

Six Questions Asked in Heaven

This week, at a Youth Group planning meeting, we needed to find a time to meet again to work on some projects. So we shared our Gmail/Google calendars. We took out our iPhones, smartphones, iPads and laptops and six calendars emerged (one for each person). In addition, each one of us had his/her own set of eight calendars: schools calendars for each child, work calendars for each parent, soccer calendar, marching band calendar, teen work calendar, family events calendar, holidays calendar, and a calendar for trips, Jewish holidays, youth group, volunteer, etc. It was a miracle that we did find one time to meet, which probably did not work for everybody.

We all have busy calendars, so a simple question becomes difficult: “Ariel, when can we have some friends for dinner, it’s so nice outside?” “Sure, but not this weekend ... not that day ... you can’t make it ... kids won’t be there.” Let’s look at all nine calendars, and, yes – sometime in December. We just missed the fall altogether!

We all have iPods, iPads, smartphones, iPhones – great! We can always be reached. We can always text or call and always look at our calendars. Yet, I often notice people having coffee with a friend, but looking at the screen half or most of the time. I meet people listening to each other, but just with one ear. The other one is listening to the MP3 (I assume that some teens are having one ear busy right now!!).

I wonder sometimes, when we look at our mobile devices, “Who owns whom?” “Who commands whom?” Just when we are going to do something, we receive a text a Facebook message, a calendar notification.

I know we create our calendar, and we choose what we do. How much do our calendar and busy *schedules take control of our lives, precluding us from doing things we would like to do, want to do, think are important to do, but “don’t have time for that right now.”* This is probably why we invented the term “**quality-time.**” We do not have much “time” anymore, so we find small bits of “quality-time.”

Perhaps that is why, eventually, people create **a bucket list**: listing all those things we **should have done**, always **wanted to do**, always thought were **so important**. Yet, somehow, our whole life has gone by and we haven’t done them!! We’ve been “**too busy**”- too busy to do what, when we sit and think, are the **things we care about the most!!**

We’ve seen the movie, *What goes in a Bucket List?* First things on the list might be racecars, skydiving, and other amazing adrenaline-pumping adventures. In real life, there are actually several websites and organizations devoted to give us ideas as to what to put on a bucket list such as <http://bucketlist.org>. It lists all great and exciting things to do such as trying strange food and doing crazy things,. There are “10,000 ideas!”

Back in the 5th century, a Jewish teacher, Rava, imagined something similar. Instead of thinking of **HIS bucket list**, he imagined **what GOD’S bucket list** would be for him. “When I die, and get to the Gates of Heaven, they are going to have a list for me. They’ll ask me Six Questions, to determine whether I make it in or not.” (from Talmud, Shabbat 31)

Guess what the questions are ...

#1 - “Did you do business, buying and selling, faithfully?”

This question is a surprising; it is not asking, “Did you come to services every Shabbat?” “Did you eat bacon?” or “Did you say your prayers religiously?” Rather, this first question asks, “How did you manage your business? How did you manage your money?”

We are told we had to conduct business “faithfully.” Perhaps this means honestly, with no deception (this is hard enough). I think this word **points to something more**. The question is faithful to what?

Was the way you managed your wealth in **keeping faith with your values**? Or do we give our money “an excuse from ethics,” a pass, saying “all is valid in business?” On Yom Kippur, we talk about our actions being “written in the book before God.” Heaven seems more interested in another book, in what is written in our check books, in our accounting books. Do the numbers there reflect also our values, our priorities, the goals we have in our faith? We have some books with numbers to review.

#2 - “Did you fix times for Torah?”

How often I hear, “Torah study, sure, I’d love to, I always wanted to, I often thought I should do it ... I can’t on weekdays ... on weekends I am exhausted and have all these activities, but I’ll come whenever I have the time.” Well, if weekdays are out, and weekends are out, how can we possibly “find” the time or “have” the time?!

When I was a child, every Friday at 6pm, I thought my dad was crazy. Since Shabbat was beginning, he would have me unplug the house phones (remember, they had actual dials and wires to the wall!!). **UNPLUGGED, DISCONNECTED!** Today, this sounds like a terrible thing. I was disconnected with no network available! For my dad, this was how he reclaimed ownership of his time with 24 hours of Shabbat, with no phone calls disturbing it! Everything could and would wait 24 hours until Saturday night. The world had him for six days, but the seventh belonged to him, and he wouldn’t miss it.

By the way, was he really “disconnected?” He would come to Synagogue, and there was the “network.” There was no WIFI, no text, no instant messaging; all the connections were done face to face. Most times, at the Oneg, my dad, the Rabbi, was “networking” with a cup of wine (actually, scotch) in his hand. This may be a tradition I should reconsider myself...

Note that Heaven’s question is not “Did you **have**” the time but is “Have you **fixed** times” in our calendars for studying, for learning, for human-interface (‘interfacing’ with an actual face). Are we **making** this time? Fix the time means “own the time.” FIX the times for Torah and for those things that, when you sit and think, you realize they are most important things now.

#3 - “Were you involved with being fruitful and multiplying?”

This question seems to me a contradiction on the list. Having kids is one of the main reasons we then don’t have time for anything else! Yet, Torah tells us something simple. Even in heaven, even among the highest religious ideals - family, spouse, children – *these* come first.

I think this question **says more**. It says to not just “have a family.” It says, “**Do not live in isolation. Multiply!**” As an individual, “find a partner.” As a couple, “build a family.”

As a family, you may still be isolated, so find “extended family” and like-minded families and friends. Life is better when lived with others, in contact with others, engaged with others.

