

CONGREGATION AGUDATH JACOB

DECEMBER 2024 HESHVAN/KISLEV 5785

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*From the Desk of
Rabbi Ben-Zion Lanxner*

Is it “Kosher” arguing with G-d?

Now that the Holy Days are behind us, the New Year 5785 is in front of us and we are all so grateful to G-d for having been forgiven for all our past misconduct, or transgressions.

The same way we were put “on trial” by G-d during this past month of Tishrei, I feel it would be acceptable and “Kosher” to ask some difficult questions to G-d, especially after having gone through such difficult 40 days of accountability or Cheshbon haNefesh before standing in Judgment in front of the Heavenly Court.

So, Holy Members of this Celestial Court, here are my opening remarks:

As you all know, G-d was frustrated by humanity, beings whom G-d created to rule creation who could not even rule themselves. G-d then selected Abraham as a moral and spiritual “role model” – someone who could show the world what it means to be a righteous person. Through Abraham, G-d would let human beings know what was expected of them. What happened next, though, may have come as a surprise even to G-d.

In last week's Torah portion (Vayera) G-d decided to trust Abraham, his “role model”, with some insider information – the plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. G-d asks, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham is to become a great and populous nation, and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him?” (Genesis 18:17-18). Maybe G-d thought that, given Abraham's mission to teach the world about G-d's ways, he needed to know about the plan to use Sodom as an

example of how not to behave. Yet, instead of accepting G-d's plan to punish Sodom, Abraham questioned it, argued and challenged G-d's own morality.

Abraham protested, "Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" (Genesis 18:25). Abraham turned the tables on G-d and told G-d that the plan did not measure up to G-d's own standards of justice. The story has a certain flavor of comeuppance. G-d is hoisted by the Divine petard. The very human being G-d designated to teach humanity how to rule over creation, almost inevitably, ended up trying to overrule G-d.

That may not be such a bad thing, though. Abraham is presented as the ideal man of faith, and faith is not understood by the Torah as mere blind obedience. To be truly faithful, one must be willing to question, to argue, to look deeply into the nature of morality and faith. Even G-d's actions should not be exempt from our consideration.

After all, G-d must have had a reason to create us. Maybe G-d put us here to keep G-d in line? Maybe G-d created us because G-d needs to have a friend who will speak up and let G-d know when things are going wrong? All of us need a friend like that once in a while. Why shouldn't God?

This, I believe, is one of the central defining qualities of the Jewish relationship with G-d. Maybe it is a quality that is unique to Judaism. To be a Jew is not just to obey G-d. It is not just to submit yourself to G-d. It is not just to accept G-d's rule. For Jews, that is not enough.

The G-d of Abraham expects us to know that we are not G-d, yet also expects us to rise above our human imperfection by engaging with G-d in a conversation about what it means to be human.

This ongoing, back and forth argument with G-d elevates us to a level beyond the limitations of flesh and blood, beyond our animal inclination toward violence, disobedience and arrogance.

For a Jew, it is no sin to argue with G-d. It is a necessity. It makes us G-d's partner and, paradoxically, it makes us G-d's trusted friend.

Having said that as my opening remarks, allow me now, *Ribono Shel Olam...Master of the World, My Dear G-d,*

It says in Your Torah, as you servant Moses delivering his farewell to Your People Israel, the One You chose to be Your Preferred Child... (Am Segulah miKol Ha'Amim).

"She'al Avicha veyageidecha, Zekeinecha, Veyomru lach"

"Ask your Father...your Elders....and they will tell you "

So, I ask questions. I have so many questions... especially now as a Rabbi shepherding your Holy flock (Your Kehillah Kedoshah).

I sometimes imagine getting an "open forum" with You my dear G-d, **Avinu ShebaShamayim**, my Heavenly Father, as would one of your favorite Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev addressed you that day when he took you to a "Din Torah", the Heavenly Beit Din, Your Own Heavenly Tribunal!

