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Kehilat Reyim 5780

"If not Now, When?"

Chaverim yekarim, my dear friends. L'shanah tovah.

It is, as always, wonderful to be here with you.

What a gift this year has been, strengthening our friendships, welcoming new families, and learning and praying together at the most important moments in our lives.

To those who are new, welcome. We're so glad you're here.

To those who have been here a year - or fifty - thank you for who you are, and for all you do for this loving community.

Thank you all for your trust, your openness, your partnership and your forgiveness.

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The night after Yom Kippur last year, I jotted down a question on a notepad I had by the side of my bed. My question was: are we any different now than we were yesterday, or last week? Did anything change for us, even slightly, during the holy days?

What would need to happen, I wondered, to return to work or school after Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and think differently, or feel differently, than we did ten days ago, in a way that is enduring, that changes us.

I asked a group of friends this question.

One friend, a musician, told me that she once heard a harrowing melody set to the words of prayer that we will soon chant "who shall live and who shall die" and that has stayed with her for years. "It was running through my head," she told me, when my daughter was born, and when we buried my dear friend."

Another friend of mine said the time he took to be reflective on the holy days helped him call up the courage he needed to reach out to his brother and they had a good first conversation, an opening to

at least reconnect after their relationship had fallen apart. I loved that one. That's so essentially what these days are about.

A teacher of mine thought about my question and wrote me a note by email very late the next night.

"I'm 61 years old," he wrote, "and I have spent much of my life waking up in the morning and the first thing I ask is, 'what do I need to get done today?' It's actually been a helpful question, kept me organized and productive, a good rabbi, a good parent, a good husband, a good son.

He continued: "I lost both my parents earlier this year just two weeks apart," he wrote. "My father and I finished sitting shiva for my mother and one week later, he died. Now when I wake up, I find myself asking a different question Not 'what do I need to get done?' but 'how am I going to spend whatever time I have left to live?'"

He ended the email there. But then followed up with a second note: "Living a holy life," he wrote, "means being open-hearted enough to change the questions you're asking when you get up. The holy days tend to remind me of that. After all, who shall live and who shall die."

What a gift of a note. I have been thinking about it for a year.

I don't think we change our questions all that much. This is not surprising - shifting our questions in a way that changes our perspective and worldview can feel dislocating.

I began thinking about when and how my own questions have changed.

To that point - just after Yom Kippur last year - I could remember three times that my questions had *changed in a way that changed me*.

After graduating high school from my small town in Maine, I decided to leave home and live in Israel. I have shared with you that in the early 1930's, my mother's parents left their families in Poland and moved to Palestine as part of the socialist Zionist movement. My grandmother came with siblings. My grandfather came alone. After raising their children through the founding and early years of the state of Israel, they decided to come to the U.S. Navigating punitive immigration restrictions, they moved through Europe and Canada and finally to Chelsea and Brookline.

I was very close with them. They both died within 3 weeks of one another during that year of my senior year. It seemed to me I had one option: go live in the one place that they spoke of as home.

In Israel, I spent as much time as I could with my grandmother's sisters, Chanah and Tzila and brother Yitzchak. Their homes smelled like my grandparents' home. They had the same pictures and the same dishes. They also had the same eyes, wide and narrow, as if squinting, worn down, except when they'd see me eat. Then they lit up with unbridled joy. I felt like I was home. That feeling wasn't about comfort or familiarity. It was about belonging.

This was the first time my questions changed.

I wasn't asking "what do I want to study?" or "what do I want to do professionally some day?" My question also wasn't as straightforward as: "should I live ba'aretz, in Israel, or return to the U.S.?"

My question was, "how do I live genuinely and truthfully, in a way that makes me feel alive, deeply rooted, and hopeful? This is a question I have asked - even struggled with - many times since then.

The second time my questions changed was, not surprisingly, after my children were born. An old, dear friend of mine from law school told me that it took him about 5 seconds after his son was born to realize that he'd literally throw himself in front of a bus for this child. I never quite got comfortable with imagining this scenario, but I knew I felt the same way. Taking care, protecting, teaching, and nurturing a human life became my new reality. My question was: how can I do this all well? Our oldest child, our daughter Elie, likes to tease Sarah and me that we really had no idea what we were doing. And we laugh, knowingly. Every joke, you know, contains a grain of humor.

The third time was actually a painful one.

It was 15 years ago already. Like so many Jews around the world for whom the Shoah continues to echo in our lives, I had become active in the movement to raise public awareness of the genocide in the Sudan. Together with a group of rabbis and rabbinical students, I traveled to New York to stand together in the center of the city with tens of thousands of others. We held up a sign that said "never again" to express that yeah, we know a thing about mass killing, go ahead, ask us about it. We can teach you."

It somehow felt *both shocking and far too familiar* that this was happening in the world again.

That day, I asked: “What am I responsible for? When and how do I need to act, be an advocate, actually fight and struggle, step up and make sacrifices because something much bigger than my own sense of fulfillment or pleasure is at stake?”

This is a fundamental question, and I have tried my best to consider it as much as possible.

