

Thirty-Six Questions
Kol Nidrei/Erev Yom Kippur 5776
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Can asking the right questions change your life? Psychologists think so. And now they are trying to map it out, more effectively than EHarmony or even JDate. What are the right things to ask, what are the right things to do, what's a surefire formula for falling in love?

So have you heard about this? A study by Arthur Aron, and others, published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal, validated – at least for me -- by its use on *The Big Bang Theory*... this study asserts that if you take two people, even those who are strangers to one another, have them ask and answer a specific set of 36 questions, and, then, have them stare into each other's eyes for four minutes, without speaking, they will fall in love – or they stand a well above random encounter chance of doing so. The paper is called “Experimental Generation of Interpersonal Closeness,” and the specific claim was finding “greater post-interaction closeness with these tasks than with comparable small talk tasks.” More modest, perhaps, but enough for the media and the press to proclaim the love code cracked, and the mysteries of the heart solved.

And now, of course, there's an app for that. You can download it in a moment, and conduct this experiment yourself. Good luck! Please wait until after Yom Kippur -- or at least until after services are over – to try!

The questions begin easily enough. “Given the choice of anyone in the world, whom would you want as a dinner guest.” (By the way, if you get into a discussion, right away, about whether the word should be “who” or “whom,”

you can probably skip some of the remaining questions!) Those other inquiries include: “Would you like to be famous? In what way?” And: “What would constitute a perfect day for you.” They get deeper as you go. And the intimate exercise at the end is... not actually that easy.

Thirty-six questions. It’s a good Jewish number, 36. Twice Chai. For those not familiar with the phrase: numbers, in Hebrew, are often represented by their alphabetical equivalent. The letters which spell out the word “life,” or “Chai,” also represent the number 18 – the letter “yud” is 10 and the “chet” is 8 -- which is why multiples of 18 are considered good luck in our tradition. So, ask the right questions, twice Chai, and two lives are entwined forever.

We just dropped our eldest, Benjamin, off at college, for his freshman year. We knew that he had a second cousin at the same school, on his mother’s side. I recently learned that he has a third cousin there, on my side of the family. The two relatives of his... it turns out they are friends of each other. But how would they have known that they had any external connection at all, if not for a chance question, a random inquiry?

At one point we had two students in our religious school here, who had been friends for years. It was not until the grandmother of one of them, who lived in Boston, told her son that she was coming to a Bar Mitzvah at “some synagogue near Baltimore” – that turned out to be us, and the service she was attending the Bar Mitzvah of this boy’s friend – it was not until then that they discovered that these friends were, in fact, distant cousins.

A hundred things that could tie us to one another, a thousand, if only we knew! What do we miss, what connections are all around us, what threads of commonality might bind us together if only we asked the right question? How many times have you met someone, by turning down one street and not another, taking one class because another was full?

In Jewish tradition, there is a special *berakha*, a particular blessing to say on the occasion of seeing a large number of people. “*Barukh ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha’Olam, Chacham HaRazim*; Blessed are you, Eternal our God, Knower of Secrets.” And, indeed, I sometimes think of God this way, as a kind of repository of all the unasked questions, all the facts that are really facts, but which have just not been measured or recorded or noticed.

Two things stay with me: the opening up required by this reciprocal self-disclosure, and the potential power that comes from asking the right questions. What if this worked in more ways than one? What if it was about more than looking for love? Could this help, even in that illusive, mysterious, some would say metaphorical relationship with God? Would this work, as well, in helping heal, in bringing love to a broken world?

Opening up, and asking. What does reciprocal self-disclosure look like, when it comes to God? If we were to sign up for G-Harmony, what would the survey say?

It occurs to me that I do not speak, publicly, about God very much. This may seem odd, given my, well, you know, my day job, as it were. But it is actually not all that unusual in a Jewish religious context. For us, we hint, we intuit, we imply... and, by the way, we also embrace such a wide range of views, so that direct assertions about the Divine realm are fairly rare. And yet touching on this sense of That Which Is Within or Beyond, that Unity at the Heart of the Universe is a significant part of our connection, our motivation, our original impulse to be here in the first place. In our very hope for purpose and meaning we are, in a way, grasping for God.

We begin with what God could possibly want to know about us. The book of Genesis opens with two versions of the sacred myth of Creation. In the second story, there is a Garden, and a tree, and a single broken rule. And God asks the first man one question, consisting of one single word (at least in Hebrew): “*Ayekha?*” Where are you?

Where are you? There are Biblical scholars who would say that in the original appearance of this story, at the time it was written, our concept of God was very different than it later came to be, and that, indeed, this is a question in which the Creator seeks information. God is looking for Adam, for the man, and does not know where he is.

Everything we came to assert about God later on, however, points to this being a rhetorical question. Of course this is not about information, we say. And this is not a GPS, a God Positioning System, seeking out a particular location. This question is essential, it is existential, it is about the core of who we are, what we stand for, how we behave and what we believe. Just as “what are you made of?” is not about chemistry, but character. *Ayecha?* Where are you?

Another question, centuries later. The story is told of the great Chasidic master Reb Meshullam Zusia Lipman of Hanipol. One day when he was sick, he was crying. His Chasidim asked “why are you crying?” He replied: “When I come before the heavenly court, if they ask me: ‘Zusia, why were you not like Moses?’ that, I can answer. But if they ask me: ‘Zusia, why were you not like Zusia?’ to that, I don’t know what to say!”

So, two questions, which God asks of us. “Where are you?” And: “why were you not yourself?”

