

"WHY?"

In the course of his work, a rabbi has many kinds of questions directed at him. I am no exception, and in my career I have been confronted with a startling variety of questions. Most of them, I have learned, fit into three categories, which I call: What, Why not, and Why.

"What?," is a straightforward quest for information and understanding: What is the meaning of this or that verse? What is the attitude of Judaism to this or that modern problem? What is it permitted to eat and what is not permitted? What may I do on Shabbat and what may I not do on Shabbat?

I like that kind of question, and I enjoy providing an answer for it. The whole process is called Talmud Torah. Perhaps this is the meaning of what Moses said: וְהָאֵלֹהִים  
שֶׁאֵלֵךְ , "What does the Lord your God ask of you?" (Deut. 10:12). The Lord your God demands of you that you ask וְהָאֵלֹהִים , "What," and thereby increase your understanding of Torah, and advance in your knowledge of God.

"Why not?," is an altogether different kind of question. For instance: Why may I not travel in a car on Shabbat? Why not trust any "Kosher" sign above a butcher shop? Why am I not permitted to do whatever I wish?

I dislike this kind of question. It is usually an impatient rejection of all inhibitions and restrictions, with the implied assumption that total permissiveness is good, and that all discipline is no good except if you can find good reason for it. It is simply an adult version of a little boy whining, "Why not?," when told that he may not cross in the middle of the street or play with fire.

"Why?," is most troubling, especially when it is applied to that most fundamental problem: suffering and evil. I do not refer to the self-pitying question, "Why did God do this to me?," when articulated by a person to whom it never occurred to ask the same question when he was basking in good fortune. I mean the very fundamental, "Why?," when asked by people of sensitivity and profundity as they contemplate the anguish and the pain that abound in the world.

To the first question, the "What," I try hard to find an answer, and it is fairly simple. I generally try to avoid the second question, "Why not," unless I feel it is a genuine quest

for knowledge. The third question, "Why," is the most distressing and most real of all. How can you answer it? And how can you not try to answer it?

I never pretend to discern the Divine Will or make excuses for G-d. That is somewhat silly as well as moot. I usually recommend an approach based upon the interpretation by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch of a verse by David in the Psalms, *למה עזבתני*, "My G-d, My G-d, why did You forsake me?" Hirsch makes the point that David is not simply calling G-d to task, as it were, demanding that G-d give a good account of His actions and submit to David's judgment. He does not say, *מדוע*, what is the reason for Your forsaking me, but: *למה*, which is related to *למה*, which means, "Wherefore?", or, "for what purpose?" David was saying to G-d: I accept whatever suffering and anguish You choose to visit upon me. I know that You must have a reason, and that as a just G-d You would not make me suffer unnecessarily. But what can I do with all this suffering? How shall I make use of it in enhancing my life and the lives of others? So, we may never be able to learn the reason for suffering, but we may pray that we discover the purpose of suffering: greater sensitivity, more compassion, increased wisdom, or the use of suffering as a building block to construct a more sober and profound view of life.

These three categories exhaust most but not all of the kinds of questions which we hear concerning Judaism. In our Sidra this morning we read a different kind of question, this time by Moses, and it is apparently a challenge to G-d. Moses had gone on his first mission to Pharaoh to demand the liberation of the Hebrew slaves. Pharaoh reacted as one would expect of him: he dismissed Moses and Aaron as alien interlopers and mere troublemakers, and not only did he refuse to emancipate the Jews, but he made conditions far worse for them. As a result, the Israelites themselves were furious with Moses and Aaron, and rejected them completely. Whereupon, Moses turned to G-d and twice questioned Him: *למה הרעותה לי עם הזה*, "Why did You bring misfortune upon this people?" *למה זה שלחתני*, "Why did You send me?"

The rabbis were somewhat taken aback at this harshness and apparent presumptuousness of Moses. Thus, the Talmud indirectly refers to it as the *עלות* (arrogance) of a rich man. Nachmanides, in a comment on a similar question later on, refers to it as *חטא*, sin. Certainly, it was most unusual.

