

THE REAL QUESTION

ROSH HASHANAH 5776/2015

[The rabbi steps to the podium. Whispers are heard throughout the congregation... *"What will the rabbi speak about?" "What's he going to say this year? "How will our lives be changed?" "What is the great wisdom he is about to utter?"* A hush falls on the crowd, as the rabbi begins...]

To be or not to be.... that is the question. [*"Oy gevalt. OK..."* The crowd settles in... *"who couldn't use an extra few minutes of nap time?"*]

It's true sermons are great for everyone: some people are greatly inspired, and some wake up greatly refreshed.

So... To be or not to be. Yes, we are all faced with the existential question... what are our lives about? And yes, it is true not only for each of us, but for all of us... collectively.

So nu... Chadeish Yameinu Jewish Renewal Community of Santa Cruz.... you've turned 21. You've grown up! Congratulations.... But the question is: now what? Where do you go from here? Oh yes, you had your first legal drink, back at our 21st birthday party a few weeks ago. But then what? Doesn't 21 represent something more than that? Why is it at that symbolic age you are now allowed to drink in the first place? Isn't it because you are now considered responsible enough to deal with the consequences of your choices? Isn't it because along with all the fun, along with the privilege, comes a responsibility?

But what is this responsibility? Put in religious terms, what does G-d want from us? Our fundamentalist friends, from every religion, always seem to know just what G-d does and doesn't like.... what G-d does and doesn't approve of – about YOUR behavior. And surprise! It usually happens to align with their political and social world view!

But what *does* G-d want from us? Isn't there something in our tradition to guide us in aligning our choices, our actions with our values?

Well, dear friends, I am about to reveal to you everything you will ever need to know. That's right, for the mere price of staying awake during my sermon, you will hear NOTHING LESS THAN THE TRUE SECRET OF LIFE.

There are so many stories and jokes told of the seeker who climbs high up the mountains of the Himalayas in search of a guru who will reveal the great mystery of life. But is there something guide the rest of us? Where can we go to find the ultimate answer?

Google, of course! My search of the term "Secret of Life" revealed no end of entries from the sublime to the ridiculous.¹

One of my favorites is from the renowned author, **Paulo Coelho**. "The secret of life is to fall seven times and to get up eight times."

And how about this one: "The secret of life is honesty and fair dealing. If you can fake that, you've got it made!" **Groucho Marx**

From the teacher **Alan Watts**: "This is the real secret of life - to be completely engaged with what you are doing in the here and now."

And perhaps the most Jewish of all, from the author of "Alice in Wonderland," **Lewis Carroll**: One of the deep secrets of life is that all that is really worth doing is what we do for others.

When I find myself uncertain how to live my life in the face of all that is so overwhelming, (*"When I find myself in times of trouble, mother Marian comes to me..."*) I remember the example of my dear mother, an activist even in the face of a life-threatening illness. She wrote:

"Alas, if only we knew what the secret of life is!!

Is it in being content with your lot in life no matter what? Is it in the appreciation of the beauty of the world around you? The birds, the trees... children playing and laughing...?

Maybe it is in knowing when to say "yes" and when to say "no," and in taking time to enjoy the activities we always say we do not have time for.

Maybe it is in appreciating the friendship of those around us and the love of our family."

And she continued,

"... In soul searching, I found the secret: **Love, Hope, Faith!**

Love to support you in your endeavors both emotional and physical. Loving others and G-d and feeling that love returned.

Hope, the never ending hope. Hope to survive your devastating disease. Hope to wake up to a new morn...

¹ www.verybestquotes.com

Hope in all of its entirety and above all

Faith - faith in one's G-d that helps us through each trial day and gives us renewed hope and renewed love and renewed hope and therefore we come full circle in the Secret of Life."

Our great 20th century teacher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: "To be or not to be - is not the question. The vital question is: how to be and how not to be?"² He taught that G-d speaks to us in the form of a question... how we live our lives is our answer.

We are indeed fortunate that our tradition is rich in guiding us on this. In the weeks leading up to the New Year, the Torah in the portion called *Ekev* explicitly asks, "And now, O Israel, what does the Eternal Spirit, your G-d, ask of you?"³ And then the Torah explicitly answers. "Only - to revere Eternal Spirit, your G-d... and to love and devote yourself....with all your heart and soul."⁴

That's it. To revere and to love.

