

Erev Rosh Hashanah 2010
by Rabbi Laura Geller

If you brought your cell phone tonight, please do not turn it off.

Yes, you heard me. Please do not turn off your cell phones. In fact, please take them out now. And if you have a Facebook or Twitter account, please log on. (By the way, how many of you are on Facebook or Twitter?) If you are like me, a bit of a Luddite, you might only vaguely know that Twitter, used by 100,000,000 people, is a way to communicate in real time with messages of 140 characters or less. Facebook is, of course, the largest social networking website. It has over 500,000,000 users, many of whom are Cantor Kliger's friends.

So, your assignment. Please post your answer to this question, in 140 characters or less: "What are you doing here?" And if you are not on Facebook or Twitter, text someone, or take those pencils. Write your own answer in 140 characters – characters, not words.

"I am in Temple Emanuel for Rosh Hashanah services sitting next to my adult children thinking about my own parents." (114 characters)

"I am going through the motions of reading prayers that don't speak to me." (73 characters)

"I am letting beautiful music wash over me and feeling a connection with Jews around the world." (94 characters)

"I am thinking about last year, not an easy year, financial challenges, health scares. I'm hoping this year will be better." (122 characters)

"I'm not really sure what I am doing here." (41 characters)

Turns out it is not such an easy question. Clearly it will take more than 140 characters to answer. So you can turn off those phones now and put them away.

What are you doing here? What are you doing here? What are you doing here, in synagogue, over these ten days? And perhaps even more urgently, what are you doing HERE, here at this moment in your life?

God asked that same question of Elijah almost three thousand years ago. The Biblical book, First Kings, tells the story of the prophet Elijah challenging and defeating the false gods of Baal. No surprise after what happened that Queen Jezebel, their defender, wants Elijah dead, so Elijah escapes to the wilderness. Elijah takes cover under a plant like the one that protected Jonah, whose story we read on Yom Kippur afternoon. Like Jonah, Elijah is so depressed that he prays for death as he falls asleep.

Suddenly an angel wakes him and tells him to eat. Miraculously, by his side are a warm pita and a jar of water. He eats, drinks, and goes back to sleep. Again the angel wakes him and feeds him, so that he is strong enough to continue on what turns out to be a forty- day journey to Mt Sinai.

Forty days. Mt. Sinai. It's clear that the author of the story wants us to see Elijah replaying the role of Moses. Elijah goes into a cave and spends the night. Then God calls to him: "*Mah lecha po, Eliyahu?* What are you doing here, Elijah?" What are you doing here?

Elijah answers : "God, I have always been devoted to you. But the people of Israel are not. I am the only one left loyal to you. And my enemies are trying to kill me." (148 characters, but it's shorter in the Hebrew.)

And then, what happens? "A furious wind split mountains and shattered rocks, but God was not in the wind. After the wind, an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake, fire, but God was not in the fire. And after the fire, a still small voice."

When Elijah heard that still small voice, he went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then he heard the question a second time: "*Mah lecha po?* What are you doing here?" Elijah answers again with exactly the same words as he did before.

So let's get this story straight. Fleeing from his enemies, hiding in a cave, Elijah hears God's question: "What are you doing here?" In response, Elijah describes what is happening in his life. He tells his story. It is his drama, the story of how he is a victim. "Oy, God, look at all I have done for them and for you. And why? Nothing is working. They hate me. I'm in danger. Nothing makes sense. "

And then God sets up major pyrotechnics, shock and awe, the power of nature at its most fierce: hurricane, earthquake, fire. And then the epiphany: God is not in any of that. God is in the still small voice, the voice that is calling from inside us.

Elijah hears that still small voice. Wow! What an amazing experience it must have been! We assume he has been transformed forever by the power of the moment. He leaves the cave. And then he hears the question again: "What are you doing here?" Elijah gives the same answer.

The same answer.

What are we meant to understand from this? Elijah has just had an experience of God. He heard it. Shouldn't he change in some way as a result of the experience? Shouldn't his answer to the existential question "What are you doing here" be different from before the epiphany?

At first glance, yes. He should have learned that God is not in the hurricane, the earthquake, the fire – that God is not in the drama, the tumult, the crisis. Elijah should have learned that everything is not about him, that he needs a bigger perspective. He needs a sense of his own calling or mission, even if it doesn't feel successful. He should have learned that silence, quiet, can help clarify who he is and who he can become. Elijah should have become gentler with himself and his people.

