

I don't know about you, but I can't think of a Jewish holiday without thinking about some special food. Chanukah? *Latkes*. Purim? *Hamentaschen* – and with poppy seeds (not chocolate chips – *feh*). So what is the food most associated with Rosh Hashanah? For Ashkenazim - apples and honey; Sephardim and Jews of the Middle East it's a wide variety of honey-flavored sweets. While these foods are a lovely way to mark a sweet year, perhaps just as appropriate would be birthday cake. Why? It is because of the rabbinic teaching that Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world: היום הרת עולם *Hayom harat olam* – today the world was created.

Some rabbinic traditions teach, however, the world was created on the 25<sup>th</sup> day of Elul (last Wednesday!), not on Rosh Hashanah.<sup>1</sup> If so, what would that make this day? Not the anniversary of the first day of creation, but of the sixth. This is not just some numerological sleight of hand, but a deeply considered understanding of what Rosh Hashanah is all about.

To figure out what is being taught we need to go back to Torah's story of Creation. On the first day what was created? “And God said, ‘let there be light ...’” So what happens on day six? It is human beings who are made. Today, then, is not about the beginning of the world. Rather, it is about what it means to be human, to be moral agents responsible for how we live and what we do, our punishment and forgiveness.

Often, Rosh Hashanah is seen as the holiday that speaks to universal themes, while Yom Kippur is more intimate and connected to our personal relationships and inner life. I would like to suggest, however, an alternative view, that these Days of Awe urge us to begin with the repair of our selves (*tikkun ha'nefesh* תיקון הנפש) and only then move towards the repair of the world (*tikkun olam* תיקון עולם). The 19<sup>th</sup> century rabbi, Chofetz Chaim learned from his own experience that, in fact, it is *only* when we get our personal life in order that we can really make a difference with others:

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Eliezer, *Pesikta d'Rav Kahana* 23:1 and Maharsha to Rosh Hashana 16a

I set out to try to change the world [he said], but I failed. So I decided to scale back my efforts and only try to influence the Jewish community of Poland, but I failed there, too. So I targeted the community in my hometown, but achieved no greater success. Then I gave up all my effort to changing my own family, and failed at that as well. Finally, I decided to change myself, and that's how I had such an impact on the Jewish world.

You want to make things better in your family, with your friends, in the community, as citizens of our nation, as part of the people of Israel and with the world? Begin here [pointing within], with understanding what agitates or excites you, what you fear and what of you want as your legacy. Rosh Hashanah is about starting with our inner life, healing our own fractured souls – and only then moving on to fix the brokenness in our world.

Many people define Jewish life in behavioral terms – that is, by what we do. After all, a מצוה *mitzvah* is an act. Whatever the motivation – commanded by God, just following “tradition” or honoring our forbearers – we have tended as Jews to follow the way of Nike shoes – “Just do it.”

A number of Judaism's greatest thinkers, however, argue that acting in a particular way is not enough. A rich and full life, they say, is one that involves inner contemplation. Only the “examined life” – one where we ask big questions and contemplate important ideas – is one that is truly lived. More than this, when we understand the source of our courage, fortitude, patience, compassion and determination we gain not only self-understanding, but the ability to be a better parent or child, to be more focused in our work or school, to accept what we cannot change, and gain a deeper resolve about our duty towards others.

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira was a rabbi who moved to Warsaw just before the Nazi invasion of Poland. He knew much personal suffering. His wife died before the war. His son bled to death from shrapnel wounds in a bombing raid. His daughter-in-law was killed in an explosion outside the hospital where she awaited word of her husband's condition; and his daughter was deported to an unknown destination. As Jews were herded into the massive Warsaw ghetto, Shapira continued to write and serve his community. He wrote on scraps of paper and buried them. A decade later, a workers involved in a construction

project, unearthed a canister into which he had placed his writings. He was murdered, but his words found new life.

