

Rosh Hashanah Evening 5768
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Have you ever been somewhere where someone says something outrageous, or rude, or ridiculous, or strange? And then that person leaves the room, and their good friend or relative says, “Oh, that’s just him!” or “That’s just the way she is.” I’ve said it about myself – connected to repeated behaviors that I have accepted about myself as being part of my general wiring. These phrases are used to excuse difficult behavior in children and to accept abusive behavior in adults. It is usually said with a shrug or a lifted eyebrow, kind of a resignation that we know another person really well, and they are never going to change – or when we say it about ourselves, we are saying that we are who we are and there’s nothing that can be done about it. “This is the way I am.”

What if, though, “the way I think I am” is not really “Who I am,” or “Who I was supposed to be?” One of the most famous stories about personal identity comes from the great Chasidic master Zusya. (You may have heard this) While on his deathbed, a student asked "Rabbi, what worries you about your death? Surely you will be welcomed into the gates of heaven." Zusya sighed. "My son, I am not worried that God will ask me, ‘Zusya, why weren't you more like Moses?’ Because I am not Moses. I am worried that God will ask, ‘Zusya, why weren't you more like Zusya?’"

Zusya throws the whole “this is who I am” out of whack. First of all, his “Zusya” isn’t a response to an action – it’s a response to a lifetime. Finding out who our individual “Zusya” is a lifetime endeavor. Even if we began with those things that we claim are “just me”, we can never be sure. Is it really you? Is that phrase a way to avoid who you really could be? If I say, “That’s me,” is that it, am I stuck now in the phrase, unwilling to explore what that “me” really is?

This idea of *Heshbon HaNefesh*, an “accounting of the soul”, and deciding whether our lives are worthy after we die is a theme that has been a part of Jewish literature and the High Holy Days for close to two thousand years, since the rabbinic period. In the Bible, the afterlife doesn’t exist, there is no place that we go for judgment – the Bible refers to a place called “she’ol” which is the place we go after our lives on Earth – and it is within the earth, dust and ashes, not some place where we live again. However, rabbinic literature has a much different view. We pass before the judge of all things, and depending on our lives, are granted a place in the world to come, or not. This world to come will begin when peace is on earth and everyone will know that there is one God - we sing it at all of our services: *Bayom Hahu, y’hiyeh Adonai echad, u’shmo echad*. On that day there will be one God, and one name: Adonai. Then all the souls who deserve to return, will be resurrected and live again.

Nowadays, I think most of us would agree with the 20th and 21st century Jewish sage Woody Allen when he said: “I don’t believe in an afterlife, although I am bringing a change of underwear.”

This circle of life, death, and afterlife – Imagine that this circle is our experience during the High Holy Day cycle. Rosh Hashanah we begin to look back on our year as if our lives are coming to an end. During the time between, we continue to reflect and ask forgiveness for hurting anyone because we may not have another chance. On Yom Kippur we don't do the things that living people do: eat, wash, engage in sex. Traditional Jews wear a kittel, the same garment they will eventually be buried in. The Torah portions we read are all about people on the verge of death. It is almost as if our sages were saying: you have lived this year, now you must, like a caterpillar that goes into a cocoon and is revealed as a new entity, reveal yourself as a brand new person. Or like the leaves that are outside of our windows dying (in New England anyway), only to come back again in the next spring as a new leaf on a stronger branch, we will leave a part of us here and enter stronger into the next world. But the next world, instead of being something beyond life, begins the moment the gates close on Yom Kippur – a kind of reincarnation if you will, carrying with us the knowledge of our previous life...this past year.

Figuring out just who I am, or who you are is not an easy task. There are so many layers that go into who we are. It's like an impressionist painting, when you stand close to it, as we are to ourselves, it's virtually impossible to recognize what the subject of the painting is. But if you pull back, you can see that those little dots have formed to make a boat, or a flower, or the ocean. Our lives are the big picture made up of all of smaller moments: our victories and defeats, our aspirations and our realizations, our relationships and our accomplishments.

In order to understand the bigger picture, we need a little bit of help. Zusya's question just brings up more questions. Was I me? Which moments are most important in making me, me? Which areas of my life are worth more than others? How on earth can I determine what my place in the world is without having some kind of blueprint, some set of guidelines through which I can begin this conversation with myself (and others). Guess what!? I happen to have such a document from our tradition that gives us a starting point from which to begin our thinking. In fact, Zusya in the 18th century wasn't the first rabbi to question what will be asked of us for entry into the afterlife. In the Talmud, Shabbat 31a, the great rabbi from the fourth century, Rava said:

In the moment that a person is brought to judgment, they say to him/her:

Did you conduct your business affairs faithfully?

Did you set aside time to study Torah?

Did you involve yourself in procreation?

Did you look forward to salvation?

Did you debate wisely?

Were you able to infer one thing from another?

And even so, if "the fear of God was his treasure" – yes, if not – no.

According to Rava, when we die, we will be asked these six questions – all dependent upon a final mindset. For Rava, if one were able to answer yes to them all, that person would have lived a life that truly mattered. Think for a second about what questions you would ask

another person to determine whether they had lived a meaningful life. . . What would you include? For Rava, it was these:

Did you conduct your business affairs faithfully?

Did you set aside time to study Torah?

Did you involve yourself in procreation?

Did you look forward to salvation?

Did you debate wisely?

Were you able to infer one thing from another)?

And even so, if “the fear of God was his treasure” – yes, if not – no.