You remember, don't You? As he was making the case for your Chosen People in front of Your Heavenly Court, not understanding why? Why do they suffer so intensely in Your World...Why do they deserve this special attention? What did they do to You that was so wrong to deserve this kind of punishment? Because it looks to me as a punishment, doesn't it to You? Or is it?

So, as I said just a minute ago, I sometimes imagine getting an "Open Forum" with you...where I could ask You ANY QUESTIONS I WANT ...and receive an immediate answer.

That would truly be the "ultimate" life experience.

Now, don't get me wrong.

Niagara Falls, Yellow Stones, the Grand Canyon, witnessing childbirth, and sunrise in Jerusalem or at Masada, are mighty thrilling in their own right.

But for 25 minutes, "Fire away!" face-to-face with the Creator would probably be "It."

If I were to get 25 minutes to try to understand everything, nearly every one of my questions would begin with the same word -- **"Why?"**

I read the papers. And You know the stories all too well.

A nine-year old boy in Haifa watches his sister become crippled in a school bus explosion, and he wonders, "**Why?**"

A 27-year-old widow, now dependent on psychotropic and sleep medications, wakes up every morning tormented and asking, "**Why** did he have to go to work so early that horrible Tuesday morning?"

Too many orphans in Israel, Your Holy Land, whose parents were murdered in terrorist attacks, numb from shock, ask You, "**Why?**"

The three religious and observant Jews about a few years ago, (You can see that I keep a detailed diary of inexplicable and terrible occurrences that happen almost daily to Your people), a father and his two adult children on Kabbalat Shabbat, that Friday night, joyfully and full of reverence for Your Holy Shabbat, celebrating this traditional "Shalom Zachar" this wonderful ceremony of welcoming a new born baby boy into the fold, being butchered to death by this blood thirsty terrorist in this little town in Judea...."**Why**"?

Just about a year ago, on October 7, on the day of rejoicing in your Holy Torah, Simchat Torah 2023, the worst carnage since the Holocaust occurred so suddenly and so horrifically, where 1200 people were literally butchered, babies burned alive in ovens in front of their agonizing mothers, raped, killed and decapitated and over 250 hostages taken to those dark hidden tunnels, tortured and abused without air in "the depths of Hell" of this barbaric and monstrous Hamas inferno as **Mia Schem**, one of the hostages released from captivity after 55 days in last year's cease-fire deal shared her ordeal at a ceremony at the Israeli consulate in New York last a few days ago...."**Why**"?

Over 800 Israeli soldiers of the IDF had their lives taken away from their families leaving too many widows and orphans desperate, suffering and falling apart...**WHY?**

And in my own humble arrogance, today, October 29, 2024 as I am writing these words in tears, at the Yahrzeit of her passing, I am not yet done with You, Almighty G-d, You took my dearest daughter Tiferet Chaya ztz"l away from me, away from her 3 young children at the age of 40, much too prematurely, when she was the finest Jewish Role Model for not only her children but for thousands of students and their parents, a true Eshet Chayil, a Woman of such great Valor? Why? I just don't understand you G-d Almighty! Your Silence is deafening!!

Innocent citizens in civilized nations around the globe experience a kind of vague and persistent trepidation. They also turn to You and wonder, "**Why?**" and "*What will happen next?*"

And more recently so close to us, this horrendous disruption and displacement by so many people, this catastrophic devastation in the aftermath of hurricanes Milton, where so many lives were lost, **Why?**

We seem to be obsessed with the need to understand everything. We are driven to know. After all, You, made us this way.

But lately I've been detecting a certain degree of arrogance when I require an explanation for everything.

It becomes pretentious to expect that no experience or encounter be beyond my comprehension. I'm no different than most.

When illness, premature death or failure of any kind strikes near me or my loved ones, or any of my people, I don't hesitate to ask, "**Why?**"

And it doesn't take much, either. I've missed planes or busses by fractions and stood angrily at the bus stop and demanded an explanation from You!

And maybe there's nothing terribly wrong with that.

After all, shouldn't I attempt to see Your hand in everything that happens to me?

But something doesn't sit right with me anymore.

I think I need to reach a point...somewhere...where I accept that I am simply incapable of grasping every nuance of Your boundless inventions and intentions.

