

## “ THE FIVE QUESTIONS ”

*Rosh Hashanah Morning 5777 — Monday, October 3, 2016*

*Congregation B'nai Jehudah — Overland Park, Kansas*

*Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff*

Mom, how do crickets make that chirping sound?

Dad, what's lightning?

Grandma, what color is the blood inside my body?

Grandpa, where's the end of the rainbow?

Mom, why is the sky blue?

Dad, what happens when I die?

Children ask questions all the time. Why this? Why that? How come? Where does it come from?

Back in the day, answering those questions was challenging at best. I don't know about you, but I didn't really understand how lightning flashes or why crickets chirp. Sometimes, it was a visit to the library to look it up in an encyclopedia (remember those big tomes?) or to ask older friends or family if they had a clue how to answer those questions.

Today, all that has changed. While I doubt that little kids have stopped asking questions, parents/grandparents/friends have a much easier time answering those questions with the arrival of Wikipedia. Ah, the internet...a question-lover's best friend!

I am a fan of questions. I love them and anyone who meets me for the first time

knows that I ask a lot of questions. It's my way of plumbing the depths of an individual or an issue. This season is full of questions: The question Isaac asks his father, Abraham...“Here is the wood and here is the fire but where is the sacrifice?” The question we asked earlier this morning...“Who shall live and who shall die?” The question implied by these High Holidays...“For what do I need to seek repentance?” Perhaps this is why Rosh Hashanah has always resonated so strongly with me...because of the questions!

So, in 2008, when Peter Drucker wrote a book, titled, “The Five Most Important Questions You Will Ever Ask About Your Organization,” I was intrigued. Not only am I a change-management junkie, who likes to read the latest “how-to” books for organizations, but as a “question-phile” I just had to know: What **ARE** the most important questions?

Here are his five most important questions you will ever ask about an organization:

1. What is our mission?
2. Who is our customer?
3. What does the customer value?
4. What are our results?
5. What is our plan?

For 8 years, I've played around with those questions, asking them about B'nai Jehudah, about our general Jewish community, about Jewish communities I work with both in Israel and Bulgaria.

They **ARE** the right questions to be asking.

Not long ago, though, I realized that they can be reframed and serve as the essential questions we ask about our own selves. And that is what I wish to share with you today. On this Rosh Hashanah, at this beginning, let each of us ask five questions for our own lives.

Drucker suggests that the first question...probably the most essential...is: What is your mission?

Earlier this summer, the Catholic Church made news when Pope Francis canonized Mother Teresa, and made her a saint in their faith tradition. Mother Teresa serves as a prime example of an individual who understood her mission – her life purpose. As early as age 12, she knew she was meant to be a nun. And by the time she was 40 and for the rest of her life, she walked her path...to serve the poor and destitute in India and throughout the world.

Not many of us are Mother Teresas or Martin Luther King, Jr. or Nelson Mandelas. Few of us are able to affect directly the lives of thousands, let alone millions of human beings. But each of us has a mission.

Consider someone a number of us know, especially if we have ever served food at Independence Blvd. Church. Darrell Cantrell is as normal as you or me. His career was with the railroad. But his mission? Caring for the down and out of the world...not so dissimilar to Mother Teresa. What does Darrell do every Monday? He cooks and directs the program of Micah Ministries, making sure that about 800 meals are served every Monday to the homeless and hungry of our community. And in his spare time? He builds chicken

hutches and sets up sewing groups in Haiti to permit residents to have replicable, reliable income in a destitute economy.

In this very room, I know more than a handful of folks who have identified their mission, their purpose...and they are pursuing it...one in the world of politics, another in self-actualization, another in photography. But on this Rosh Hashanah, shouldn't we **ALL** ask ourselves: What is my mission? Why do I exist? What is my essential reason in being here?

Question #2 that Drucker asks is: Who is our customer?

That, indeed, is a strange question. How can we – as ordinary people - have “customers?” The answer could be next to you. For our customers are our families. They are our friends. Our colleagues. Simply, they are our community. In this new year, let us commit to knowing – really getting to know – those whom we cherish. Not in a Facebook-I'm-Friends-With-You kind of knowing. But face-to-face, in what Martin Buber described as an I-Thou encounter. Yes, it may make us vulnerable. But it also ensures our continued relationship.

Question #3: What does our customer value?

Once you know someone, you know what they value. Usually. But you better be sure. Once I bought Leslie a piece of jewelry. I thought I knew what she liked. It ended up being re-gifted. My bad! So, it takes time and it takes understanding.

