



Erev Rosh Hashanah 5778: Curiouser and Curiouser

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“Starting from my very first taxi ride as an Israeli citizen,” Rachel Sarafray writes:

I’ve learned to never step into a cab with expectations of how the next ten minutes of my life will go. On the very same day I made aliya, I managed to catch a cab with a very enthusiastic driver. Hearing my accent, he launched into a lecture on how amazing it is that I’ve come to see the Holy Land. There’s no place in the world like Israel, he explained, insisting that I absolutely must marry an Israeli man and raise Israeli babies on Israeli land.

Agreeing with his Zionist sentiments, I informed him that I’d just made aliya. Suddenly, the driver shifted in his seat to face me. Why would you do such a thing? he asked.

Israeli taxi drivers are many things, but I’ve never met one who is shy. My kids’ favourite was the one who gave them candy – which, much to their surprise, I let them accept. “But you don’t let us take candy from strangers!” they said, not quite believing their luck. “It’s true,” I replied, “but he’s not a stranger.” And by that point in the ride, he wasn’t.

Most of all, though, my experience with Israeli taxi drivers involves questions. Many, many questions. “You want to go *where*? Why would you want to go there?” Or, “Who are the people with you? Are they your parents? Your *congregants*? What do you mean, you’re a rabbi?”

You get the idea. In Steimatzky’s bookstore in Israel, the bookmarks they give out have the phrase, *Mah hasipur shelcha? What’s your story?* And when you step into an Israeli taxi, you better be ready to reply.

I have a theory, my friends, as we begin this new year. We will experience many metaphors of God over the coming days: God as parent, God as ruler, God as judge. But I want to offer you the image of God as Israeli taxi driver: God who is insatiably curious, and who has an opinion or two about our lives.

In the Talmud we read that when a person dies and arrives in the next world, that person is asked six questions: Did you do business with integrity? Did you make time for lifelong learning? Did you invest in your family? Did you live a life of hope? Did you learn from conversation? Did you find understanding?¹

Curiously – and I use that word intentionally – God is asking us, among other things, whether we were curious. Curious about our actions, curious about the future, curious about each other, curious about our world.

¹ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a. See also Ron Wolfson, *The Seven Questions You’re Asked in Heaven* (Woodstock, VT, 2009).



The Israeli poet Zelda wrote: “There are those who think that if a person is religious, then their faith, as it were, sits in a box. They don’t understand that every single day, the believer must renew his or her faith.” To be Jewish, to be religious, to be human means not to be stagnant; rather, we are made to wonder, made to ask, made to change, to challenge and to grow. Did God really think we wouldn’t want to eat the one thing that was off-limits in the garden?

We grow when we are curious about those of different faiths.

Interfaith dialogue has been part of Temple’s tradition since our founding 135 years ago. I forget sometimes how unique this is, and how different from other approaches in the Jewish world. Like any conversation that bridges a divide, interfaith and intrafaith dialogue call for genuine curiosity. Writing in the Times of Israel, Father Erik Ross, a Dominican priest, shares this piece of Torah:

“Curiosity killed the cat!” our eighth-grade teacher, Mrs. Keller, liked to say. Then she added: “But satisfaction brought him back!” And then she would say something about photosynthesis.

I thought of Mrs. Keller’s cat when I previewed the church’s readings for this Sunday, which start with Genesis 15: “The Lord God took Abram outside...”

To me, this harks back to, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.” And it points forward to that mildly famous fragment from Exodus, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt.”

What does God do? He brings people out.²

And then, when I looked that passage up in our tradition – because, after all, I was curious – I found this interpretation from Rashi, who writes: “God brought Abraham outside. The simple meaning is that God brought Abraham out of his tent to look up at the stars. But according to its interpretation, God said to him: Go out from your astrology...”³ Leave your old ways of thinking, and open yourself to new possibilities. Ask new questions. Find new answers. That is how religion begins.

Father Ross coins a beautiful phrase: “holy curiosity” – the questions we ask when we see each other’s sacred rites. When I was sitting among religious leaders for the mass in celebration of the 375th anniversary of Montreal this year, I kept leaning over to the kindly nuns beside me to ask them to explain parts of the service. “Why are the priests taking their hats on and off?” “Why don’t they turn their own pages?” For the record, I refrained from asking, “Where are all the women?”

² <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/curiosity/>

³ Rashi on Genesis 15:5.



It may seem trivial, but this holy curiosity can help take us out of our insularity, our echo chambers, our bubbles. Simply the fact that other people, climbing the same mountain, take a different path is a vital reminder that no one has a monopoly on being right. I am so pleased that we are offering a series this fall entitled “Inside Religion, Outside the Box,” which will feature a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim, all of whom are religious leaders who have taken unconventional paths. I can’t wait to see what we learn.

We grow when we are curious about those at different ages and stages.

Intergenerational dialogue is more recently on our radar, but I believe it is at the core of what community is about. Sherry Turkle recently wrote a book entitled, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*. In it, she describes research into robots as companions for the elderly. These robots are not designed to perform tasks; rather, they are designed to listen – or at least, to look like they are listening, enough to provide comfort and support.