As I read through them over and over, I tried to find how they could have significance for me almost 2000 years after they were written. After all, I imagine that in some ways life was no different then, and in many ways, it was very different. So I tried to break them down into ideas or values that I felt spoke more to me in 2007.

Conducting business affairs faithfully:

It is possible that to the outside world, a person’s business affairs can look perfectly respectable, and yet, his inner motivations were devious. Immanuel Kant wrote, "In law, a man is guilty when he violates the rights of others. In ethics, he is guilty if he only thinks of doing so." Honesty and integrity on the inside is the key.

Set aside time to study Torah:

In the time of the Talmud, Torah study was the way to learn about everything (as it still can be): Mathematics, Business, Law, Reading, Logic, they are all embedded in studying Torah and Rabbinic literature. That was how one learned for hundreds of years. There were no secular studies, no Bachelor’s or Master’s or PhD’s, there was the study of Torah. Although the way in which these ancient texts was used has changed over the centuries, the value of the wisdom found in the texts of Israel remains, and one who sets aside the time to study Torah has searched for meaning in a unique and meaningful way.

Because Torah study was all there was, it was used to educate an individual to be able to live in the world. The world of academic learning has taken its place in our world. I would venture to say that the value of education is in the top three of every person in this room, and the roots of that value in each of us is directly linked to the value of Torah study stressed by the rabbis of the Talmud.

Involving yourself in procreation:

Before we get to procreating, let’s mention love. I’m sure that we could all agree that love is difficult to find. To be able to share your life in such a unique and meaningful way with another person must be considered a part of this question.

The reasons to have children are very similar today to Rava’s generation. One has children to ensure that there are future generations, so that Judaism survives, so that through you or your children the world can be a better place. But then again, in our society, not everyone gets

married, not everyone has their own children, or any children for that matter. Certainly we all can participate in guaranteeing the future of our people.

Looking forward to salvation:

The great modern Jewish thinker Mordecai Kaplan believed that God was “The power that makes for salvation” – he defined salvation as self-realization or self-actualization, or self-fulfillment. It is not in a vacuum, however. By working towards the realization or fulfillment for all people, this self-actualization can be a world-actualization. Another way to imagine it is that only when one is looking forward to improve, himself and the world, can both benefit.

Debating wisely:

Other translations have rendered this value: debating, using the correct logic, but I imagine it being less about style and more about openness and honesty. To know when to even enter into the debate in the first place. To be reasonable, to argue in order to find the truth, to discuss in an open way, to admit when you’re wrong and fight when you’re right.

To infer one thing from another:

Many believe that this line is an explanation of Debating Wisely. I separated them. I see this as living in the moment, understanding what is happening to you. The ability to infer something from your life. To be able to read your friends, to be able to anticipate what may happen next. The ability to understand what is going on around you, connecting your life.

So for me, the questions move from:

Did you conduct your business affairs fairly?
Did you set aside time to study Torah?
Did you involve yourself in procreation?
Did you look forward to salvation?
Did you debate wisely?
Were you able to infer one thing from another?

To:

Did you conduct yourself honestly with integrity?
Did you set aside time to learn?
Did you love others and ensure future generations?
Did you seek to make yourself and the world better?
Did you argue openly and honestly?
Were you mindful of your life and its moments?

So now we’ve got to pull it all together. There was a final line that I haven’t mentioned again. It goes like this. “And even so, if ‘the fear of God was his treasure’ – yes, if not – no.” (In the words of my daughter, “what?”) This is a puzzling sentence, and yet, it is the core of all of the questions. The word “fear” in this context isn’t the Hebrew word “*pachad*” which is the fear you feel when afraid, but more the sense of awe. If you have the awe of God in your existence, then all of the others have meaning, if not, then they are for naught.

The Talmudic text explains the meaning of this sentence in two ways. The next line reads “This may be compared to a man who instructed his agent, ‘Take me up a *kor* of wheat in the loft,’ and he went and did so. ‘Did you mix in a *kab* of humton?’ he asked him, ‘No,’ he replied. ‘Then it were better that you had not carried it up.’ Without a *kab* of humton (which is a sandy substance which preserves the wheat), the act of putting the wheat in the loft is superfluous, because it wasn’t done completely. Carrying on with an awe of the mystery and majesty of all things preserves all of the actions in the questions.

In the same section of the Talmud, Rabbah b. R. Huna said: “Every man who possesses learning without the fear of Heaven is like a treasurer who is entrusted with the inner keys but not with the outer: how is he to enter?” The sense of awe, of wonder for the miracle of life and our lives themselves gives us access to the actions that are found in the questions. For how can we be honest, or learn, or love, or seek to make the world better, or be open to argument, or to be mindful of every moment unless we are amazed that all of it exists.

Dr. Devorah Weissberg, Talmud professor at HUC wrote that this awe of God helps us to integrate all of the parts of our lives represented by the questions: professional, intellectual, personal, spiritual – and balance them in our lives. Without the binding force, they cannot be balanced; with it, one can find wholeness (*shalem*), can find peace.

Albert Einstein wrote, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.” Perhaps you have lost the mysterious, perhaps you no longer pause to wonder, perhaps, only now can we see that we can’t see. We must begin to open our eyes, and as we approach the closing of the gates in ten days, may we have come to a better understanding of our place in the world to come, the world that begins the moment they close. May you be written and sealed in the book of life.

Ken Y’hi Ratzon