

## Rosh haShana 5784-Asking Big Questions

designed by Rabbi Sid Schwarz

*Note: The last hour of the service on Rosh haShana, 5784, was a creative reframing of three liturgical themes having to do with God, memory and redemption. For each, Rabbi Sid chose a contemporary reading that offered a unique perspective on the theme. He then had the congregation look at a source sheet he prepared with several prompt questions on each of the themes. Finally, one member of the congregation offered prepared remarks in response to the questions. Between each section, the congregation stood to hear the blowing of the shofar. At the end of the hour, Rabbi Sid invited everyone to find a partner (chavruta study-buddy) with whom they would connect in the ten days between Rosh haShana and Yom Kippur to further discuss the questions on the source sheet. The source sheet was entitled, “A 10-Day Self-Improvement Journey”. Here are Rabbi Sid’s opening remarks and the three responses delivered by selected congregants.*

Part of the genius of those who crafted the Jewish calendar was to understand that we cannot reach our full human/spiritual potential in one moment. It is always a journey. We should not enter Rosh ha-Shana cold. The entire month of Elul is designed as a preparation for Rosh haShana. And the 3-part theme, introduced during Rosh ha-Shana, about “repentance, prayer and acts of kindness and justice,” does not get fully realized by anyone during a 3-hour service, nor even over the course of a 2-day festival. We have the ten days, until Yom Kippur, to wrap our brains around it and, hopefully, begin to integrate the meaning into our day-to-day behavior.

Preparation and warm up. Whether in sports, the arts or any professional pursuit that demands excellence, we are familiar with the need. If you enter the “main event” without proper preparation and warm up, you are likely to fall short of peak performance.

I mention this because, with the next section of the service, we are going to challenge everyone to do a bit of work between now and Yom Kippur. In this section, we move from the theme of *teshuva*, with life and death hanging in the balance to the part of Rosh haShan *musaf* service that I like to call: “Ask big questions”. The first section, *Malchuyot*, challenges us to think about who or what is God and why it matters. The second section, *Zichronot*, tells us that faith is about collective memories and how we tell our story. The third section, *Shofrot*, asks us to consider what redemption might look like, for us and for the world.

Between each of the three parts of the *musaf*, we will have actual shofar blasts to heighten the ritual drama of considering these big questions.

### I. *Malchuyot*- Sovereignty of “God”

- a. Questions: Rabbi Eisenstein’s reading associates “God” with the characteristics of a “good” life and, by extension, a “good” society. The rabbis of our tradition enumerate many attributes to God

like truth, justice and compassion, and Jews are commanded to emulate these attributes in their own lives.

- i. Do you resonate with this way of understanding “God”?
- ii. Do you have some practice in your own life in which you think about how well your life is aligned with these Godly values?
- iii. Our society and our world are very far from this Godly ideal. Does this lead you to despair or does this motivate you to be more pro-active to fix the broken parts of the world we live in?

### **Ari Levin-Response to *Malchuyot* Questions**

When Rabbi Sid asked me to speak about the Sovereignty of G-d today, my first reaction was to respond with “thanks but no thanks.” Talking about G-d publicly would be too hard and too personal. After pausing to sort out my immediate visceral reaction to the assignment, I realized it’s because I normally shy away from talking about G-d. I find that for most of my friends, talking about G-d makes them uncomfortable. This is especially true for my friends who, as adults, had to choose between staying with a narrow vision of G-d or living a life based on their own beliefs and values.

Luckily for me, Reconstructionism doesn’t believe in a “my way or the highway” understanding of G-d. Instead, Reconstructionist Judaism offers a more nuanced understanding of G-d, allowing for varying interpretations that can grow and change, as we do. I am eternally grateful for having been brought up as a Reconstructionist where I could be rooted in my faith and my connection to G-d even while my understanding and relationship with G-d evolved and matured as I became an adult.

Having developed my understanding of G-d right here in this sanctuary, I appreciate the understanding of G-d that Ira Eisenstein describes – one that is dependent on human behavior and in need of human action to appear. This definition resonates with me as it removes the tension between science and G-dly intervention and works hand in hand with the notion of freewill. I also appreciate the sense of agency that exists when G-d is an adjective and not a noun, in other words, that G-d only exists if you create a G-dly world. The duality of believing in a higher power and understanding your own responsibility in creating that power helps to provide the strength and courage to bring forth truth, justice, and compassion and create a world designed in G-d’s image.

All that said, I’d be lying if I said this understanding of G-d was always easy. Sometimes it would be so much easier to believe in a G-d who was in charge and who had it all figured out. When I was little, this version of G-d in my imagination looked very much like King Trident, sitting in a room full of computers, keeping tabs on the world and intervening as desired. And while I’ve moved far away from the notion of G-d as a white male interventionist, I do sometimes miss having the feeling that there’s a higher power that’s coordinating all of this.

