

Erev Rosh Hashanah
Congregation Beth Israel
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My high school was awesome: we were a National School of excellence, everyone attended the football games, even though we only won 5 games in 4 years...what did you expect? We were in Coral Springs, FL. Our quarterback was Jewish. And we had a state champion marching band...in which I was the tuba section leader. But perhaps the most famous event at my high school involved the Advanced Placement exam. Two students, one in a study abroad program, and one back in Florida, thought it would be genius to try and cheat on the AP test. They devised a plan to have the student abroad send the AP test questions to Florida, since students abroad take the exam in advance. The plan worked flawlessly, and the student at my high school aced the exam. Until however, he decided to share the details of his great scam with some of his friends. The story spread quickly and soon the administration found out, expelled both students, and the Advanced Placement test was completely revised.

The High Holidays are a time to look back at our year, fix our mistakes, and start anew. How can we find ways to repair ourselves? Where do we start?

According to the Talmud, we will be asked a series of questions when we arrive in heaven. We can use these questions to perform tikkun atzmi – to repair ourselves and improve our lives for the coming year.

In his book, The Seven Questions You're Asked in Heaven, Dr. Ron Wolfson writes, “when you get to heaven, you’ll be asked questions that aren’t like the ones you’ve been

asked in a job interview or to get into college. You won't be asked about your strengths or weaknesses. You won't be asked about your skills or hobbies, these are transformative questions. You'll be asked the seven questions in heaven that reveal how you lived your life on earth."¹

Like the student in my high school, we have these questions in advance, so now we can perform tikkun atzmi- repairing ourselves to better our future.

What could God possibly ask you as you're standing at the gates of heaven? Did you fulfill the commandments? Did you feed the hungry? Did you donate lots and lots of money to your rabbi's discretionary fund?

The first question that God asks you in heaven is: Did you deal honestly in your business practices? (Shabbat 31a)

Out of all the questions in the world God could ask first, God wants to know about our business **ethics**? You think to yourself, I may not have been perfect, but I was no Bernie Madoff. Stealing \$64 billion worth of other people's money was certainly unethical, but for the rest of us this question becomes much grayer.

Amidst your business transactions did you remember that the person sitting across from you is a human, a soul just like you? Did you treat others with dignity and did you make decisions that you're proud of? Did you remember the humanity in your actions?

Question one helps us to perform tikkun atzmi-to repair ourselves by repairing our business practices.

¹ Wolfson pg. 1

The second question that God asks you in heaven is: Did you leave a legacy?

(Shabbat 31a)

Although on the surface, this question seems to be about having children, it's really more than that. A midrash speaks of a young man named Honi, who came across an elderly man planting a carob tree. Honi asked "how long will it take for this carob tree to yield fruit?" The elderly man responded, "it'll take 70 years." "70 years" said Honi, "but you won't be around to enjoy the fruit." The elderly man chuckled, "I'm not planting this for myself; I'm planting it for my children and their children." (Ta'anit 23a)

Question 2 is about providing for future generations.

Are we mindful of how our actions today will affect the future? How will you be remembered? We're enjoying the fruits from our ancestors, now what will we plant?

Question two helps us to repair ourselves for the coming year by ensuring a positive legacy.

The third question that God asks you in heaven is: Did you set times for Torah?

(Shabbat 31a)

Personally, I think I got this question in the bag!

If we look at the phrase carefully, we notice that God isn't necessarily asking us if we studied, God is asking whether or not we set **time** to study.

In his book The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, Stephen Covey states that when we are figuratively cutting down tree after tree in our lives, occasionally we need to stop and sharpen the saw. Although it seems counterintuitive to stop working in order to increase productivity, when we enter heaven, God will ask if we dedicated time to

Jewishly exercise our minds. Question three helps us to perform tikkun atzmi-to repair ourselves by assigning times to Jewishly enrich our lives.

The fourth question that God asks you in heaven is: Did you hope for redemption?

(Shabbat 31a)

Sometimes it's hard to imagine that God will reach out a strong hand and an outstretched arm to rescue us. But the key word in this question is not redemption, its hope.

The first three questions you're asked in heaven are about what you **did**—did you act with honesty, did you leave a legacy, did you set time to study? This question, however, is about our attitude. Basically, did you live with hope in your heart? Did we see the cup half full or half empty? God is asking us about hope. Amidst living in a broken society, with our country at war and our economy in crisis, God expects us to hope for redemption. Question four helps us to repair ourselves by repairing our attitude.

Now “Imagine that your husband has just been nominated to be the Democratic candidate for president of the United States of America. You have given a stirring speech about why you think he would be an excellent choice. Walking backstage, your two young daughters Malia and Sasha, greet you with a request that brings you down to earth:”Mom we have something important to tell you. We need to have a sleepover!” According to Michelle Obama, “That snapped me out of speech mode, with the bright lights and applause, and back into the role I love: mom. The next night, sixteen giggling girls-my daughters, the Biden granddaughters, and friends-took over our hotel room.”²

² Ibid., pg 86

The fifth question that God asks you in heaven is: Did you get your priorities straight? (Shabbat 31a)

A priority is what matters most to you. So, what really matters in your life? Did you spend enough time with your loved ones? Did you tell the people around you how you feel? Did you appreciate your relationships? Did you give with your actions as well as your words? Question five helps us to perform tikkun atzmi-to repair ourselves by reprioritizing our lives for the coming year.

For my birthday a few years ago, Lisa, and I woke up at 5:00 in the morning and drove to Eloy, AZ to the largest drop zone in the US-where my pregnant wife stood on the ground and watched me jump out of a plane at 13,000 feet. It had always been a dream of mine to skydive, but my wife thought I was crazy. I even thought I was crazy...until I read question six. **The sixth question that God asks you in heaven is: Did you enjoy the world? (Kiddushin 4:12)**

Have you done/accomplished/tried/ or at least researched something you've always wanted to do?

God's world is not here for us to ignore. This question is not about what you did, but about what you did not do. God wants us to enter heaven complete, fulfilled, and without regret. Question Six helps us to repair ourselves by encouraging us to take chances, live our dreams, and learn from our mistakes.

The seventh question that God asks you in heaven is: Were you the best you, you could be? (Tales of Hasidism, Vol I)

“Before his death, Rabbi Zusya said: “In the coming world, they will not ask me: ‘why were you not Moses?’ They will ask me—‘why were you not Zusya?’³ Most of us are too busy living our lives to take the time for introspection. The high holidays give us this opportunity for analysis and repair. Did we challenge ourselves?

Were you the best you, you could be? Did you exceed your own expectations? This seventh and final question helps us to perform tikkun atzmi-to repair ourselves by helping us live-up to our potential.

We’ve heard all the questions, now is the time for us to prepare the answers.

When we enter heaven we’ll be given our ultimate final exam. And like the student at my high school, we have the questions in advance. Were we honest? Did we leave a legacy? Did we set time to study? Did we hope? What were our priorities? Did we enjoy the world? Were we the best we could be?

These questions are not only meant to prepare us for the world to come, but to guide our actions in **this** world. The High Holidays are a time for introspection and reflection. We need to use these questions to perform tikkun atzmi – to repair ourselves and improve our lives today. The Talmud provides us with the questions, now good luck with the test.

³ Ibid., pg 111