

Five Essential Questions A Yom Kippur 5778 Sermon

On Yom Kippur, the invitation is simple: we Jews are invited to get serious about our lives by remembering our mortality. If our health permits, tradition has us give up food and drink for 25 hours. Perhaps less well known, it also bids us refrain from the luxuries of leather, anointing with oil (or other cosmetics) and physical intimacy. The idea implicit in all this ritual restraint is to focus our attention intensively inward. The rituals of this day are designed to encourage us to hear the liturgical words -- who shall live and who shall die -- not as a question with an answer but as motivation for introspection; this day impels us to face the reality that our lives have limited spans. Some of us will live and some of us will possibly die during the coming year and, so, we do well to consider even in our youth the legacy we create by the choices we make, by the words we speak, by our deeds, by our actions and by our inactions. Yom Kippur implores us to pose with great seriousness the questions essential to the task of constructing that legacy. But what are those questions?

On Rosh Hashanah, I suggested one. Today, I expand the list. A few days before Rosh Hashanah, I learned that the next president of UVA had been selected, a fellow named James Ryan, a graduate of UVA Law School, currently the Dean of Harvard's Graduate School of Education, and, most qualifying of all his impressive attributes, a native of New Jersey (my home state). In May of 2016, Dean Ryan gave the commencement address to the graduates of the school he heads in which he enumerated five essential questions, questions he identified as key for living a happy and meaningful life. With attribution, then, I am hereby stealing these five questions and reframing them in Jewish terms suitable for this sacred day of invitation to a meaningful life.

The first question is "Wait, what? ..." Ryan describes a common scene in his household where he gives a list of instructions to one of his children while the child hears "blah, blah blah, blah and then **don't forget to clean up your room!**" Suddenly attentive, the child responds, "wait, what?!" Ryan's point is to pay attention to what you are hearing, to pause in order to digest your experience of the world, not to take things for granted, but to slow down, to engage in inquiry before advocacy. This first question is the lesson of Shabbat, our weekly ritual gift of encouragement to pause in our routines in order to refresh, recover our inner passions, to turn off the flat screen devices that have addicted us, to reorient around our deeper values, to cultivate the capacity to listen, to be still, to hear what others have to tell us and what the heart has to tell us. "Wait, what?"

By Ryan’s second question, “I wonder why/if?” he means to encourage a posture of lifelong curiosity and wonder about the world, a posture found typically in the youngest among us, but one that often recedes with the accumulation of experience and the presumption of needing to seem certain and knowing and blasé. The Jewish theologian Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel coined the term “radical amazement” to convey his notion that the essential quality of the religious person is an abiding ability to see the world as wondrous, to arise each day with the expectation of new and unprecedented possibilities. Inspired by Heschel, I have come to regard most of the rituals of Jewish tradition as potential aids in our capacity to wonder.

According to this approach, each bracha, each formulaic blessing, if spoken with mindful intention, should awaken in us a fresh ability to be present in the moment, to appreciate, say, the bread we are about to swallow, the baker who baked it, the miller who ground the wheat into flour, the farmer who planted and harvested the wheat, the trucker who made delivery, the checkout clerk and the bagger and to marvel at all the elements of nature, sun and rain, earth and micro-organisms, and chemical combinations that conspired to enable us to be fed, and, if you are so inclined, the Mastermind behind the whole amazing business. The ritual pronouncement of blessing intends to awaken us to the wonder behind the mundane act of eating bread and the appreciation that leads to and from a sense of wonder.

Third on Ryan’s list: “couldn’t we at least?” He has in mind settings of conflict or disagreement. Perhaps you have noticed that life presents us with these from time to time, in our work settings, in the arena of local, national, and international politics, and in our relationships with acquaintances, friends and loved ones. To Ryan, the question “couldn’t we at least ...?” suggests the desire to seek common ground, to find pragmatic ways to move beyond differences despite differences. On one level, the desire to seek common ground strikes me as merely a matter of common sense, even if such common sense has come to seem all too uncommon in current public discourse and in our national political life.

Yet, more fundamentally, the very notion that common ground could exist among those who disagree sharply has roots in the Jewish account of human creation as found in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis. There the Torah describes one bisexual human, the ancestor of every human who will follow, as being created *B’tzelem Elohim*, in the divine image. This description does not reveal anything about evolutionary biology or history but it tells us a great deal

about Jewish morality. It affirms the belief that all humans contain divinity within them and that no human possesses superior origins. Rather, all humans share a common ancestry and therefore possess a deep commonality of essence.

Yom Kippur takes the point about core commonality and turns it into a specific moral lesson. On this day, a day given largely to sober introspection, our tradition forces us to listen to the Prophet Isaiah as he reminds us that unless we remember the least well off and transform our pious rituals of this very day into righteous deeds, our rituals will amount to no more than a hill of beans. And as if that were not challenging enough, as we come to the conclusion of this day of prayer and fasting, we receive a complementary lesson from the Book of Jonah that the Almighty cares about Ninevites as well as us. By deploying Jonah to scare the Ninevites into repenting, thereby saving themselves, and by describing their rapid and sincere turning from evil to decency, Jonah teaches us, the Jews of today, a lesson that Jonah himself does not appreciate: our God is a universal God. God's caring extends necessarily to every quarter. And, by extension, so must ours. Thus, Jewish places of worship are required to have windows lest we forget in our prayerful yearning that our obligations extend beyond the walls of our houses of worship, that we are connected to others, that our responsibilities to seek welfare extend beyond our own group. The question "couldn't we at least...?" gets at the commonalities that transcend the interests and concerns of distinct affinity groups.

