

The Religious School lesson was nearing its end when the teacher asked the students if they had any questions. Little Rachel raised her hand.

"Yes, Rachel? What's your question?"

"I have four questions to ask. Is it true that after the Children of Israel crossed the Reed Sea they received the Ten Commandments?"

"Yes, Rachel, that's true."

"And is it true that the Children of Israel defeated the Philistines?"

"Yes, Rachel, that's also true."

"And is it true that the Children of Israel built the Temple in Jerusalem?"

"Again you are correct, Rachel."

"So my last question is: If the Children of Israel did all those things, what were the grown-ups doing?"

Perched on a veranda one afternoon at a Jewish summer camp in hot, humid Indiana is a group of 35 twelfth graders. They've spent the day working on various crews that keep the camp clean and the campers happy. Clad in their signature white t-shirts stained with souvenirs from their toils that day and the weeks prior, the teens are sweaty and tired. It's 5 o'clock, an hour before they have to work dinner, and most of the group would rather be napping or swimming than sitting on a dusty porch for an

“Ask the Rabbi” session. We Rabbis are veterans of this annual ritual and know our audience well. Armed with licorice and popcorn, M&Ms, corn chips and liters of caffeinated soda, we’ve got the teens eating out of our hands before the first question is batted our way. Here’s a sampling:

- Do you believe in God?
- What happens after we die?
- What’s the Reform Movement’s position on gun control?
- Why did you decide to become a Rabbi?
- What happens when you mix Ajax and Clorox? (The kids spend a lot of time cleaning!)
- How should we as American Jews respond to the immigrant crisis in Europe?
- How do you define Zionism?
- Why are you here?

One of the reasons I like doing this “Ask the Rabbi” program is to get a sense of what concerns our youth at this stage in their lives. No longer teeter-tottering on playground seesaws but rather on the precipice between high school and college, these 17 and 18 year olds are a good barometer of where we as Jewish lay and professional leaders need to focus our attention to keep them active Jewishly during college and as young adults. Of course we have this demographic here at Temple Sinai, but camp affords a totally different and unique environment in which to engage and interact. For the two weeks we’re at camp, my colleagues and I work one-on-one with these teens. Because the teens hail from various cities throughout the Midwest and affiliate with different synagogues and different

Jewish youth groups, the perspective of opinions and experiences is diverse. By learning what's on their minds, by getting a glimpse of the spectrum of concerns that keep them up at night, by picking up on what they do and don't know, we as a Jewish community can gain broader insight into how to reach out to their peers in our own community and how to keep them involved in Jewish social, religious, and educational activities. The "Ask the Rabbi" session also offers an opportunity for the teens to hear that we Rabbis don't always agree on what being Jewish is all about.

Today, as we begin the New Year, let's consider one of the questions addressed to the panel of Rabbis this summer and no, it's not "What happens when you mix Ajax and Clorox?" You can Google that later. Instead, let's consider the question "Why are you here?" The initial challenge in responding is to figure out the intent of the question, and that depends on which word in the sentence is stressed. Why are you here? Why are you here? Why are you here? Why are you here?

My inclination this summer was to answer the question with the emphasis on the word here: "Why are you here?" Why was I at camp, spending two weeks of my vacation tutoring B'nai Mitzvah students, helping counselors plan educational programs, sweeping floors, washing dishes and enduring the climatic extremes of an Indiana summer? I volunteer at

camp because as a child and teen I loved going to my Jewish summer camp. I loved the Jewish rituals. I loved the song sessions and the Israeli dancing. I loved learning conversational Hebrew and spending four weeks, summer after summer, in a holistic Jewish environment. (I did not love swimming in the frigid, frog infested lake with catfish nipping on my toes). Seriously, I loved being part of a community in which being Jewish and expressing my enthusiasm for Judaism wasn't considered weird. My experiences as a camper greatly influence the decisions I make as a Jewish adult. They impact my connection with God. They inform my love of Jewish learning and teaching. They fuel my passion for the people and the land of Israel. As a Rabbi at camp, I hope to share my love of Judaism with today's campers and staff and, to the best of my ability, inspire in them a comparable passion for all things Jewish. This also is why I'm here at Temple Sinai. I'm privileged to have this opportunity to teach, to engage with you in Jewish rituals and practices and, always a personal highlight, to explore Israel together.

