

AYEKA SERMON RH1 5773

Shanah tovah.

Ayeka?

Where are you?

A seemingly simple question but, in actuality, it is not.

Often, we come to shul on the high holy days searching for God. At other times in our lives, we yearn for God or God's help after experiencing death, an illness, or losing a job. There are many times we call for help - call for God's help.

But before we can ask God, we must ask ourselves: *Ayeka*: Where are you?

Ayeka: where are you? Such an important question, but the word appears only once in the entire Torah, even in the entire *Tanakh*, the entire Hebrew Bible.

But it resonates strongly, right in this moment.

It resonates because it is found in the story of Adam and Eve.

Now, you might ask, "Rabbi, what do Adam and Eve have to do with this moment, with *Rosh Hashanah*?"

Well ...that's also a good question. Today we read of the birth of Isaac, and tomorrow, it is the binding of Isaac. What do Adam and Eve have to do with *Rosh Hashanah*?

To answer this, let me share a *mahloket*, a disagreement in the Talmud about *Rosh Hashanah*. The debate is about when the world began.

So, let me ask you: when did the world begin?

According to science, the world is some 14 billion years old. According to traditional Jewish counting, it is only 5773 years old – as of today. Now, neither answer is complete - it turns out that most physicists would tell us that our universe began 14 billion years ago, but there were probably many universes before ours, so the original-original date of the whole world would be difficult, if not impossible to ascertain.

The Jewish counting is also complicated since, as our rabbis already wrote 2000 years ago, each day of creation was actually a thousand years or more, which can jive much better with the scientific account. In fact, they also said that the universe was created many times before ours as well.

But however many years it was, today is the date that our world began, so we celebrate everything in it including all of nature. Today, we celebrate the birthday of the world.

But, wait, this is the Talmud, the rabbis – so there is another opinion!

The other opinion says that the world wasn't created today on *Rosh Hashanah*, but that creation was initiated on the 25th day of Elul - last week. That would make today the sixth day of creation, the day on which Adam and Eve were created. So, *Rosh Hashanah* would celebrate not the birthday of all of nature, but the birthday of all humanity.

Those two themes, nature and humanity, both find their way into *Rosh Hashanah* and its liturgy. We will sing in *Musaf: hayom harat olam* – today is the birthday of the world.

They are both vital to this day - a day to celebrate humanity and nature - a universal day.

So, now that we've cleared that up, back to Adam and Eve.

So, let me share with you the well-known narrative in the Garden of Eden about Adam and Eve.

“The two of them were naked, the man and his wife, yet they felt no shame. Now the serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild beasts that Adonai God had made.

He said to the woman, ‘Did God really say: You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?’

The woman replied to the serpent, ‘We may eat of the fruit of the other trees of the garden. It is only about fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said: ‘You shall not eat of it or touch it, lest you die.’

And the serpent said to the woman, ‘You are not going to die, but God knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like divine beings who know good and bad.’

When the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave some to her husband, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked; and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loincloths.

They heard the sound of Adonai God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of day; and the man and his wife hid from Adonai God among the trees of the garden. Adonai God called out to the man and said to him, ‘*AYEKA?* Where are you?’” (Genesis 2:25-3:9)

Ayeka: Where are you?

The question is strange. Surely, God knows that Adam is in the garden - after all, God just put him there. The question is not about location, but about something deeper.

As Rabbi Harold Kushner comments: God’s question might lead Adam to wonder where he is vis-à-vis God. Or: “Have you changed, have you regretted what you did?”

Just last Friday, I met someone who was visiting our shul for the first time during our BBQ and *Barekhu* and I asked him, “Where are you?”

He smiled and said, “I am right here.”

I smiled back.

So he asked me, “Do you mean existentially where I am?”

His was a truly deep interpretation of my somewhat simpler question.

Where are you really?

Where are you in your life?

Ayeka?

When I was growing up, my father would often open his interactions with the members of his synagogue with, “So, how’s your spiritual health?”

It was greeted with a grin - opening the door for a conversation or merely a reciprocal smile. My father sees the role of the rabbi as a doctor of the soul. When we visit our physician for an annual physical, the doctor asks, “How are you feeling? How are you physically or even emotionally?” In the same way, we should check in on our spiritual lives.

Imagine if every year, each one of you made a half-hour appointment to check in with me or Rabbi Fel about your spiritual health?