This double question of Moses belies what is often said, that "for a believer there are no questions, for a non-believer there are no answers." Not so! I prefer to think that a non-believer has no questions, but only answers -- he knows that life has no meaning, or whatever piddling meaning it does have -- and that is why he never attains true belief. A true believer does have questions -- belief means living in the great tension of unanswerable questions -- and that is why he believes. Witness Abraham who presented G-d with The great question *השופט כל*, "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?"

And here, in our Sidra, Moses questions G-d twice, *למה* and *למה* !

How shall we understand this sharp questioning by Moses? It does not seem to fit neatly into any previous categories.

Of course, we can easily depict Moses as a dramatic figure, indulging in a heroic gesture, taking on G-d, as it were, on behalf of Israel, and shaking his fist at Heaven. But Moses, as he appears to me from Scripture, is not a man of gestures and sham heroism. He is not identical with the material he seems to provide for playwrights and writers and novelists.

I am most impressed by a less dramatic but more profound interpretation offered by Rabbi Shmuel, the Slonimer Rebbe. According to this interpretation, the second question explains the first, and the total is a confession, not a challenge.

Thus, Moses asks: *למה הרעיתם לעם הזה*, "Why did You bring misfortune on this people?" And then he waits a moment, and something dawns upon him, and he is aware of the fact that it is not G-d who brought evil upon the people but rather that it is Moses himself who is responsible! And so he turns to G-d and says, *למה זה שלחתי*, "Why did You send me?" It is I as the *שליח*, the messenger, who has failed! Had I done my task properly, I could have averted this tragedy. Hence, it is not G-d's fault and not Israel's fault, but that of the *שליח* or emissary. I, the Jewish leader, am responsible.

Moses is here confessing to a collapse of leadership. He does not blame everyone or anyone else, only himself. As a *שליח*, as a leader of his people, he failed in some important aspect of his work.

If there ever was a time when leadership has failed, it is our day. It is true internationally, throughout the world. We in America have sustained a disastrous failure of leadership, and G-d only knows whether the new leadership is much superior. Israel has undergone a convulsion of leadership change, as the people rejected the leaders of charisma, and now complain that their leaders are totally anti-charismatic. We in the American Jewish community are suffering on appalling weakness in leadership.

Regretfully, I must come back to an issue that I discussed from this pulpit two weeks ago. I refer to the scandal that has been filling the pages of our daily press, climbing from the back pages to page one.

If I repeat my position, it is for two reasons: because of the importance of the problem, and because I seem to have been misunderstood last time.

Let me therefore make it clear that I am offering a balanced view, which means that I want to proceed rationally, and be understood rationally.

I do not believe in trial by newspaper. Not every word that is printed is the absolute truth. There must not be guilt by association or guilt by rumor. Not everyone who is accused is necessarily guilty, even as not everyone who will be officially exonerated and legally acquitted is necessarily innocent.

We hear too many unfounded accusations. People say, "Where there is smoke there is fire." Maybe, but sometimes the fire is that of incense...The Rabbis said: *וְאִין בִּי שְׁחוּטָא דְּבִי וְאִין בִּי שְׁחוּטָא דְּבִי*, "May my lot be with him who is suspected but is not guilty." Bear in mind that it is no less a figure than Moses who was suspected, both according to the Bible and the Midrash, of being both a horse-thief and an adulterer!

I by no means wish to compare anyone, *לְהַנְדִּיל*, with Moses. I just want to plea for caution before bandying about names and assuming guilt without sufficient evidence.

That having been said, the pain and the anger is no less. When I survey the awesome Hillul Hashem caused by recent revelations, the besmirchment of the good name of the Jewish community, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox, from the largest national and international Jewish organizations down, both those which have received publicity and those which have not yet received publicity, both the facts that are known and those that will yet be revealed, I feel like turning to Heaven and crying out *לָמָּה הִרְעִיתָהּ לָעַם הַזֶּה*, "O G-d, who needed this misfortune at such a critical time in our history?!"