The question intensified when I learned that major financial firms in the U.S. were invested in oil companies that worked with the Sudanese government. A few years earlier, Sarah and I had started to set aside some savings into college accounts for our children. Terrified, I sat down at my desk, turned on the computer and logged into our account to review the investment portfolio of our funds. I saw the name of the oil companies. I sank into the chair and Sarah, nearby, said it looked like I had been hit. I cried into my hands. At what point, I asked Sarah, if I’m just not paying attention, am I *complicit*? I felt the shame of participation.

Over 25 years, three core questions became existential pivots.

First, how do I live genuinely?

Second, how do I care for others who have placed their trust in me?

And third, what am I responsible for? How open do my eyes have to be? In an unprecedented era of global interface, how do we fulfill the responsibility of being a citizen of the globe, and the earth? How do we stay conscious of the impact, both positive and negative, on people across the world now, or in the 3 generations.

It seems to me that a life lived well, with meaning and with purpose, depends on our ability to respond to these questions with some clarity.

These are actually ancient questions. There is a collection of teachings called “Pirkei Avot,” meaning Chapters of the Fathers. According to tradition, the teachings were passed down from Moses to the prophets to the ancient rabbis, through each generation, to us.

In the first chapter of Pirkei Avot, we hear from the great sage Hillel.

Hillel would say: הוא היה אומר

If I am not for me, who will be for me אם אין אני לי - מי לי

And when I am only for myself, what am I וכשאני לעצמי, מה אני

And if not now, when ואם לא עכשיו, אימתי

Hillel's questions became the foundation of Jewish ethical and spiritual teachings that have endured for two millenia.

אם אין אני לי - מי לי

If I am not for me, who will be for me?

Hillel's first concern is personal fulfillment. *To the claim* that moral and ethical ideals, to be legitimate, need to be free from our own interests, Hillel responds, emphatically: actually, no that's not true; personal fulfillment and living one's own truth is *central* to one's ability to love, to give and to teach.

וכשאני לעצמי, מה אני

And when I am only for myself, who am I?

But you cannot only be for you. Be attentive to others' needs, which are great. That is why you are here on earth, and it is also where you will find the most meaning.

Hillel then offers a final insight, adding an *urgency* to his questions.

ואם לא עכשיו, אימתי

If not right now, then when?

Tell me, he seems to be challenging us - when will you claim and exercise the power you have to make a positive change? When will you stand up for what you believe is morally non-negotiable and necessary for human dignity? There is suffering right now. When will you tend to it, and how will you do it?

Lo alecha ha'mlacha ligmor, we learn in the next chapter of Pirkei Avot. You do not need to complete the work of perfecting the world. V'lo atah ben horin l'hivatel mimeneh. But you are not free to desist from it.

Is there a more important teaching for us right now than this?

~

What I didn't know at the time I jotted down that question on my notepad was that three and a half weeks later, Saturday October 27, my questions - together with the questions of the entire Jewish community - would change dramatically and irrevocably.

I learned of the shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue just before our Shabbat afternoon mincha service. I tried to lead us in prayer, but it felt like I was just saying sounds in the form of words on a page. For days we were all dizzy, wondering and wishing there was something we could do to offer comfort. Soon after, our questions shifted.

We began to ask: "What do we do now?" and "How do we stay safe?" and "Are we on our own?" and "Who is *against* us?" and most importantly, "Who is *with* us?"

For many of us, this was the first time in our lives that we started to worry about the safety of Jewish community in America. Sometimes this anxiety feels irrational; other times it feels like it's the only question we should be asking, as the shooting seems more and more a symptom of a culture of hatred that has been unveiled and unleashed.

What's critical to understand about the shooting, however, is that it was motivated in large part by the attacker's condemnation of HIAS, formerly the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society established in 1881 to aid Jewish refugees, mostly from Russia at that time. Two generations later, HIAS was primarily resettling Jews fleeing Nazi Germany. The work and the mission of the organization now extends well beyond the Jewish community, assisting and supporting refugees of *all religious*

backgrounds and nationalities who are fleeing persecution. HIAS, the shooter proclaimed, this Jewish organization, was enabling immigrants to attack Americans.

It became clear to me that we cannot understand the presence and the impact of anti-Semitism in an isolated way. We cannot disentangle anti-Semitism from anti-immigrant and racist sentiments. Hatred against Jews is deeply connected to every other degradation and *dehumanization* that has been unmasked, renewed and even overtly supported.

But just as *we are not alone* as targets of hate, so *we are not alone* in the *re-humanizing* tasks of solidarity, support and comfort.

For generations the Jewish community has been at the forefront of standing together with people of color and people with disabilities and more recently LGBTQ folks in solidarity for civil rights and justice. Part of our mission has always been to care for and stand by those who are vulnerable. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel famously marched with Dr. Martin Luther King in numerous civil rights marches including in Selma Alabama in 1965. Together with Dr. King and African American leaders, stood Rabbi Heschel carrying a Sefer Torah.

Following the shooting, I received an outpouring of notes and calls from pastors, ministers, reverends, and imams. Some were friends, others I didn't know. But they all said, essentially: "You are not alone. "We have your back." And even, "let's stay together."