Shapira was not blind to the reality of great evil in the world. He knew all too well how hate can demean human life. He was a witness to how adherence to ideology can make people accept lies as truth, define murder as moral virtue and vilify compassion as weakness. And yet, in the midst of all the horror, Shapira continued to affirm that the world is filled with God's Presence. Life is more than is just what is physical, and there are times, he wrote, when each of us just knows this (you know, those times when you say, “This is the perfect moment” or a time when, out of the blue, you experience something that brings you to tears). Such moments are a gift, but because they are so fleeting, we have to become consciously aware or more mindful of the great blessing of being alive.

There are, however, obstacles to being more aware. One is anxiety and fear. We get so caught up in making a living or providing for our physical needs or losing what we have that we lose touch with what, in the end, really matters. A second is that it is hard to keep focused. And so, Shapira taught, we must “fortify and expand our powers of concentration.”<sup>2</sup> A life only focused on making a living, he claims, is not only superficial. It is empty of meaning. Only the examined life can help one find the answers and strength to withstand the pain that inevitably comes with illness and death, tyranny and demagoguery, disappointment and loss.

How does one live a life so mindfully and intentionally? How do we find the path to the examined life?

A story is told of a sage who was once confronted by a soldier who aimed his weapon at the teacher, and asked, “Who are you? Where are you going? Why are you going there?” The rabbi replied, “How much are you paid?” Astonished by the response, the soldier actually answered: “Twenty *zuzim* a month.” The rabbi said, “I have a proposal for you. I'll pay you double that if you stop me every day I come by here and you ask me the same questions.”

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<sup>2</sup> *Conscious Community*, Andrea Cohen-Kiener (translator), p. 10

These Days of Awe are reminders to take some time to reflect more deeply on who we are, what we do, where we want to go in our lives and why we spend time as we do.

Some of those questions to help guide us in a more examined life – and to engage in a real “repair of the soul” – are in the booklets from UJA-Federation title “Living With Purpose” that are on your seats. But I would like to offer three other key questions to ask our selves every day. Those questions are easy to ask, but if you are honest – really and brutally honest with yourself – they will shake and challenge you. The questions are from the Bible, but they are as relevant and worth asking today as they ever have been: Where am I? What am I? Perhaps (not)?

### **Ayekha – where am I?**

The first time God addresses a specific human being in the Torah it comes in form of a question. Adam eats the fruit and hides because he is naked. “איכה Ayeka? Where are you?” God asks.<sup>3</sup>

Surely this inquiry is a response to Adam's hiding and in this single word is implied a challenge to the human desire to live as if there is no God, no moral compass in the world. At times we act on our own yearnings and desires as if what we do has no impact on any other. But what we do and what we avoid doing have inevitable consequences. איכה is a question of challenge and responsibility: What have you done? Why do you hide? Of what are you ashamed?

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady was once asked, “How could God ask Adam, ‘where are you?’ Are we to assume God did not know?!” The rabbi responded, “God asks each of us, ‘where are you in the world? So many years and days allotted to you have passed, and how far have you gotten. How far along are you?’”

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 2:9

No matter how sophisticated the GPS or mapping system, it cannot tell us how to get somewhere unless it knows from where to start. These Days of Awe are a reminder to take stock of our spiritual place in life, to ask, “Where am I? Is this where I wanted to be?”

It is all too human, of course, to evade and avoid the hard question “am I where I want to be in my life?” Adam’s attempt to hide is mirrored in the story of Jonah that we read on Yom Kippur afternoon. All he does he want to run away. When God calls him he boards a ship to Tarshish – the ancient equivalent of the ends of the earth. The sea thrashes in a tempest (a metaphor for life’s chaos) and Jonah sleeps away in the bottom of the boat. Later, swallowed by the fish, in the depths of the sea – seemingly as far from God’s demands as possible – he comes to the realization that no matter how far he may seem to be from God, no matter how low, he cannot run. Alone, afraid, desperate ... he calls out for help.

