. Our tradition regards Abraham as a hero because earlier, when God threatened to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham argued with and questioned God: How can you, the Judge of all the earth, not do what's right? But our tradition also regards Abraham as a flawed hero because in the Akedah, Abraham was ready to sacrifice his son out of blind faith. It is precisely because he *didn't* raise any questions that his heroism is considered flawed.

And what is the most important moment at our Passover Seder? It's the asking of a question: Why is tonight different from all other nights? The Talmud, the great encyclopedia of Jewish wisdom, teaches that if you're too embarrassed to ask questions, you'll never learn anything.

The way we ask questions is so characteristic that it becomes a theme in Jewish humor. You know the classic story of the two Jews who meet each other. The one asks, “So, Shmerel, how are you?” And Shmerel answers, “How should I be?” Or the college student who comes home for winter break, and the parents ask: “I see you got a ‘D’ in physics,” and the student answers, “Who am I, Einstein?!” Or the non-Jew, wondering

about our propensity for asking questions, finally asked the rabbi, “Why do Jews always answer with a question?” And the rabbi replies, “Why not?”

So on this day which marks the beginning of a new year, let us in good Jewish style, consider some questions and they are not questions about the meaning of God, or why this or that has happened in the past year or even in the sweep of Jewish and human history. Rather the questions are questions about our own lives, yours and mine.

We can find some of these questions right at the beginning of Torah.

After Adam eats from the forbidden fruit of the tree of Knowledge, he and Eve hide in the Garden, and God calls to Adam and says: *Ayeka* - Where are you?” That’s the first question. That is to say, “What have you accomplished in your relationship with your husband or wife, with your parents and your children? And where are you going with those relationships? Do you love each other more or less? Are you helping each other or destroying each other?”

And then Adam blames Eve for having tempted him to eat of the forbidden fruit, whereupon God says to her: *Mah zot asita?* What have you done that is wrong?” That too is a question we can ask ourselves not just during the High Holy Days, but each day. “What have you done that is wrong? Have you hurt somebody today with a cruel word, an unfeeling comment, a callous act? How about those principles you used to believe in? Have you become jaded or cynical, and have you decided to join the pack who have long ago given up any principles they might have had?”

Two questions - “Where are you?” and “What have you done that is wrong?” And yet a third question, and we’re still at the beginning of Torah: “Cain kills his brother, Abel, and God confronts him with the question, *Aye achicha?* Where is your brother?” That is, “Are you concerned about other people? If you are a student and there is a classmate of whom everybody makes fun, do you join the rest or do you try to help? If you are at a meeting and somebody is the target of a vicious attack, do you remain silent or do you speak up for the victim? If you see a police car and an ambulance near a neighbor’s house, do you watch the scene through the window or do you go over and ask if you can be of help?”

Those three questions from the beginning of the Torah are not simply the foundations of a People that went on to become a “questioning people.” They are questions we should keep asking ourselves in this new year and in every year that, God willing, follows.

But as we begin the year 5777 let me suggest some other questions. And they are not

found in the Torah or the Talmud or in any of the thousands of Jewish texts. Sometimes, just asking the right questions can change your life.

And here's an insight into how our new year relates to change: The word "Shanah," usually translated as "Year" [as in Rosh Hashanah meaning "The new year" or "the head of the year"] – the word "Shanah" comes from a root that literally means "change." "Rosh Hashanah" could very plausibly be translated as "the beginning of change."

The first question that I would pose is "Why worry?" Worry rarely leads to positive action; it's just painful, useless fear about hypothetical events, which undermines happiness rather than ensuring it. God knows we have enough to worry about – just consider the upcoming election! – but if we can get up each day and focus on gratitude, then we can shut down the part of the brain that worries. There is actually some psychological and medical evidence that working to create a positive attitude actually works!

Perhaps you know the old stereotype about Jews worrying a lot. A classic joke is told that the typical 'Jewish telegram' reads: "Start worrying. Details to follow."

We do worry. We worry about our children and grandchildren and whether they have enough to eat. We worry about the safety and security of Israel. We worry about the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe. We worry about the survival of the Jewish people. We worry about our health.

You have probably heard the story of the four Europeans who go hiking together and get terribly lost. First they run out of food, then out of water.

"I'm so thirsty," says the Englishman. "I must have tea!"

"I'm so thirsty," says the Frenchman. "I must have wine."

"I'm so thirsty," says the German. "I must have beer."

"I'm so thirsty," says the Jew. "I must have diabetes."

Yet dwelling on our worries does impede progress. It undermines happiness rather than ensuring it. In this new year we need to ask ourselves more often than we have in the past "Why worry?" And we need to put things into perspective and worry about the things that really matter. If anything our worry needs to be accompanied by yet another question, "What am I doing to alleviate the situation that causes me and others to worry?"

Here's another question to consider this New Year: "How do I want the world to be different because I lived in it?" One of our Yom Kippur Torah readings teaches that WE

have the choice between life and death, the blessing or the curse; free will is one of Judaism's core teachings. We have been taught from the earliest of times not to rely on chance. There are those among us, maybe especially those in their latter years, who might say "What difference can I make now?" And my response to that is that every day provides us with opportunities to make a difference. We are never finished with making a difference. It may not be some earth-shattering difference. It may be the difference we make in the life of just another human being by treating them more respectfully, with greater generosity, with greater sensitivity. It may be the encouragement and appreciation rather than the criticism that we voice to our children or grandchildren. It may be the embracing of a good cause that we have heretofore neglected. Many of us have, thankfully, already made a difference by what we have done in our lives but that is not enough. Each of us CAN make a difference in the years ahead. We need to keep asking ourselves, "How do I want the world to be different because I lived in it?"

These High Holy Days call on us to engage in *Cheshbon hanefesh*, an accounting for who we are, where we have been, where we have failed. It is so easy to make excuses for our wrongdoing, to resort to the proverbial "He or she made me do it!" None of us are good at self-criticism. We are not comfortable with confronting our weaknesses. We need not be harsh on ourselves but we do need to be honest with ourselves. And we must never stop asking the big questions, and working towards our own answers.

These, then, are some of the questions that could change your life and mine. May these questions change our lives for the better. Thus we will make this new year a truly good year and we will make all future years with which we will be blessed good and meaningful.