This feeling hit hard during the early months of COVID, when I was stuck at home for 24 hours a day, 7 days a week with a 22-month old in a “why” phase. It very quickly became easier to answer Shai’s questions by pointing to G-d’s plan than try to explain chaos theory. If I’m being honest, I

even found some comfort for myself in the idea that someone, somewhere had a plan. We humans had really messed this up; I had no faith in our ability to fix anything in that moment.

I think this is why so many adults have held onto the more antiquated version of G-d – that old guy in the sky controlling the marionet strings of humanity. While there are clear advantages to the nuances and complexity of G-d existing (or not) through our collective actions, it does rob us of the useful concept that there is a personal G-d who is in control. Just like Shai looked to me to help him figure out what exactly was going on with this world that made no sense, humans for millennia have looked to G-d for the answers. The reconstructionist understanding of G-d doesn't offer that kind of comfort. Instead, it relies on a parenting technique I've grown quite fond of – flipping the question back on the asker. "Why do YOU think things are the way they are? And if you don't like it, what can you do to change it?" From my experience, these are questions that can really annoy a child whose looking for clear answers. For adults who weren't raised to think this way, this exercise could feel beyond annoying and downright daunting. It's hard to confront the idea that the existence of G-d could go hand in hand with individual and community actions, especially if you're looking for divine intervention.

I don't fall into that camp. After the last few years, my disappointment in humanity and our approach to everything from COVID to climate to racial justice is even greater than I could have imagined but so is my faith that our collective human actions are the only way out. At this point in my life, the comfort of relying on King Trident in the sky feels cheap and myopic. While scary and much harder, I find more hope in the idea that the only way we achieve a G-dly world is to show up and do the G-dly work.

This understanding of G-d offers a different kind of comfort. It's equivalent to the feeling of your parent (or someone else who you care about and look up to) saying "you can do this, you've got it," and that encouragement, helps you realize that yes, you can. That said, I'm probably not going to wholesale stop using G-d as my copout answer to toddler "why's." But this exercise has helped me focus on recommitting to myself in the coming year that the strength I draw from a higher power that can be channeled right back into working to fix the world.

## II. *Zichronot*- Memory and Remembering

- a. Question: Rabbi Heschel's selection suggests that in Judaism, "remembering" is more important than believing. This distinguishes Judaism from many other religions that focus on "belief in...".
  - i. What from the history of the Jewish people and the heritage of Judaism is most important for you to remember in order to live a life of meaning?
  - ii. Are there people whose life and role model inspire you to live a better life? They might be teachers, or famous people or a parent or an ancestor. Name them and raise up how they inspire you.

## Cate Whiting-Responses to *Zichronot* Questions

When I first read this selection, my first thought was well, I'm in trouble. I can't reliably remember where my keys are, who's picking up the kids, and why I got up to walk to the family room. So, if being Jewish relies on memory, I'm in trouble.

Then, even so, I'm in trouble because I'm a convert. In what sense does a sentence like "you may remember the day of your departure from the land of Egypt as long as you live" apply to me?

And finally—even if I get over that hurdle—as a convert, my faith began long before I was able to drink from the stream of memory. By this, I mean that even as I observe this day as best I can, my memories are not based on generations of celebration. With apologies to Vanessa, I can never remember ahead of time if this is a brisket holiday or some other special food. I am not troubled if we don't have a traditional meal. And I never suffered through interminable services as a kid. (Benji and Addie, you'll thank us later).

But despite all this—I have no doubt at all that I remember all that I need for this day, this time, or indeed any time, to make a life of meaning possible. I do not have to trace my lineage back to the time of ancient Egypt to get why Exodus is part of every Shabbat service; why we celebrate it yearly; and to be immersed in the lessons I learn and re-learn every time I acknowledge the deliverance from Egypt. The learning, the repetition, the habit in my lifetime serves to develop those memories that then reinforce the learning, the repetition, and the habits.

And to what end? What is learned from memory, as opposed to belief? If recollection is a holy act, if we sanctify the present by remembering the past, it is because, in doing so, we carry forward those lessons that were worth writing down and passing along. We are people of the book because that is where those memories reside, where they flow from. For me, it is the lessons of ancestors acting badly and yet still lurching toward a life of meaning that reminds me that acting badly does not preclude a life of meaning.

I know that recollection of events that didn't happen directly to a person can be as powerful and instructive as personal memory. My mother, though a WASP through and through, was also, for lack of a better word, a Zionist. She was profoundly affected as a young child by the pictures and accounts of the Holocaust and the concentration camps. I grew up listening to my mother talk about the horrors of Nazi Germany, the rise of Hitler and how no one paid attention to his early, anti-semitic rhetoric. It was a regular feature of our dinner conversations. And I grew up hearing the view, repeated often and strongly, that Israel had the right to exist and also, perhaps controversially, to do anything it felt necessary to protect itself. My mother never wavered from this belief. If recollection is a holy act, my mother was a lot holier than I ever thought. As far as I know, our family had no relations that were Holocaust survivors, and yet, she clearly took what happened so personally and was always worried that it could happen again.

