

Last Sunday, on the first morning of religious school, a third grader had a few ‘simple’ questions for me, which her mom encouraged her to ask as they were getting ready to leave. “What is God?” she asked. “Is God real, or made up? Why are we here? Why do you pray? Is the Torah real?” The student looked at me expectantly, while her mom smiled at me. “She asked me a lot of these in the car on the way here. I told her to ask you.” I smiled back at her mom, and was happy to talk to her daughter. “Those are all great questions,” I said. “For now, I’ll quickly talk about the God one. I can’t give you a definite answer, because no one knows for sure. What I can do is tell you what I think, and what other Jews have thought and talked about. Hopefully, as you keep coming here, you’ll figure out what you think. The most important thing is to keep asking questions - that’s what Judaism is all about.”

This definitely happened on Sunday, although exactly what was said may have changed in my memory over the last few days. The specifics don’t necessarily matter, though, because regardless of the exact details, this is an apocryphal Jewish story - a big part of how Judaism survives is by continually asking significant questions, and exploring the answers to them, individually and as a community. It was a satisfying moment for me as this young girl’s rabbi, as encouraging Jews of all ages to ask questions about everything Jewish, big and small, might as well be my job description. Today, many of us live such busy and full lives that we don’t always take the time to ask some of the fundamental Jewish questions - there are certain things that we just do, without every really questioning what they mean or why we do them. As I’ve been preparing for the High Holidays this year, it occurred to me that the nature of these holidays themselves might fit in this category.

Therefore, I’d like to start out this New Year in a way that I’m considering making an annual TBE tradition. I’d like all of us to ask ourselves a very basic question as we begin our High Holiday season together: Why are you here? What brings you to our services here this evening, and, if you’re planning on returning, what will bring you back here tomorrow, to Tashlich tomorrow afternoon, to second day services back at the synagogue on Friday, or

to the lengthy Yom Kippur services next week? I invite you to take a few moments - maybe now, maybe during the times for silent prayer later, or really at any point during the service - to really think about this question.

Why are you here? What do you hope to get out of attending High Holiday services this year? Maybe you're here because it's a family obligation, or a personal obligation, or a Jewish obligation? Maybe you're here because tonight, when we start the service with our children on the Bimah and have such joyous music interspersed throughout the evening, is one of our most uplifting services of the year. Maybe you're here to share a wonderful Oneg with each other, or to see the beautiful new configuration of our Unitarian friends' spiritual home. Maybe you're here to celebrate the New Year. Maybe you're here to examine yourself, to kick off the process of Teshuvah, to engage in our sacred annual process of working on yourself, of making yourself a better person, of making yourself more worthy to dwell in the house of God (as we've been singing in Achat Sha'alti, also known as Psalm 27, over the last month). Maybe the reason you're here is something that I didn't suggest, or maybe the answer is a combination of the different things I did suggest. I want to ask you to make a commitment with me right now to really ask yourself this question during the service tonight, this evening when you go home, and throughout these Yamim Nora'im, these Days of Awe. Why are you attending services this year, and what do you hope to get out of doing that?

I'd like to tell you about some of the reasons why I'm here. For one thing, of course, it's my job. I'm happy to note that - in case this isn't obvious - I love my job, and there is truly no place I would rather be tonight, no community I would rather share these holidays with, than this one. Especially at this time of year, I don't really think of this as a job - particularly not in the most pedestrian sense of that term. For me, being the rabbi of this congregation, helping to lead this holy community in prayer, is a sacred privilege and a sacred responsibility. Part of why I'm here is because one of my favorite things to do every year is to help to guide this congregation through the complex journey that High Holiday

services can be. I'm especially excited to do what I'm doing with this talk - to invite you to join me in exploring more deeply the question of why we hold these services. I thrive on being a part of a community in which asking questions is so highly valued, and is such a high priority. I love being the rabbi of a congregation that is rarely complacent, that is uncomfortable accepting simple answers, and that is always willing to ask more and to explore further. Helping to steer this ship of questioning is something that brings great meaning, and joy, to my life.

I'm also here tonight for myself. I'm here to celebrate that another year has gone by, to pause for a moment to recognize and consider the many very good, and very troubling, things that have happened in our community, in the world, and in my life, since the last time we celebrated Rosh Hashanah together. Marking the passage of time is extremely valuable - taking stock, looking backwards and ahead, is the only way to gain an accurate sense of what's been happening, and what we want to be happening, in our lives. I'm here tonight to re-focus on what's important to me, on who I want to be, and on how I want to walk around in the world. I'm here because while I know what some of the steps are that I need to take in order to be my best self, I don't always know how to actually make that happen, how to get through all of the very human parts of me that resist change, that resist making the extra effort, that get in the way of simply and quickly embracing the right thing to do when it's right in front of me. I'm here to try to find new ways to open up my heart and my soul, so that I can be a better version of myself. Ultimately, I'm here tonight because Judaism gives me this annual opportunity for Teshuvah - to return to my essence, to start over and try again, to pray for and to rededicate myself to having a more positive, less self-interested, more efficacious and impactful footprint on the world, and to think about how I might practically accomplish those goals.

Throughout these Days of Awe, I'll be praying for and rededicating myself to finding more balance in my life - balance between my inner and outer commitments, balance between what I want to do and what I can do, balance between what others need from me

and what I need to do for myself. I'll be praying - expressing my deepest hopes to That Which Is Beyond Human Comprehension for the things that are beyond my grasp - that I, the people I know and love, the people I don't know at all, and the entire world around me - might in the coming year move closer to a sustainable state of equanimity, wholeness, and peace. I'll be rededicating myself to figuring out what I can do to help to achieve those things, and to taking the steps I need to, to create more tzedakah/justice, ahavah/love, and shalom - wholeness and peace - in the world around me. I'll be thinking about the concrete steps I can and need to take in order to do those things, and committing to really creating a new path for myself in the coming year. Tonight, I pray, will be the beginning of the new, 5778 version of myself. Tonight I invite you to take the time to ask yourself the big questions you need to ask, to seek out the answers to them, and to figure out how to make this Rosh Hashanah, this Head Of The New Year, a new beginning for you, too. In the year 5778, may we all be able to ask the questions that we need to ask, and to take the steps forward that we need to take - the steps towards being our best selves, and towards helping the world around us to be its best self, too. Ken yehi ratzon - may this be God's will. And let us all say together, Amen. L'shanah tovah!!!