

A Question for Each of Us

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5778

Every Jewish holiday carries its own constellation of themes, its own rhythms (in the literal sense of musical modalities and in the metaphorical sense of pace and mood) and its own specific invitation for spiritual deepening. To get at Rosh Hashanah's invitation for spiritual deepening, I begin with a story within a story:

In 1798, in Northern White Russia, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, the founder of Lubavitcher Hasidism (d.1813), was put in jail in Petersburg. His Jewish opponents, the Mitnagdim, had renounced him to the government. The story is told that while Shneur Zalman was awaiting trial, the chief of the gendarmes entered his cell. In the telling of Martin Buber, here is how the meeting went:

The majestic and quiet face of the rav, who was so deep in meditation that he did not at first notice his visitor, suggested to the chief, a thoughtful person, [the] ... manner of man he had before him. He began to converse with his prisoner and brought up a number of questions which had occurred to him in reading the Scriptures. Finally, he asked, "How are we to understand that God, the all-knowing, said to Adam: "'Where are you?'"

"Do you believe," answered the rav, "that Scriptures are eternal and that in every era and generation, every [hu]man is included in them?"

"I believe this," said the other.

"Well then" said the tzaddik, "in every generation God calls to every ... [person]: 'Where are you in your world? So many years and days of those allotted to you have passed, and how far have you gotten in your world?' God says something like this: 'You have lived forty-four years. How far along are you?'"

When the chief of the gendarmes heard his age mentioned, he pulled himself together, laid his hand on the rav's shoulder, and cried: "Bravo!" But his heart trembled. [Buber. *The Way of Man*]

Ayeka? "Where are you?" is the very first question recorded by Torah and it is addressed to the first human by the Almighty, the Creator. In Martin Buber's

retelling of the encounter in the Petersburg jail, the chief of the gendarmes poses a question of common curiosity – why does Scripture depict God who is presumably all knowing and all-seeing as asking Adam for his whereabouts. Shneur Zalman refuses to take the bait of a perhaps real but superficial inquiry. Instead, in authentically Jewish fashion, he reframes the conversation by redirecting the question asked of Adam into one posed right now, in the present moment, to the chief of police himself. Thus, does the rav turn a onetime query about location into an ever-present opportunity for a spiritual self-assessment, an accounting of the soul, what Jewish tradition terms a *Cheshbon Hanefesh*.

So too with each of us: especially at this season, we are asked, “*Ayeka?* -- Where are you?” In posing the question to each and every one of us, Rosh Hashanah and the Days of Awe invite and encourage us to turn away from the trivial, to minimize the harmful, to shun the ungodly, and to turn toward our better natures, to seek healthier paths, to look honestly and seriously at ourselves and ask: “Self, where are you? Are you where you could or should be? Are you where God calls you to be? Are you where you want to be in your heart of hearts? Are you allocating your time and your energy according to your declared values? In your relationships with friends and loved ones, are you engaging in those relationships in a manner that enhances them? As a citizen of a specific community or country, are you meeting your responsibilities as citizen appropriately? As a child of your parents, as a parent to your children, as a dweller upon the earth, as a person of the means you possess in relationship to those with less, are you behaving like the person you want to be, with kindness, with love, and with compassion?

Lest you be so inclined, Rosh Hashanah comes to inform you that no one gets to offload the question. Rather, everyone gets to transform it and apply it to their precise circumstances. Everyone gets to respond, to perform the spiritual accounting for oneself. By way of illustrating an initial step in a process of *Cheshbon Hanefesh*, using myself as a case study, when I last gazed at the odd-looking version of me that stared back from the bathroom mirror, I heard the question *Ayeka* through the filter of Mary Oliver’s poem **The Summer Day** which goes:

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

So I ask, “Dan, myself, tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” From the question posed in this way as a point of departure, I arrive at many possible pathways of further inquiry, some looking depressingly devoid of lightness and possibility; others appearing deliciously ripe with potential beauty, opportunity, and intrigue. In my present situation, I feel blessed by many factors -- decent health, relationships with loved ones, a relatively safe community in which to reside, among them. These permit me to contemplate not only the losses that inevitably come with my aging but also some distinct opportunities. I would observe that noticing the contrast between losses and opportunities at all stages of life comprises an important and ongoing theme for one seeking spiritual growth at every stage and age.

