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The Seven Questions You'll Be Asked in Heaven

A man dies and his good deeds and bad deeds are just about equal. So he is given a choice as to where he wants to spend eternity. He takes an elevator down to the bottom floor. The doors open and there is a wild party going on. Grant you its kind of hot. But what an enormous buffet of food is spread before him and people dancing to a rocking band. He gets on the elevator and goes to the top floor. The doors open and there are three people sitting with glowing crowns on their heads studying the Torah. A little puzzled he finally gets up his nerve and asks God, "How could it be that by comparison, in heaven this is all there is?" God answers him, "Well, for three people I should hire a band?"

Much of our views of heaven are informed by films such as the classic, "It's a Wonderful Life." The film depicts a heaven where guardian angels watch over individual human beings; Clarence, an angel-in-training, must help George Bailey see how he made a difference in the world and thus 'earn his wings'. In the humorous film "Defending Your Life," Albert Brooks dramatizes the idea that we are asked questions about how we lived this life when we get to the next. After a sudden and fatal accident, his character Daniel, finds himself in Judgment City where he undergoes a type of trial to see whether he can move forward to the next stage of "afterlife." Apparently, Judgment City is not exactly heaven, but you do get to eat as much gourmet food as you want without gaining any weight.

In the Jewish tradition, the Rabbis of the Talmud envision a Heavenly Court that reviews the lifetime of a person upon arrival in the next world. The imagery includes a "scale" to weigh the accumulated good deeds on the one hand and mistakes and transgressions on the other. There is a Saatan, a Hebrew word meaning prosecuting attorney, (the origin of the word Satan) and a defense attorney. The ultimate Judge, God, considers the case and renders judgment. The Machzor, the High Holiday prayer book, is filled with this imagery. Yearly in preparation for the final accounting, we take account of our lives weighing our good and bad deeds, rendering judgment, and trying to repent and change the bad.

One element of heaven, often satirized in the cartoons of the New Yorker Magazine is the entrance exam. You are asked certain questions, which you have to pass to get into heaven. Think for a minute. This is literally your "Final

Exam.” What questions do you think are on the exam? These are some that have been collected by the noted Jewish educator Ron Wolfson: (The Seven Questions You’re Asked In Heaven-Jewish Lights Press).

“Were you a good person? Did you make a lot of money? Were you a good spouse, parent, grandparent, brother, sister, son or daughter? Did you give to tzedakkah? Were you famous? Did you make a contribution to the betterment of society? Did you eat too much? Did you drink too much? Did you believe in God? Were you good at your job? Did you wear the latest fashions?”

We actually don’t have to guess which questions are on the final exam. In the Talmud there are listed seven questions that we will be asked at the gates of heaven. (Wolfson) Ninety seven percent of Americans believe in heaven. Many Jews do not. Regardless of our belief, contemplating how we would answer these seven questions tells us whether we are leading a life that is worthy in the eyes of Jewish tradition. That is something to contemplate in this season of judgment.

The first and foremost question according to Rava, a beloved fourth century Talmudic master, is *Nasata v’natata b’emunah?* (Shabbat 31a) Did you deal honestly with people in your business? Is that it? The most important not did you believe in God? As Ron Wolfson notes, this is not just about buying and selling? It’s about integrity. Did you act with integrity, with honesty in your relationships? Ed Klein, a Temple member in the women’s retail business, often says you can tell the character of a person in business. There your ethics are tested every day. It’s so easy to try to cheat someone; to shave a little more profit here or there. But this also means honesty in your relationships with others. Were you an honest person? Did you tell the truth? Did you embellish it or tailor it for your own advantage?

Were you someone in whom others could put their trust? When I am marrying couples, I often tell them that this is at the core of the Jewish wedding vow: that you will be trustworthy as a husband or wife or sacred partner. The word *Emunah* means trust. The first question will be: Were we trustworthy, honest in our relationships with our family and friends, in our work, and in the world?

The first question also asks, “Were we honest with ourselves?” A Hasidic rabbi once said, “Repentance is available to everyone except a person who is dishonest with himself.” How can we own up to our mistakes if we are not honest about them with ourselves? So you can see why the first question is so important. Are we a person of honesty, integrity, truthfulness, with ourselves,

with others, in our family, in our work, and in all the areas of our lives, and with God?

Question number two: Askata b'friyah u'riviyah? Did you busy yourself with procreation? (Shabbat 31a). Certainly one of the most important mitzvah of the Torah is that of parenthood, either biologically or through adoption. Here Rava is asking, did we invest in love and in the future? Not everyone can be or feels they should be a parent. Others become teachers, or therapists, or volunteer as coaches, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, or work with students. Sometimes we play a special role as a beloved uncle or aunt. The second question is did we invest in our families? What is important here is the word asakta. It doesn't ask, "Did we provide our families the most expensive things money could buy?" It asks did we engage them, spend time with them?

