

## **Be Curious** Rosh Hashanah in the Round 2019 Rabbi Sarah Graff

### Introductory remarks

We usually think of the Passover seder as our night of questions. I want to suggest that Rosh Hashanah is also meant to be a holiday of questions. Some say this is why the shofar is the shape of a question mark. It's meant to wake us up to our questions. Not questions in search of facts, or knowledge. Questions that open us to mystery, to wonder, to connection.

This morning, I'm going to invite us to play with questions, in a variety of ways, and to practice **being curious**. There will be opportunities to be curious with ourselves, to be curious with one another, to be curious with God, and, to be curious with chocolate. But before we go there, I want to share a story.

Rabbi Laurie Matzkin shared with me this story about Andy, the husband of a friend of hers, who just completed a year of treatment for tongue cancer. The treatment included daily radiation on his tongue for 7 weeks, which had the effect of killing all of Andy's taste buds. The great thing about taste buds though, is that they grow back. So Andy is now in the process of learning to taste all over again, retraining his brain and tongue to recognize tastes, to enjoy tastes, and to discern what he does and doesn't like to eat.

Apparently, it's been surprising. He went out with his family for pizza, and he ordered plain cheese pizza, sure that that was what he liked. But then he tried his son's pizza with pesto and sun-dried tomatoes, and discovered that he loved it. He had never wanted to try pesto pizza before. But, what do you know, he found it delicious.

I was curious to see if I could find other stories like this on the internet, so I did a search for "regenerating taste buds." What I found though was not more cancer stories. I found out that all of us are regenerating our taste buds, all the time. The lifespan of a taste bud is 10-14 days! So we too have entirely new

taste

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buds from what we had a month ago, or last Rosh Hashanah. But I'm guessing, our taste in food has not changed much since last Rosh Hashanah. When my family sits down this afternoon to partake of brisket made with Scott's mom's beloved recipe, I can predict now, Scott and I will say it's delicious, Chava won't eat it because she's a vegetarian, and Eliana and Orli will humor us with eating a few bites but then declare, they just don't like brisket. So why is this, if we all have different taste buds in our mouths today than we had last Rosh Hashanah?

I think it's because of our brains. Our brains are convinced they already know what we like and what we don't like. And let's be honest, they're also pretty convinced they know who we like and who we don't like.

It's easier to already know these things. To be able to judge what comes our way and put it into pre-established categories. Food I like, food I don't like. Person like me, person not like me. Person I want to talk to, person I don't want to talk to. There are probably good evolutionary reasons for why we make these snap judgments - to protect ourselves from eating something dangerous, or talking to someone dangerous.

But our brains are simultaneously depriving us, of the opportunity to learn and grow and experience the deliciousness of the world.

**Fortunately, our brains have a natural antidote to the judgment habit. And that is, the ability to ask questions. To be intentionally curious about our own experience and about the world around us.**

So today, I want to give us some time to practice being curious. We're going to pass out a paper with some questions that I hope you'll be curious to ask yourself. You can reflect on your own, or you can turn to someone sitting near you, and practice curiosity with them. Practice listening without judgment, just

being curious what they have to say. After being curious with each other for 10 minutes or so, then we'll have the chance to hear two members of the congregation speak about their current journeys with curiosity.

And, as is our tradition at Rosh Hashanah in the Round, we do have treats for this portion of the service - fair trade mini chocolate bars (milk chocolate and dark

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chocolate varieties), cookies, and grapes. But I want to invite you to receive this treat with curiosity. Resist the urge to just pop it in your mouth. Instead, imagine that you've never tasted this before. Ask yourself, **"What is this?" "Mah Zeh?"** Notice the shape of your treat. The wrapping of your chocolate. The color of your food. The feel of it. The smell of it. Notice some small detail and ask yourself, "What is this?" Now, "what is this?" Judaism gives us another phrase to express amazement at the variety and beauty of our world, "Mah Rabu Ma'asecha Adonai," "How great are Your works, Adonai." How varied. How amazing "Mah Rabu." Maybe it's not even a statement. Maybe it's a question. **What is great, in this thing right in front of me? Mah Rabu?**

We're going to come around with the treats and the handouts. I invite you to stay in your seat and try to keep the mindful headspace as you receive your treat and turn to a partner with curiosity.

Chevruta Time (see handout in separate attachment)

Speaker 1: Chaplain Bruce  
Feldstein

Speaker 2: Michelle  
Oberman

## Closing Remarks

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## Closing Remarks

I want to close with one last thought.

I'm curious how many of you discussed the Hayom Harat Olam passage, that I included from the prayers that we'll say in Musaf, after each time we blow the shofar. When I first started thinking about curiosity for today, I thought, "Hayom Harat Olam!" "Today is the birth of a world!" That's perfect. Every moment is pregnant with possibilities.... Just open your eyes.

Then I looked at the words that follow Hayom harat olam, and thought "Huh!" "Today is the birth of a world. Today all creation is called to judgment? Whether as Your children or as Your servants. If as Your children, be compassionate with us as a parent is compassionate with children. If as Your servants, we look to You expectantly, waiting for You to be gracious with us, and, as day emerges from night, to bring forth a favorable judgment on our behalf, awe-inspiring and

Holy one.”

What does the birth of a world have to do with judgment? I asked myself. What is this prayer saying? (I’ll look forward to hearing what answers you came up with.) I think, what we’re asking God, is **to be curious toward us**. To turn to us and say, “What is this, my child?” And to listen with compassion.

There’s an amazing midrash in which the rabbis say: we blow the shofar **to move God** from the seat of judgment to the seat of compassion. It’s a pretty audacious thing to imagine. That God needs to move from judgment to compassion. And that we can do something to make that happen.

Well, if we can move God from judgment to compassion, I want to suggest that we can also move ourselves from the seat of judgment to the seat of compassion. We can do it with curiosity. Suspending that part of our brain that says we already know the answers. We already know how this food tastes. We already know what this person is like, and why they do what they do.

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As the Talmud says, teach yourself to say, “I don’t know.” I don’t know what it feels like to be you, or you (my husband), or you (my daughter), or you (my congregant), or you (the homeless person on the street). But I can ask.

What is it like to be you?

This is how new worlds are born. Hayom harat olam. Today is pregnant with possibilities. Just be curious.

