

The following is a story about Rabbi **Elazar Rokeach**, (c. 1665—1742), the author of the work *Maaseh Rokeach*, and Chief Rabbi of **Amsterdam** who was born in Kraków in about 1665; died in Safed, Israel, 1742.

You see, Rabbi Elazar in his later years decided to make aliyah to the Holy Land. He boarded a ship for the long voyage from Amsterdam to Eretz Yisrael. During the extended sail, Rosh Hashanah fell upon the travellers, most of whom happened to be... Jewish. On the very first night of Rosh Hashanah a massive storm prevailed upon the ship. The storm was very intense; suddenly there was a “crash” followed by the revelation that there was a **hole in the boat!** Water began to seep into the ship through the hole and the passengers found themselves in a life threatening situation. All the passengers worked as hard as they could to draw the water overboard one pail at a time. Despite their best efforts, the water level continued to rise inside the ship! Rabbi Elazar Rokeach was nowhere to be found, he was, apparently, so engrossed in holy contemplation in his cabin, he had not even realised what was happening. Two of his students, seeing the waters would soon overcome them, ran to the rabbi, crying and screaming for help! They exclaimed, “Rabbi, the situation is life-threatening, that God forbid we are likely to drown in the sea...”

And the Rabbi responded...” wait hold on, the end of the story is too good to give away so easily...I do, however, promise to let you know how the story turned out at the end of the sermon, if you are still paying attention!

Setting historical facts aside, this story offers a metaphor for thinking about our personal as well as our collective problems. Can anyone relate to feeling so overwhelmed at times by their problems that you feel like you are actually drowning in them?

I would like to acknowledge the context in which we presently find ourselves and the problems we have faced and will continue to face. We have not sat together in this sanctuary on Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur **for 3 years!** Few of us can deny that our lives have been profoundly affected - and not always positively - by what we have been through these past few years. The ongoing pandemic has left us with some deep problems to deal with concerning ourselves, our families, our children, our neighbours, and the world. As we sit here together today, certainly aided by the vaccine, Covid may not be as dangerous, but continues to affect us and the whole world... We are simultaneously faced with a myriad of new worldly, societal and yes - personal problems as a result of or at least on the tail of this pandemic. In fact, it seems like economic, political and environmental concerns are worsening, which only adds to the feeling of overwhelm as we also contemplate the problems in our own personal lives. How can we solve all of these problems?

Perhaps, rather than asking “how” we should solve all of our problems, we might start by asking a different question: “how might I/we think differently about the phenomenon of ‘**problems**’ in our lives, community, and the world? Let’s start with the most basic question, “will there ever be an end to our problems?”

In Devarim we read:

Deuteronomy 15:11 (ASV) For the poor will never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt surely open thy hand unto thy brother, to thy needy, and to thy poor, in thy land.

The Torah indicates that there will be no end to the problems of poverty, scarcity or lack. Couched within that is an obligation to open one’s hand, that is to help. Could the chronic nature of poverty apply to problems in general. It seems that as long as we live, we will always have problems- they are here to stay-in fact, solving one will create a few more!

The Parshah we read today from Vayera gives us multiple examples of how attempts at solving problems can create more and more problems. Let’s take a look at the section from Bereishit (Vayera). For example: In the beginning of the section, Sarah, after many years of suffering for lack of a son, is overjoyed at the news of the forthcoming birth of her son at an advanced age. Her problem(s) are finally solved, right? She says, God has brought me laughter צחוק...everyone will laugh with me” (Bereishit 21:5). She even names him Yitzchak, derived from that word צחוק / laughter. This laughter indicates her joy. Derivations of the word צחוק appear six times in these first eight verses and always in the positive sense of joyful, triumphant laughter. But lest we laugh our way to “and they lived happily ever after”, consider the use of a variation on the word צחוק laughter in the very next verse: Bereishit 21:9, connoting that the solution to her childless state has yielded new problems!

וַתֵּרָא שָׂרָה אֶת־בֶּן־הַגֵּר הַמְצַרִּית אֲשֶׁר־יָלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם מִצְחָק:

[and then] Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham מצחק –the translation renders מצחק as “playing’. Clearly the use of צחוק is no longer positive, but rather indicates that Abraham’s “other” son is doing something “bad” to her son, since she then asks Abraham to kick out both Hagar and Ishmael from the family home.

So now that “the problem” of Ishmael the metzacheker and his Mother are out of the picture, Sarah’s problems must be solved? Before we answer that question, let us recall how the problem of Abraham having a son with Hagar came about.

If you recall, Sarah had initially asked Abraham to have a child with Hagar, since she herself was not able to bear children - she had a problem. How did she hope to solve that problem- surrogacy! And Sarai said to Abram, “Look, יהוה has kept me from bearing. Consort with my

maid; perhaps I shall have a child through her (*Gen. 16:2*) Abram heeded Sarai's request and had Ishmael. She was not happy with that solution from the moment he was born. Later he heeded her additional request to kick them both **out**. How might this have affected their relationship? And if we ponder how Abraham coped with the loss of his son Ishmael...we can also wonder how Sarah coped with hearing that Abraham had taken her son Yitzchak to be sacrificed on Mount Moriah? According to the midrash, she instantly died of shock when she heard about the matter. We see that Abraham and Sarah's problems, trials and tribulations did not end until they left this world and every attempt to alter the intended course of events created more problems and more drama .

