

### QUESTIONS FOR TOMORROW

For my theme of this morning I turn not to those urgent themes which so excite us and have seemingly monopolized our attention of late, but to a matter that is more timeless than timely and which, in the final analysis and in the long run, may be more consequential to our survival and the quality of that survival. I refer to the question of religious doubts, especially by youth.

The problem, is, of course, not limited to the young. It afflicts people of all ages. I have known men and women who had a good Jewish education in their youth, even an advanced Jewish schooling, and who had begun to build good Jewish homes -- and who, either in their middle years or later, suddenly turned away and abandoned the entire Jewish enterprise. And I have known Jews who were alienated, who had not the remotest idea of what it means to be a Jew, and who were inspired by someone or something to turn to Judaism as the source of their very being, and whose teshuvah is a model and an inspiration for all of us. Moreover, I consider emunah (faith) as something which is constantly open to challenge and reaffirmation. Who amongst us is so strong that no cloud of doubt has ever wafted across the horizon of his mind? And who is so callous that he has never experienced the sudden awareness of the absurdity of kefirah (denial), the meaninglessness of a life without God and without Torah, that he has never doubted his own doubts? For most of us, then, faith is not static, but is in flux and in tension.

Yet, by the time we are mature, the majority of us are more or less fixed in our basic affirmations and orientations. We may assume that the worst period is over, and our directions are clear. But for young people, this period can be one of sheer agony. This is the time when a young person begins to evaluate critically and decide whether to appropriate the ideas and values of his elders as his own. It is therefore a time of shifting, of displacement, in the development of personality. It can come during high school or college or in the post-graduate years; it can last a day or a month or a year or a few years; it can cause mild discomfort or shake a person to the core of his being, and prove a noble torment and an exquisite anguish.

In normal religious counseling, I speak to people person-to-person, and address their individual problems on the basis of their own singularity. But is there any general advice that can be offered to people on how to cope with such situations? I believe there is, and I would like to offer four guidelines.

The first thing I would say to a young person undergoing this experience, is: you are not alone. Almost every intelligent religious person has gone through it in one way or another, in greater or less in measure. If they are sensitive -- and the experience itself is one that sensitizes people -- then they sympathize with and understand you, and if you are truly engaged in בְּקֵשׁ אֱמֶת (the search for truth), then they are confident that you will arrive safely in the harbor of faith after traversing the stormy seas of safek (doubt).

Second, there is nothing shameful about this spirit of confusion. It is a necessary part of spiritual growth, of developing a firm and enlightened emunah. A thousand years ago, the great Sage of Sura, Rabbi Saadia Gaon, taught that the very process of cognition or learning was in reality a successive and sequential conquest of doubts. The doubts may have no inherent value, but unless questions are raised, there is no way to expand your knowledge and education. What Saadia said about knowledge holds true for faith as well.

I wish to take my third and fourth points together, and explain them by reference to our Sidra.

At the very-end of our Torah reading, we are told ב' ישאגל בנך מחר, "If your son will ask you tomorrow, what is this all about?" then you shall answer him that the Lord took us out of Egypt with a strong hand. We all recognize that verse, that question and answer, from the description of the Four Sons by the author of the Haggadah -- the Hakham (Wise Son), the Rasha (Wicked Son), Tam (the so-called Simple Son), and the She'eino yodeia li'sheol (the Son who is not even intelligent enough even to ask a question). This verse is interpreted by the author of the Haggadah as the question of the Tam.

However, the verse is not entirely clear. For one, why the word מחר, "tomorrow?" Why put off the question for tomorrow? Furthermore, I confess that I myself have been so influenced by the interpretation of the author of the Haggadah, that it was only recently that it dawned upon me that the entire verse is not even talking about Passover! The whole context of the exchange is the law of pidyon ha-ben, the redemption by a father of his first-born by paying a certain amount to the Kohen.

I was perplexed and searched the commentaries for an answer. The solution I now offer is largely based on that of the כ"י יקר.

This commentator sharpens the problem: Of the Four Sons, two of them are referred to by the Torah as asking the question מחר, tomorrow. One is the Tam, and the other is the Hakham, the Wise Son (in the portion ואתחנן). The other two do not have the term "tomorrow" mentioned with regard to them and, on the contrary, concerning one of them we read that it specifically takes place on the same day! -- והגדת לבנך ביום ההוא.

How do we account for this difference?

The Wise Son asks questions. No doubt, he has his doubts too. He asks מה ... מה הקדוה והתקין והמצטטים. What is the meaning of all these laws? He wants to know the טעמי המצוות, the reason for the commandments. He wants his faith and his practice to be enlightened, intelligent. But -- he is wise enough to postpone his questions to מחר, tomorrow. He knows that now, while the Seder, the service of God, is going on, it is time to restrain himself. He holds off all questions. He will not allow his questions to interfere with his practice! Of course he has questions. But he will ask them after he performs the mitzvah itself.

A story is told of a well known German-Jewish scholar who came to a city of Eastern Europe to deliver a lecture on the theme, "Some Existential Consequences of an Ontological Analysis of the Metaphysics of Prayer." While the professor was well into the substance of his profound and recondite lecture, he noticed that his audience began to evaporate, until almost no one was left. He felt deeply offended, and later asked one of those who left why everyone thought so little of the product of his research. "No," came the answer, "we thought your lecture was fine." "Then why did you all leave?" "Very simple," the man answered, "it was time for minhah, and so we all left in order to daven..."

So too the Wise Son knows there is a time to discuss prayer, and a time to pray; a time to perform the commandments, and a time to ponder their meaning and question their value.

So, while the Son who cannot even ask must be taught how to ask, and one cannot wait with him for tomorrow lest he forget; and while the Wicked Son specifically

wishes to ask immediately in order not to have to practice; the Wise Son separates the המצוות, the actual living out of the law of the Torah, from his questions and doubts, and puts them off to מחר, tomorrow.