What a great idea! What a meaningful conversation, and it would not have to be around a more urgent lifecycle moment or illness.

We could ask you:

Where are you in your life?

Are you happy?

Are you reaching your full potential?

How are your relationships? With yourself? With those you love?

How is your relationship with God?

Is Judaism playing a meaningful role?

About a decade ago, I was privileged to participate in a two-year spirituality institute for rabbis. Every six months, we experienced a five-day retreat that included meditation, yoga, silence, song, and the study of Hassidic texts.

Last January, I was able to go back and participate in an alumni institute with the same practices; a number of members of our community participated in a similar lay institute this summer.

(I hope to offer a spirituality group here at Emunah based on those practices - details to come.)

In between the retreats, we continued our learning with study and seminars. During the last six months of the two-year program, we were introduced to a new practice called: Spiritual Direction.

Each of us was assigned a mentor with whom we would meet in person or over the phone for an hour every couple of weeks.

Once we reconnected and entered into the experience with silence and breathing, the mentor would ask me, “So where are you in your relationship with God?”

“Where did you experience God over the course of the last month?”

And then I would share. I would share moments and feelings - moments of connection and moments of disconnection.

There were powerful moments with a member of my community or with my family at home; sometimes there were times of disconnection and brokenness and pain and loss. This emotional and spiritual sharing helped me get in touch with those experiences and see them all within the context of developing a deeper relationship with the divine.

My mentor or spiritual director, as they are called, affirmed my experience and skillfully shared with me how my experience reflected on my spiritual life and on my connection with God.

One of the great truths I discovered through that process was that God is always asking me: *AYEKA*: where are you?

Where are you going?

Are you making a difference in the world?

Where do you feel whole?

Where are you broken?

Think about it.

Just as God asks Adam at the opening of the Torah: *Ayeka*: where are you, God is constantly calling us to ask where we are – we merely have to stop and listen to that *kol dememah dakah*, that small still voice in the words of Elijah.

It is always there – it is asking us to be better, to make the ethical choice, to change, to perform *teshuvah*, repentance and transformation.

Imagine that we could still our minds so much that we could hear God (however we might imagine the Holy One); imagine hearing God's question right now – asking you directly (close your eyes and listen): *Ayeka?* Where are you in your life?

On *Rosh Hashanah* in particular, we hear that question. Sometimes it is not heard in the silence, but in the loud crash that reverberates through each and every note of the shofar.

Imagine that each of the 100 blasts of the shofar is a question that is posed directly to you.

Ayeka? Where are you?

Or perhaps it is in the space between the blasts that we truly hear the question.... There is a great Hasidic story that expands on this idea:

As Martin Buber tells it, Rabbi Shneur Zalman, the great Hasidic master and the founder of Chabad who lived in the 18th century in Russia, was thrown in jail. Other Jews who were opposed to Hasidism told the Czar's police that he had defamed the Czar, which, of course, landed him in prison.

One of his jailers asked the rabbi about the Adam and Eve story: "If God is all-knowledgeable, then why does God ask Adam where he is? Surely, God knows!"

The rabbi replied to the jailer: “Do you believe that the Bible is eternal and true in every generation and to every person?”

Being a faithful Christian, the jailer said, “Yes, I do believe that.”

Rabbi Shneur Zalman replied: “Then, at all times, God asks every person: where are you? So many years and days of those allotted to you have passed and what have you done?”

The rabbi continued to illustrate his point: “God says something like: you have lived for 51 years, what have you done?”

Since that was the exact age of the jailer, he was quite shaken. He stood up, walked over to the rabbi, placed his hand on his shoulder, broke down and cried.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman taught that God didn’t need to know where Adam was, but Adam needed to be asked. So too, it is we who need to be called.

Especially, on these *yamim noraim*, these days of awe, we need to be called:

Ayeka? Where are you?

As most of you know, I was given the great privilege and eye-opening experience of volunteering with the American Jewish World Service in Ghana this August. We volunteered, building parts of a school, and we interacted with the faculty, the village elders, and the students.

Most enjoyable was playing soccer with these kids who often did not even have shoes, but played as well as if they did. In one of these interactions, one of the boys who must have been about 10 years-old, asked us what we were doing there.

He knew there was something strange about us – with our cameras and nice shoes – coming all the way across the world to play soccer with him in a poor country on a dirt field. And we weren’t even coming to missionize...something he had seen before.

What were we doing?

It was a great question.

