

Why Are We Here? To Transcend

Yom Kippur Morning 5776 (2015)

I don't want to prejudice the study session with me later today, where we'll be looking at differing answers throughout Jewish tradition to the question "Why are we here?" but there's one other answer to this question that we've been exploring since Rosh Hashanah that I feel is extremely relevant. I have so far talked about how we're here to change the world and to do so in a communal setting, not just as individuals. On Shabbat Shuvah, we explored why we're here surrounded by so much suffering and I suggested that suffering is a basic fact of existence, that we allow and sometimes even desire certain moral evils to continue because they make our lives better, and that *teshuvah*, repentance, is the act of reducing suffering in others. Last night, I spoke of us being here and not chatting in a social club or meditating in a field because I believe that liturgy is the art of the soul and that working our way through liturgy takes us on a guided, communal journey that cannot be achieved any other way. But what is the end goal of that journey? That answer to that question gives us one more answer to the overriding question of Why Are We Here?

To define one specific end goal seems to be extremely limiting. After all, we all experience liturgy in a differing way. Is it not just enough to say that the journey itself is sufficient? I'm reminded of Franz Kafka's famous passage, *My Destination*, in which he writes,

I gave orders for my horse to be brought round from the stables.
The servant did not understand me. I myself went to the stable,
saddled my horse and mounted. In the distance I heard a bugle

call, I asked him what this meant. He knew nothing and had heard nothing. At the gate he stopped me, asking: “Where are you riding to, master?” “I don’t know,” I said, “only away from here, away from here. Always away from here, only by doing so can I reach my destination.” “And so you know your destination?” he asked. “Yes,” I answered, “didn't I say so? Away-From-Here, that is my destination.” “You have no provisions with you,” he said. “I need none,” I said, “the journey is so long that I must die of hunger if I don’t get anything on the way. No provisions can save me. For it is, fortunately, a truly immense journey.”

This seems particularly relevant to today. The individual is going on a journey heralded by a bugle call, which is the shofar. The destination is simply to be somewhere else, to have moved on, to have progressed personally or perhaps spiritually. Food does not help the protagonist, just as it does not help us today on Yom Kippur. From this short narrative, *teshuvah*, returning to God or atoning, is simply moving beyond.

But what does that mean, exactly? To progress? Once again, we can progress by talking to friends or even by sitting in a field. So what is this journey Kafka is talking about? I think it is a journey of transcendence. Transcendence is the act of rising from one state to another, or the act of reaching something beyond the limits of ordinary experience. The theologian who truly explored transcendence is, as far as I’m concerned, Abraham Joshua Heschel, who said that what distinguishes us from the animals is our “being compelled to draw a distinction between the utterable and the unutterable, to be stunned by that which is but cannot be put into

words.”¹ But if that’s the case, why do we gather together with liturgy in front of us and try to put it into words? Because all words are an approximation to reality, they are the best possible response we have. We use metaphors, particular of God, that describe ourselves and that set a world view that not only explains the world as we see it but that also leads us forward. Because our words are an attempt to explain transcendence. The problem is that words sometimes limit and instead of helping us transcend, they limit and inhibit. This is because, as Heschel explains, “letters are one-dimensional and have only one function: to represent sounds. Words, on the other hand, have fullness and depth, they are multi-dimensional... A word is a focus, a point at which meanings meet and from which meanings seem to proceed. In prayer, as in poetry, we turn to the words, not to use them as signs for things, but to see the things in the light of the words. In daily speech, it is usually we who speak words, but the words are silent. In poetry, in prayer, the words speak.”²

Let’s take the word *Baruch*, usually translated as blessed. We sometimes bend at the knee when we say that word, and the Hebrew for knee uses the same root letters, *beit, resh, chaf*. So does the word spring, as in a spring of water. So when we say the word *Baruch*, we connect it to the Bar’chu but we also connect it to the constant outpouring like a spring of God’s love and blessings to us. And that’s just the word *Baruch*. Think about the word *Atah*, meaning You, or the word *Adonai*, one of the names of God. If we want we can read each word formulaically or, if we want, we can use each and every word as a potential springboard for transcendence. Part of the challenge, though, is time. There are traditional prayers to recite and if we stopped to