So, the third point I am making is this: Do not abandon the commandments or prayer or the study of Torah at the first -- or even the second or fifth or tenth -- sign of doubt. Live Torah today; there is always time to question tomorrow.

I know that this is not a permanent solution, and it cannot last forever. If, Heaven forbid, doubts harden into denial, the collapse of Jewish life will follow for that person. But it need not last too long. As long as they are only doubts, terrible as they may be, do not give up the mitzvot! They are so easy to lose, so hard to rediscover; so simple to abandon, so difficult to relearn. Wait, and your doubts may well be resolved before long.

Do not be afraid to live in the tension of doubt versus affirmation, and of unresolved uncertainties. It is a sign of genuine maturity. Only children become impetuous and allow their lives to be wracked by zig-zags reflecting every twist and turn in their mental and emotional states, and come to fateful decisions when dealing with the great issues of life without patience and further reflection.

If you are truly a Hakham, a wise young man or woman, wait! Perform the avodat Hashem, the service of the Lord, and separate it from שאלות, from your questions. Not that you will not or should not question. Do so! And do not hide them, but discuss them openly -- with your Rabbi or teacher or parent or elder or friend, or anyone who can give you intelligent and authoritative advice. But don't mix realms, do not cross over the boundary into practice so that every question is immediately transformed into a transgression. Thereby you will be translating every doubt into a denial. That is what I mean by postponing the questions for tomorrow: not a chronological postponement, but a separation of the realm of theory and practice until you have had time to delve into the question and search for the answer intelligently and patiently.

My fourth point deals with the Tam, usually called the Simple Son. The תורה explains why the Tam too postpones the question to tomorrow, and why the Torah places his question in the context of the redemption of the first-born, and not of Passover. The reason is: there is an expense involved in this mitzvah -- the father must pay five silver pieces to the Kohen. The Tam, knowing this, does not want anyone else, or even himself, to suspect that there are base motives to his questioning, as if all his questions were merely a cover-up for a fundamental stinginess! If he has to go to an expense in order to perform a commandment, he will do so, and wait for מחר, tomorrow, to ask his מה זה? ("what is it all about?"). He will not compromise his integrity by associating his question with his expenses. His question is authentic, and he will not permit the context of pecuniary obligation or inconvenience to undo this authenticity.

In that case, the Tam emerges not as a Simple Son, or בן טיפא as the Jerusalem Talmud calls him. Rather, instead of being the fool as compared to the Wise Son, he is the Zaddik or righteous son as opposed to the Wicked Son! (Thus too, Jacob is referred to as איש תם, a whole or perfect man; we are commanded תמים תהיה עם ה' אלהיך, "You shall be whole with the Lord your God"; and even God Himself is referred to as האלהים תמים דרכו in II Samuel 22:31.) Maybe the Tam is not as learned as the Wise Son, but he possesses a healthy intuition, a marvelous integrity, a sense of justice and rightness, and he is acutely sensitive to the intrusion of self-interest and egotism into his religious quest.



This is an important point. I have seen the corruption of what is otherwise a legitimate question when it is asked ביום ההוא, on the same day, instead of מחר, tomorrow; then it is clear to me that it is asked in order to avoid the expense of pidyon ha-ben -- or any other mitzvah. You ask a man to support the mikveh, and suddenly he becomes a theologian and doubts its validity as a contemporary religious practice; or he plays the sociologist, and by extrapolating statistics, doubts whether it is sufficiently popular to be viable today. You approach him to support a yeshiva or day school, and he turns on his political philosophy, explaining that he believes in the public school system, or his children are not old enough to attend the school, or they are already past school age. You approach him for a synagogue, and he has complaints -- all, of course, of a disinterested nature; and he invents other rationalizations for U.J.A. and Bonds. The Tam is quite right when he will not ask his question today, but wait for tomorrow. He knows the nature of man.

What the Tam teaches young people, therefore, is to examine and question themselves as to the nature of their questions: to make sure that they are not unconsciously permitting their questions or doubts to become merely a rationalization for their יצר הרע, for their desire to throw off the discipline of Torah and its moral restraints.

The Tam reminds us that even our questions and doubts must themselves be תמימים: pure and selfless and noble, and must never be made to serve the personal interests of sex or money or career or convenience or power.

So, to summarize, I would say to a young man or woman in doubt that we have four words of advice:

\*Don't feel you are alone. Many of us have been through it and we feel with you.

\*It is part of your growth, and will leave you stronger in your faith.

\*Remember the Wise Son's principle of מחר, tomorrow: while involved in questing and questioning, do not for a moment give up in your practice of the commandments or in the fervor you bring to them.

\*Like the Tam, remember the principle וה"תם נק"ם מיה' ומישראל, you must always be and also appear clean and pure in the eyes of both God and man. Make sure your questions are sincere, and not a mask for unworthy ambitions.

Let us conclude the way the Sidra does. After recording the answer to the Tam, the Sidra ends with the law of tefillin: והיה לנצחית על ידכה  
ולמוטפות בין עיניך כי בחוזק יד הוציאנו ה' ממצרים

"They shall be for a sign on your hand (the tefillin of the arm) and for frontlets between your eyes (the tefillin of the head), for with a strong hand did the Lord take us out of Egypt."

If we apply ourselves to our questions with strength and dignity and honor and purity, then with the help of the strong hand of the Lord, we will emerge unscathed and even strengthened from our personal agony of our individual Egypt.

And then we shall be whole -- in both thought and deed, in both mitzvot and emunah -- in the realm of practice (presented by the tefillin of the arm) and that of faith and emotions (symbolized by the tefillin of the head).