Erev Rosh Hashanah • Rosh Hashanah Eve
A Torah of Life
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Jewish Gateways
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Once I became a rabbi, people started saying surprising things to me. You know how, in social situations, when people learn what you do for a living, they sometimes ask you for advice? If you're a doctor, they might tell you about their bad back. If you're an auto mechanic, maybe they want to know what car to buy.

When people find out that I'm a rabbi, though, they don't usually ask for my advice. What they have said to me many times is, "Oh, I'm a bad Jew." Or, "I'm Jewish … but ..." fill in the blank.

At first I didn't know what to think. Why would people say these things to me?

Imagine if you were a librarian, for example, and when you met people socially they often said, "I have overdue books at home that I'm too embarrassed to return." Or you're a dentist, and people tell you, "I haven't flossed my teeth in years."

When people say to me, "I'm a bad Jew," or "I'm Jewish, but …" usually I ask them to tell me more.

They tend to talk about the same topics.

First, God. People often tell me, "I don't believe in God."

Second, Hebrew school. "I never went to Hebrew school," "I hated Hebrew school." Or, "I didn't send my children to Hebrew school."

Third, synagogue. "I never go to synagogue." "When I've gone to synagogue it's boring, I don't understand it, I can't relate to the prayers."

Many people also say, "I don't know much about being Jewish." And, "I can't find anywhere I feel comfortable in the Jewish community."

I bet many of you have had some of the same thoughts.

And, if you think about it, it makes sense. Let's look at that list again.

First, God. When people tell me they don't believe in God, they almost always mean the God of Bible stories, who splits the sea, strikes some people dead and saves others. I can see why, for many adults, this just doesn't make sense.

Second, Hebrew school. If Hebrew school means memorizing a new alphabet, learning to say prayers in a language you don't understand, and hearing Bible stories about the God you may not believe in as you grow up, no wonder many people didn't find it meaningful.

And third, synagogue. Let's mix together the God of Bible stories, the Hebrew you forgot, or never learned, prayers you don't understand or don't believe, add in sitting, standing, and bowing without knowing why, when it seems like the people around you do … no wonder you might not want to be there.

I've had some of these experiences myself. But eventually I discovered another side of Jewish tradition that has meaning, depth, and relevance, but has not been visible to many of us.

That's why I created Jewish Gateways, because I want to make this powerful source of wisdom, spiritual connection, and community available to people like you.

I'll explain more about this kind of Jewish tradition, but first, there's something I want to ask you. It may seem like I'm changing the topic, but I promise, there is a connection.

These holidays – the ending of a year in our lives, the beginning of the next – are a time to stop, to step out of our daily routines, and reflect on the big issues in our lives.

What positive actions have you taken in the year now ending, that you want to build on?

What do you regret from the past year? How might you take one doable step towards change?

Who do you need to apologize to, or reconnect with?

And, what would help you take these steps – support from friends or family members, a new practice or habit in your life, a change in perspective?

These are the kinds of issues the holidays invite us to consider, here at services, or during other moments when you can put aside distractions and focus on what really matters.

This evening I want to look at a particular way to engage with these holidays. I ask you to consider: What question is at the heart of your life right now?

I don't mean a question that will be answered in time, like: "Will my family member get the job she wants?" Or, "Will my test results be OK?"

I mean a question about the meaning and direction of your life. Here are the questions two friends of mine shared that they have now, as they enter the New Year. One asks, "Given my current challenges, how can I stay calm and hopeful?" The other's question is, "How can I love my grown child and let him make his own decisions, even ones I don't agree with?"

These are just examples. You will have your own.

If you're not sure what your question is, that's OK. Take your best guess. It doesn't have to be perfect.

I'll give you some quiet time now to think about this. What question is at the heart of your life right now, as we enter this New Year?

At the close of this evening's service I'll invite you to write your question down, which will help it stay in your memory. Then, allow it to remain with you during this holiday season, through Yom Kippur, 10 days from now.

Whether or not you're aware of it, you will be listening for new perspectives, understandings, and even possible answers.

Now I want to return to my earlier topic -- Jewish tradition as a powerful source of wisdom and meaning. I experience this again and again as I enable people to discover Jewish teachings that help them to address the big questions they're wrestling with.

Here are a couple examples, of people I've served through Jewish Gateways or through my private work with individuals.