But that point is not easy to reach.

I'm a bit uncomfortable to admit that my aptitude falls short of being limitless, and that some of life's mysteries will remain just that.

I often forget the magnitude of Your wisdom, of your power, and infinite supremacy.

And that's dangerous. Because then I begin to accept only those things that I can understand.

You know how it goes: *"If it doesn't fit into my definition of rational thinking and purpose, I discard it."*

That's when my thoughts become preoccupied by the "**Why?**" question. That's when "faith" becomes a pariah.

It's confusing. In reality, You *want* me to question.

You *want* me to understand and to ask, "**Why?**"

Isn't that one of the signatures of Your People?

And so, I ask. But I'm not always privileged to be blessed with the insight I desire.

Frequently and lately I *"just don't get it."*

And so, I ask again...and again...and sometimes I'm still denied access to your Heavenly answer.

I am coming to realize that You have Your reasons.

I must believe that. And that's when faith...and a dash of humility must kick in. But You know what, it isn't easy.

And this is especially difficult when the incomprehensible is accompanied by pain -- sometimes a lot of pain, unbearable pain.

The crushing pain of parents burying children.

The pain of Holocaust survivors replacing years of triumph with sudden tragedy.

The pain of those who need so badly to cry, but have been drained of all their tears.

That is when our need to make sense of the senseless becomes paramount.

You certainly know that recent world events have left all of us stunned, questioning, and frightened.

Scores of leaders, authorities, and plain folk like me have beseeched You for the ability to comprehend unspeakable acts of global and personal catastrophe.

Countless terrorist's attacks, actually more than a year long war against Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis and all Iranian proxies in the middle east, life bombers... *"If only we could understand the reason, the plan, the ultimate purpose – then perhaps the pain could be ameliorated."* We're all asking, "**Why?**"

I am sure that among the millions of prayers You have been sifting through in the past month or so, many of them began with "**Why?**"

But maybe the recent overload of wanton acts that totally defy reason should really be compelling me to accept my vast limitations of comprehending Your ways.

So, this year, I decided to omit the "**Why?**" to my list of questions.

Perhaps my place is not to require an answer that I can appreciate.

I'll leave that to Your Higher Judgment.

Instead, I humbly substitute the word, "**Why**" with the word "**When?**" When a child asks his parent, "**When?**" instead of, "**Why?**" he's stating his confidence...his belief that the time will definitely come. The only real question is, "**When?**"

And so, as the New Year begins, I wonder:

- *When will the sirens finally end?*
-
- *When will we turn to You in complete and absolute confidence?*
-
- *When will the world recognize its ever-growing prejudices?*
-
- *When will our children go to sleep without fear?*
-
- *When will we put aside our petty habits and differences?*
-
- *When will we stop worshipping the holy dollar?*
-
- *When will the time come that we can wake up without "needing" 9/11's or October 7's ?*
- *When will the media recognize accomplishment more than destruction?*
- *When will we learn to be happy, to be loving, not critical; giving, not sarcastic?*

- *When will we stop labelling our brothers and sisters, because they have different opinions and aspirations than ours?*
-
- *When will we remember Nietzsche's simplicity: "Life is not an argument"?*
-
- *When will we stop asking, "Why?" as a prerequisite for acceptance?*
-
- *When the Messiah, Mashiach Ben David comes, will we stop asking questions?*
-
- *When?*

Dear G-d Almighty, Tatehnuh (as we say in Mame Loshen) I know You are near. I can feel it. I can almost touch it. I sense Your Holy Shechinah in this Makom Kaddosh.... But You know and You Hear, Your children are still crying.

We may not need to know, "Why?" But we do need to know, "When?"

Hopefully, G-d Willing as we always say, the answer will be, "Soon...very, very soon." Sooner than soon!

Ani Ma'amin Becha, Be'Emunah Sh'leimah!

I believe in You, Dear G-d, with absolute faith!

But G-d! YOUR PEOPLE IS READY.

I HOPE YOU ARE TOO.