In Jewish tradition a child is called a Kaddisha-one who will say kaddish for us after we are gone. A child is a part of our immortality. In the wider sense, what impact we have on children, lives on after us in the good or harm they do. Ron Wolfson named in Jems for Elul the influence of others on him. Some of them are: "Zadie Louie: Greet everyone, Bubbie Ida: Bake mandel bread, Grandma Celia: Soap operas rock. Mom Bernice: Always think about others... I know that each of you could come up with a list of those who have had an enduring influence on you. Rabbi Harold Shulweiss calls it the immortality of influence. Did you have children? Adopt children? Mentor children or young people? Teach children or young people? Help children or young people? Did you invest in life, and in the future? It's the second question on the exam.

Question number three: Kava'ata itim la-Torah? Did you set aside time for Torah? (Shabbat 31a) Rabbi Louis Finkelstein wrote, "Prayer is the way we speak to God. Studying the Torah is the way God speaks to us." One of the things about the Sabbath throughout the history of Judaism is that it was a time each week where a person learned a lesson of Torah. It's amazing that these stories are the enduring templates of human life. But even more so, they contain the core values of living a meaningful life. In her office in the Supreme Court Ruth Bader Ginsberg has hanging on her wall the guiding words from the Torah, "Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof - Justice Justice Shalt Thou Pursue." From the Torah is engraved on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, "Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land to All the Inhabitants Thereof." One of my favorite books is Joseph Telushkin's, "Jewish Values." One can set aside a few minutes before going to bed every day to learn a Torah teaching about every day life. Some of the more than 100 participants in my online Ten Minutes of Torah tell me how enriched their lives have been since they have been studying the Torah portion each week for just a few minutes. One of the lessons was about Joseph and his brothers. It

explored how he came through his own hardship to be a less arrogant and more empathic person. He was able to forgive his brothers because he learned to be more honest with himself about his part in the alienation of his brothers. I received a large number of responses to that week's teaching. A few people even said they were able to repair some relationships with siblings, parents and friends because they thought about Joseph and more about their part in the conflict that had ensnared them.

Studying Torah in addition to guidance also gives us a yardstick of values for to guide our lives. Torah comes from the word yoreh which also means to shoot, to hit the target. It provides what we are to shoot for in life. Tractate Shabbat 127, for instance, states "These are the deeds that yield immediate fruit and continue to yield fruit in the world to come: Honoring parents, Deeds of loving kindness. Setting a time for study - morning and evening. Providing hospitality. Visiting the sick. Helping the needy bride (and groom). Attending a funeral. Probing the meaning of prayer. Making peace between one person and another. And the study of torah is the most important of them all because it leads to them all. (Talmud Torah k'neged kulam)

Did you set aside time for Torah? Did you set aside time as an adult to learn the lessons, find out the key values of the Torah and apply them to you life?

Question number four you're asked in heaven is not about your accomplishments, your values or your legacy. It is about you're attitude. (Wolfson p. 57) Tzipita le Yehshua? Did you hope for deliverance? (Shabbat 31a) Did you live with hope in your heart? In the Jewish Biblical story of creation after each day God says that it was good - Ki tov. After completing the creation God says, "Tov meod" it was very good. Rabbi Ed Feinstein says that good is the most important word in the whole chapter. "The whole world sees chaos, terror, random death as inevitable. And this one little people, a people who suffered more than any other people, this people has the cosmic chutzpah to say, 'It doesn't have to be that way! Come be God's partner. There is goodness in creating the world.'" (Wolfson p.60) In the darkest of times it was Ann Frank who saw Miep Gies and others risking their lives in hiding her and her family from the Nazis. She wrote, "Despite everything I believe people are really good at heart."

Our own President has written in that same spirit in these trying days, about "The Audacity of Hope." Writing about the struggling people he encountered as a community organizer he recalls, "It wasn't just the struggles of these men and women that moved me. Rather, it was their determination, their self-reliance a relentless optimism in the face of hardship, 'the audacity of hope'. That was the

best of the American spirit. I thought - having the audacity to believe despite all the evidence to the contrary that we could restore a sense of community to a nation torn by conflict, the gall to believe that despite personal setbacks—the loss of a job or an illness in the family or a childhood mired in poverty, we had some control - and therefore responsibility - over our fate.”

In another part of the world during the beginning of Zionism, a song captured the Jewish spirit of hope. Naftali Hertz Imber, a Ukranian Jew, put into words the two-thousand year old dream of the Jewish people to return from exile and establish the modern state of Israel. It became the national anthem of the Jewish State: Hatikvah-The Hope. “As long as in the heart within A Jewish soul still yearns, and onward toward the ends of the east an eye still gazes toward Zion. Our hope will not be lost, the hope of two thousand years - to be a free people in our land, the Land of Zion and Jerusalem.”

The first three questions ask about what you do in your life. Question number four is about your attitude. In spite of difficulty were you more an optimist than a pessimist? Did you hope for a better world and help to make it better?

The Fifth Question you’ll be asked in Heaven has two parts: Pilpalta b’chochma and Havanta dvar m’toch dvar. Did you seek wisdom and did you understand one thing from another?