The renowned teacher Nechama Leibowitz taught⁵ that this passage contains the essence of the whole Torah... the statement of the will of G-d. To revere and to love.

But for me, the real secret is in a verse that follows:
For * your G-d is the Power of all powers and the Lord of all lords, the great, mighty and awesome G-d....⁶

This description, which has made its way into our prayers, into the Amidah which we have just recited and by tradition which we say three times a day.... *Ha-El Hagadol Hagibor v'hanora....* The Power of all powers! The great, mighty and awesome G-d. But, as we learn from the Wizard of Oz, "Great & Powerful" can sometimes be an illusion.

REVEAL TO ME.... I say... reveal to me the Truth of this mighty Power of all powers to which the Torah refers.

Is it the power over life and death?
Is it the power to bring down nations?
Is it the power to reverse nature, to do the super-natural?

2 "No Religion is an Island," p. 264.

3 Deut. 10:11.

4 Deut. 10:12.

5 Studies in Devarim (Deuteronomy), Ekev ch. 3, p. 98.

6 Deut. 10:17.

No... in the very next verse we read just what this mighty power is:

G-d's Power is in doing justice for the orphan and the widow,
in loving the stranger - to give him bread and clothing.⁷
And you shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.⁸

To love and care for the vulnerable.
This is G-d's great power. What a great teaching. What a model for us on what
real power is, for how to live our lives.

And so, it actually is easy to know what G-d wants from us. To care for
those in need, to give bread to the hungry.

This year, we at Chadeish Yameinu are taking on this important mitzvah.
We are committing to monthly joining in an interfaith endeavor to provide meals
to the homeless – on the third Sunday of every month, beginning just one week
from today. Lynn LeRose and Rose Ashford, along with our newly formed Tikun
Olam Committee, are spearheading this, and there are flyers in the back of the
room with more information on how you can get involved in helping.

Perhaps this is indeed what G-d wants from us. And yet, am I not, like our
fundamentalist cousins, telling you just what G-d wants from you? Perhaps this is
only what I want. I can say this, however. This is how I understand our tradition.
And this is the way I want to understand and choose to respond to that Power,
that energy some of us call "G-d."

The Sages of the Talmud taught⁹ that everything is in the power of Heaven,
except whether a person will choose to revere Heaven. The word *Yirah*, to
revere, is often translated as fear, and often as awe. Both are correct. For there
are two levels of G-d-fearing. The higher is a sense of awe and reverence. The
second and lower is the visceral fear of punishment.

I can drive down the road calmly and safely, either because I see the red
lights of the cop car right behind me, or - because I sense being part of an order
that flourishes on caring for each other.

Indeed G-d does not demand from us some supreme standard, but rather
the fulfillment of doing the right thing in daily acts, "in the grey routine of our 24

⁷ Deut. 10:18.

⁸ Deut. 10:19.

⁹ Brachot 33b on Deut. 10:11.

hour living. And it is this which will gradually lead us to the higher plane of awe."¹⁰

In Psalm 111 we read: Yirat hashem, this fear, this awe of the Eternal... is the beginning of wisdom. And in Job¹¹, that it is, in fact, the essence of wisdom. It is the essence of wisdom to bring ourselves to a place of awe.

Coming to this place is not attained by contemplation, but by doing.¹² Yet when we think of all the issues that need our attention, all the worthy causes that vie for our limited time and energy and money, we can sometimes come to a place of near paralysis. Maybe we don't even bother because it's all so overwhelming. Again, our sages have shared their good counsel. *Lo aylecha hamlacha ligmor....* It is not incumbent upon us to do it all... but neither are we excused from joining in the endeavor. Just step in. One mitzvah at a time.

So... what is the Secret of Life? To be or not to be? No... Rather, it is how to be. That is the question.

And... how shall we live our lives? What does G-d want from us? Only this, to love and revere.

That is the question... and the answer.

10 Leibowitz, p. 101, citing Albo.

11 ch. 28.

12 Leibowitz, p. 102, citing Albo.