Rosh Hashanah Morning 1:
Yom Hadin, the six questions at our last trial (5783-2022)

Welcome to your 5783 mock trial. Welcome to a new mock exam. This is Rosh Hashanah after all. Welcome to Yom HaDin, the day of judgment. According to the tradition each Rosh Hashanah we start a 10-day trial that will finish on Yom Kippur. We start today by pleading our case to God. Our pleas are not with words only, but especially with actions. Each one of the actions that we did over the last year will be considered in this trial. Each good deed, and each Mitzvah will constitute evidence in our favor. Each transgression, each Averah we committed , will serve as evidence against us. We are being judged today. This is the main idea of Rosh Hashanah: not a joyous celebration of a new year but a day when each one of us enters into a trial... or as I would like to suggest: a mock trial.

I´m not sure how long it has been since you had a mock exam or if you have ever participated in a mock trial. I used to love them. They gave me the confidence that when the real exam/trial would arrive, I would be more prepared, I would have rehearsed my answers, and I would have had more time to be able to study subjects that I didn't know much about. And this is Rosh Hashanah for me. A gift from the Jewish tradition to better prepare ourselves for our final trial. Since the times of the prophets, we hear in our tradition the notion of "Yom Hadin", the day of final judgment. This notion could be understood as a collective day when humanity as a whole will be judged at the end of time. But also there is another way to understand this idea: that each one of us- when we die- will have to confront God in trial and respond to different questions He will be asking us. And in order to be prepared on how to answer His questions, we have a mock trial, a Yom Hadin, each year at Rosh Hashanah.

Let's stop for one second to state the obvious (or maybe not so obvious): is there going to be a trial? Is God going to judge each one of us like a judge does in a courthouse? I´m not sure. Sometimes I take this to be literal, sometimes as a metaphor, but in both cases, I truly believe from the bottom of my heart that living our lives as if we would go to trial (answering for our actions) is a powerful idea that motivates us to be the best that we can, in our life.

And now let's talk about this mock trial. What questions do you think God will ask you on your final day of judgment? Happily for us, a Talmudic Sage called Raba, around 1700 hundred years ago, thought about which are the questions God would ask us in our final trial, and every year during Rosh Hashanah we can meditate on them, to see how we would respond. First, let´s review the six questions, and later on let's try to make sense of each one of them in detail:

אָמַר רָבָא: בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁמַּכְנִיסִין אָדָם לְדִין, אוֹמְרִים לוֹ: נָשָׂאתָ וְנָתַתָּ בָּאֱמוּנָה? קָבַעְתָּ עִתִּים לַתּוֹרָה? עָסַקְתָּ בִּפְרִיָּה וּרְבִיָּה? צָפִיתָ לִישׁוּעָה? פִּלְפַּלְתָּ בְּחָכְמָה? הֵבַנְתָּ דָּבָר מִתּוֹךְ דָּבָר?

Rava said: After departing from this world, **when a person is brought to justice** for the life he lived in this world, **they say to him** in the order of that verse: Did **you conduct business faithfully?** Did **you designate times for Torah** study? Did **you engage in procreation? Did you await salvation? Did you engage** in the dialectics of **wisdom** or understand **one matter from another? (b. Shabbat 31)**

Did you conduct business faithfully נָשָׂאתָ וְנָתַתָּ בֶּאֱמוּנָה?

The first question is not about rituals. It is not about Shabbat, Kashrut, or prayer but is about business. Were we honest in our business transactions during the year? Were we loyal to our words and to the ethics of each one of our businesses? Did I try to take advantage of others to earn a few more dollars? Judaism is not about what you do in the synagogue but (and especially) how you behave in the street. You may come to synagogue a bunch of times a year but, on the contrary, you do business every day, and that is where our true sense of what it means to be Jewish should be shown. In the Temple everyone behaves. The true challenge is to behave in each one of your transactions, in every encounter with other people as if you were in Temple all day long. How many times have you said or heard "We can't say this or that here… we are in the Temple!" I don't want to ruin your party, but we are a people that believes that God is everywhere. God is here at Rosh Hashanah, and God is there when you are dealing with a customer, your boss, or your employee. **And this is the first question: Did you conduct business faithfully? How honest were you this last year?**

Did you designate times for Torah study קָבַעְתָּ עִתִּים לַתּוֹרָה?

