

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 2022/5783

“The Questions We Ask Ourselves”

Albert Einstein was teaching at Oxford University in 1942 and had just finished giving his class their final senior exam. Walking across campus after class, his assistant turns to him and asks, “Dr. Einstein, the test you just gave your students, wasn’t that the exact same test you gave last year?” Einstein turns and says, “Yes, yes, exactly the same test.” To which his assistant replies, “but, Dr. Einstein, how is that possible? Why would you give them the exact same test?”

“Well,” says the brilliant physicist, “...the answers have changed.”

Each year on Rosh Hashanah, our liturgy challenges us to ask ourselves questions. And even though these questions do not change from year to year, our answers do as we GROW and we CHANGE.

In fact, think about these basic questions and how your answers to them would vary from your 20’s, 30’s, 40’s to now. For example: What is your ideal vacation? What is your favorite food? Or if you have a sweet tooth like me, what will you have for dessert? While I still love my childhood dessert,

mint chocolate chip ice cream, my tastes have certainly changed and matured not to mention my recent need to limit dairy!

And of course, during this time of year, we tend to also ask ourselves deeper, more serious questions such as: Am I making a difference in this world? And if so, where and for whom? What mistakes am I making? And why am I making the same mistakes repeatedly? In essence, we are asking, what kind of person am I? And what kind of a person do I want to be?

Reflection is important. Reflection is how we grow and change. However, if we are asking ourselves the same questions year after year, I encourage us to think about putting more effort into those questions, not just the answers.

Yes, Einstein would tell you that each year there are new answers to old questions, but he also recommends asking the right questions and if we do, it will lead to even better answers. Einstein once said, "If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask... for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes."

So, this Rosh Hashanah, as we reflect on this past year, let's allocate time to develop the right questions. And as Einstein suggests, by making this upfront investment of time we will make it easier to find our answers.

Here are three popular questions that we often ask:

What do you do?

What do I need?

And - What is the meaning of life?

Now let's look at these questions, reframed.

Rather than asking, what do I do? Ask, what am I doing?

Rather than asking, what do I need? Ask, where am I needed?

Rather than asking, what is the meaning of life? Ask, how can I live a life of meaning?

The first question, 'What do I do?' is one of the most common questions we are asked. When most people hear this question, they respond automatically by explaining what they do professionally, how they make their living. If we take a moment to think about that response... is it really what they wanted to know?

I remember when I was visiting a synagogue in New York many years ago. The senior rabbi, Rabbi Avi Weiss, who had been there for over three

decades introduced himself to me and asked me, “What do you do?” I replied, “I am in rabbinical school!” He smiled and said, “Fantastic, that means YOU are just the right person to help me move some chairs!” I was amazed and humbled as we moved those chairs. This was one of the most wonderful lessons about what rabbis actually do! Today if someone asks what I do? I would reply, ‘rabbi’ but if you want to know what I am doing, I will tell you, I am doing whatever it takes to make Temple Judea a spiritual home for each one of us...including moving chairs when needed!’

What makes each of us unique is how we choose to spend our time and where we want to make an impact. When we care about something, when we love someone, there is always something we can be ‘doing’ to make a difference. Tonight, let’s try answering the question, what am I doing? Because there are so many consequential ways to answer this question. When Rabbi Heschel was asked to define the word ‘mitzvah’, he responded, “A mitzvah is a prayer in the form of a deed!” He’s teaching us that doing becomes the sincere expression of our hearts because our actions become the embodiment of our highest hopes and dreams.

The second question we often ask is “what do I need?” Sometimes prayer is associated with petitioning God for what we need. According to this approach, prayer humbles us when we ask God for help, for sustenance, and for guidance.

There is a story of a young boy at summer camp who said he needed to use a phone to call his grandmother because it was her birthday. Normally, phones are not allowed at camp, so the boy thought he had a reasonable request. The counselor asked, “YOU need to call your grandmother?” “Yes”, the boy replied. Again, the counselor asked, “are you sure YOU need to call your grandmother?” “YES”, the boy replied again, now a bit frustrated, but then it clicked and the young boy realized that HE didn’t need to call his grandmother, rather it was his grandmother who needed to hear his birthday wishes that would bring her more joy, more nachas than any gift! At that moment this young man understood what it means to be a *mensch*, and to start asking where he is needed, to start helping others in need.