And so I ask: "Why are you here?" Of course Cantor Heit and I know why you're HERE here! But why are you here? Is it because going to Temple on Rosh HaShanah is your family's traditional New Year practice, or is this your first time and you want to experience an alternative way to

celebrate Jewish time with friends and family? Are you here because being part of a sacred community is a comfortable way to express your Jewish identity? Are you here, as Tevye might say, to pray for prosperity, for good health and happiness and, most important, for life, for life, *L'chaim!*? Is that why you're here?

Perhaps the question posed by the camper on that sticky summer day wasn't "Why are you here?" but rather "Why are you here?" With an emphasis on the word you, the question can sound snarky. YOU?! Why are YOU here?" Intonation makes a difference in the messages we want to convey and in how our words are heard. So let's ask the question in gentler manner: Why are you here? What motivates you to be here this morning? What inspires you to be a part of this community? What connects you to this? Perhaps you are here because Temple Sinai provides a spiritual home for your Shabbat and Festival observances. Perhaps you are here because Temple Sinai offers the Jewish educational and social opportunities that align with your needs and interests and schedule. Perhaps you are here because Temple Sinai supports you and your family during times of *simchah*, as well as during times of sorrow. Perhaps you are here because Temple Sinai is your hub for all things Jewish and makes available multiple concourses to guide you on your Jewish journey.

The different names by which we call Rosh HaShanah impact how we relate to this special time. Today is *Yom Hazikaron*, the “Day of Remembrance.” Today is *Yom Hadin*, the “Day of Judgment.” Today is *Yom Teruah*, the “Day of Sounding the Shofar.” Today also is *Yom Harat Olam*, the birthday of the world, literally, the day on which the world was born. When we study the creation narratives in Genesis chapters 1 and 2, we learn how the world was created. God spoke and the world came into being. *Abracadabra!* *Abracadabra* is based on two Hebrew words: *bara*, which in Hebrew means create and *dabra*, or *davar*, which is derived from the Hebrew infinitive “to speak.” *Abra* – “I will create” -- *cadabra* – “that of which I speak.” God created the world *Abracadabra!* God spoke the world into existence. Then God assessed the works of creation. There’s nothing like grading your own work. Not surprisingly, everything passed with flying colors. What I find missing from the creation narratives, however, is the answer to a very simple question “Why are we here?” God obviously had a rationale for creating a world and everything in it. Scholars of every generation have composed *midrashim* in an attempt to fathom a logical response. *Midrashim* are stories based on the Biblical texts. Academics have penned tomes of philosophical speculation. Yet all is conjecture when it comes to the question “Why are we here?” *God* knows!! Yes, God knows.

The fact is that we are here. I believe we exist for a purpose. I think each of us has a unique role or mission in life. One of our responsibilities as a creation of God is to figure out what that role or mission is. To do so, we must address the question “Why am I here?” Young children ask WHY questions instinctively. Their curiosity about life and the world in general sometimes can get exasperating and we often dismiss their inquiries with a curt BECAUSE. Bad answer. Asking WHY is a worthy approach to gaining a mature perspective on the purpose of life. A Rabbi once said, “To ask is to believe that somewhere there is an answer....Questions testify to faith – that history is not random, that the universe is not impervious to our understanding, that what happens to us is not blind chance. We ask, not because we doubt, but because we believe.” Asking WHY helps us identify the values we hold sacred. Asking WHY leads us to appreciate that which gives meaning and purpose to our lives.

The little Rachels of this world, the teen campers, and the youth right in this community look to us for answers. They want to know what it means to be a Jew. They want to know how to balance their Jewish interests with everything else going on in their lives. They want to know how to prioritize, how to integrate these seemingly separate pieces of “Jewish” and “other” into a personal identity that isn’t disjointed. We have the experience to

Rosh HaShanah Morning 5777 – Alternative Service  
**Why Are You Here?**

instruct them. We have the enthusiasm to encourage them. We have the hindsight and the foresight to guide them. But we owe it to them, to first articulate for ourselves, the answer to that all-important question: WHY ARE YOU HERE? Only then can we guide them responsibly. The New Year is the perfect time to begin this this self-reflection, to ask ourselves: WHY ARE YOU HERE?