The second question is about Torah, about learning. How much did you learn this last year? How much time do you devote yourself to enhancing your Jewish (and non-Jewish) knowledge? Usually, during tax season we need to declare how much money we earned during the year… God in His final trial is not asking that but rather how much did we learn. But not even that… the question really is if we fixed designated times to study during our week… not about how much knowledge we amass, but if we put aside time for study, for spiritual and intellectual growth. It is Shamai in Pirkei Avot the one who recommends that we should "Make your Torah fixed" (1:15). Meaning that we should set aside specific moments each day of the week to learn. Like I have said to my students many times: "If you really want to prove that you care about something, let me see your calendar". We can all say that we would like to study more, exercise more, spend more time with the family, to be involved in social action, but the truth at the end of the day will be shown in the phones you have in your pockets… When you open the calendar what do you see? We need to "fix times" for the things we truly care about.

There is a deeper connection between the first and second questions. Business and learning. How much time do we devote in our lives to increase our wealth and how much time do we devote to increasing our wisdom? In ancient times, in the Jewish villages of Europe or in the Jewish populated cities in the Arab countries, the answer was easy: our primary concern should be to learn and, only secondarily, to work (see. Avot deRabi Natan 28:10). This has been the tradition of the Jewish people for almost two millennia. But modernity changes the equation: the primary (and usually, the only) goal is to work and increase your wealth. So what do we Jews do in this current time? Go back to the Yeshivas and study all day and live just above the poverty line? No! That is not the Talmudic answer. As God will ask… we need to do business! We need to work! But faithfully and honestly. But together with that, we need to fix times in our calendars on a weekly basis to grow in our learning. We need to read more. We need to study more. **As a dear friend of mine, Rabbi Eli Levy, once told me: we should ask questions before we go to sleep: what new thing did I learn today? And who did I help today?**

Did you engage in procreation?

The third question. The third verb. And pay attention. The first question is not how much money we made but is "Nasata" (did you conduct business honestly), the second question is not how much we learned but "Kavata" (did you fix times for study), and this third question is not so much about how many children did we have but rather "Asakta" (did you engage). God, with these questions, is trying to tell us something. The results don't matter as long as you devote time and effort to each one of these goals.

This question, like many others, would make some uncomfortable. And that's ok. Questions should shake us, and should allow us to think about how we lived and how we want to live. Having children is the first commandment of the Torah. The first, and only, Mitzvah given to Adam and Eve. Engaging in procreation is a Jewish deed. Ensuring and nurturing the next generation is a Jewish Mitzvah. But once again the question is not how many children you have but if we engage during our lifetime to fulfill this Mitzvah. How much we care about the future, our legacy... that is the question.

Having biological children is only one way to respond affirmatively to this question, but there are at least two other ways to fulfill in some way the Mitzvah of procreation: adopting children and having students. The Talmud says that "whoever raises an orphan in his home is considered by the Scripture to have given birth to him" (b. Megillah 13a). And, on the other hand, the Talmud emphasizes that in the same way we should have children we should have students (b. Yevamot 62b). When you become a teacher each one of your students becomes like one of your children, expanding your message from generation to generation.

Did you await salvation?

Question number four is without hesitation also connected to our previous matter. One talks about procreation, the other talks about salvation, and both talk about the future. If business/learning is our present, children/salvation is our future. This fourth question is not so much about what we did but rather how we lived our lives. Did you live your life being a pessimist or a cynic, believing everything is wrong in the world, and the future is even darker and that there is no way to solve it? Or have you lived your life believing in the Geulah (redemption), in the Yeshua (salvation), in the Mashiach (Messianic times)? Do you believe that the world could be a better place? Were you an optimist?