Regarding the losses associated with aging, I recently heard the author Ann Patchett liken aging to a person in a room with numerous doors leading to other rooms; in the period of youth, the room appears large and has many, many doors, each one leading to untold spaces worthy of exploration, delightful fantasies about future accomplishments and glory. As the person ages, the doors close; opportunities dwindle; goals, ambitions, and fantasies recede from view; the room itself gets smaller; the person declines in mobility and even in the capacity to perceive the few doors that remain. Hers is a dispiriting picture to be sure and, in my view, one that contains some truth. In truth, as one ages, certain opportunities do undeniably recede or disappear altogether. To say otherwise is to deny reality.

However, in their book *Wise Aging: Living with Joy, Resilience, and Spirit*, the authors, Rachel Cowan and Linda Thal draw a broad and nuanced and Jewish picture of advancing years. They quote the Psalm 90:12 which implores us

famously “teach us to number our days that we may attain a heart of wisdom.” The Psalmist assumes that attaining heart wisdom could be an optimistic possibility of aging. That is, while no one can know with certainty the precise duration of their own life, each of us has choice about the attitude and the degree of intentionality we will bring to our days from here on out.

Furthermore, even as many opportunities do fade away with aging, others may open up. Using myself again as an example: Regrettably, I can no longer reasonably expect to win an Olympic gold medal in the 400 meters. However, I may still get to climb a volcano in Hawaii or take a raft through the Grand Canyon and I now have the time to arrange such a trip. I probably need to give up any illusions that I could win a Nobel Prize in any field, but I could decide to spend more time with my friends. I could devote more effort at playing my guitar or writing poetry. I can help teach refugees English as a second language, might volunteer to build houses, do plan to become a Court Appointed Special Advocate for foster children, have offered myself as a mentor for younger rabbinic colleagues, do continue to teach some Torah, might do that in some new venues, and could perhaps even lead High Holiday Services in the Shenandoah Valley.

I can and do enjoy the grasshoppers in the grass, the humming birds hovering around the feeder in our back yard, the flowers planted by my wife in the mulch beds, the whitening snow of winter, the life-giving rain of spring and summer, the rays of the warming sun, the graceful Blue Ridge Mountains peaking through the tree leaves and winking at me as I gaze out the window of my study, or the turtles sliding off their rocky perches in the reservoir as I glide by on my kayak. I can take pleasure in walks and cuddling with my dear wife who has endured me for over 44 years. I can relish conversations with our two adult children and with my father, still alert and intellectually engaged as he approaches age 93. I can take advantage of the opportunities that come with time to do yoga, practice meditation, delve more deeply into Jewish prayer as a contemplative and centering, mindfulness practice. I can engage more actively in political advocacy and causes of social justice.

In short, I could moan and groan at the losses that have come with my aging to this point or I could say, “Self, Ayeka, where are you and now that you are where you are, what do you plan to do with the wild and precious life that is possible?”

Before I conclude, let me add a word about how I am hearing the question *Ayeka?* after the White Supremacist, alt right, Neo-Nazi, and KKK invasion of

Charlottesville this past August 11th and 12th. The incursion of these xenophobic racists did shake me as it did many in the Charlottesville community while radiating tremors of concern far and wide. And I do not want to minimize the sorrow and pain inflicted, nor the trauma caused, nor the serious tensions within the community that were exposed. However, I am left with an overriding and powerful sense of tremendous strength and resilience on the part of people of good will. The invasion generated multiple expressions of connectedness across various communities of faith and ethnicity within Charlottesville and from outside. It impelled folks to reconnect to the values which bind us to one another.

As expressions of support and love and delegations arrived from the Reform Movement, the Israeli Consulate, from the New York Federation, and from Jews and non-Jews far and wide, I was reminded of the tremendous power that inheres in community and the extent to which solidarity can be mobilized in moments of crisis. At the impromptu memorial created for Heather Heyer, one poster summed up the sentiments of many. In the words of MLK, it read: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

Ayeka? Where are we after the invasion by hate-spewing racists? One response is that we are in a state of determination to recommit ourselves to the values we uphold, to the light that brightens our welcome of refugees and immigrants who continue to enrich the fabric of this nation and the light that enables us to uphold and value the diversity within the human family. And we are determined to cultivate qualities in ourselves and in the culture of our communities, qualities of love and kindness, qualities emphasized by our Jewish tradition under the rubric of the holiness toward which our tradition would have us aspire.

And so, the New Year has arrived and with it an invitation to feel ourselves, each and every one of us, addressed by the same question. Now that we have reached this age and this stage, where are we in our wild and precious lives?

In the New Year now begun, may each of us in our own unique way, feel encouraged and empowered to respond according to the wisdom in our hearts.
Ken Y’hi Ratzon. May this be so.