

A story is told of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the legendary teacher at Yeshiva University – a great philosopher and Talmudist – who demanded that his students prepare rigorously for each class. Often he began his class by asking if any of the hundreds of students crowding his lecture hall had any questions on the assigned text. Many of the students had reviewed the material and yet they feared to ask, lest the questions reveal their ignorance to their teacher. Once, when not one of the hundreds of students dared ask a question, Rav Soloveitchik demonstratively slammed his Talmud closed and walked out saying, “No questions? No class.” Learning begins with questions.

-A Night to Remember: The Haggadah of Contemporary Voices by Mishael Zion and Noam Zion

How we Jews love a good question! And although the art of inquiry is most closely associated with the holiday of Passover and not Rosh Hashanah, I believe that the art of asking and answering not only unlocks the gates of learning but also the gates of *teshuvah* (spiritual return) as well. The Hebrew month of Elul, which began about two weeks ago, is said to usher in a period of self-reflection and introspection which allows us to arrive at the High Holidays ready to commit to the intense work of acknowledging missteps, changing behavior, repairing relationships, and both asking for and granting forgiveness that is the focus of this season. As with most things in life, preparation is key to maximizing the potential of these sacred days. The time for such psychic work begins now!

The Hebrew word *l'hitpalel*, to pray, is reflexive and comes from the root *peh-lamed-lamed* meaning “to judge.” Worship is an exercise in self-evaluation, not necessarily in a pejorative sense but rather in a constructive one as we reflect on who we are, who we most fervently want to be, and what to do about the disconnect between these two states. In order to spur contemplation on what we wish for ourselves and our world in the year to come, I offer the following questions originally created (with some modification) by my colleague at The Jewish Center in Princeton, Rabbi Adam Feldman. I hope that you will find them as meaningful as I have:

- When was a time during the last year that you felt grateful? Proud? Remorseful?
- Is there a relationship in your life that needs healing? What would it take to fix it?
- Was there a time in the last year that you felt that your prayers were answered? How did you know? How did you feel?
- What is something that you're looking forward to in the year to come?
- What is something that you are praying for this year – for yourself, for your family, for our country, for our planet?
- What do you think is the most serious sin afflicting our world today?

In addition to reflecting upon these queries privately, I invite anyone who so chooses to share some or all of your answers with me – either anonymously or with attribution – and I will incorporate a selection of our collective responses into the holiday worship later this month.

Each morning we recite as part of the *shacharith* service “What are we? What is our life? What is our piety? What is our righteousness? What is our attainment, our power, our might?” May these questions and so many more spur us to pray this season in the fullest sense of the word, examining the state of our conscience, our spirit, and our soul.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Annie Tucker