

WHY WHY?

Sermon for Yom Kippur Morning, 2012/5773

In the three sermons I have already given during these High Holy Days, each one began with a question. Why believe? Why Israel? Why do good? This morning, what I am going to talk about also begins with the word “why,” but the question is not about some specific, substantive issue. Rather, today I want to talk with you about the very process of asking questions. And so I have titled this fourth sermon of the series “Why Why?”

We ask questions throughout our lives. Some of them are mundane and pedestrian, like “Honey, do you know where my car keys are?” Or, “How can they repave a street and still leave a washboard of bumps behind?” Other questions have more complex answers, like “Why is the snow cold?” (Because it is at least 68 degrees colder than our average temperature, so, compared to the normal human body, it feels cold when we touch it.) Or that classic question that every young child asks at least once: “Why is the sky blue?” (Because the earth’s stratosphere scatters the sun’s light rays, and blue rays penetrate into the atmosphere more easily than red ones.) You can come up with a much longer and better list of your own queries.

These are examples of scientific questions. Science is good at asking how things are made, how they work, and what are the consequences of their operation. Religious questions are different. We live in a world that is often filled with awe and mystery. Religion and faith are ways we try to make sense and ascribe meaning to the mysteries of existence. Because religious questions are essentially unanswerable, at least by scientific standards, there are thoughtful people who suggest we should just stop asking them. But what does it mean that we never do stop asking? Albert Einstein said that “behind everything that can be experienced there is something that our minds cannot grasp, whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly.” We are human because we constantly ask “What does it mean?” but also because we puzzle why we cannot stop asking; we ask “why” and then we ask why we ask “why.” To repress our urge to ask even unanswerable questions would not be to become more mature, but to regress to a pre-human state. We would extinguish the intellectual and spiritual flame that, burning brightly, makes us who we are.

Many people come to a rabbi – or a priest or a minister, I suppose – and ask questions in anticipation of an answer. Sometimes, our questions have to do with Jewish ritual. Around the Passover holiday, people want to know how many days they should eat matzah and why Jews don’t eat peas and beans and corn during those days. At other times, people will ask when it is appropriate to erect a monument over a grave or whether it is acceptable for a Jew to be

cremated. Sometimes, the questions deal with theological issues: Does God exist? Why should I pray? And the most frequent question of all, What will happen to me after I die?

One of the classic functions of religion is that they exist to provide answers to questions that we cannot answer in any other way. According to this theory about the purpose of religion, theology is supposed to be the repository of last resort for the great dilemmas of human existence. When faced with a quandary that we cannot solve anywhere else, we are supposed to turn to religion.

When we think about orthodox types of religion, whether Jewish or otherwise, this concept is relatively on target. There are codes of religious law and manuals for religious behavior and rituals from which one may deviate only at serious risk of one's eternal soul or salvation. When you have exhausted the formal religious guidance in orthodox religions, you can turn to the voluminous body of legends and stories and *bubbe meises* and other kinds of religio-cultural advice that may not be mandatory, but, in fact, are as binding as any of the official legal dictates of the religion.

Here's an example. When I was a student at Hebrew Union College in the early 1960s, my professor of Talmud reminded us that there is a law in the Torah that prohibits stealing. In fact, it's one of the Ten Commandments. And yet there were *ganovim*, thieves, in every *shtetl*, no matter how orthodox, throughout Jewish history. On the other hand, Dr. Guttman suggested, if a small Jewish community had had a custom that no one in the hamlet steals, that non-binding custom would have been so forceful that there would never have been a theft.

Now, make no mistake, liberal religions also try to answer questions. If you ask me a question – or if you ask any of my liberal Protestant colleagues a question – of course we'll do our best to give you a decent, straight answer. But there is a difference. And the difference is summarized by the old joke that you all know. How does a Jew answer a question? With another question.

Let me tell you what an Orthodox rabbi, born in Transylvania in 1905, but who was at heart rather liberal, said: Rabbi Shmuel Sperber thought that "Religion offers answers without obliterating the questions. They become blunted and will not attack you with the same ferocity. But without them the answer would dry up and wither away. To question is a great religious act; it helps you live great religious truth." That's why the why is so important.

To be Israel, to be a Jew means constantly to be wrestling with uncertainty and with challenging questions. The very word "Israel" means "he wrestled with God," referring to the story of Jacob at Beth El when he struggled all night with an angel – or was it God? The interesting thing about that biblical story is that the ancient patriarch emerged damaged – his hip was wrenched at the socket and he limped for the rest of his life – but the Torah and the Jewish tradition affirm that the act of wrestling with the divine was to be praised. No supine acquiescence and craven surrender was acceptable. Jacob's act of wrestling with the divine creature was so commended in the Bible that his name was changed to Israel and he moved from being a spoiled brat to one of the great patriarchs of our people.