Let's ask ourselves: What do the ones we love value? What's important to them? Perhaps it is attention. Perhaps

understanding. Perhaps simply more time. Each of us is as unique as a snowflake is. None of us is created the same. Thus, we all value different things in different ways. It could be wealth. It could be acknowledgment. It could be health. But it is ours to discover if we wish to invest in our relationships with our “customers.” Only by knowing what they value, can we give that part of us that fulfills them. And isn’t that what we want for our family, our friends, our community?

Question #4 is the tough one: What are our results?

The truth is that – with a little bit of soul searching, we can discover our mission. And who comprises our customers – our community – is usually self-evident. And figuring out what they value from us...we just need to listen. Don’t get me wrong. It’s all important work. But the question that is hardest to figure out is: What does it all mean? What are the results we want? That’s what Peter Drucker challenges us to discover. And it hits at the core purpose of these Yamim Noraim.

The beauty of our tradition is that space is carved out for us to wrestle with this question. And it is not easy. What is it we **REALLY** want? From our family, our friends, our work? What’s the goal? What **should** we be doing. These ten Days of Awe are considered an opportunity for “cheshbon ha-nefesh,” an accounting of the soul. As we look at our lives, what has been effective in our relationships, in our work, in our growth as soul-filled human beings? And what do we want those efforts to look like in the coming year?

Finally, Drucker asks the most important – most exciting – and most frightening question: What is our plan?

I don’t know about you, but it’s this step that often gets me stuck. Any really big project I have undertaken – renovating a house, putting together a new outdoor grill, or even any of the many 100-piece “easy-to-assemble” toys that we bought for our kids in years past – they are all so complicated. And I never really knew exactly how to start, how to move forward...in other words...what’s the plan?

Peter Drucker offers some advice. He suggests any plan should include five elements: What we need to abandon? On what immediate goal should we concentrate? What are innovative ways to get there? Are we willing to take risks? And...as with any good plan, analyze and evaluate the results.

The first element – knowing when to quit what you are doing because it isn’t producing the results you want – seems initially like a weird place to start a plan...but it does make sense.

For the longest time, I was convinced that I could have my family be more on time by simply telling them to be on time. Guess what? It didn’t work. So, I had to abandon that strategy. The next step was to focus on what was keeping my family from being on time. It was my opportunity to concentrate on the goal and figure out alternatives. What resulted was looking at things differently and experimenting. I tried “helping” them get ready on time, by freeing them from other tasks so they could focus on getting out the door. I tried setting the clocks around the house ahead by 10 minutes so they would think they were running late. It was an exercise in being innovative with solutions and taking risks with how they would be perceived. And in the end, I needed to analyze whether my efforts succeeded. What did I learn? As

the Talmud teaches us, we sometimes know something from long ago, but just needed to be reminded. For me, it was that I can only be responsible for myself. My family's internal clocks – belong to them.

Interestingly enough, once I figured that out, my tension about being on time lessened and we were a much happier family.

Being on time isn't life-shattering or life-changing. It's just a small example. The point is that we need a plan for what our year will look like. How are we going to fill the next 12 months? What will we do? How will we do it? And with whom? It takes a willingness to abandon old habits. It means to concentrate seriously on what we want to do. We have to step outside the box, be innovative and willing to take risks to see what we can accomplish. And most of all, it means to reflect...to take the time and emotional and mental space to consider if we are on the right path towards our goals.

Repeating a Chasidic story I told 9 years ago today, Reb Zushya was on his deathbed, surrounded by his disciples. A great fear gripped Zushya and he began to cry out. His disciples asked him, "Reb Zushya, what worries you? Surely you will be welcomed into the gates of heaven for you have been as righteous as Moses." Their teacher sighed. "My children, I am not worried that God will ask me, 'Zushya, why weren't you more like Moses?' Because I am not Moses. I am worried that God will ask, 'Zushya, why weren't you more like Zushya?'" God expects us to discover our mission, to know our customers, whom we serve, to know what they value, to understand our goals, and to develop a plan to embark upon that journey.

Those are the challenges and opportunities this season offers us...the chance to dig deep, ask five essential questions, and discover the answers that rest inside.

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No, I don't know a lot about rainbows, crickets, or lightening. I marvel at the blue sky. I can only imagine what my blood looks like inside my body. And no one truly knows what happens when we die.

But they are great questions.

This Rosh Hashanah, may each of us ask our own great questions about who we are, where do we want to go, how do we get there, and with whom should we journey? If we ask...and we answer...it will be...as God said after humanity was created on the sixth day...very, very good.