Now G-d, it's Your turn. It's **SHOWTIME!**

Your Devoted and Humble Shepherd,

Rabbi Ben-Zion Lanxner

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Well, we have made it through the High Holy Days and all of the associated *yamim tovim* from *S'lichot* to *Simchat Torah*. As every year, it was a busy time for introspection and repentance, and G-d willing, we are now all inscribed for a sweet new year in 5785. Thank you to everyone who participated and contributed to all of our services and celebrations and other activities for the past almost two months.

We are in a bit of a restful period until the end of the calendar year. But a few things will be taking place, besides our regular weekly services. On Sunday, December 29th, we will have a Chanukah service and event, coinciding with our annual members meeting, at which we will review the state of the *shul*, including our financials, as well as vote on the Board nominations for the coming year. Once the details of the event are firmed up, information will go out to everyone, via the weekly announcements, the CAJ website and Facebook page, and email. We look forward to seeing everyone there!

In addition, as I have discussed with several folks, sometime before the end of the year we will get a group together probably on a Sunday and do a walk-through of the entire *shul*, room by room, taking an inventory of any and all maintenance and repair and upgrade items that we can identify. This will also include any deep-cleaning issues that are not covered by our regular cleaning service. We will make a master list with two columns: "must-do" items and "wish list" items, which we can then prioritize. We will then identify which of these we can do drawing on the talents of our handiest members, and for which ones (e.g., issues involving building codes) we would need to hire professionals. This is an exercise that many of us have talked about for years, and I am hopeful that we can continue our momentum in making improvements to our building, an effort that began in earnest when Judy Hersh was President.

Last weekend, at the time of this writing, we had members participate in a couple of events: the annual meeting of the Texas Jewish Historical Society (TJHS), here in Waco, and the annual global conference of the Jewish National Fund (JNF), in Dallas. CAJ members attended both events. The TJHS meeting was notable for the premiere of a new documentary on the life of Jacob De Cordova, a founding father of Waco. I attended the film, at the Waco Convention Center, which had a packed house. The JNF conference featured, if that is the right word, a protest by hundreds of Hamas supporters promoting the usual anti-Semitic lies and calling for the destruction of Israel. By now, we can hardly be surprised by this sort of thing, but thank goodness apparently nobody was physically injured.

Also, as a part of the TJHS meeting, we celebrated Erev Shabbat services at our sister congregation, Temple Rodef Sholom. At least half a dozen *shul* members were in attendance, along with scores of Jews from across the state of Texas. I got to spend some quality time with my counterpart at the Temple, Cindy Wood, as well as with their new Rabbi, Sabine Meyer. It was a very friendly event, and hopefully we can identify other ways for members of both congregations to interact socially in the coming year. As our beloved Rabbi Lanxner likes to say, "A Jew is a Jew is a Jew." We may use different *siddurim* and have similar-but-different liturgies and somewhat different levels of religious observance, but we are all one people, *Am Yisrael*.

L'shalom,

Jeff Levin

December Service Schedule

Friday, December 6
Kabbalat Shabbat 6:00 pm
Candle Lighting 5:07 pm

Saturday, December 7
Shacharit 10:00 am
Shabbat Ends 6:05 pm

Friday, December 13
Kabbalat Shabbat 6:00 pm
Candle Lighting 5:09 pm

Saturday, December 14
Shacharit 10:00 am
Shabbat Ends 6:07 pm

Friday, December 20
Kabbalat Shabbat 6:00 pm
Candle Lighting 5:12 pm

Saturday, December 21
Shacharit 10:00 am
Shabbat Ends 6:10 pm

Friday, December 27
Kabbalat Shabbat 6:00 pm
Candle Lighting 5:15 pm

Saturday, December 28
Shacharit 10:00 am
Shabbat Ends 6:14 pm

Saturday, December 29
Annual Membership Meeting 4:00 pm
Hanukkah Celebration 5:00 pm