Stephanie grew up with a mother who cared about Judaism, and a father who thought religion was a crutch. She had a few positive Jewish experiences with her grandparents, but mostly Judaism was a source of conflict in her house, and she didn't learn much about it. As Stephanie approached a significant birthday, she found herself looking at her past and future, and wondering why Jewish tradition was so meaningful to her elderly mother. She decided to explore it, and see if she was missing something.

Stephanie told me that it was a busy time in her life, but she wanted to charge ahead anyway, and asked for suggestions of books about Jewish tradition. A few weeks later, though, she hadn't had time to read them, and wondered whether she needed to drop her exploration.

I suggested that, instead of a reading list, we look at how Jewish tradition could address what was happening in her life now. "My biggest challenge," she told me, "is finding a way to stop thinking about work all the time. I feel so stressed and distracted that it's dominating my life. Even when my husband and I watch a movie I keeping thinking that I should be checking my phone."

"That makes sense," I said. I told her about Shabbat, the weekly Jewish Sabbath, and that the word itself means "stop." That sounded good to her! Soon she was excited about trying out Shabbat as a way to take planned breaks and focus on totally different parts of life – nature, rest, relationships, pleasure, spiritual connection … she even decided to turn off her phone for several hours on Shabbat.

She and her husband started experimenting. A couple weeks later she was amazed by the difference it was making in her life. Stephanie was exploring Judaism, not by making it one more item on her to-do list, but by seeing how it could enrich her real life, and that of her family, too.

One more example. Neil grew up going to synagogue, and had a bar mitzvah, but it seemed like a boring obligation -- nothing he'd want to make his kids do. Once he had children, though, he and his wife struggled to find ways to help them learn gratitude. His wife said to him, "I know religion is supposed to help with that, but I don't have one. Can't we try sharing Judaism with them?"

Neil was resistant. How could he teach his kids gratitude through Judaism when he didn't believe in God and found synagogue boring? He took the chance of asking for help. He discovered that Jewish tradition includes sophisticated, intellectually honest ways to think about God that no one had ever shared with him. He learned about Jewish practices for expressing gratitude that could be part of daily life, and were meaningful rather than boring.

Soon he brought these practices into his family's life in ways that felt comfortable. They discovered that it made a big difference, not only for their children, but for Neil and his wife, and their relationship, as well.

In my own life, and with people like Stephanie and Neil, I experience again and again how Jewish tradition can enable us to live with greater meaning, depth, and authenticity, to address the big questions in our lives, and to make the world around us a better place.

A few days ago I talked with a friend of mine who does a lot of public speaking about business issues. She asked me, "What are your takeaways for your talk at Rosh Hashanah?" I don't usually think in those terms, but it sounded like a good idea. So, I want to close now with three takeaways for you this evening. First, two action items.

#1. You may have noticed a big scroll on the wall over there, titled the Torah of Life – Torat Chayim. The Torah, and all of Jewish tradition, has meaning when it speaks to our lives. Throughout these holidays we will place notes about our lives on that Torah, and I will connect them to the Torah of our tradition.

After the service ends, please find, in your prayer book or in the basket there, a paper on which to write the question that's at the heart of your life right now. Do so in such a way that it's anonymous. Then drop it in the other basket, for those that are filled out. Take someone else's question out of the basket, and tape it on the Torah of Life. In this way we will experience that we are not alone with the big questions we face. Tomorrow, I will share teachings in response to some of the questions you post, and I will do so in emails as well during these holidays.

Action Item #2. I want to continue this conversation with you during the year, to keep sharing how Jewish tradition can help you to address the challenges in your lives. The leadership of Jewish Gateways and I came up with ideas of ways to do this, and posted them on the board over there. Please take time after or before services to indicate which ideas interest you the most, or to write your own, to help us plan what would be most meaningful for you.

Number three is not an action item. I want to share words of encouragement. If you are one of those who has been frustrated, or bored by, or felt shut out of, Jewish tradition, if you would like to connect in meaningful and relevant ways with this ancient wisdom that can speak to your modern life, I want you to know that you are not alone. Other people like you have been

brave enough to say, “I want more, that speaks to my life, to the life of my family.” There is power in that wanting, and in moving towards that possibility.

And if any of you have ever felt, or feel this evening, like a “bad Jew,” I want to use my magic rabbi powers. I absolve you. Please, forgive yourself.

Now, I invite you to join me throughout these holidays, and in the new year ahead, in creating together our Torah of Life.