

Temple Aliyah
Shavuot 2017 Sermon Slam
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“The Art of the Question”

My two and a half year old granddaughter, Mira, is at the age where, when told to do something, will often ask, “Why?” As we Face timed last week, and she asked our son, her father, “why?” when he asked her to leave the IPAD alone, we had to laugh when he answered, “Because I said so!” You can’t imagine how satisfying this is to hear as a grandparent/mother of the son that he, too, resorts to the old “Because I said so!!!” He, who always asked for an explanation!!!

But this also triggered me in this way: As some of you may know, I grew up in an Orthodox Jewish household, where, among other things I learned, was that I was not supposed to question “Why?” we did the things we did. In fact, I was taught, it was not only wrong to ask why, but also dangerous. While this wasn’t explicitly stated to me, although it was to my older sister, I clearly understood it, and so we never asked. Although I did have many questions about our observance, and although I did derive much comfort from attending shul weekly, keeping Kosher, and being Shomer Shabbat, as I entered middle school, my questions kept coming, but there seemed to be no place to ask them. At that time, the most crucial question for me was “Why, as the only serious, and for that matter, only girl, in my Hebrew School class, was I not allowed to participate in the service at shul? The 6 boys in my class were forever goofing off, throwing spit balls, falling out of the chairs, and I was paying attention, honing my Hebrew reading, and wanted to show that I could do this from the Bima. But it was not to be. So, the next question was “Why should I take all this stuff seriously when I couldn’t see any role for me other than sitting in the back of the shul with the other girls and women?” But.... I never asked; it was too dangerous to do so.

What is it about asking that can seem so dangerous, so threatening? And how is it that the kind of Judaism that I love is one that struggles with questions, and acknowledges that sometimes there aren’t clear answers or that there are a multiple of answers? The first question in the Torah is the one G-d asks Adam after he eats the forbidden fruit: “Where are you?” Our forefather, Jacob, is renamed “Israel”, the one who struggles, wrestles with questions. Our matriarch, Sarah, asks G-d “how can I have children at my age?” in Chapter 18 of B’Raishit. At 90 years old,

this is a very good question!!! Our liturgy abounds with questions. Prayer, itself, is a supplication, we ask G-d to listen to our prayers...Our Hagaddah immortalizes this asking in our 4 Questions: “Why is this night different from all other nights?” Mi chamochah, in Parshat B’shalach, Chapter 15, asks the question “Who is like you, Oh G-d?” Such a good question, after the people ask Moses: “What have you done to us, taking us out of the wilderness?” and G-d asks Moses: “Why do you cry out to me?” and last, but not least, are Hillel’s questions in Pirke Avot: “If I am not for me, who will be? If I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, when?”

Our sages posed many questions and gave many “Teshuvot”, answers, on issues they deemed significant for our lives.

It seems to me that “The Art of Questioning” is the answer to G-d’s question “Where are you?” The existential questions “Why am I here on earth? What is my purpose? How do I make meaning? How can I have impact? How can I practice Tikun HaOlam”? resound in our Jewish traditions.

This is so satisfying for me. Rather than finding questions dangerous, I find questions comforting when confronting the uncertainties that we all live with. I do understand why my father could not be in the place of “both/ and” but rather had to live an “either/or” life. But I choose to live my life full of questions, contemplating a myriad of answers and appreciating, at times, that the question, itself, is the answer. This is good.

And so, when my granddaughter Mira asks “Why?” I feel grateful that she is continuing our Jewish tradition of questioning, that she is learning that questions are not dangerous, that every question is a good question.

Chag Shavuot Sameach!