What happened in Nazi Germany, the stories in the Torah, and what we read in the Prophets—these are all part of my "remembering". However, I came to have these memories, they create the

framework and substance of my faith. And whether I like it or not, it is all this jumble of stuff-- the examples, the stories, the morals, the striving and falling, that lights the path for a life of meaning.

Whether I follow that path consistently is up to me. Especially today, in the coming 10 days—it is up to me to do the hard work that a life a meaning requires, even if I fall short. And that is where this place, Adat Shalom, this time, Rosh haShana, helps me, helps us all, by making us remember the work that needs to be done.

### III. *Shofrot*- Redemption: A Vision for Self-Improvement

- a. Question: The selection we just read reminds of the gap between the kind of person we aspire to be and how we often fall short of that ideal. That does not make us a bad person. It is human nature. The High Holyday season and liturgy is designed to make us conscious of that gap so that, in the coming year, we can improve, even if only a little bit.
  - i. Which one of the eight paragraphs of the reading speak to you most powerfully?
- b. Response: Matt Biel

#### Dr. Matt Biel-Response to the *Shofrot* Questions

In the spirit of a new year, fresh starts, the optimism of new beginnings, I'm hoping to speak to you for a few minutes about... failure.

Many of us sat in this room twelve moons ago, reflecting on the previous year. Here we are again. How many of us, as we reflect on our vows of the previous year, particularly those vows that we made to ourselves, notice that many of the changes that we sought to make in our lives have not come to pass?

I know that this is true for me, this year and every year in memory. I come to *shul* on Rosh Hashanah, I reflect on the process of *teshuvah* and make commitments to myself about how I might make improvements in the most important parts of my life—to strengthen my relationships with my wife and children, my parents and siblings and friends, and to deepen my gratitude for the innumerable gifts in my life. And then I fall short—I lose my patience, I take precious moments of beauty, as well as the people I love most, for granted. If I'm honest, I know it will happen again this year. I'm going to fail.

How can I make peace with and respond to my inevitable shortcomings? God willing, I will sit here in a year, and this will be true once again. How can I accept this likelihood, and yet still commit in my heart to change?

I want to draw particular attention to one paragraph of the reading that Rabbi Sid has shared with us about the many ways in which we wait too long: “We wait too long to do what must be done today, in a world which gives us only one day at a time, without any assurances of tomorrow. We frequently lament that our days are so few; and yet, we procrastinate as though we had an endless supply of time.”

This passage resonated with me because it focuses on the immediate. Perhaps a way that I can reckon with almost certain failure to meet lofty year-long goals is to focus on the moments that are right here, right now. I also know, when I reflect carefully, that sometimes I insist to myself that there isn't enough time to do something today that I know is quite valuable—a call to an old friend who I know is lonely, or making space for an overdue conversation with a sibling at a family gathering, or taking a few moments of quiet contemplation in the morning rather than rushing headlong into the day. This is a dance that I do with time, the supply of which is most certainly not endless.

I wonder if one path toward being able to strike a balance between accepting my shortcomings and pursuing teshuva is to focus on the phenomenon that most determines my precarious relationship with time: my attention. Attention is the link between what I say matters to me, and what I actually make matter. Perhaps by developing my capacity for intentional attention I can draw closer to seeing myself clearly, to bringing small changes about, to accepting where I really am.

I've been drawn to one kernel of wisdom in a popular self-help book called *Atomic Habits* that is dedicated to promoting development of better habits of living. The author emphasizes the effectiveness of focusing on a values-driven approach to habit change. He suggests that rather than telling ourselves, "I really should exercise more," we should instead insist, "I am a person who takes care of their body." By orienting toward values, rather than toward shame or self-reproach, we can perhaps begin to relate to change as something that makes us more whole. I was immediately struck by what seemed to me to be the Jewishness of this approach, which combines a firm focus on immutable values with a practical implementation of daily practices that provide scaffolding for the pursuit of those values.

So, returning to attention, and to the exhortation in this text not to wait too long to act today. I don't think that the text is suggesting that we plunge forward into mindless action. Instead, I'm reminded of the advice that my senior resident gave to me more than 20 years ago when I was a frantic intern in a chaotic midnight emergency room at Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan: "Don't just do something—stand there." Following this excellent advice, particularly when life seems to be in a particular hurry, has always been difficult for me, but I'm still learning. My hope this year is to improve my capacity to fully attend, to allocate this finite and fleeting and precious resource as consciously as possible. And, also, to know that I will fall short, and my best next step might be to just begin again.