Let me share with you something about my family that you may not know. My dad comes from a traditional Sephardic family from Syria. He has five siblings. All of them were raised as Jews, of course, but his oldest brother (my uncle) at the age of 20 decided to leave the faith and convert to Jehovah's Witness. Strange move for a Sephardic jew in the seventies in Argentina but that is a story for another day. Why am I telling you this? Because he did not only convert, but he also became like a priest in their churches (but they don't call themselves priests and neither do they call their gathering places churches). And many years ago when I asked him why he didn't have children, he answered me: why are we going to bring a child to this world to suffer? High-ranked Jehovah's Witnesses don't believe it is right to bring children to the world until the arrival of the messianic times... why should we bring someone to a world full of hatred, division, poverty, war, pandemics and more?

But this is not the Jewish, our Jewish perspective. We are a people that bet on life despite the darkness. We are a people that awaits salvation and engages in procreation hand in hand. In the darkest times of our history, like the Shoah, in the middle of the Ghettos, our women still gave birth believing that their children could have a better life. And not only that. We believe that with each life that comes to the world the potential of the messianic times draws closer. Maybe one of our children, or our students will be the Messiah, the one that could bring more light into this world. In the midst of Egypt as slaves still, Jewish women, according to the Midrash, encouraged their husbands to procreate because maybe one of their children would be the one who would eventually take them out of slavery… and Moses was born.

Awaiting for salvation is not sitting still believing that the answer to all our problems will fall from heaven but rather looking to the future with hope and working for and with the future generations for Tikun Olam, the reparation of our fractured world. Did you have faith? That is the question!

Did you engage in the dialectics of wisdom or understand one matter from another?

The last two questions are really one: did you discuss with wisdom? Did you understand one matter inside another? If in every generation each one of these questions was relevant for our times, these last two questions are even more relevant and pressing. We are a generation that lost the ability to discuss with wisdom. We are a generation that is unable to understand the depth of the arguments.

When faced by God in our final trial… What will we answer? When we discuss politics, pandemics, wars, immigration laws, gun control, climate change, about the Israel-Arab conflict, do we do it with wisdom? How do we discuss it? Did we learn enough to be part of a debate? What is our information source? Do we read just the headline or the whole paper? Do we care enough to check the peer review of that article that we cite all the time? Do we take time to read articles and listen to speakers that do not agree with our preconceived ideas? Do we discuss with wisdom? Do we listen to the "other side" of the argument? Do we believe at least for one second that we could be wrong? Do we discuss with wisdom? Do we discuss with respect? Do we honor the person we are arguing with? Do we go in-depth or do we only remain on the surface? Are we divers or just swimmers? Do we follow the stream of water or do we swim against it?

If there is going to be a final trial then every year´s Rosh Hashanah is the mock trial to be better prepared. According to Rabba, these are the questions God is going to ask us. Every year, it is a good practice to ask ourselves these questions; to search in our hearts and find out whether we would be able to answer them in a positive way, or if there is still room for improvement.

But, and this is a big but, I believe that each one of us has our own questions. Rabba may have thought that these were the questions God would ask him, and each one of us, because those were the matters that occupied his thoughts and his life. So now the question is: what are your questions? Because at the end of the day God will ask each one of us the questions that we asked

ourselves. He will ask the questions in regards to how we decided to live our lives, what our priorities were, what our goals were. So now is a good time- at the beginning of the year - to set our priorities, to ask the questions that we would like God to ask us, and try our best during this year to rehearse the ideal answer to each of those questions.

With your permission, I would like to finish with a story. When Rabbi Zusha of Hanopil, an 18th century Hasidic rabbi, was on his deathbed, his students found him in uncontrollable tears. They tried to comfort him by telling him that he was almost as wise as Moses and as kind as Abraham, so he was sure to be judged positively in Heaven. He replied, "When I get to Heaven, I will not be asked Why weren't you like Moses, or Why weren't you like Abraham. They will ask, Why weren't you like Zusha?" Why didn't he fully live up to his own potential?

The questions God will ask us are unique. No two people have the same questions in our final exam. Each one is unique. Life is not an exam we can copy from another student sitting next to us. God will not compare us with others. God will ask us, at the very end, what Rabbi Zusha said: "Why didn't he fully live up to his own potential?" And the question for us today is: what would our answer be?

LeShanah Tova uMetukah,
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