More challenging: what would we want to know about God? And how, on heaven or on earth, would we know it?

From Kant we learn that we can say nothing, for sure, about the way the world really is. All of our assertions are only about the world the way we experience it. So, then, anything we say about God is... of course it is a metaphor. Or course it is an approximation, a guess, a finite, feeble attempt to light a candle in a cavern of an endless deep.

Our tradition uses paradox as a way to approach what we might want to know about God. After all, we say that God “speaks” to us. But God has no mouth. So how is this possible? One answer unfolds in the following Midrash: The Torah asserts that God spoke the “Ten Words,” the Ten Commandments, before Moses, and in the hearing of all the people. Immediately, though, this statement is limited: no, it was not the Ten, but only the first, only “*Anochi Adonai Elohecha*, I am the Eternal God, who took you out of the house of Egypt,” not the detailed commandments, but only the basis of our relationship was spoken and heard, and then the people were terrified, and they stepped back, and said to Moses, you, Moses, go and get the rest. But then that, too, is limited. No, it was not the first commandment, it was just the first word, just the word “I,” just the speaking of the presence, and then people stepped back, and were afraid, and they said to Moses, you, Moses, go and get the rest. But then that too is limited. Not the first verse, nor the first word; it was just the first letter, just the *Aleph* of the word *Anochi*, that God spoke out loud, and then the people said... But the thing is, the *Aleph*, if it has no vowel... is silent. Thus, then, we solve the problem, of a God who has neither mouth nor vocal cord, who speaks to us. God pronounced the Aleph, and we were afraid, and sent Moses to get the rest. But in that Aleph which is said out loud is the sound of silence. In English we call it a pregnant pause. It is an emptiness that contains everything. An absence, filled with power and presence, that leads to awe.

As to staring into God's eyes for four minutes...for some of us that might come... in sunlight dancing on water, in the sand and the surf, in the lush green of the woods, looking up at the mountains, holding hands, or holding a baby. Sometimes you just sense, you just feel, perhaps you believe you know, even if you cannot understand.

Opening up, and asking. What does reciprocal self-disclosure look like, when it comes to our work in the world?

In a world of such great divides, how do we best build bridges, with those who are different from us? What is the best way to get to know an "other?" Do we reach out with what we have in common, or by cherishing what is distinct? Do opposites attract, or repel? Or is it more about our will, our stance in the world, our willingness to be open? Like a Bluetooth: either you are set as "ready to connect," or you are not.

Sometimes, it is the sense of what we share, that overcomes previously perceived distance. All of us have an experience, I am sure, a moment of surprise, a sense of delight... when we become friends with someone from a different group, age, class, orientation, culture, background. There, as we laugh together, as we cry together, old thinking ends, preconceived notions about the group the other person is from just... crumble. In light of looking into real eyes, all kinds of things we thought were so important...just don't matter anymore. One on one, walls fall down.

And sometimes, of course, the opposite happens. It is precisely appreciating that which is “other,” developing a taste for a different cuisine, sensing something profound in a ceremony strange and alien to us, that intrigues and attracts, that touches and moves us from where we had been.

So, then, can closeness come either way: from confluence or dissonance, discovery of something shared, or delight in what sets us apart. And yes, even love can grow, and flow, in either direction.

What is the story, the narrative, that makes you who you are? How can you express that, articulate it, be willing to share it? And, when are the moments, what are the ways... that you are open to take in, to absorb, to hold in your hands and your heart, someone else’s story?

We opened our High Holy Day season together this year on Selichot, the Saturday night service the week before Rosh Hashanah. Traditionally meant as a midnight service, as the darkness is divided, as the light is most concealed, as one day turns into another, alright, well, so our congregation convenes a few hours earlier than midnight. But this year, we showed a film which told the tale of artists and musicians coming together, writing and singing and producing an album in Hebrew, Arabic and English, Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs and West Bank Palestinians and American Jews, working together, to bridge gaps and show it can be done.

I have a fantasy. I believe the right words, the right stance, the right kind of questions are out there... If only we opened up, and showed enough of ourselves, if only we found some way to actually understand each other. Not some *kumbaya* encounter, not some naïve sense that everyone is really the same, but a real sharing of differences and knowing the “other.”

I believe that the questions are there, the path is possible, the breakthrough is waiting to happen. Israelis and Palestinians. Irish and British, Afrikaner and South African, citizens and police, Venus and Mars, ENFJs and ISTPs. Even, maybe, Democrats and Republicans? What would be the right questions, to ask across a divide?

And what would it be like, to sit down with an enemy... and stare into each other's' eyes? Let's not wait... until all we are able to share in common is a sense of grief and suffering and loss.

Somewhere... somewhere in my father's possessions, as we packed him up and moved him to a new room this past summer... somewhere he has, legitimately obtained *I think*... a piece of the Berlin Wall.

It is Erev Yom Kippur; it is the eve of the Day of Atonement. The word *kippur*, which means “expiation,” or “atonement,” is related to the word “*kofer*,” which means “pitch,” or “a layer of tar.” It is, thus, a thin covering, a veneer. Linguistically, I am convinced that it is related to the English word “cover.”

How.... revealing, then, that we “cover” our sins only by... uncovering. By removing the masks of the ordinary, diving deep, asking intimate questions. Mistakes and missteps; we close the book on the past only... by opening up.

This day, we come together. To reveal and to receive revelation. To cover and discover, uncover and recover. To be vulnerable, and to open up – to God, to each other, and to ourselves.

L’shanah Tovah.