

“Are You Alright?”
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5771
September 8, 2010

Shanah Tovah, and my best wishes for a happy, healthy year of 5771. We come together this night at a time fraught with expectations; the Middle East is on tenterhooks as tentative peace talks begin once again, tension builds around what to build at Ground Zero, and domestic discourse seems as vicious and mean-spirited as that of any time that I can recall.

My friends, we will tackle some of these topical concerns in the days to come, and more specifically on Yom Kippur. Tonight I have a simpler but I hope still helpful subject to explore. For me, this is a night of questions.

A young comic I know often begins her review of the sacred calendar with the following observation. “Why are they called the High Holy Days? Because,” she says, “people come together on Rosh Hashanah, look at each other and say: ‘Hi, how are you? What’s it been, a year?’”

You pass a person in the street, a casual acquaintance, even a total stranger with whom you make eye contact. “Hey, how ya’ doin’?” Is that really a question? Do you really want to answer? Do they really want to know?

Words often fail, in the face of life and death. You greet someone after a funeral, or you see them in the days or weeks after a loss. “How are you?” The words just come out, an instant instinct. There are so many wrong things to say at such a time, even from the most well-meaning among us. You know, we’ve been to funerals before, we’ve been with people when times are tough,

you'd think we'd know better, but there just aren't words that are just right. "How you doing?" Really, how are they supposed to be? What are they supposed to say? Does every encounter require the baring of the soul, the deepest intimacy of our lives?

Sometimes, though... Sometimes you do want to know. And sometimes. Sometimes you do want to share.

Sharing from the heart. And asking the deepest questions of our lives. We hope, perhaps, that it is part of what coming here is about. At least that's the way it is supposed to be. A synagogue, a spiritual community can be the place you turn to for answers to what Garrison Keillor calls "life's persistent questions." Things like why do we work, and what are we working for? What are my priorities, and how can I best use the time I have? How we can uncover the sacred and special in the midst of the ordinary and everyday? What is our role and how we can act in our families and our friendships? Questions like how we balance the demands of a particular people against personal interests and inclinations and the values we want to express through a connection with humanity as a whole. Or what are we supposed to do to mend and heal a broken world? Or whether the vowel underneath the Hebrew letter *zayin* in the word *zochreinu* is a *kametz katan*, pronounced as an "o," or just a regular *kametz*?

Are these, though, the kind of deep questions you ask, in the middle of a service? Is this what the Jews in the pews are thinking?

Perhaps not. A recent survey of synagogue-goers revealed three of the most prevalent questions people ask of themselves during Jewish worship. Those questions are: “What page are we on?” “How do I keep the kippah from falling off my kid’s head? And: “When will this be over?” Not sure if that last one meant just the sermon, or the whole service. Probably both.

My friend Rabbi Jonathan Hecht, one of the “cohort” of colleagues in the Rabbinical Leadership Initiative of the Shalom Hartman Institute with whom I studied this past summer reframed these questions for his own congregation: “What page are we on?” Rabbi Hecht observed, is not about a book, but about life. It is about location, and direction, and purpose. It is an existential question, not an informational one. “How do I keep that kippah on?” is not about what is in our hair but about those in our care, not about a clip for a cloth but about a chain of tradition. It is about continuity and change. It is not about behavior over the course of a couple of hours, but about choices made for the next couple of generations. Will this “take?” Will it “stick?” Will our children remain Jewish? And “when will this be over?” That, too, is not about the service that we are in, but the service that we give. It is not about someone else’s speech as it is about our own story. Mortality, not brevity, is the ultimate point of reference of what is, at its core, a profound and important question.

All of these questions, perhaps, can be rolled into one, which I found myself asking in an unexpected way this past summer. We were sweltering in a heat wave in Israel, it is true, but, so, too, were those who remained here, suffering from above average temperatures of your own. Signs of global warming, or a localized phenomenon from which it is impossible to generalize, who knows?

