

Questions

Isidore Rabi, an American physicist and Nobel laureate, was once asked why he became a scientist. He replied: "My mother made me a scientist without ever knowing it. Every other child would come back from school and be asked, 'What did you learn today?' But my mother used to say, 'Izzy, did you ask a good question today?' That made the difference. Asking good questions made me into a scientist." I remember reading this story in a Hagadah -where it appeared as an introduction to the famous four questions of the Passover Seder and thinking: Isidore's mother, an Orthodox Jew from Galicia, was following a pattern established generations ago by the rabbis of the Talmud and even earlier, by the Torah itself.

Abraham, the first Jew, sets the example for questioning when he challenges God to reconsider destroying Sodom and Gomorrah by asking: "How can you, the Judge of all the earth, not do what is right?" And the greatest prophets do the same. The Book of Job, for example, is a book of questions asked by man about suffering -to which God replies with a string of questions of His own!

Questioning and even responding with another question is firmly rooted in our tradition. It is so widespread that jokes on this subject abound. Like the one about Yossi who asks his friend at synagogue: "So, how are you?" To which his friend replies: "How should I be?" Or how about the non-Jew who asks the Rabbi: "Why do Jews always answer with a question?" Taken aback, the rabbi responds: "Do we?"

By now *you're* probably asking yourselves a question, like: "where is the Rabbi going with these stories and what does it have to do with Rosh Hashanah?"

So, the answer is this: if the High Holydays are to make a difference in our lives we need to be asking the "tough" questions. Questions like: Where are we going? Where have we fallen short? Where and how do we want to make a difference? But that's not all. We also need to come up with some answers and a few concrete steps for changing course! That's the work that lies ahead of us over the next ten days.

These questions aren't new. In fact God poses them to the first human beings - to Adam and Eve, who according to tradition, were created on Rosh Hashanah. After Adam eats from the forbidden fruit and he and Eve hide in the Garden, God calls to Adam and says: "*ayeka* – where are you? This is not a mere request for a location but rather an opportunity for Adam to accept responsibility for the choices he has made.

And tonight, we too need to be asking ourselves: where are we? Where are we in our relationships with our loved ones, where are we in our relationship to work and to play? Are our values aligned with the choices we've made? And if not, how do we get there? Today, thanks to various apps – like fitbit, we know the exact number of steps we've taken to get from point A to point B and can probably estimate how many more steps we need to get to point C. But knowing the *number* of steps and understanding *where* we are headed are two very different things.

God asks a second question – this time addressed to Eve when he says to her: "*Mah zot asita?* What have you done?" You might remember that Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the serpent. And likewise, during these days we need to ask ourselves what have we done? Where have we fallen short? How do we assume responsibility and move forward.

The third question is directed not at Adam and Eve but at their son, Cain, in response to the murder of his brother Abel. God asks him: "*Aye Hevel ahicha?* Where is your brother Abel? To which Cain responds with yet another poignant question: "Am I my brother's keeper?"

This final question: "Am I my brother's keeper" is about asking ourselves whether we have been sensitive and responsive to the needs of others – those in our community and beyond. Are we doing our part –in helping those in need - right here in our own back yard; are we doing our part in responding to issues that extend beyond our walls?

These are the important questions we need to be asking ourselves – these are the questions that jump out at us if we listen carefully to the words in our High Holy Day prayer book. I know, however, that it's not easy to separate from what's happening at work, at school or at home. Our minds wander and before we know it we're thinking about the emails we're not responding to, or the

brisket we haven't yet prepared. But if these questions aren't front and center now, then when? And if not here, then where?

I'd like to share with you a compelling response offered by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel to this last question – “if not here then where.” In speaking about synagogues and their place in our lives he says:

“In the pursuit of learning ones goes to a library; for aesthetic enrichment ones goes to the art museum; for pure music to the concert hall. What then is the purpose of going to the synagogue? Many are the facilities, which help us to acquire the important worldly virtues, skills and techniques. But where should one learn about the insights of the spirit?”

Many are the opportunities for public speech; where are the occasions for inner silence? It is easy to find people who will teach us how to be eloquent; but who will teach us how to be still? It is surely important to develop a sense of humor; but is it not also important to develop a sense of reverence? Where should one learn the eternal wisdom of compassion? The fear of being cruel? The danger of being callous?

And then, he goes on to say: Everyone has a sense of beauty; everyone is capable of distinguishing between the beautiful and the ugly. But we also must learn to be sensitive to the spirit. It is in the synagogue where we must try to acquire such inwardness, such sensitivity.”

Heschel believes deeply in the power of community – where the concern for the spirit is shared, lifting us up, helping us achieve this inwardness of spirit.

Together, may we embrace the stillness and humility necessary to open ourselves to these difficult questions so that on Yom Kippur we can emerge with our heads held up high, celebrating the opportunity to start anew!

Shana Tova u'metukah.