

“Asking Constructive Questions”
דבר תורה (sermon) for Yom Kippur Day 5779/2018
By: Rabbi Noah Gradofsky

Note: This sermon is largely inspired by a sermon delivered by Rabbi Eryn London to Lechu Neranena, the partnership minyan of Bala Cynwyd, PA on Shabbat Erev Tisha b'Av 5578/2018.

All translations my own unless otherwise indicated.

"לִקְנוֹךְ מִה אָדָם וּתְדַעְהוּ בֶן אָנוּשׁ וּתְחַשְׁבֵהוּ", Lord, what is man that you take note of him, son of man, that you consider him?"¹ This verse of Psalms is the traditional opening to the Yizkor service. It ponders deep questions of the significance of humanity. The question, though immediately reflecting on the significance of the lives of our loved ones to us, begs the same questions about ourselves. What can we accomplish in our lives that will make our lives truly worthy of God's notice? What significant impact can we have on our friends and loved ones?

As we discussed yesterday, it's not particularly easy to figure ourselves out.² We often overstate our abilities and positive characteristics while stubbornly ignoring and denying our shortcomings. Yesterday³, I introduced organizational psychologist Tasha Eurich. Dr. Eurich champions the goal of self-awareness, which she describes as “the ability to see ourselves clearly, to understand who we are, how others see us and how we fit into the world.”⁴ Self-awareness can be a very positive quality. Dr. Eurich notes:

There's ... a ton of research showing that people who are self-aware are more fulfilled. They have stronger relationships. They're more creative. They're more confident and better communicators. They are less likely to lie, cheat, and steal.⁵

¹ Psalms 144:3.

² <https://utj.org/viewpoints/parashat/3-steps-to-better-you/>.

³ See sermon at <https://utj.org/viewpoints/parashat/3-steps-to-better-you/>.

⁴ “Increase Your Self-awareness With One Simple Fix,”

https://www.ted.com/talks/tasha_eurich_increase_your_self_awareness_with_one_simple_fix, transcript at https://www.ted.com/talks/tasha_eurich_increase_your_self_awareness_with_one_simple_fix/transcript.

⁵ *Id.*

So, naturally, if we want to be self-aware, we should spend a lot of time being introspective – thinking about ourselves, who we are, what we do, and why we do it, right? Surely that will lead us to live a more happy and fulfilled life. So, it's a good thing that we came to synagogue today to engage in some good-old-fashioned self-flagellation. We'll all come out stronger and happier in the end, right? Well, that's what Dr. Eurich thought as well. But every once in a while, a good scientist has to admit that the data do not show what they were expected to show. As Eurich writes in an article titled "The Right Way to be Introspective (Yes, There's a Wrong Way)", she was shocked when she looked at the data and learned that:

The people who scored high on self-reflection were more stressed, depressed and anxious, less satisfied with their jobs and relationships, more self-absorbed, and they felt less in control of their lives. What's more, these negative consequences seemed to increase the more they reflected.⁶

For instance:

One study examined the coping style and subsequent adjustment of men who had just lost a partner to AIDS. Although those who engaged in introspection ... had higher morale in the month following their loss, they were more depressed one year later.⁷

Through further study Dr. Eurich learned that the problem wasn't *that* people were introspective, but *how* they were introspective. It's all about the questions we ask, she explains. Her simple advice is in general to avoid questions that ask "why," such as "why did I do that?" or "why did this happen to me?" As she puts it, such questions "can trap us in a hell of our own making."⁸ This is in part because "why" questions tend to ask us to find explanations for things that are very difficult to explain. We may think, for instance, that we know why we did something, or why something happened to us, but the truth is that there are so many factors that go into what happens at any given moment that our answers are at the very least going to be gross oversimplifications if not outright fabrications. As Dr. Eurich puts it, "Introspection might ... lull us into a false sense of certainty that we've identified the real issue."⁹ And once we think we've found an answer to our "why" questions, we tend not to reconsider those answers, due at least in part to

⁶ <https://ideas.ted.com/the-right-way-to-be-introspective-yes-theres-a-wrong-way/>. This article is excerpted from Dr. Eurich's book, [Insight: Why We're Not as Self-Aware as We Think and How Seeing Ourselves Clearly Helps Us Succeed at Work and in Life](#). Please note, hyperlink is to Amazon using the Union For Traditional Judaism partner code. UTJ is a participant in the Amazon Services LLC Associates Program, an affiliate advertising program designed to provide a means for us to earn fees by linking to Amazon.com and affiliated sites. Dr. Eurich addresses similar themes in the video referenced above at footnote 4.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ "Increase Your Self-awareness With One Simple Fix," above footnote 4.

