

We learn from our holy texts that asking questions is intrinsic to our religion. Abraham questions God about destroying Sodom and Gemorrah. Moses questions God's ability to take care of the people in the desert. He also stops God from killing all the Israelites when they disobey Him. In our rabbinic texts, the essence of studying is to pose questions to one another. In Yeshivot and rabbinic schools, pairs of students together, go through the text and ask questions. We do that because we learn more that way than studying on our own. We teach our children to ask questions at the youngest age possible, for example at our seders. Judaism is a tradition with a passion for asking questions as well as for engaging in the process of finding answers. We take no real enjoyment in finding an answer that ends the discussion but rather in finding one that continues it.

The main thing we learn from this passion for questions is that there is never a final answer. There is never a certainty in anything, only the process of living and learning and continuing to change.

And on tonight of all nights, when we list our transgressions and plead with God to forgive us, to sign and seal us in the book of life, we know there is no certainty about the outcome. The question we pose is, 'How do we face that uncertainty and still live the best way we can?'

We have such a hard time with uncertainty, such an insistence on having all our questions answered once and for all, leaving no loose ends. We want to know what our lives will be like. We work very hard to create order and do away with the chaos that faces us every day.

We live constantly in two opposite realities. One is the chaos of the universe: something we have no control over, natural disasters, destructive behavior by groups or individuals, random accidents caused by ourselves or others. There is a constant world of uncertainty that we just have to accept and live with.

But our other reality is how we attempt to cushion ourselves against uncertainty. Strong family connections. Social groups. Religion. Other ways of bonding with each other. Those loving and caring connections help us push the chaos away from us. Help us focus on something other than how out of control we really are.

There's a wonderful story which teaches us about living with uncertainty in the most profound sense.

A king commands a Rabbi to teach his pet monkey to pray. If he doesn't do it within five years, the rabbi will be put to death. When the Rabbi tells his people what happened, they are horrified. But not the Rabbi. 'Anything can happen,' the Rabbi says. 'In five years, the king could die. In five years, I could die. In five years, the monkey could die. And in five years, I could teach the monkey to pray.' It's that expectation that anything can happen that keeps us fresh, that stops us from finding anything like the final answer.

There are three disciplines that search for meaning: Science, Art and Religion. None of them can offer the complete and final answer. In all of these fields, any real efforts to find that completeness always leads to more questions, to doubt. Science, art and even religion cannot give us sure, unchanging answers.

But we want so badly to find something permanent, something that will last forever. Many of us have read Percy Shelley's poem Ozymandias. It's a wonderful meditation on impermanence, on the need to never rest with what we think is the final answer or outcome. The poem talks about the remains of a sculpture of a man lying in the desert. On the pedestal it reads,

'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!'

Of course around those remains is sand dune after sand dune. For all of what Ozymandias had when he was alive, he wasn't able to make any of it permanent.

Any time we try to secure anything we end up ensuring destruction and chaos. We have to constantly change, to constantly question what we are doing and how we are doing it. This doesn't mean we can't leave a legacy to our community and to our children. But the legacy has to include the wisdom that being able to live with doubt is a holy practice.

We sometimes confuse living our lives with finding answers. Living is about our whole selves, our heart, mind, emotions and spirit. Answering questions is only about our minds. The one truth we can count on and the one that leads to spiritual satisfaction is that we need to be able to live with the reality that we will never have the final answers.

Rebbi Tarfon in Pirkei Avot, the Sayings of our Ancestors [2:21] tells us that we cannot expect to finish any task, but we are required to start it. Often something we begin is continued by others in a way that we never could have imagined. We are not required to know everything or to create the ultimate plan for anything. We simply have to begin with our ideas and let future generations take it from there.

Philosopher Walker Percy tell us that our need to have a final, correct answer leads us to having 'prepared experiences.' As we approach learning, we have to ask ourselves are we looking for what we already know or are we learning something we don't know.

At my rabbinical school orientation, the deans asked us a halakhic question assuming we did not yet know the answer. One other student and I had spent the previous year studying at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem and we did know the answer. While the other students were being wonderfully creative in their answers, all we could think about was the 'right' answer. The other students weren't limited by having learned this law and could be much more creative. I saw so clearly that it wasn't always best to know the right answer. Sometimes that is exactly what stifles creativity.

That's why we need to continue to ask questions even about those things that we believe we already have the answers to. And that's why children often have the best answers about how to solve problems. They look at things with a beginner's mind. They are able to think creatively and not be bogged down with what has come before.

Too much of our education and our lives in general are filled with gaining prepared knowledge rather than creative discovery. We tend to gather facts rather than discover the depth and breadth of a situation.

"On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who will live and who will die. Who shall live a long life and who shall come to an untimely death?" This too is really a question, not a statement.

Let us learn how to live with uncertainty without fear of the unknown. Let us ask ourselves what would we do, if we were not afraid.

Let us learn to experience each moment to its fullest rather than lost in planning the future or remembering the past.

Let us ask how can we help others rather than finding more for ourselves.

Let us enter this Yom Kippur without attachments to any preconceived notions, without preparing questions and answers but with the openness to all the possibilities that surround us.

Ketiva v'hatima tova. May we all be written and sealed in the Book of Life.

Thanks to Rabbi Elyse Goldstein for some ideas in this sermon.