Whether you pray every day or just once a year, I invite you to try approaching prayer by asking “Where am I needed?” When I pray, I try to focus on gratitude – gratitude not just for what I have in my life, but also for the ability to use what I have to be of service to others. This approach to

prayer empowers me and inspires me, and I feel honored to be doing God's unfinished business in this world.

Often mornings, in our house with children ages 10, 8, and 4, can be hectic, and it can feel like we are herding cats to get the kids ready and out the door. One morning, amidst the chaos, I took a few minutes to pray and then it occurred to me, what if I calmly asked my kids, "Is there anything I can help you with this morning?" Even when their answer is no, this question not only keeps them on task, but they feel supported and loved! When I enter this headspace, I can be a blessing in someone's life. Imagine if we all did the same, we asked people in our lives, 'Is there anything I can help you with? Even if the answer is no, they will feel loved and supported!

And finally, a third question we tend to ask during these High Holy Days is "What is the meaning of life?" When I ask myself this question, I have difficulty finding any one answer that is completely satisfying. This is why I suggest asking the same question with a twist, ask, "How do I live a life of meaning?"

On Rosh Hashanah, we are invited to participate in a powerful process that helps us find meaning in our lives. Three mitzvot are at the core of this

process. The mitzvah of tefilah, prayer, which opens our hearts, the mitzvah of teshuva, of repentance, of getting in the right headspace to reach our goals and the mitzvah of tzedakah, of helping others.

And you are no strangers to these mitzvot. During my past two years here at Temple Judea I have witnessed countless acts of loving kindness you do for one another, our temple, and our community. You give of your time and money to the Jewish Federation, Jewish Family and Children's Services, the JCC, and to a plethora of other worthy and significant Jewish and non-Jewish causes. You care for those who are more vulnerable and are there to be a source of support at times of sickness or comfort in times of mourning. You leave legacy gifts ensuring not only your children's and grandchildren's futures – but their ancestors too. You challenge yourselves to learn and grow – participating in adult Bar and Bat Mitzvah's, studying Torah, or other adult education classes. You join, welcome, and embrace being a member of a sacred community not only in prayer and song, but also in outreach and connection. You work hard to turn your oy's into joys. You do all this and much more to give meaning to your lives.

So, I know with all of this goodness, and support, you are off to a great start. You can only grow from here and become an even better version of yourself.

So, I encourage you to join me and begin this new year, 5783, by asking yourself questions like, “What am I doing? Where am I needed? And how will I live a life of meaning?” I invite you to take the time to be thoughtful about what questions you will be asking yourself and how you will phrase the questions that will help you more easily find the answers you seek.

Asking questions in this way will help us reveal who we are and who we want to be. This is the essence of *teshuva*, to return to who we want to be, and who we are meant to be. Rosh Hashanah is a reminder it is never too late to be the person YOU were meant to become.

As you embark on the journey to answer these questions, let’s learn from God’s answer to Moses when Moses asked God, ‘What is Your Name?’

God responds, “*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*” - “I will be as I will be. I am the God of infinite possibilities.” Each of us can say the same, *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*. Each of us has infinite possibilities to shape ourselves into the person we want, need and are meant to be!

And so, as we begin these days of awe, I would like to offer you this prayer: God, may we ask the right questions, and may we be open to the answers even when they are hard to hear. May our answers lead us to be our truest selves. May we never forget that the answers we seek are not in heaven, lo bashamayim hi, not beyond our reach. Rather these answers are here, in our hearts. God, strengthen us and encourage us to make this a sweet new year.

L'Shana Tova u'Metukah, Wishing us all a sweet and happy new year!!

Sing 'Lo Vashamayim Hi' by Alana Arian

Rabbi Feivel