

The Torah of Admiral Stockdale
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Shana Tovah.

Most Americans were first introduced to Admiral James Stockdale on the evening of October 13, 1992, from the stage of that year's vice-presidential debate in Atlanta. Stockdale, a Vietnam War hero, was more surprised than anyone to find himself on the national scene as the unknown and unexpected running mate of third party presidential candidate H. Ross Perot.

There were three podiums on the bimah that evening: stage left, Senator Al Gore; stage right, Vice President Dan Quayle. Both Gore and Quayle were imposing figures, both tall, young, handsome, politically savvy, and very well-prepared. In between them, in the center, was Admiral Stockdale. He was much older, somewhat stooped from injuries from having been tortured by the Viet Cong, wearing thick glasses and a hearing aid.

Senator Gore's opening statement argued for the necessary change that a Bill Clinton presidency would bring. Vice President Quayle's opening statement asked whether we could trust Bill Clinton.

And then it was Admiral Stockdale's turn. Asked to make his opening statement, he looked left at the figure of Al Gore, then right at the Vice President, and then stared straight into the camera as he delivered these immortal words. "Mi ani?" "Lama ani po?"

OK, so it didn't come out in Hebrew. But I believe that it should have, for these were words of core truth, of emmes, that emerged from his politically innocent heart: "Who am I?" "Why am I here?"

The guiding importance of those most personal of questions has stuck with me ever since, long after we stopped thinking about that election, about Mr. Perot, Admiral Stockdale, and even Dan Quayle. Those questions come to me when I find myself in an unusual place, or at a crossroads. Those questions come to me as your President.

While uttering those words in front of over 50 million viewers caused our poor hero much buffooning in his short-lived political career, I do believe that he gave us something very important to ask ourselves. Let us therefore take just a few moments to study what I like to think of as the Torah of Admiral Stockdale.

Mi ani? Lama ani po??

[Voice of Congregant 1]: I am a Jew. I have always belonged to a synagogue, and of course I always go to services on the high holy days. Shabbat too, when I can—but that's not very often. I am here today because—where else am I going to be on Rosh Hashannah? And after so many years, most of my friends are here too. I'm not a pious man. As the old joke goes, I don't go to shul to talk to God. Goldberg goes to shul to talk to God. I just go to shul to talk to Goldberg.

Who am I? Why am I here??

[Voice of Congregant 2]: Since my parents were Jewish, I know that means I am a Jew. But I can't say that I've figured out yet what that means to me. I have my life, with my friends and my job and my interests. But religion? Not so much. Yet here it is the High Holy Days, and I am called to be with Jews. So I come to this Jewish place. And something deep inside me stirs. And I don't yet know what I will do with it, or when.

Mi ani? Lama ani po??

[Voice of Congregant 3]: I chose to be a Jew! When I met the woman who would become my wife, I soon learned how important it was to her that she have a Jewish husband. Since I wasn't religious myself, I figured that it was just as easy to be a non-religious Jew as a non-religious anything else! So I came to this place and studied, and learned, and became. For her. But after many years, I began to get it. I became interested in what was happening to other Jews. I took personal pride in the accomplishments of Jews in the public eye, and I felt personally shamed when a Jew transgressed. I now have dear friends in this place, and more and more I look forward to the high holy days, and to spending them here—with my people.

Who am I? Why am I here??

[Voice of Congregant 4]: I was raised Jewish, and happened to marry a Jew, but other than going to the occasional seder, we never observed. We used to pay lip service to “raising our kids Jewish”, but we never thought about what that meant. Yet once the children reached school age, we had to get serious. We enrolled them here because the school had a good reputation, and frankly, because the location was convenient for us. But as parents know, you can’t fool kids for very long. We weren’t going to get away with having them learn about a Judaism that they didn’t see in their own home. So soon we started lighting Sabbath candles and having Shabbat dinners. And after the first year, it was family attendance at high holy days. And then activities with other parents. Followed by a volunteer project or two, and then the committee memberships. And soon enough, observant or not, we were finding ourselves spending a lot of time here.

Mi ani? Lama ani po??

[Voice of Congregant 5]: I believe. I believe that Hashem created our world and is the sovereign of all that is in it. Torah is the written word of Hashem, and we are commanded to perform its mitzvot. More and more I live by these commandments, and the more I practice them, the more meaningful they become to me. But I also live in this modern world. And I believe that Hashem intended for his commandments to adapt as we, his creatures, have evolved. I am

here because tradition is very important to me. And I am here because adaptation is necessary for me. As a person who believes.

Who am I? Why am I here??

[Voice of Congregant 6]: Well, I suppose you could say I'm a seeker. A spiritual wanderer. An experimenter. A meditator. And, oh yes, I'm Jewish too! It always amuses me how many other Jews I find who are like me. My teachers at Spirit Rock? Jewish! The writers who most inspire me? Jewish! It feels like my spiritual path, even when it's not travelling on a Jewish road, is guided by my Jewish soul. And on the High Holy Days, my Jewish soul leads me to a Jewish space. What a joy it is then to be able to immerse myself in this High Holy Day Meditation service. My spirit knows this music.

Mi ani? Lama ani po??

[Voice of the Congregation]: Ani Ha Neshama Shel Kol Shofar. I am the soul of Kol Shofar. I welcome people as they come to me. I make a community for Jews who want to be with Jews. I provide Jewish learning and sustain tradition. I innovate, for the strength of Judaism comes from its endless questioning and adaptation. I encourage those who want to grow in their personal observance. I share rituals for joyous life passages, comfort for mourners, and remembrance for loved ones. I welcome Jews who believe, Jews who do not believe, and Jews who believe but

are not yet sure in what. I am here to be your Jewish home, when you are ready to have me in your life. The colors of my walls may appear different, depending from which direction you have approached me. But the structure inside my walls is solid. Very solid. Thousands of years solid.

So then, I return one last time to the Torah of Admiral Stockdale to ask: Mi atta? Lama atta po?? Who are you? Why are you here??

L'Shanah Tovah Tikatevu—May you be inscribed for a good year, a healthy and fulfilling year, a year of self-knowledge, and a year of embracing your Jewish home at Kol Shofar.