Now, let’s see. You are a Jewish person or family and you now live in North Carolina. Where may you find like-minded people or an “extended family?” You are here, so you know the answer. This is why we joined our congregation, and we belong to it. But **for every one of us here** – in fact, for every Jew in North Carolina who is today connected with any congregation or Jewish group, **there are two who are not**. They are left out and disconnected. I don’t know **where** they all are, but **you** do, **we** do. You see two of them at your kids’ soccer game. You see one of them at your kids’ school. You see one of them in your neighborhood (you know, the ones without Christmas decorations on the door!). *All of us together – we know dozens and scores of Jews who are disconnected.*

Surely it is an important Mitzvah to respect people’s choices and not to intrude in their private life. It is a greater Mitzvah, and a greater benefit to them, to **reach out** to people, to **invite** them, to **actively** welcome them! I have not met too many people who were offended because they were invited to a Shabbat dinner and Family Service. I haven’t met many people who were made angry because they were invited to an adult education discussion on a Sunday morning. On the other hand, I have met MANY who have gained an extended family in this and other congregations, who have connected with friends, and who have reconnected with their tradition, and their spiritual life. It all started by someone reaching out to them, saying

something like, “My kids and I will go to Family Shabbat Service, and we’d love for you guys to join us.” This is why many of you are here today.

#4 - “Were you anticipating the redemption?”

This question is *not* “wishing one day that the Messiah will come and all will be good.” It actually involves believing that things will be better, if we make them better. It is about not giving up that hope, not giving up our part in bringing that to happen.

This is what I have learned from Beth Shalom people:

Not “I wish people who are in need of transportation had it available” for you have made this real through the bike repair and distribution program.

Not “I wish the homeless would have food and learn how to keep a job” for you have made this real through your work with the Caring Place!

In addition, Meals on Wheels and making blankets for hospitals are a few of the many Mitzvot you constantly do. You are not giving up the hope that you, that all of us, CAN and WILL make a difference, if not for all, than for many!

We read in our Beth Shalom Siddur, “We don’t wait for a Messiah to come and solve our problems...each one of us has an element of messiah in us...as we engage it, we bring the messiah to this world, at least for someone, as we create that better life we hope for.” We do this each on our own time and in our own ways. However, we can have a greater impact by joining efforts and in larger numbers, thru Beth Shalom. We have a Social Action Committee, a Mitzvah Committee, Religious School classes that perform Mitzvah projects, etc. All of these groups can use some help. All are “anticipating redemption” for some, in some way.

Many of you do this in your own way, in other organizations. Great! If you can, consider helping with us. Help in the many efforts underway; bring your own projects and ideas for us to engage in. Just yesterday, one of you brought up a new 5K race for a cause, a new initiative. Let’s do these great things together.

5- “Were you intellectually engaged in pursuing wisdom, and understanding a thing within a thing?”

There is a word in Hebrew used in the original question, “**pilpul**,” which is untranslatable.

It describes the unique way we study, discuss, and learn texts. If you haven’t yet been to one of our Talmud study or Bible study, you may have never seen this. It goes like this: We read a text, and everyone makes a comment on whatever is on his or her mind as a result of the text. Then someone comments on the comment, and 25 minutes later, after a heated discussion, it seems that we have totally forgotten the very text we actually wanted to discuss, because we are having another great discussion! This is not getting distracted or sidetracked for it is on purpose! The main reason for being in this study group was not to memorize a text, but to let our thoughts come out, exchange our views, hear others, and come up with insights and ideas which may or may not be in the text. Yet, we got them out of it. That’s pilpul. When you get into it, it’s the most rewarding learning, thinking, and social experience.

Now, where can someone do this? Some episodes of Seinfeld have some “pilpul discussions,” but they are “about nothing.” Here****, ****we have deep, engaging, intellectually satisfying learning sessions, where we all learn from our discussion, but on the most relevant topics. I hold in my hand the Adult Education Brochure with this year’s programs: Current social issues, justice issues in America, how Biblical values speak to us, NAACP and the Jews, and, of course, Talmudic Pilpul. **Fix these times!** Engage with us; enrich our discussions and yours.

6- “Were you in Awe of Heaven?”

“Awe of Heaven” are big words, but I think we can all relate to watching the ocean at a sunset. We feel not just the beauty, but the sense that some things are bigger than us, and that we “owe” some respect, reverence, and care for this world, for life.

I had a moment of awe seeing a birth and realizing and feeling how life is a wonder – not just my baby, but all babies and new lives. Being in awe of life surely means more than loving these babies while they are small and cute – that’s easy! “Being in Awe” is to care for people, especially when they are grown, and they are not so small and so cute. “Awe of Heaven” is showing awe for the Source of all, by caring for all and each one.

As we modify and change this world and try to make a better life for children and for ourselves, do we think beyond doing good for us? Is what we do also for the common good? Is what we build and create done “in awe of life,” through caring for others? What legacy, what heavens and earth, do we leave for the next generation?

So here is *God's Bucket List* for us. There's no need to wait until we run out of time to do it. This is our "to do list" beginning now:

- Being in "Awe of Heaven" by making the commitment to do our best
- Keeping our faith and values especially in business
- Making the time for those goals which are not urgent but are the most important
- Multiply and grow our families and actively building up our family of families
- Being the messiah for someone by bringing redemption and real help
- Engaging our minds, with each other, with our heritage. Next year we will be a little older, but we will also be a little wiser and happier.

These are the questions. I look forward to a year in which we work together to provide our best answers.

Shanah Tovah!

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