

Bringing Judaism Home
Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon at Kol Shofar
Rabbi Sarah Shulman

Where do you feel most Jewish?

My 7 year old cousin Max came home from a Jewish summer camp in the Los Angeles area and declared, "Mom, I love being Jewish at camp, but I don't want to be Jewish at home. Can we have a pepperoni pizza for dinner?"

In addition to giving me good chuckle, Max's comment got me thinking about what it means to bring Judaism home - from camp, from synagogue, from religious or day school, from Israel trips or USY events, and from other Jewish institutions and experiences.

In other words, how do we and our children be Jewish beyond these seats? A question I believe that's so critical to answer for ourselves and our world especially right now.

This is a response that I would like to share with Max and with us --

Dear Max,

I love that you love being Jewish at camp - so do I! It's why I do what I do.

And I'm impressed that you've caught on that Judaism can look different and be practiced differently in each new environment we visit. What's remarkable though about our Jewish faith and culture, is that it travels with us and even more so within us.

There once was a child of a certain Rabbi who was an adventurer just like you and he liked to wander in the woods. At first the Rabbi let him wander, but over time she became a bit concerned. The woods were dangerous. The mother did not know what lurked there.

So she decided to discuss the matter with her child. One day she took him aside and said, "You know, I have noticed that each day you walk into the woods, I wonder, why do you go there?"

The boy said to his mother, "I go there to find God."

"That is a very good thing," the mother replied gently. "I am glad you are searching for God. But my child, don't you know that God is the same everywhere?"

"Yes." The child answered, "But I am not."

Max, each place you'll visit will nurture a different part of yourself, like the woods did for this boy. Indeed, we have the capacity to be transformed by all the different places we go and the people we meet. AND at the same time, wherever we go we can bring the divine and our Jewish values, curiosity, and core Jewish principles with us, even to those places that don't seem so "Jewish" at all - like the soccer field, the playground, the cafeteria, or the office.

Ultimately, that's what I pray for on Rosh Hashanah: to be my best Jewish self the rest of the year even in the most difficult of places and difficult of times. To live each day with Torah and integrity. Jewish integrity, that is what I hope you'll find Max. I think that might be the most important thing of all in this world of ours.

Thankfully the rabbis offered us guidelines for how to find and refind a sense of integrity rooted in Jewish practice and principles and how to bring it along with us into every decision and every relationship of our lives.

The 4th century Rabbi Abba ben Joseph bar Ḥama of Babylonia known as Rava laid it out for us in a series thought-provoking questions, each of which is an invitation and a pathway to bringing Judaism into all aspects of our lives:

Rava said: at the hour a person enters for judgment (which we can read as either in the heavenly court, or in the spiritual architecture of the high holidays right now), one is asked 6 questions, 6 questions which are as relevant today for developing our best selves as they were in the 4th century when Rava articulated them:

1. נשאת ונתת באמונה

Nasata v'natata b'emunah

Did you conduct your business with faith or honesty?

Yes, that's the first question, and how interesting is that! the first question in reflecting on one's life is not about how many days you went to synagogue or kept kosher or how much tzedakah you gave, rather:

Did you tell the truth and did you go about the business of our personal and professional life with honesty?

This first question invites us to consider when we've been honest this year with others and with ourselves and how we can be even more anchored in truth in the coming year.

2. קבעת עתים לתורה

Kava'ata etim l'Torah?

Did you fix times for Torah, for learning?

Last year a staff member came to me to ask if we could spend some time learning together each week. I couldn't help but hear a little voice inside of me question "do I have really have the time?" -- perhaps you've heard that little voice too when a meaningful professional development or Torah class came your way.

But I said yes, and now we sit down between registering campers and planning surf programming to study Torah together for 30 minutes each week because, as Rabbi Louis Finkelstein said: "If Prayer is how we talk to God. Study is how we hear God's voice." What can it look like to set aside time for learning to nourish you this year?

3. עסקת בפריה ורביה

Asakta b'firyah u'riviyah?

Did you engage yourself in family and the next generation?

This questions originates from the first mitzvah in the first chapter of the Torah when God tells the first humans to be fruitful and multiple.

We each have an opportunity to shape our legacy... to spend time with family and the future generation. Take a moment and picture what that looks like for you... because it's different for each of us... and it's Jewish for each of us.

4. צפית לישועה

Tzipita l'yishuah?

Did you look up towards salvation? In other words,

Did you live with hope and do your part to work towards a better tomorrow?

I think of my own grandmother Della of blessed memory who used to recite emily dickenson's poem Hope every day in her green tiled kitchen.

Hope is the thing with feathers

that perches in the soul

and sings the tune without the words

and never stops at all

And sweetest in the gale is heard

and sore must be the storm

that could abash a little bird

that kept so many warm

I've heard it in the chilliest land

and on the strangest sea

yet, never, in extremity

it asked a crumb of me

The premise of this high holiday season is one of hope -- that we have the capacity and the opportunity to apologize, to repair, and to change through *teshuvah*. This question reminds us that Judaism is a way of looking up; it's a

lens through which we together can find hope, even in the most difficult of times.

5. פלפלת בחכמה

Pilpalta b'choma?

Did you actively seek (and debate) wisdom
through questions, relationships, experiences?

What are the areas of your life, your work, your community, or your nation that demand more attention -- a deep dive -- and are you willing to take the plunge in being more present in these areas?

6. הבנת דבר מתוך דבר

Havanta davar metoch davar

Did you understand one thing from another?
In other words, did you distinguish what matters most?

Havdallah, my favorite time of week at camp in which we gather under the stars on the beach -- is a time when we carefully and symbolically choose to carefully select things from the past week to bring into the next as represented by the sweetness of wine or grape juice, the awakening of spices, and the inspiration of a flame. The rest we leave behind as we distinguish *bein kodesh l'chol*, between holiness and everything else.

But at the time of Rosh Hashanah, when we flow not from week to week but from year to year, it's the blast of the shofar that awakens us to distinguish what's important from what's not. Some say it's an alarm clock, others a siren or a mother's cry. This is how Jewish tradition jolts us to distinguish what matters most, and that process is admittedly hard in today's world when we have so many inputs.

On the last day of camp this summer, I overheard a conversation between a parent and child when his mother picked him up from camp.

-Mom, what do you mean you didn't bring my phone with you?

-You've waited 4 months to use your phone while you've been at camp, don't you think you can wait 40 more minutes until we get home.

-Yeah, I guess you're right mom. And I've learned I can probably survive without it on Shabbat too, he added.

Distinguishing what's important from what's not, and taking it home with us.

So those are the questions:

How can I be more honest?

How can I find time to learn?

How can I leave a legacy?

How can I have hope -- to believe that better days are ahead?

How can I engage more in the conversation of what matters most in today's world?

and, how can I prioritize what's most important in this life?

I invite you, Max and all of us to choose one question to marinate on further over the days of awe ahead and to live out into the coming year. As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke so wisely instructed: "The point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

So, where do you feel most Jewish? If the answer is here or some other there, then I challenge us to bring that feeling someplace else, until slowly it becomes everywhere.

Choose one question this year that you could live out the answer to, and in doing so bring Judaism home for you and for all of us.

Shana Tova