But then I pause, and I realize in all candor: *לָמָּה זֶה שְׁלַחְתָּ*. Why have You sent me? We have failed somewhere along the line -- not the scoundrels who have brought this calamity upon us, but the rest of us who were silent while the greatest prestige of the Jewish community was bought and sold, usually for pittance! *לָמָּה זֶה שְׁלַחְתָּ* -- we have failed in our *שְׁלִיחוּת*, in our mission.

It is fatuous to speak of being on the brink of a new age, with a surge of individual morality. Immorality will always exist. Corruption will always be present as long as there is temptation.

But never again dare we be so casual about the qualifications of Jewish leadership. We must be much more circumspect about the ethical and moral credentials of those who aspire to the highest positions of the Jewish community. Not being legally guilty does not qualify one for communal leadership.

I have my own confession to make, after the manner of Moses' *לָמָּה זֶה שְׁלַחְתָּ*.

I and a number of respected colleagues and friends knew a long time ago the ill-repute of one such person. And we did not do enough about it!



True, I have personally refused all this time officially to affiliate with a certain organization which has a distinguished past and with which I am in ideological sympathy.

True, a few years ago some colleagues and friends and I made an effort to oust this person and introduce a new administration, and thus feel that our consciences permit us to join.

True, we tried and we failed.

True, if I had said explicitly what everyone knew, I might have been open to libel suits, I certainly would have faced the derision of sophisticates, and I did not have clear proof that could stand up in court. I still don't!

And yet I say *אולי כן*, as people who consider leadership a trust and a mission, we should have protested more vigorously, we should have fought harder instead of simply staying out. Maybe it would not have been any more effective, but it would have cleared the air.

But before anyone jumps on the band-wagon of condemnation of many worthy organizations and wonderful members of such organizations who have had their confidence betrayed, let me be a spoil-sport. The right to criticize any of these community organizations, Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike, is not open to everyone. The right to assume a self-righteous and morally superior stance is reserved for very few indeed.

Remember: an organization, like an individual, has an instinct for survival. To survive, an organization needs two things: people who will give it time and effort, and people who will give it funds. Without either, it will disappear and die.

So, those who have time and again indicated that they have no time for community organizations; who are too busy with bridge or tennis or occasional courses; those people, especially women, who even felt somewhat superior because they were not involved in mere organizations -- such people have no moral right to complain when organizations fall into the wrong hands. It is because they were not there that those leaders who were clean could not fight strongly enough and protest loudly enough, because they knew that they had no volunteer constituency to fall back on!

And those who fail to support and contribute do not have the credentials for self-righteous reproach against such organizations. Of course, a large contribution to an institution is never enough reason for it to tolerate immorality! Certainly it is detestable if Jewish organizations sell out to someone who buys his way into leadership, exploiting its prestige and using it as a cover for his other activities. But if those

people who can give, do not; if people who have progressed rapidly in their income over the last several years continue to contribute the pittance<sup>s</sup> that were characteristic of their early income -- or not at all!, then they are the ones who are creating the temptation to accept tainted money.

All of us share in this Hillul Hashem: leaders who did not try hard enough to protest, and not loudly enough; those who could have contributed time and effort, and did not and do not; those who should have supported more generously, and did not and do not.

All of us must accept blame, as did Moses: למה זה שחטג' .  
In this sense, all of us are implicated in למה הרעותי לעם הזה,  
the ill-fortune that has befallen us.

What will be the result of this unhappy development?

Of course, it is not good for our reputation and for our cause. But if we are careful and circumspect and intelligent and resourceful, this can be the beginning of a new era, one in which new and higher and more honourable standards of leadership will prevail.

To Moses' question, G-d answered: This is all a preliminary to redemption and Kiddush Hashem.

If we learn our lessons well, if we act with resolve and determination, with vigor and sensitivity, all of this will serve as a catharsis and we will emerge with new honor, one which will make us worthy of redemption.