“Life is full of choices. Every day, seemingly every hour, there are important decisions to be made. If I eat fried eggs instead of poached, will my cholesterol go sky high? Is it time to confront my boss about his negative attitude? He could fire me or I might quit. My daughter is performing in the school play this afternoon, but I’m expected at a crucial meeting. Which should I choose? What should I do with my ninety-year old father in law who wants to continue driving a car? It is his last vestige of independence but I fear he might hurt himself or others.” (Wolfson p81) Everyday life brings us questions and decisions that matter. Ron Wolfson translates the fifth question, as “Did you ask questions about your life experience that led you to wisdom? Did your analysis lead you to understandin?.” Did you use this wisdom to make good choices? Were those choices based on the right priorities?

“A priority is what matters most. The Fifth Question you’re asked in heaven leads you to this question: What matters to you? How do you really spend your time and money? Are the things you spend the most time and money on the things that matter most? (Wolfson p. 87) Question number five you’ll be asked is did you understand what mattered to you and did you lead a life that mattered?

The great leader of nineteenth-century German Orthodoxy, Samson Raphael Hirsch, surprised his disciples one day when he insisted on traveling to Switzerland. “When I stand shortly before the Almighty,” he explained, “I will be answerable to many questions. But what will I say when...and I’m sure to be asked, “Why didn’t you see my Alps?” (Jewish Wisdom, Joseph Telushkin p. 230) The sixth question we’ll be asked is, “Did we enjoy the fullness of God’s creation?” The Talmud tells us that we are to recite a hundred blessings a day: To notice and be thankful for all kinds of things that we overlook in our haste and business: smelling fragrant spices, trees, tasting new fruits, seeing a sunrise, witnessing trees blossoming, seeing the ocean, encountering creatures and people of striking beauty.

For a long time my friend Dennis Caspe, who is a runner, has encouraged me to participate in the Warf-to-Warf Race. I have had it on my list for many years. This year I actually did it. I didn’t run; I walked. It was so much fun. I enjoyed the spirit of fun and camaraderie, the bands along the route. It was an especially beautiful day and walking leisurely I was able to immensely enjoy it. I’m sure we all have our lists. Question number six we will be asked in heaven? Did you enjoy the blessings of God’s world?

Can you guess what is the last of the seven questions? It is found in one of the most famous of the Tales of the Hasidim. (Volume I p.251) “Before his death, Rabbi Zusya said: “In the world to come, they will not ask me: ‘Why were you not Moses?’ they will ask me, ‘Why were you not Zuzya?’” In 1981, the Army recruited the noted advertising agency N.Y. Ayers and Son to create a new recruiting slogan. Advertising Age magazine ranked it the number 2 jingle of the 20th century. What was it? “Be all that you can be....” The question you’ll be asked is: were you not somebody else but were you you and all that you could be? In Jewish tradition we have a literature called the Musar literature. It is a path of study, awareness and action whose purpose is to help us develop as human beings, our humanity. It is called also Tikkun Nefashot, the improvement of the soul. From the mussar literature which aspect of your character will you chose to work on this coming year? Humility, Patience, Gratitude, Compassion, Order, Equanimity, Honor Simplicity, Enthusiasm, Silence Generosity, Truth, Moderation, Loving Kindness, Responsibility, Trust, Faith or Awe? Did we work on ourselves to be all that we could be? Did we work on our relations with others to be all that they could be? Finally, did we work on Tikkun Olam, on trying to make the world a better place to be all that it could be?

It's not often that we get the questions in advance for such an important quiz. But here they are. They provide us questions to answer right now on this New Year about how we are living:

1. How can I be more honest with others, with myself, and with God. How can I be a more trustworthy person, creating trust with my loved ones and friends and in my work?
2. Am I leaving a legacy? Have I given love to and influenced children? Am I making a difference in the lives of others?
3. Am I setting aside time to study the Torah, learning and applying its core values and lessons?
4. Do I strive to live with hope? Even in difficult times can I struggle to see the glass as half full? Do I act on hope or am I cynical about the world?
5. What are my priorities? How do I really use my time and spend my money? Are both invested in the things that really matter?
6. Do I enjoy God's creation, enjoying the fun and pleasure and the blessings and beauty of God's world?
7. Do I cherish being me? How can I be all that I can be, fulfilling my own unique potential in joy?

Over the next 10 days of Repentance you can prepare for life's final examine. You may believe with the Rabbis that it comes in a future at the Gates of Heaven. Or you may believe as Rabbi Harold Schulweis has written (Wolfson p.144) "Immortality is not found in heaven. It is not on the top of the mountains, or the bottom of the sea. It is here in your hearts, in the way we live... Look within you and find the immortality that God has planted there." For the righteous are not in heaven. Heaven is in the righteous.

How we answer these questions helps us prepare for the afterlife or at least determine whether we experience the New Year as a Heaven on Earth. May you experience a Heaven on Earth this year. Amen.