Reverend Regina Walton and a group of members from Grace Episcopal Church in Newton came to Reyim. Grace Episcopal is one of the congregations in our multi-faith collaboration supporting individuals and families seeking asylum that we founded a few years ago. They joined us in prayer here in our sanctuary the following Friday evening for Shabbat services. They stayed for dinner and spent the evening talking with our members. Reverend Walton told me her community felt the need to be together with us.

I received calls and texts from old friends. "May you have strength, may you find light and love from within the darkness," one friend wrote. We hadn't been in touch in 20 years.

Both *within* the Jewish community, and *across* religion and ethnicity, race, nationality and class, there is a shared human experience that can connect us to one another and evoke within us empathy and compassion.

Judaism's great spiritual insight is that our experience of individuation - meaning seeing ourselves as totally separate and apart from others - is an illusion; the truth and purpose of a human life is in its connectivity to others, and the pathway to connectivity is compassion.

It's hard to overstate how foundational this insight is to Judaism. Compassion for others, particularly in moments of pain, is what our ancient sages call "walking in God's ways." Jewish philosophers insist that it is the highest spiritual level we can achieve. *Compassion for others is how we embody the Sacred. It is godliness.*

Drawing on stories of God's compassion in Torah, our ancient rabbis taught: "The Holy One, Blessed by He, visited the sick, so you should visit the sick. The Holy One, blessed be He, comforted the mourners, so you should comfort the mourners. The Holy One, blessed be He, buried the dead, so you should bury the dead."

The Talmud is full of stories of scholars who have come to the end of their lives and are surrounded by friends, students, even maids and assistants at home who rush to take care of them, sit with them and listen as they share their wisdom and their regrets.

If we are willing to ask: "how can we be more compassionate?," our lives will change. I know that this is no small ask.

During a d'var Torah on Shabbat morning two weeks ago, I shared a book by the author David Grossman, one of the great Israeli writers of the past two generations. He wrote a novel called *A-yen Erech: Ahavah*, which means *See Under: Love*, first published 35 years ago in Hebrew.

Grossman tells the story of Momik, an only child who grows up in the shadow of his parents' experience as Shoah survivors. He is driven to force out of his consciousness and identity the trauma and victimization, anger and vengeance that he has inherited. At the same time, he is preparing for a second Holocaust that he is sure is coming.

His great uncle, however, tells Momik stories of kindness and generosity during the Shoah, and like his uncle, Momik becomes what Grossman calls “infected with humanity.” That language of *infection* was very intentional; there are times when acts of compassion and generosity will need to invade our body tissue, pierce and cause a rupture in the feelings of anger and hatred that have become solidified, calcified, in our minds and hearts.

I listened recently to recordings of testimonies held at the Visual History Archive at the Shoah Foundation. Survivors offer what they call “messages to the future,” advocating for understanding, tolerance and the importance of teaching about the impact of hatred. Their testimonies describe the horrors of the Shoah - but they also describe acts of generosity and kindness both *among* Jews and by Christians to Jews. Many of the survivors testified that acts of care and empathy *during* the Shoah opened up the possibility of post-traumatic growth. There is a name for this: it is called “altruism born of suffering.” Their suffering was not healed, of course, but they were able to draw on the experience of feeling cared for to help them restore their ability to care for others. They were once again able to see and believe in goodness.

This cycle of generosity is the heart of Judaism. Everything we are doing during these long days of prayer on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur has this same purpose: to help us feel less alone, more connected, more compassionate.

We are here to pause and meditate on and pray for a life full of wonder and love, full of simcha, of joy and purpose, and of compassion and empathy. I don’t mean that’s why we’re here at Reyim on Rosh Hashanah, though that too is important. I mean that’s why we’re here *at all, the purpose of a human life.*

Asking the right questions will guide us.

If I am not for me, who will be for me אִם אֵין אֶנִּי לִי - מִי לִי

Can I live purposefully and genuinely?

If, when you wake up in the morning, you tend to ask, “what do I need to get done today?” at some point during these holy days, you might instead wake up and ask: “how will I spend the time I have to live?”

And when I am only for myself, what am I וְכִשְׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי , מָה אֲנִי

Can I be more connected and compassionate?

Will I raise my voice when a person’s dignity is mocked, challenged, or oppressed?

Will *we, as a Jewish community*, stand up for others, care for them, go to their holy spaces and pray with them, when they, too, are attacked?

36 times Torah teaches us "*The Eternal your God upholds the cause of the orphan and the widow, and loves the stranger, providing food and clothing - so you too must love the stranger...You know the heart of the stranger...for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.*" 36 times. There is no leeway here.

And finally, will we do everything we can to leave our children a world that is better than this one?

more moral

more empathetic

more philanthropic

more engaged in service

more capable of upholding the dignity of every person

and therefore, more sacred.

This is how we will live genuinely, with meaning and purpose. This is how we will care for others. This is what we are responsible for. This is how we live a holy life.

One question remains for each of us, and for this *kehilat Reyim*, this community of friends.

וְאִם לֹא עֲשִׂיוּ , אֵימָתִי

If not now, when? *L'shanah tovah.*