It is this possibility and hope – the willingness to answer God’s “where are you” with *היניני* *hineni* “I am here” that allows for redemption, forgiveness and a sense of life rich with purpose.

*איכה* *Ayeka?* Where are you?

### ***Mah adam – what am I?***

Take a moment to close your eyes to think of the quietest place you have ever been.

This summer Anne and I visited Canyonlands National Park in eastern Utah. At one point we looked across a canyon 30 miles wide. The description at the rim told us that the Colorado River had carved all we saw in the past 15 to 20 million years, and that the layers of rock were from 175 to 300 million years ago. It was so far off the road that the loudest sound was the blood pounding in my ears. When we spoke to one another we whispered because it felt like we were in a sacred space.

How many of you have been awed by the expanse of a great plain or felt a thrill seeing or hiking a mighty mountain? Have you had your breath taken away

by a sunset or traveled far enough away from city lights to marvel at the night sky filled with stars and the Milky Way? Are you aware that there is actually a special blessing in Hebrew for seeing such natural wonders? “Praised are you God ... that Your power and strength fill the world.”

Does an ocean need a blessing? Does a volcano seek praise? Of course not. The purpose of the blessing is meant to arouse something in us – to create awareness, perspective and teach us no small measure of humility.

This brings us to the second question – one asked by the Psalmist who said, “מה אדם ותדעוהו בן אנוש ותחשבו” What is a person, that you should know that individual; the descendent of human (flesh) that you even give that person a thought?”<sup>4</sup>

The Biblical poet says that contemplation of the grand scheme of the universe shows that our lives are like a passing breath of wind, a “shadow moving on.” To ask, “what am I?” is a reminder to have some perspective. All the things that we worry about – are they really so enduring? This is not to minimize what we feel. Yet given that each of us is one of billions, and that our days are like a “breath that passes by”, surely we can learn to think that the world does not revolve around us.

The Biblical poet offers, however, a theological lifeline. “When I behold Your heavens ... the moon and the stars: What are we ... that You (God) take note?” Looking at rocks hundreds of millions of years old we are nothing. And yet ... and yet – we affirm singing the ancient words that God made us “little lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor.”<sup>5</sup>

What is the meaning, then, of my life? מה אדם *Mah adam* – what am I? I am – in the grand scheme – small, but if in the eyes of God I am great and glorious, so can I be each and every day. Gain perspective. Be a bit more humble. And never despair that in your life you cannot play your part.

### **Uli – perhaps (not)?**

No dictionary has ever been able to satisfactorily define the difference between “complete” and “finished.” However, Samsundar Balgobin, a

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 144:3

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 8:5-6

Guyanese linguist once challenged a colleague who claimed that there is no difference by offering an easy way to understand the distinction. He explained, "When you marry the right person, you are 'complete.' If you marry the wrong one, you are 'finished.' And, if the right one catches you with the wrong one, you are 'completely finished.'"

Young people are wonderful learners because they are open to everything and willing to hear new perspectives. As we get older, however, there is a danger not only of our muscles growing stiff, but our souls doing the same. Indeed, among the confessions we will offer on Yom Kippur is the *על חטא al chet* for *קשינו אורף kishinu oref*, being "stiff-necked." It is a reminder that there is something wrong about being certain you are always right. Too often in our lives we live as if all we know is enough. "I know what I believe." "I have all the answers." "I am complete." "I am finished listening because I believe what I believe." In this age of political certitude we retreat to our respective corners – only listening to the news that echoes what we already think and vilifying or dismissing anyone with a different perspective.

The unwillingness to question one's own views, however, is what it means to be "stiff necked" and closed minded - and it is a trait that distances us from loved ones and divides nations. You want to really be "completely finished"? The quickest way there is to stop listening.