What can we learn from this section about problems? Perhaps we need to give up on ridding ourselves of our problems, but instead starting to see that the goal is to get ourselves some **better quality problems by asking some better questions**? The midrash in Bereishit Rabbah 53:11 focuses on the aspect of inheritance in explaining the initial use of the word מצחק "playing", and offers an insight into what was really "bothering" Sarah about Yishmael's "playing" with Yitzchak.

Rabbi Azariah said in Rabbi Levi's name: Ishmael said to Yitzchak: "Let us go and see our portions (that is our inheritances) in the field (in the land)' and he, [Ishmael], picked up his bow and shot arrows, aiming in Yitzchak's direction, while pretending to be מצחק "just playing" (just kidding)...From the moment that Yitzchak, our father, was born, **everyone was [so] happy**. [but] Ishmael said to them: 'what are you so happy about? (sing song) 'I am the first-born", " I am going to receive a double portion [of the inheritance]". Apparently that is what Ishmael said "jokingly" - and at that moment everyone stopped feeling so joyous about Isaac's birth.

We can derive from the midrash that Ishmael's "joking around" with bow and arrow could kill her son in this life but Ishmael's comments about who will receive the inheritance threatens her son's inheritance in the future even for his descendants and therefore the future of her People. One might understand that Sarah's concern, according to the rabbis, was not about her own personal desires but rather about their legacy. What would be the qualities and values invested in future generations if not in Yitzchak? This question about inheritance and its implications for her family and People once she is gone is a much higher-quality problem than her personal comfort, feelings or dislike of Hagar and of her son, and it also reflects a higher-quality question, namely, Who will be the heir to their father and lead our People? This would be a higher quality question and therefore reflects a higher quality problem.

If we accept that our problems will be ongoing we can see them as challenges rather than as obstacles or as reasons to become overwhelmed, hopeless, or incapacitated. What are higher quality questions we can ask if we want to have higher quality problems?

In Pirkei Avot 4:1

Ben Zoma said: Who is wise? He who learns from every man...Who is [truly] mighty? He who subdues his [evil] inclination Who is rich? He who is satisfied with what they have...

Pirkei Avot offers us a set of questions that help us to reframe the ultimate questions for our lives, our world. Notice that the answers are higher quality answers. What if we asked more of these kinds of questions in our own lives?

We need to ask these kinds of questions every day. But we can start with the 7 days that follow Rosh Hashanah and lead us to Yom Kippur. These are called the days of teshuva, which not only means repentance, but also “an answer”. Of course, in order to get a good answer, you must first ask a good question, so here are some for you. You do not need to remember these; if you want to take the “better problems / better questions challenge”--you can take them on a slip of paper at the end of the service, and they will also be available on KN’s website and Facebook page:

Day 1: At the first thought of a problem that bothers you today, ask: Am I sure I understand the problem? What else could this mean?

Day 2: What is it about the problem I am dealing with that offers me an opportunity to serve, to heal or to help? What will I do about it?

Day 3: Is there something in a perceived problem I have that offers me an opportunity that I might have otherwise missed?

Day 4 : If I move on from this problem, what are some higher quality problems that feel more like noble challenges that I will be blessed to tackle?

Day 5: Shabbat Shuva: How does Shabbat offer an opportunity to break the addictions and patterns that hold us hostage? What can I let go of for these 25 hours?

Day 6: How can I add more **presence, value and kindness** in my interactions with others today as a way to interface with life and its inevitable problems?

Day 7: How can I make what I learn from books, including Torah, podcasts, articles (and other information sources), more **actionable— being challenged to help others?**

What will happen to your days of teshuva (answers) if you ask these questions – what answers will you come up with? pause—

Does anyone still want to know what happened to the sinking ship of Rabbi Elazar Rokeach?

When Rav Rokeach heard that the ship was sinking, he answered his talmidim (students) with great excitement and enthusiasm! (Nu! Wasn’t he scared?) He said, “If this is our situation [then so be it], bring me the shofar right away as dawn is about to break and we can perform

the mitzvah of “blowing the Shofar” while we are still alive for today is Rosh Hashanah!” That is what they did and he performed the mitzvah of Shofar with the greatest kavanah—(intention) including a long and soulful tekiah gedolah (do that)---of course, the rising waters and high waves immediately abated, the spirit of Hashem passed over and all became calm. They were saved.

What can we learn from the rabbi’s reaction? The Hasidic master Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peshischa explained the point of the story this way: Do not think that Rabbi Elazar Harokeach blew the shofar to cause a divine miracle, that is, he was not trying to influence God to save them; but rather, he accepted what was actually happening, that they would drown soon and so...asked an incredible question: how can I serve God in this moment? Can we fulfil one more mitzvah?

When we feel we are drowning in our problems, can we accept the reality of what is actually happening right now, take it as a challenge to ask a higher question: how can I be of service; what mitzvah can I perform at this very moment? Shana Tova