He was asking: *Ayeka?*

What was I doing there? I had to think. I had come for many reasons – to open my eyes and see something I had never seen, to change my perspective, to help, and to change myself.

He reminded me that I was in Ghana and not with my own family for that time because my Judaism encouraged me to go. Judaism demands that we think about where we are and then act on that.

We are supposed to think about Big Questions:

What are my priorities?

What are my values?

How can I connect more deeply to where I am in each moment to respond to the question of *Ayeka?*

So, today, on *Rosh Hashanah*, let us try to answer this question for ourselves.

After God asked him, how did Adam answer?

“I heard the sound of You [God] in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.”

Adam was afraid – fearful of what he had done and embarrassed, so he hid from God – and from himself.

From there, he goes on to blame Eve for his predicament – and God for creating her.

Not his finest moment! No self-exploration here. Blaming others, he hides from himself. Not so wonderful, but very real.

How many times do we ignore an opportunity for self-examination and transformation by turning it into a chance to blame someone?

How often when we are offered some gentle criticism do we turn defensive?

How often do we close our ears to the depth of a question turning it back to the one who asks, instead of answering it ourselves?

What a waste when one has the opportunity to delve deeply into the *Ayeka* question; but often we don't delve, we respond with blame and other external answers, instead of a rich, internal process.

Thankfully, the divine *Ayeka* looms all around us, allowing us to offer another answer. In fact, the Torah itself offers us a very different model.

For that, we need only to turn from Adam to Abraham, to the father of the Jewish people. We turn to tomorrow's Torah reading.

Abraham is called several times in the narrative of the binding of Isaac. First, he is called by God at the beginning of the story; then he is called by his son, who wants to know where is the lamb for the sacrifice; and finally, he is called by the angel of God (some call it Abraham's own soul or consciousness).

Three times, he is called. God calls: “Avraham”; Isaac calls: “*Avi* - my father;” and the angel calls, “Avraham, Avraham.” Three different calls, but Abraham answers them all with the same word:

Hineini.

Here I am.

What does it mean?

It is a statement of deep presence; it reflects an awareness of the questioner; it means I have heard your call, your question, your *Ayeka* and have thought about where I am in response to you, and I am present.

I am here and ready to be fully present for you in this moment.

See – answering the *Ayeka* question allows us to know where we are in our lives – as parents, as children, as partners, as co-workers, as siblings, as friends, as teammates, as retirees, as Jews.

If we can think about where we are, then we can answer *Hineini* – we can be truly present for others.

Think of those who call Abraham – God, Isaac, Abraham’s son, and the angel. We are called by God, by our children, and by ourselves. We need to be called by many.

But, the best answer to all those questions is *Hineini* – to think of where we are and be fully present.

The best answer to *Ayeka* is *Hineini*.

Where are you? I am here.

Where am I in my life? I am thinking about where I am and am I living a balanced life that is imbued with meaning and acts of love and am I ready to be fully present.

But, there are no shortcuts. We cannot just say *Hineini* and poof – we are really here. No, *Hineini* takes practice and discipline.

The way we cultivate the *Hineini* answer to *Ayeka* is through a balanced spiritual life.

For me, there are clear practices that allow me to say *Hineini*: yoga, prayer, cycling, meditation, learning, song, and movement – *birkat kohanim*, a new ancient ritual that we will bring back on Yom Kippur. Our shul needs to be a place where we can hear the *Ayeka* and a place that helps us get in touch with ourselves so we can get to *Hineini*.

Sometimes, to feel *Hineini* we need to lose ourselves a bit.

Hear the call of *Ayeka*, know where we are and respond: *Hineini* - I am ready.

One cannot take care of others in the world, however, without first taking care of oneself. But, as Hillel cautioned, if I am only for myself, what am I? Unless we reach out beyond ourselves, we might be alive, but our life is not that meaningful.

Ayeka?

Hineini.

We are left with this wondrous dialectic: God is calling us all the time – *Ayeka* rings out through this shul on *Rosh Hashanah*, during these days of repentance and introspection and, in fact, in every moment and every place in our lives.

God is calling: *Ayeka?*

It can be loud like: WHERE ARE YOU?

Or it can be soft like: *where are you?*

But, one thing is clear, it is constant.

Stop.

Close your eyes and listen.

God is asking: *Ayeka?*

Open yourself up to the question, to God's call and then prepare yourself: will you be able to answer *Hineini*?

Shanah tovah.