Ryan's fourth question "How can I help?" assumes a social setting that often suppresses the desire to look beyond self interest. Curiously (and this may be because he addresses an atypical group, graduates from a division of Harvard), he warns these Harvard grads to be aware of the dangers of taking on a savior complex, a notion that you are the one chosen to fix all the ills of society, balance the budget, make poverty go away, provide universal health care, end racism and other forms of xenophobia, make a certain country great again, and the like. But, warns Ryan, do not let this worry extinguish the strong and noble human instinct to help.

In this regard, I have the distinct recollection of the first gathering of my rabbinic school classmates as we filed into the student lounge at the Jerusalem campus of Hebrew Union College for our orientation in June of 1974. I think it was Rabbi David Forman, of blessed memory, who used the term "messiah complex" as he half jokingly remarked that, no doubt, some of us – perhaps most of us -- suffered from this disease, the delusion that somehow we would fix or save or bring redemption to either the smaller or larger world we imagined serving as rabbis. Rabbi Forman wanted to instill in us at the outset of our journeys into

rabbinic service a measure of sober realism even before experience in the real world would perform that task anyway.

But at the same time, and on the other hand, even though no rabbi, no doctor, no teacher, no business person, no social activist, and not even any president of the United States, will have the ability to bring complete redemption, as Judaism teaches us in so many ways, there is much that each of us can do and must do if our lives are to have purpose. In the famous words of Rabbi Tarfon: “whereas you are not called to complete the task, neither are you exempt from beginning the work.” That is, depending on one’s circumstances, each of us, without exception, can improve the world in some measure. The Day of Atonement arrives to nudge us to consider concrete deeds we might perform in the direction of improving the world, what we Jews call *Tikkun Olam*. This day impels us to ask: who could use a kind or encouraging word from me or, more problematically, a word of reproof or warning? What can I do with the hours of this day with the skills and capacities I possess and my accompanying passions and limitations? What can I do that will bring some measure of healing to a friend or a neighbor or my community or some ostracized group or person? Is there an enemy to whom I can reach out? Is there a loved one I could hug? The precise words “How can I help?” may not be the most artful words to direct to one in need but the question as internalized comprises a necessary disposition for a life of meaningful service.

Turning to Ryan’s fifth and final question, he would have us ask “What truly matters (to me)?” Very much in the spirit of this season, the fifth question means to orient our behaviors around the values we truly hold. In this day and age when the global purveyors of information [Google, Facebook, Apple, and Amazon, among them] have become ubiquitous in cleverly manipulating our tastes, our thoughts, and behaviors, it becomes ever more crucial that we each find ways to stay rooted in the values we truly hold. The prayers we recite every Shabbat or every day have that function as do other grounding practices, including mindfulness meditation, physical exercise, Mussar, and Torah study. So too, the observance of Yom Kippur, among the Jewish holidays that provide for us their own rhythm and orientation around core values.

The concluding Torah portion we will read this afternoon comes from the central section of the middle book of Torah, the book of Leviticus. The name of the book in Hebrew is *Vayikra*, and He [God] called. That is, the very name of the book suggests that God calls us. To what does God call us if not to the core ethical motif of Judaism, the aspiration to holiness as articulated in the middle section of

the Torah's middle book. Holiness, as laid out in this portion, does not exist as an abstract or other-worldly concept, nor as a notion applicable only to a select group. Rather, the Torah tells us that we can each walk on a path toward holiness by exhibiting attentiveness in specific ways in our daily behavior, by acting respectfully to our parents, by refraining from idolatrous practice, by upholding the rights of the poor, by promoting fairness in the legal system, by respecting elders, caring for the marginalized (immigrants and refugees among them), by practicing love and controlling anger, and on and on, concrete, pragmatic ways all of them – which is not to say easy or uncomplicated. This Day of Atonement, this culminating act in a season devoted to turning to a better way and returning to our better selves, is all about reconnecting to this ultimate question “what truly matters?”

Dean Ryan concludes his commencement address quoting the short poem **Late Fragment** [A New Path to the Waterfall, *Atlantic Monthly Press, 1989*] by Raymond Carver. The poem reads:

And did you get what you wanted
from this life, even so? I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved,
to feel myself beloved on the earth.”

“Even so,” the poet says. I imagine Carver means that even though life will not always be a bed of roses, and will include struggle, pain, and disappointment, even so, he nonetheless attests to the attainment of the status of feeling beloved. Even so, even though life will include setbacks, losses, and unmet goals, Jewish tradition insists on this day more than on any other, that we find our way to fulfillment, that we do so by, one, maintaining a routine of pausing to listen, two, by cultivating eyes made for wonder, three, by connecting our particular affiliations and tribal identities to a common humanity, four, by living a life of service, and, five, by returning again and again to the core values that sustain us and ensure for each of us a life of quality and meaning.

On this day and on every day, may we hear the questions as directed to us. May they lead us toward fullness and ease, toward a sure sense of feeling beloved on the earth.

Ken Y'hi Ratzon. May it be so.