Turkle describes watching an older woman speaking about her loss of a child to a robot in the shape of a baby seal. The researchers were enthusiastic at how well it seemed to work. But Turkle writes:

That day didn’t reflect poorly on the robot. It reflected poorly on us and how we think about older people when they try to tell the stories of their lives... when you think about the moment of life we are considering, it is not just that older people are supposed to be talking. *Younger people are supposed to be listening.* This is the compact between generations.⁴

We know this, as Jews. If, in Israel, you decide to take a bus instead of a taxi, you will see a sign saying, *Lifnei seiva takum, Stand up before the aged*. In other words, give up your seat – but with the weight of a biblical proof-text and a healthy dose of respect. So too on Rosh Hashanah, we call on God not to abandon us as we age, and we call on ourselves not to abandon each other. After our Selichot service, one of our members reflected on what she called, “the challenge of aging in place with children scattered across the globe...” and how at Temple, “we create our own caring community...a family of friends who are there for us and we for them.” We aim for that compact between generations; we aim to build bonds beyond family. I promise you that every young couple who gets called up for a wedding blessing on the same night that an older couple celebrates an anniversary emerges from that experience inspired.

And so we as a Temple community, cognizant of our ninety members over ninety⁵ and our hundreds of members over eighty, are committed to finding a way to listen and to ask. We have applied for a grant to enable our bnei mitzvah students, on the cusp of adulthood, to ask questions of our seniors and collect their stories. To create interactions, which, in Turkle’s

⁴ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York, 2015), p.359. With thanks to Mitsumi Takahashi for recommending, and sending me, this book.

⁵ As our Member Connections chair, Maggie Jacobs, so astutely noted.



words, contain “shared experience of life,” and contribute “to a shared story of human meaning.”⁶ *L’dor vador* – from generation to generation. An ancient project for a new year.

We know to ask questions across religions; we are learning to ask across generations. But what about in the relationships we most often take for granted? What about with those who are most close?

We grow when we are curious about the ones we love.

In a recent Modern Love column in the New York Times, Kerry Egan tells the story of how, on the way her honeymoon, her new husband casually mentioned that he had spent the night before their wedding in jail, following a fight at the bar at his bachelor party.⁷ The story could have ended right there. But Egan uses this episode, and many that followed in their marriage, to reflect on how we never really know who we marry, what will happen to us or the marriage, or how we will change. And so she asks:

Why, then, would any of us leap into marriage, knowing that the future is unknowable, knowing our spouse is a mystery we can never fully understand?

What is essential, she maintains, is keeping our curiosity about the other:

That’s really what falling in love is, isn’t it? Yearning to know more about a person, the amazement and delight as each layer is peeled back, the realization that you can never get enough of the one you love. Perhaps the death knell of love is not anger or even indifference; it’s losing the desire to know more about your partner.

As a partner, grateful for a second-chance at love, I hear this. I know it as a parent; the best wisdom I ever heard about parenting is that our children are not blank slates – they are like undeveloped photographs, and our role as parents and teachers is to help them develop their own photo as clearly and truly as possible. I know it as a sister and as an adult child, thinking of all those questions still unasked as my brother and my parents go forward in their lives; thinking of those who have lost their parents, who speak of what they regret not having asked them.

Our Jewish tradition knows this too. In the hide-and-seek relationship between the lovers in the Song of Songs. In the way a couple circles each other under the openness of the chuppah, creating sacred space for wonder. In the creation of Shabbat, as a time to reconnect. On Rosh Hashanah, when we re-examine our most important relationships, when we ask questions of others and ourselves. Why did she act that way? What is he afraid of? What did I get wrong, and how can I make it right? How can we dream together?

⁶ Ibid, p.360.

⁷ Kerry Egan, “Married to a Mystery Man,” *The New York Times*, August 18, 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/18/style/modern-love-married-to-a-mystery-man.html>



In your handouts, you will find questions from the “10Q Project.” The concept is simple: you get ten big questions to answer over the High Holy Days, to encourage reflection on your life. If you do it online, your answers will be stored to a vault, and sent back to you next year at this time. I encourage you to take part.

New technologies aside, though, we are the People of the Book; and this is the time that we open the books of our lives. We look back and read what our actions have inscribed. And we look forward, asking for another year, another chapter, another chance to ask and reply. In the words of the poet Yehuda Amichai: “I want to be written again/in the Book of Life,/to be written every single day/till the writing hand hurts.”

Still we know that one day we will hail that last taxi up to the sky, and the Driver will turn to face us, and ask us about our lives.

And as to last summer’s taxi adventures? Well, the best one was the first one. Jetlagged and coming from the airport to Jerusalem, it was a fairly quiet ride, but when we got off and the driver sped away before Shabbat, I realized to my dismay that my seven-year-old’s backpack – full of all her treasures, too precious to check in – had been left in the back of the car. Speaking soon after with the man who left the keys for our apartment, a quick and practical call, I happened to ask: “I don’t suppose you know anyone at the airport taxi company?” “Let me call you back,” he replied. And wouldn’t you know but his cousin’s friend works for the company, and that same cousin’s friend just so happened to have been our driver. By the end of Shabbat, the backpack was back, and the driver was no longer a stranger.

It was worth asking the question. But isn’t it always?