

Rosh Hashanah Evening 2009

The Three Most Important Question For The Holy Days

Do you know the TV game Family Feud, where you have to figure out how most people who took a survey would answer certain questions? If we were to take a survey of the three questions Jews most often ask as the high holy days begin, what would they be?

What are we going to wear? Where are we going to eat before and after the services? What teachers, bosses or co-workers will judge us for missing our normal activities?"

But when it comes to preparing our spirit and our souls for the holy days, the Mishnah provides us with three similar questions with a very different intent. Akavya Ben Me halel teaches in Pirkei Avot, the Sayings of our ancestors, Chapter 3, verse 1:

Not what are we going to wear, but what are we? Where are we going? Who is going to judge us? He prescribes that if we answer these questions a certain way, it can actually cleanse our spirits and keep us away from sin.

What are we? When I was growing up, what we wore was always very important. It was a reflection of who we were, how we wanted to present ourselves to the world, our sense of ourselves. Our "debates" on the topic of what was appropriate to wear to temple were so lively that an outsider would think that the only way we would ever be written in the Book of Life was to dress appropriately. We had more discussions about how everyone else looked at high holy day services, than about the rabbi's sermons.

I don't know if Akavya ben Me halel was a fashion plate, but I'm pretty sure he was not a believer in the concept that "clothes make the man or the woman." What are we? His Mishnah says. Nothing more than a putrid drop.

The story is told by the friend of the famous Israeli writer S.Y. Agnon. The day he won the Nobel prize for literature, dozens of reporters came to his small apartment in Israel. One photographer asked him to pose at his desk and write something. When everyone left, Agnon's friend couldn't resist looking at what he wrote. At the moment this great author won the greatest literary prize of all he scribbled "*Adam afar vesofu afar.*" "Man is dust and his end is dust."

[Another story is told of an astronomer who invited one of his students to view the stars with him in his powerful telescope. The student peered through the

telescope and was overwhelmed. “Professor,” said the student, “look at the magnificence of the stars. Think of what is in the Milky Way and the galaxies beyond it. In the face of all this, what are we?” “In the face of all this,” replied the professor, “we are the astronomers.”]

The rabbis teach that every Jew should carry two pieces of paper at all times. One should say “anochi afar vaefer” “I am but dust and ashes.” The other should say “bishvili nivra haolam,” “The world was created just for me.” As we begin these days of reflection and introspection, we should remember that we need to balance self confidence with humility.

The second question Akavya says we must consider is “where are you going?” When I was growing up, if someone were to ask me this question on the high holy days, I would immediately reply, “The South Pacific restaurant on Beacon St. Half the temple will be there having Chinese food after services. Want to join us?”

Akavya’s answer to this question was that we are going to a place of dust, worms and maggots. I hope that Akavya didn’t know something about the South Pacific restaurant that we didn’t know. But his point was that no matter who we are, no matter how much or how little we have, no matter what we try to acquire in our lifetime, no matter how important, rich or famous we become, we all end up in the same place.

Acquiring wealth or material possessions isn’t important. We shouldn’t think that we are better than anyone else, or that others are somehow superior to us. We shouldn’t stress about achieving some great accomplishment, or overly worry when we have failed to live up to our own standards, because in the end it doesn’t matter.

The commentators to this Mishnah add that on the holy days it is important for us to question our direction in life, if the way we are spending our time is for the best purpose, to consider how we can make the best use of our time to make the world a better place, or tikkun olam, repair the world.

The story is told of a man who is walking along a street in Moscow. He came across two men who were shoveling dirt. One was intently digging a trench, throwing the dirt into a pile on the sidewalk. The second man was furiously shoveling the same dirt back into the hole the first man had just finished digging.

The passerby couldn’t help but shout out to them, “What are you doing? It doesn’t make any sense!”

The man who was digging the hole shouted back, "Usually I dig a hole, Ivan plants a tree in the hole, and Misha fills in the earth around the tree. But today Ivan is sick. So what do you suggest? That just because Ivan isn't here today, Misha and I shouldn't do our work?"

What do we want to do with our lives which will make a contribution to society? What mitzvot can we do as long as we are granted life on this earth?

Many parents this time of year automatically enroll their kids in all kinds of extra-curricular activities. I'm just as guilty as the next one. The competition to come to religious school and services becomes pretty fierce, particularly during spring and fall athletic schedules. Many years ago, a rabbi gave a famous sermon in which he asked, "What is our goal for our children? Is it to have them become professional soccer players, prima ballerinas or good Jews?"

Now is the season when we evaluate our work and our direction in life. What goal, what ultimate benefit do we derive from the path that we are on? What do we really want to achieve in life? How can our actions best reflect our values? And no matter who we are, we shouldn't think we are so much better or worse than anyone else, that we aren't all ultimately going to end up the same place.

Final question – who will judge us? Akavya's answer was that we must remember that we are judged by God alone. Unfortunately, many school systems and companies still do not understand the significance of our observance of our holy days and put us in the awkward position of penalizing us for our religious observances. Every year there are members of our community who fear the repercussions and skip their holy day celebration to not fall behind.

If Akavya was living in one of our communities today, he would have no hesitancy about standing up for his rights as a Jew. He was known for being a rebel. He lived in the time of the famous Rabbi Hillel. Apparently he was considered to be such a wonderful scholar that he was in line to take Hillel's place. But the one problem was that he refused to go along with the majority when they were discussing Jewish law. He had very strong opinions and wouldn't compromise his beliefs on what he thought God intended in his interpretation of the Torah. He said that he would rather be a fool in everybody's eyes his whole life than a sinner in God's eyes for one moment. He gave away all the honor he could have had among his peers to stand by his principles. He didn't care how anyone judged him. He only cared about how God judged him.

We ascribe power to many people in our lives. We bestow upon them the ability to grade us, to define how we feel about ourselves, to make us feel like a success, a

failure or something in between. Our parents, our teachers, our bosses, our friends, our co-workers, people who give us the once over in the mall, our clients, our congregants. It is so easy for us to be an insecure mess about ourselves when we allow everyone else to define who we are, to rate our every action.

On these days we remember that others have no right to judge us. On the other hand, we remember that God is always watching. There are consequences to our actions. Even if no one is around, no other human being sees us, on these holy days we remember that God is watching, the record books are open, every word, every action, is written there. None of us has the right to judge another. But there will be an ultimate accounting by the Ultimate Judge.

What are we? Where are we going? By whom are we judged? If we had to sum up Akavya's teaching in one word, it would be humility. Remember that we are just a small speck, a little drop in the world. No matter who we are, it is equally up to us to make a contribution to this world. It's not up to us to judge or anyone to judge us. That's God's job. If we keep these answers in mind, we will be less likely to stray toward sin.

We consider these holy days a success not when we get into a family feud over what everyone will wear to temple, when we have a nice dinner with family and friends, when we are able to maneuver our way through the school system and the workplace to avoid any penalties for taking the time off. But when we remember our place in the world, when we consider our direction, regain our perspective on life and come away with a sense of inner peace. Then we will truly be ready to begin the holy day season and have a shanah tova.