⁹ "The Right Way to be Introspective (Yes, There's a Wrong Way)," above footnote 6.

confirmation bias.¹⁰ Asking “why” often narrows our way of thinking, as sociologist Howard S. Becker writes:

When I interviewed people, asking them why they did something invariably provoked a defensive response. ... [T]he poor interviewee understood my question as a request for a justification, for a good and sufficient reason for the action I was inquiring about.

When, on the other hand, I asked how something had happened—“How did you happen to go into that line of work?”—my questions ‘worked’ well. People answered at length, told me stories filled with informative detail, gave accounts that included not only their reasons for whatever they had done, but also the actions of others that had contributed to the outcome I was inquiring about.¹¹

Asking why questions often provokes us to lay blame and/or to become defensive to avoid blame, hence limiting our ability to thoroughly and openly explore an issue productively.¹² As my colleague Rabbi Steven Saks wrote recently in an d’var Torah about mindfulness, our goal is to “acknowledge and process” our “emotions without passing judgment.”¹³

Dr. Eurich, who generally advises we find questions that start with “what” rather than “why,” gives some examples of how to re-focus our introspective questions. And while perhaps some of the distinctions she draws are a bit semantic, I think her key point is that we need to be careful to ask ourselves constructive questions, questions that focus less on understanding what may be a confusing or difficult reality and more on what we can do about that reality, thus reinforcing our sense of control over our destiny. For instance, rather than, “Why do I feel so terrible?” better to ask things like, “What are the situations that make me feel bad and what do they have in common?”¹⁴ or “What’s another way to see this situation?” or “What can I do to respond better?”¹⁵ Dr. Eurich concedes that it is OK to ask *why* something went wrong so that we can figure out how to fix it and explains that “[a] good rule of thumb, then, is that why questions are generally better to help us understand events in our environment and what questions are generally better to

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ From [Tricks of the Trade: How to Think About Your Research While You’re Doing It](https://medium.com/@carolinekyungae/asking-how-vs-why-38a78dfac1e2), as quoted in “Asking ‘How?’ vs. ‘Why?’: What I Wish I Had Learned in J-School,” <https://medium.com/@carolinekyungae/asking-how-vs-why-38a78dfac1e2> accessed September 16, 2018 (I have preserved a pdf of the article). Please note, hyperlink is to Amazon using the Union For Traditional Judaism partner code. UTJ is a participant in the Amazon Services LLC Associates Program, an affiliate advertising program designed to provide a means for us to earn fees by linking to Amazon.com and affiliated sites.

¹² *Id.* CF “The Right Way to be Introspective (Yes, There’s a Wrong Way),” above footnote 6. (“Asking why appeared to cause the participants to fixate on their problems and place blame instead of moving forward in a healthy and productive way.”)

¹³ <https://utj.org/viewpoints/2018/08/mindfulness/>.

¹⁴ “Increase Your Self-awareness With One Simple Fix,” above footnote 4.

¹⁵ “The Right Way to be Introspective (Yes, There’s a Wrong Way),” above footnote 6.

help us understand ourselves,”¹⁶ but I wonder if maybe one could avoid this distinction by asking “what went wrong” rather than “why did things go wrong.”