¹ Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion, p.5

² Quest for God, p.26

contemplate each one then Yom Kippur would last a week! But according to Heschel, “prayer is an event that comes to pass between the soul of the human being and the word.” Prayer is an event. An event that we bring into being. We have to therefore create that event while we are reading. So, the first reason that we are here is to transcend – to transcend the normal use of language and to engage on that immense, never-ending journey of plumbing the depths of language and creating events with our words.

But why? What’s the ultimate goal? If Kafka is right, there is no goal. And I think he is right. When we engage in a true encounter, to use Buber’s frame of religious reference as mentioned on Rosh Hashanah, there is no goal. The encounter is sufficient. The encounter with God doesn’t have a goal, or it shouldn’t have. Our liturgy tries to spell out goals to use as a baseline – forgiveness, atonement, renewal, regrowth. But while these each seem to be end goals, they are in fact springboards to something much greater – the transcendence of the self and the realisation of connection to something greater. Once we realise, truly realise, that there is transcendent existence and that we all can connect with it, then that realisation brings with it a question. The words in our prayer book are not scientific formulae, or sets of instructions to create something if followed meticulously. They are not magical rites that need to be performed correctly in order to bring about a change. They are signposts. They are guides on a journey heralded by a bugle call. And they are signposts not to an end goal but to a question. That question is the question that God asks the first human beings once they gain knowledge of themselves. And the question is this – *ayeka* – “Where are you?”³ Once we can use our liturgy to take us away-from-here, away-from-

³ Gen 3:9

here, once we transcend the interrogation of our liturgy and the demand for it to produce results, then and only then can we use it as a signpost to the eternal question that faces us, “WHERE are you?” “Where ARE you?” *Ayeka* “Where are YOU?” As we transcend the basic words in our liturgy, as we transcend our own simplistic expectations and demands of God, as we release liturgical signposts from our demand that they be statements of fact, then we can transcend to the point of hearing the continual question asked to every one of us - “Where are you?” And it is the question that is always asked of us at every moment of every day, it is the question that takes us on a journey, a journey that invigorates us, that challenges us, that changes us. A fortunately truly immense journey.

There is a temptation to answer the question simplistically. *Ayeka?* Where are you? “*Hineini*,” shout the ancestors in the Bible... “Here I am!” But that is not enough. That is nowhere near enough. That is merely the start of the response. Our liturgy today is designed to take us on a day-long journey to start formulating a response. What does it mean to be here? What does it mean to say *hineini*, I am here? How did I get here? Why am I here? Why are we here?

Ultimately, then, why are we here? We are here to transcend normality, to transcend words, to transcend normal experience and only through that, to be asked a question – “Where are you?” Because *teshuvah*, repentance, isn’t an act, it’s a state of being. It’s a state of living in the question, “Where are you?” When we talk of engaging in *teshuvah*, we’re not talking of engaging in an act, but of engaging in a total life change. *Teshuvah* is the act of returning to the true self, to the self living in awareness of God, to the self

who is constantly being asked, “Where are you?” There is no end goal, the journey is forever. It is always away-from-here, away-from-here.

This Yom Kippur, let us not beg for forgiveness or to be written into a book that was clearly meant to be a metaphor and a signpost. Instead, let us reflect and respond, let us ask and be asked, let us explore and let us commit to a new way of living. Let us transcend not for a specific goal but only to provide opportunity to be asked the ultimate question, “*Ayeka* - Where are you?” That is ultimately why we are here – to be asked to be somewhere else.

May God guide us in our journey away-from-here, away-from-here, and let us say, Amen.