Questioning is the essence of the mature religious life. You see, answers are static. Once you give an answer, you have stated a proposition that does not change. It is true and permanent. Orthodox religion, Orthodox Judaism likes that. So, if one asks "What is the Torah?" the answer is that it is the unchanging, permanent revelation that has existed without alteration since Moses and the Israelites stood at Sinai about 3200 years ago. The Torah in the ark in every synagogue in the world, according to this response, is identical to the revelation that Moses carried down the mountain- identical in terms of every letter, even every space between the words and even to words that may appear to be misspelled or derived from languages that were not even invented at the time of the Sinaiitic encounter. If there are questions in an Orthodox context, it is only about how to apply this permanent document of God's unchanging will, how to make it applicable in new circumstances. But the answer does not change. Torah is Torah is Torah. There is no discussion and no debate and simply nothing more to say.

We are not orthodox, either with a capital "O" or with a lower case "o." Whether you think of yourself as a Conservative Jew or a Reform Jew or as a trans- or post-denominational Jew, you are not an Orthodox Jew. If you were, you would not be here this morning. If you were, your life-style would be very different from what it presently is. I hesitate to use the word "Liberal" to describe us because it is so loaded with political baggage today, so perhaps we can agree that we try to be modern Jews.

Modern Jews share one characteristic. We are committed to the idea that the most ubiquitous feature of life is that there is constant change and that, as life changes, we must change with it. As human beings, we grow from day to day; we are not the same people we were last year, and we are definitely not the same people we were ten years ago – or twenty or thirty. The stable thing about us is a paradox: we are in a constant process of growth and development as individuals and so are our institutions and our society, the way we conduct our lives, the ideas we think about and the values we hold dear. Consider a couple of examples. In the 1950s, Ozzie and Harriet portrayed the role of women in a very traditional vein. There are very few Harriet Nelson's around anymore. The Civil Rights Movement has brought about an amazing decline in inter-group prejudice, both in terms of race and in terms of religion. Language that

was commonly used in reference to minorities only a generation ago is today unthinkable and unutterable. And who would have thought, only a few years ago, that roughly half of the states of the Union would now be considering authorizing marriages between members of the same sex? The only thing that is constant about our lives is that there are very few absolutes anymore; almost anything is grist for the mill of change; we expect tomorrow to be different in almost every way from today.

A former professor of mine once wrote a book about Moses as a political leader. {Aaron Wildavsky, *The Nursing Father: Moses as a Political Leader*, 12] In that book, he suggested that "...there is no ultimate right answer on earth, only the temporary assent of informed opinion....Society is not static, and neither is interpretation. Without continuous interpretation in the light of changing circumstances, it would be impossible to maintain the integrity of any original conception. Stability requires change."

Change comes from the audacity constantly to be asking questions, to challenge, to doubt, to probe, to wonder, to raise the banner of skepticism high above the ramparts of certainty and, perhaps most of all, to believe that one's religious faith is made stronger by constant asking and continual questioning. We may not get answers to our questions, or the answers we hear may not be to our liking. Do you remember the story about a little Christian boy who prayed like crazy every day for a month before Christmas: "God, I really hope You will give me a bicycle." When the 25th of December rolled around and he dashed downstairs, there was no bicycle parked in front of the tree. He turned to his father and exclaimed: "I prayed as hard as I could for a bicycle, but God did not answer my prayers." His father replied: "Oh, yes He did. Only the answer was 'No.'" Sometimes, all we can hear is divine silence, and sometimes all we can hear are answers we do not want to hear.

In case you think this is a modern phenomenon, please remember that great worthy of biblical fame, Job. Job was an eminently decent man whose life fell completely apart. He lost his fortune, his family, his friends. Finally, he is presented to us, sitting on the garbage dump of his city, his body covered with sores and wracked with illness. In desperation, Job turns to God and demands an answer: "Why are all these misfortunes happening to me? Surely, I was not evil enough to occasion this kind of retribution from the Almighty. God, I think You owe me an explanation." God's response rivals the tough-love answer of any modern parent: "I'm sorry, but I owe you nothing. And nothing is what you'll get. I am God and there are things that I understand that you as mere human will never comprehend." As unsatisfying to Job – and to us – as this answer might be, it is THE answer. That's all there is.

The interesting thing to me about the end of the book of Job is that the Bible never tells him

“Don’t ask.” In fact, Job is commended for his bravery and his courage to confront God with an ultimate question. It’s the way Job was going to grow as a spiritual being, and it is the way each of us can mature and develop and grow as religious and thoughtful human persons. So I end my series of sermons on the subject of “Why?” with this talk entitled “Why Why?” And the answer is because without ongoing challenge and questioning, you cannot grow as human beings and as Jews. So, this afternoon, after the children’s service is over, I hope you’ll gather for a half-hour or so to ask as many questions as you can imagine. Who knows? Perhaps we’ll even find an answer. And maybe that answer will be another question.

AMEN