The Haftarah for this morning gives an interesting example of a “why” question and a “what” response. The people ask God, “למה צָמְנוּ וְלֹא רָאִיתָ עֵינֵינוּ נִפְשָׁנוּ וְלֹא תִדְעַ” Why have we fasted and you have not answered, afflicted our souls and you did not notice?”¹⁷ God points out that the people fast and feign contrition amid continued strife and wrongdoing and then asks rhetorically, “הֲלוֹא זֶה צוֹם אֲבֹתֵינוּ” is the following not the fast that I desire?”¹⁸ God guides the people not to ask “why haven’t you responded to our fast,” but rather, “what kind of fast would elicit God’s response?” God then supplies the answer – a fast where you turn away from your evil ways and show kindness to those in need. Similarly, we ask as part of the confession, “מה אנחנו, מה חיינו, מה חסדנו, מה צדקנו” what are we, what are our lives, what is our kindness, what is our charity” and in Yizkor, “Lord, what is man that you take note of him, son of man, that you consider him?”¹⁹ It’s not “why are we here,” for instance, but “what significance will we make out of our lives? How will we make our mark such that our lives will be worthwhile?” As we apply the words “what is man that you take note of him” to the Yizkor service, it further begs the question – what is the meaning of our memories of our loved ones? What is their legacy and how do we continue their works? How will their memories inspire us for the better?

Nowadays, many of us are disturbed, one way or another, at the current state of the world. Why is there evil in the world? Why is our political reality steeped in so much enmity and recrimination? Why is there suffering? But there are many better questions out there to be asked, for instance “what led to this situation and what am I going to do about it?” Over the course of these high holidays, I’ve tried to supply a little bit of wisdom in response to these questions. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we spoke about our responsibility for increasing the manifestations of God’s kingdom on earth by being emissaries of justice and righteousness.²⁰ On the second day we spoke about being passionate, even stubborn, about our ideals but still insisting on respect for others and challenging ourselves to consider their positions.²¹ We talked about how important it is for us to recognize that we don’t always have all the answers, but we can seek out those answers through study and careful consideration of Torah.²² In just a few moments we’ll have the education appeal, which will serve to highlight even further the importance of growing in our understanding of Torah in order to better understand what we can and should achieve. Yesterday we spoke about identifying one aspect of ourselves that we would like to improve and committing to work on that goal on a daily basis.²³ Rather than

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ Isaiah 58:3.

¹⁸ Isaiah 58:6.

¹⁹ Psalms 144:3.

²⁰ <https://utj.org/viewpoints/parashat/rosh-hashanah-making-god-king/>.

²¹ <https://utj.org/viewpoints/parashat/benefits-of-being-stiff-necked/>.

²² *Id.*

²³ <https://utj.org/viewpoints/parashat/3-steps-to-better-you/>.

asking “why is the world in turmoil?” let’s ask “what is wrong in the world, and how can we play a part in fixing it?”

The thirteenth century Muslim scholar Rumi²⁴ said, “Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself.” A more modern version of this wisdom comes from Michael Jackson, who said “if you wanna make the world a better place, take a look at yourself and make a change.” Creating change, as Jackson puts it, requires us to start with the man in the mirror. How will you change the world this year?

CONCLUDING PRAYER PRIOR TO FINAL SHOFAR BLAST

ה' א-להינו, Lord, our God, we pray that our repentance during this season and the future deeds that it inspires will make us worthy of the words of Ecclesiastes, “לֶךְ אֲכַל בְּשִׂמְחָה” go and eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a happy heart, for God has already found favor in your deeds.”²⁵ May our deeds of justice and kindness affirm your kingdom on earth. May we remain steadfast in our humility to consider the opinion of others and our dedication to caring for the needs of others. Guide us so that our sense of humility does not lead us to forget the tremendous capacity each of us has to improve our own lives and positively impact the lives of others. Inspire our every day so that we may come closer to You each day. Teach us to ask the right questions so that we may learn to build our better selves one step at a time, and help us find those answers in your Torah and throughout the world of Your creation. May Your wisdom guide us each day, henceforth and forever, so that we may merit your greatest blessing, the blessing of peace, as it is written, “דַּרְכֵיךָ דַרְכֵי נֵעַם וְכָל נְתִיבוֹתֶיךָ שְׁלוֹם” its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are paths of peace.”²⁶

²⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rumi>.

²⁵ Ecclesiastes 9:7.

²⁶ Proverbs 3:17.