December 1

Harry Hareluk

December 3

David Jortner

December 4

Shauna Bauer

December 6

Emily Rogers

December 12

Eden Via

December 21

Paul Farmer

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY



December 1
Jeff & Colleen Wolf

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- ❖ The next Yehudi Men's Night Out will be on December 8th at Poppa Rollo's Pizza at 3:00. Any questions can be directed to Mike Pesses.
- ❖ December 15th the Jewish Federation of Waco is having its annual lunch meeting at Moroso's at 11. A donation of \$180 to JFED is required to attend the lunch. Any additional questions can be directed to Judy Hersh.
- ❖ The office will be closed the entire week of December 23rd.
- ❖ There will be a congregational meeting on December 29th followed by a Hanukkah Party celebration. The meeting will begin at 4:00 with the celebration to follow.

THANK YOU for your donations in November!

Shabbat

Javis Howeth
George & Kathleen
Keller

Susan Raphael
Joseph Settle
Jeff Levin

Michael Pesses
Henry Hacker
Inez Bonneville

In Memory Of

Geraldine Harelík
Harry Harelík

Bernard Jortner
Jeff Levin

In Honor Of

High Holidays
Harry Harelík

YAHARZEITS

The following names of dearly departed will be read aloud by the Rabbi preceding the Mourner's Kaddish on Shabbat morning. It is fitting and customary that the nearest of kin be present in the synagogue for the recitation of this special prayer in their memory. Attendance not only honors the departed but also enhances and guarantees that a Minyan is present to recite the Kaddish.

Kaddish will be read on December 6

Kislev 5 Esther Blinderman
A M Bierman
Morris Giniger
AJ Goldberg
Elmer I Smith*

Kislev 6 Edith Koss
Pauline Koss*
Mrs Toby Novich

Kislev 7 Arthur Schwartz
Mrs Edith R Weisberg

Kislev 8 Mrs F Chazanow
Archie David Goldfine
Isaac Goldstein
Rosa Genecov Ellis

Kislev 9 Sophie Blank
Mrs Isaac Feldt
Jack Goldberg
Sarah Holste
Isidor Israel*
Wm Petchesky
Dora Sackett
Beatrice Segal*
Mrs M Wise*

Kislev 10 Joe L Reed*
Sol Siegel
Hannah Udashen*

Kaddish will be read on December 13

Kislev 12 Sam Gelberger
Mina Parven
Samuel Milberger*
Mrs Goldye Solomon*
Toby Zelda Zeichner

Kislev 13 Miriam Leah Berkman*
Phillip Stupak*

Kislev 14 Stanley Marmelzadt
Lilian Mendelsohn

Kislev 15 Pauline Bartz
Moses W Cinnamon
Elihugh Frankfort
Devorah Lanxner

Kislev 16 B Roddy
Mrs Dave Wizig*

Kislev 17 Mary Freidman
Moze Novich
Max Reid*
Robert Weidhorn

Kislev 18 William Goldblatt
Harold Warren Israel
H Novich
Rachel Rosenthal

Kaddish will be read on December 20

Kislev 19 Max Corman
Robert Glick
Mose Harris
Jack M Silver*

Kislev 20 Sidney Fleischman

Kislev 21 Flora Epstein
Toby Schwartz
Vernon Woolf

Kislev 22 Yetta Cohen

Kislev 23 Amanda Goldstein
Sarah Leah Markusfeld*

Kislev 24 Maragaret Harelik*
Carrie Loewenstein
Samuel H Robinson
Sarah E Schaevitz*
Kislev 25 Edith Elaine Koss*
Leon Rouvant
Sam Rubel*

Kaddish will be read on December 27

Kislev 26 Sadie Berman*
Chaim H Green
Margot Meyers
Diana Green Rosner

Kislev 27 Shirley Kleiner
Cochavah Lavi

Kislev 28 Cecile Aronson
Dora Goldberg
Max Knop*
Henry Novy*

Kislev 29 Paul Adams
Saul Morris Gellman
Julian L Levinson
Sam Rosenberg*
Mrs Harry Smith*

Kislev 30 Jake Berkman Infant
Mrs L Levy*

Tevet 1 Mary Roddy
Harry Udashen*

Tevet 2 Beatrice Klein
Sobel Baby