How different is the model presented in Torah when the first question is presented not by God to humanity, but the other way around. God comes to tell Abraham that the cities of wickedness are about to be destroyed. In response, Abraham models for us what it means to be a moral being. "Abraham stood before the Eternal ... he drew near ... and said, *אולי uli* Perhaps there are fifty righteous in the city?"<sup>6</sup>

You want to have a life that counts for something? These two verses suggest the way. First, stand up. Ask yourself: What is it that I am willing to stand for? A big house? Getting kids into the right school? Another far-off land off the "bucket

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<sup>6</sup> Genesis 18:23-24

list”? Lovely. Good. But is that all? Does my life *stand* for something? And, if so, what matters so much to me that I have to rise up and fight for it?

Second, Abraham's “drawing near” teaches us that when we disagree with others we must be engaged with them and not shy away from dialogue. Too often we either avoid conflict or just talk over others who have a different point-of-view. The encounter between Abraham and God teaches us what it means to offer passionate, reasoned and respectful disagreement. Hard debates – be they about the Iran-deal or what Jewish path will best ensure the Jewish future, or differences between siblings about how to run a family business or care for an aging parent – must begin with wanting to draw others near. To belittle or disparage one with a legitimate (even if very different) views, is not the way of holiness.

Finally, and most critically, Abraham says to God, “perhaps” ... or maybe better, perhaps *not*? Maybe, Abraham suggests, you had not thought of this. Perhaps you had not considered that. God's willingness in this story to entertain such a question is, I believe, the critical point being made in the narrative, for if God is willing to be asked to consider a different point-of-view, so ought we.

The theological idea at the heart of these Days of Awe – that we can recognize the wrongs we have done, atone for them and find forgiveness – beings with אולי *uli*. It is the question that each of us must confront about our lives. Is *this* the way I wanted my life to be? Can there be a different way, a better way? Is what I do best for the strength of the Jewish community? Is it possible that someone with a different political perspective is not a “warmonger” or “traitor”, but just came to a different conclusion? Is there – perhaps – another way? To turn in a new direction, therefore, begins with saying that “perhaps” this does not have to be the way I live.

How, then, can we really rid ourselves of pride and a “stiff neck”? To learn to be more spiritually limber. And the easiest way to do this is to say to oneself אולי. אולי Maybe I was wrong. אולי Is there is another understanding I did not consider?



אולי Maybe – just maybe – I love my family and friends, I love my fellow Jews, even when they drive me crazy, more than I love myself.

אולי Just this one word opens the possibility of seeing the world anew – as if to say, at any moment, a new path lies ahead – and so היום הרת עולם “today is a new world (a new possibility) was born.”

A final thought. When Abraham and Isaac were on their way to the mountain, some *midrashim* say that when the father looked up and saw it from afar, he beheld the Presence of God. So, too, did Isaac. But when Abraham asked the servants what they saw, they said, “We just see a mountain.” “Since you see nothing,” Abraham said, “stay here with the ass.”<sup>7</sup>

If you want to have a name that lives into the future, the rabbis seem to be saying – not just living like any other animal, but like a human being, with the capacity for moral judgment and a life of meaning – take note of what is *really* important in the world. Every day the Glory of life lies before us, but our lives are weighed down by our self-absorbed fears, our yearnings and our pleasures. We have the capacity, however, to repair our souls – and thereby see the world in a different way. We have to begin by asking questions – big ones, important ones, the ones that will make our days worthy and good.

היום הרת עולם *Hayom harat olam*. Today the world is created. But to create it means asking where I am, what am I and is there, perhaps, another way? It means focusing not just on what we did wrong, but what more we could have done that was right. It means not being concerned simply with having a happy life or successful life, but a life examined each and every day, so that we might say of it, this is a life worth living.

And so the Psalmist sang:

הללי נפשי *Halleli nafshi* My soul is a praise ...

אהללה ה' בחיי *A'hallela Adonai b'chai'yi* I praise God through my life.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Tanchuma Buber, Va-Yera, 46*. Interpreting עם החמור *im he-chamor* (with the ass) as *am he-chamor* (ass people). Also in *Pirqa de-Rabbi Eliezer*

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 146:1-2