But the truth is, even after the epiphany, the facts of Elijah's life have not changed. He is still faced with a difficult situation; he is still dealing with people who don't really get what is important; he is still in danger of being killed by his enemies. That truth of his life hasn't changed.

The externals of his life haven't changed, but maybe his internal reality has. The man who was ready to give up, to hide in a cave forever, comes out. He responds to the question with an honest assessment of what is really happening. And then, as the subsequent verses tell us, Elijah continues on his journey, with new instructions from God to anoint a new king and to mentor a younger prophet.

The facts of Elijah's life haven't changed. But he has. He is able to come into the sunlight, to be a bit more forgiving of himself and others, to believe that it is possible to change, and to work on himself so he can really be the prophet God wants him to be.

"What are you doing here?" I will hear the question through the sounds of the shofar tomorrow morning. "What are you doing here?" I will hear the question through my hunger on Yom Kippur. "What are you doing here?" I will hear the question as the gates begin to close during the Neilah service.

No pyrotechnics, but enough power to get me to pay attention. No earthquake or hurricane, but enough stillness and space to help me look at the truth of my life. What is really happening in my life now? What do I need to change? Where am I stuck? What am I here for? What work on myself do I need to do to be the person I am called to become?

Change is hard. It is often not dramatic. As many of you know, in February, my husband Richard was diagnosed with cancer. It came as a complete surprise. One day he was totally healthy, feeling stronger than he had in years because of a great trainer and regular workout sessions at the gym. The next day he learned he had cancer, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

We told our children. We told our siblings and my mother. We told our colleagues. I told the Temple Board. We put off our remodel, and I cancelled my summer plans to go to Israel to study.

It turns out that if you have to get cancer, this is a good kind to get. And Richard was very lucky. His doctor had found it early; it hadn't spread, and it could be treated with radiation. He didn't have to miss any work. No pyrotechnics, thank God, but still the experience challenged both of us to hear the question "What are you doing here?" in a more urgent way.

Thankfully, now he is in remission, and the ordinary dramas of our lives continue. Our remodel will be finished in time for my mother to come for Yom Kippur. (At least that's what the contractor says.) But maybe we hear the question "What are you doing here?" just a little bit differently this year. We are grateful to be here, to have each other.

What am I doing here at this moment in my life? I don't know how many other moments I will have. What are you doing here, now, in this new year?

Not easy to answer for me or for you. But we can learn a few things about the question from the Elijah story. The first thing to learn is not to get too caught up in the particular dramas of our lives: Who said what to whom and why? Who is angry at you and for what? Who let you down or whose expectations are making you feel inadequate and guilty? Just do the best you can, and let the drama go. And as we let the drama go, perhaps we can see more clearly the truth of our lives, and what we would like to change about ourselves and our relationships.

The second thing we can learn is to try to take care of ourselves a little better. Elijah is passionate, a zealot for what he believes, and exhausted. (That pretty much describes my normal condition! Probably some of you feel the same way about your own lives.) An angel takes care of Elijah until he gets his strength back. We need to listen to our own angels sometimes, giving ourselves permission to take a breath, go on vacation, take a nap, have a massage.

The third thing we can learn is to wake up, to pay attention. For Elijah, it was the angel who woke him up. Again, we need to listen to our angels calling on us to be awake in our lives, not just conscious, but self-conscious – conscious of our own selves and how we are tied to the Self of the Universe.

The fourth thing we can learn is to listen for God in the stillness. We need to quiet down the chatter in our brains to make room to hear that still small voice. We need to turn off Facebook and Twitter, the I-phone and email sometimes, maybe even taking seriously the idea of a Shabbat from technology and of constantly being on-call. You can't hear the still small voice when your cell phone is ringing.

What can we learn? Let the drama go; be kind to ourselves; wake up; quiet down, and listen. We can learn to believe that change is possible. And so we can continue to work on ourselves, and become the people we know God wants us to be.

What are you doing here? I hope that here, in temple, you are listening, really hearing that question. Because if you can really hear the question "What are you doing here?" then you can change, even if just a little at a time.

What are you doing here (in 140 characters or less)? My Tweet would say: "I'm here in Temple Emanuel, listening for that still small voice. And because I can hear it, I know I can change. So I am working on myself." (140 characters, exactly.) What would your Tweet say?

Oh, make sure to leave enough room to add: "*Shana Tova u'metukah!*" Or at least: "*Amen!*"