QUESTIONING AS AN ARTICLE OF FAITH
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A Yeshiva student came to his teacher Reb Moshe and asked: "Why do Jews always answer with a question? And Reb Moshe replies, "Why not?"

That joke has many versions, the other one "A man asks a rabbi: "Why do Jews always answer a question with a question?" The rabbi answers: "Do we?"

We Jews are a strange people. We spend more time asking questions than we do affirming our faith by answering them.

You may recall from your high school or university philosophy class that Socrates (469-399 B.C.E.), the great Greek philosopher and mentor of Plato, was also in the habit of asking disconcerting and probing questions. To this day, persistent questioning in search of clarity is known as the Socratic method. For this habit, among other things, Socrates was put on trial by the Athenians, accused of 'corrupting the young,' and sentenced to death. Nothing could be less like Judaism, in which teaching the young to ask questions is an essential feature of what it means to be a Jew.

We love questions: from the four questions on Passover to the hundreds, if not thousands, of controversies in the Talmud. A collection of rabbinic works that by my count (I haven't really counted) has contains far more questions than answers.

This disparity has a rather simple explanation, more often than not, the questions we ask don't have answers, or at least they don't have simple answers. For every question we ask – there are three more that we formulate. Don't ask me why; that would be yet another question.

The importance of asking questions is literally central to the Torah and Judaism.

By the way, my children will tell you that I have a pet peeve; they are not allowed to use the world literally for something that is not written. Why they ask, that actually does have a clear answer; "literally" means something written, literally.

So, I use the term here quite intentionally, in this week's parasha Shemini which Yael will chant for us tomorrow morning, we come to **literally** the middle word of the entire Torah: דרש.[1]

The root word darash means to question. Other related meanings include: inquiry, research, investigate, and study.

[1] According to the Masoretes, the middle word in Torah is "דָּרֹשׁ," which is found in Leviticus 10:16

I need to note that many scholars question this particular method of counting by the Masoretes that arrives at the middle word, there are other opinions and methods that point to other words. Imagine that multiple Jews with multiple opinions about the same question, but that's for another sermon.

Does it matter whether a word is exactly at the center of Torah? Does it give that word extra luster? Good questions. We are taught that every one of the 79,976 words in the Torah is there for a specific purpose, that each letter represents a Jewish soul; so I think it does but it's a valid question. There are many.

This literally central word darash in our text it is proceeded by the word *darosh,* so that we read — *darosh darash*.

The words are found in the verse (Lev 10:16)

"Then Moses **inquired** about the goat of sin offering, and it had already been burned! He was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron's remaining sons, and said, "

When words are doubled in Torah, like the famous call from the angel to Abraham when he is about to sacrifice his son Issac, Avraham, Avraham! This word play of *darosh darash* adds an extra layer of meaning.

People turn to religion seeking different things. They come seeking comfort, solace, guidance, but most of all they come seeking answers to the "big questions" in life. Where do we come from? What is the meaning of life? What happens when we die? Is there life after death? Why do bad things happen to good people? Where is God? We assume that religion is supposed to answer these questions. And if religion is the answer, then rabbis, priests and ministers are supposed to be the experts.

My colleague Rabbi Mark Greenspan, who's own sermon on this subject heavily influenced mine writes, "The truth is, faith doesn't answer these questions. It teaches us how to live in a world without answers. Faith is a willingness to defer the answers because we believe that the answers are there even if we don't know them or can't completely comprehend them. If we knew all the answers it wouldn't be faith, would it?"

The thing I love about this week's Torah portion is that it has so many unanswered questions. In the opening part of our Parshah, we read about the death of the two sons of the high priest Aaron, Nadav and Avihu. On what should have been a joyous day, these two young men are mysteriously incinerated by a divine fire. What did they do to deserve such a horrific death? Yael is going to teach us about that tomorrow in her drash so I will save it for her, except to say that the sages were not of one mind regarding this tragedy.

Some believed they committed some unforgivable sin while others argued that they died because they were overcome by religious fervor; another reasoned they must have been drunk.