But for those in Washington and at Temple Shalom this summer, it wasn't just the heat. There we were, in the middle of the Middle East, with our email alarms going off like crazy. I've never gotten so many Alert: Montgomery warnings in one month. We were perfectly fine in Israel. But here? Storms and Earthquakes and Fires and Floods! Even a hostage standoff last week, around the corner from here. In an almost welcome reversal, from a place where people who have not been are sometimes too afraid to travel, we called home repeatedly and asked the same question of those remaining here: "are you alright?"

A word, for a moment, about the fire in our own building. We owe our thanks to staff and strangers, to neighbors and friends. It was a neighbor, walking through our parking lot late on a Friday night, who heard something amiss, and called 9-11. This neighbor's name is Brian McDonald, and while it is *possible* the fire would have remained in the one room, I still believe it is equally possible that his action saved the rest of our building. It was our shammas, our neighbor Lenny Raskin and his wife Marcia who greeted the fire

trucks, let them in the building, and helped watch out for us, as he has so very many times before. It was Susan Zemsky who managed the details from the outset, getting here in record time, staying all night until everything was secure, and who continues to handle the enormously large load of paperwork and inquiries and dealing with insurance and restoration companies alike. Past presidents Marilyn Ripin and Andrea Mark were present for much of this time; our past Educator JoHanna Potts was on the scene for services the following morning and helped in the communication with the congregation. Carl Tretter, whose preferred service to our congregation I assume comes in the form of the beautiful music he offers during this sacred season rather than in dealing with crises, nevertheless has spent countless hours here with Susan and on his own from the moment of the first call. And Mike Gurevich, sitting with me at our farewell dinner at a restaurant in Jerusalem when we first got word of the fire, helped manage details of dealing with the building as he does so often and well.

It is still too early to say what the reconstruction of the Youth Lounge will look like. I am strongly recommending an approach that includes flexible use for the space, including something we need more of, and the footprint of the building often mitigates against, which is additional social space. Time will tell and we will move forward, but for now, just: thank you, to all those who rose to the occasion, who gave above and beyond, who worked day and night, who really showed what coming together in a crisis is all about.

As the new year dawns, though, it occurs to me that the question we asked so much this summer serve well as a theme for the turning of time, a framework with which to begin this High Holy Day season. It contains within it assumptions about purpose, and about legacy, and about the finitude of life.

“Are you alright?” Just that. It’s not a complicated analysis of Biblical texts, rabbinic reinterpretation, medieval mysticism, philosophy or commentary. It’s a simple question. “Are you alright?”

To begin to respond, the first thing is to figure out... what being “alright” means to us. What page are we on? What do we mean by the words? Is it a momentary thing, a matter of safety and security? Is it about health, our bodies, our physical being? Does it depend on circumstance, or on others? Or is this state of equilibrium something that should be... in our own hands?

Maybe you have... everything you want, or, at least, everything you need. If you are alright... are you aware of it? Are you grateful, and able to celebrate? What does it feel like? To have the presence, and the ability, to “count our blessings” is a great gift indeed.

Or do you know what it would look like, but you aren’t there yet? To paraphrase Rabbi Harold Kushner, is all you’ve ever wanted really enough?

If you are not alright, why not? A material lack, a corporeal deficiency... or a yearning of the soul? What stands in the way between how you are, and

who you want to be? What would it take to get there? Is it possible... that it is in your hands?

If the reason you are not alright is external, if it is because of circumstances... then the hardest question I can ask you is this: do you really want to surrender that much control? Do you want to yield to the world the power to define how you are, and how you see yourself? Alternatively, if you are not alright, and it is out of your hands... what can help, and who?

My prayer for us all is that this is an easy question to answer, or at least one which is easy to act upon. This year may we all take steps in that direction, towards healing and hope, towards being better. And my friends, let us commit ourselves anew – in the face of this simple but still pressing personal query – let us promise... to be there for each other.

A night of questions. Where are we, and where are we going? Does what we do matter, and will it last? How long do we have? How are you, and, are you alright?

L'shanah Tovah.