Whatever the reason for their deaths, the explanation does not minimize the terrible tragedy for Aaron and his brother Moses. In the end we might be able to explain **how** such tragedy took place but not **why**. That is why Aaron responds to the death of his sons with silence. *Vayidom Aharon* we read after they are killed, "and Aaron was silent" Some questions are best left unanswered.

How often have you found yourself confounded by silence in the face of tragedy and human suffering? You make a shiva call and standing before the mourner you don't know what to say. Words are not necessary at that moment. There are no answers to the unspoken questions. What is called for is a hug, a caring glance, or simply sitting silently beside the mourner. What is called for is not our answers but our presence.

The second half of our Torah portion, the part Yael is not teaching about tomorrow also provides us with difficult questions. Rabbi Greenspan framed them this way:

"We read about the laws of kashrut, the laws of permitted and prohibited animals. Throughout history scholars have sought to explain these laws without much success. Moses Maimonides in the 12th century argued that the laws of permitted and prohibited food had to do with hygiene and health.

Two centuries later Don Isaac Abarbanel rejected the idea that the main reason for the various prohibitions is to protect out physical well-being. He pointed out that non-Jews eat the prohibited animals without any detrimental effects whatsoever. He also argued that there were numerous plant species that are exceedingly harmful which the Torah does not mention at all.

So, who was correct? The truth is there is no correct answer to this question. The laws of prohibited and permitted animals in Torah fall into the category of chukkim, or statutes. These are laws for which there is simply no explanation. We accept them on faith; we do them simply because we're commanded to do so. No matter how logical we are, there are certain things in life we do – simply because we do them. We can ask the questions but sometimes the answer is not so apparent to us."

What we learn from Judaism in general and Parshat Shemini in particular, is that life is filled with questions and that is perfectly Ok. There is nothing wrong with asking the questions or seeking answers to these difficult questions. And there is nothing wrong with learning to live with doubt.

Gregg, Yael's dad is a Talmudic scholar, so is Rabbi Brown – they are literarily (but not literally) a Jewish Power Couple. If you study Talmud with either of them they will explain that in Jewish rabbinic tradition of text study there is a term for not knowing the ultimate answer, for living with doubt. The term is: teiku.

Teiku is Aramaic for "Let it stand." When a question is raised in the Talmud for which there is no solution, the sages would say "Let it stand." We don't have to answer this question right now.

We can live with the doubt. The sages interpreted this word as an acrostic for Tishbi Yitaretz Kushiot U'Baayot, "Elijah the prophet will solve all our unanswered questions." Elijah is believed to be the forerunner of the Messiah, so what we say is – don't worry, eventually you will get an answer to your question.

Parshat Shemini, teaches us to question and through its unanswerable questions it also teaches us humility.

Because we can't possibly know all the answers or solve all the problems of the world, we must have the humility to say "maybe I am wrong;" the humility to listen to other people; to recognize that there may be more than one answer to any question; and that we live in a world of uncertainty.

Finally, Parshat Shemini teaches us that questions do not weaken our faith; they strengthen it. Rabbi Baruch of Medzebezh said: "To attain the truth, a person must pass through forty-nine gates, each opening with a new question. In the end he will arrive at the last gate, the last question, beyond which he cannot live without faith."

Darash. Asking questions. Digging for answers. Going below the surface. One word means all of these things. It's central place — literally — in the Torah, certainly lets us know its importance.

The word midrash comes from this root. And what is midrash if not attempt to answer questions about the Torah?

When we interpret the Torah, we call it a d'rash — we ask a question about Torah and d'rash — explain — the meaning.

And when we communicate with each other, we must think in terms of d'rash — asking. Then we listen.

One of the things I love about being a parent, about being a rabbi, about working with students like Yael is that children are filled with questions. Too many adults have lost our sense of wonder and curiosity. We have falsely convinced ourselves that we have all the answers that we need to get by in life. Nothing could be farther from the truth. By asking questions, we can pass through the gates of truth and slowly come closer to the true meaning of faith.

After all, faith does not begin until we are willing to ask a question.

This concept lies at the center of Torah. May we place it at the center of our hearts. Literally, figuratively and most important of all - frequently.

Acknowledgements: This sermon drew heavily from the following – *b'shem omro*

- Religion without Answers – by Mark Greenspan
- Shemini and Inquiry – by Shaina Bacharach