

Rosh Hashanah: *Ayeka*, Where are you?

I came into this world without being asked,
And when the time for dying comes
I shall not be consulted

The opening of this poem stops me in my tracks. Before I read on, the poet sums up our lives with the stark statement that we have no control. Sometimes I feel that way now.

And then, Gertrude Housman continues:

But between the boundaries of birth and death
Lies the dominion of Choice;

To be a doer or a dreamer,
To be a lifter or a leaner,

To speak out or remain silent,
To extend a hand in friendship
Or to look the other way;
To feel the sufferings of others
Or to be callous and insensitive.

These are the choices;
It is in the choosing that my measure as a person
Is determined. (Gertrude Hildreth Housman)

We do make choices after all. The first choice is to affirm my free will. I choose not to succumb to helplessness.

But helplessness is only six feet away. In this time of disruption, which borders at times on chaos, the choices feel weightier.

How do I keep myself and my family safe? Where do we get our food? Do I send my children to school? Do I show up for a protest? Do I work remotely or go in? How do we get there? And if I work at home, how do I attend to my family, my work, and myself in one space at one time?

Those are but some of the choices we face. I find some consolation knowing that we share these questions with all of humanity in this moment.

But what about *your* choices? The small acts of generosity, the gestures of friendship, the moments of kindness--the decisions of seemingly small consequence that touch others more deeply than you know?

It is in the choosing that my measure as a person is determined.

I am reminded of the Hasidic tale of the saintly Rabbi Zusya of Hanipol. The story is told of Zusya, the great Chassidic master, who lay on his deathbed, surrounded by his students in a circle of comfort. Zusya was weeping inconsolably. Seeing his tears, the students asked him, "Rebbe, why are you so sad? After all the mitzvahs and good deeds you have done, you will surely get a great reward in heaven!" The students were already thinking about the rebbe's life everlasting. They imagined a grand welcome in heaven awaiting their revered teacher.

Zusya responded, "I'm afraid!" Was he afraid of dying? Was he afraid of leaving this world? No, Zusya explained to them, "I am afraid, because when I get to heaven, I know God is not going to ask me 'Why weren't you more like Moses?' or 'Why weren't you more like King David?' I am afraid that God will ask 'Zusya, why weren't you more like Zusya?'"

We are all living in a Zusya moment right now. When it seems that everything has been taken from us, when the world is not the way it was or we hoped it would be, it is a time to step back and ask ourselves Zusya's question.

Who am I, really? Who am I trying to measure up to? We each have our dreams to become Moses or King David, or Rosa Parks or Harvey Milk, or great musicians or artists or any number of heroes. But that is not our path. Though none of us could achieve their feats of courage, leadership, or wisdom, we have the distinct possibility to be ourselves. Martin Buber once said, "Everyone must consider, thinking: 'I am unique in the world. There has never been anyone else like me in the world; if there had been anyone like me, there would have been no need for me to exist.'"

Each of us is a unique combination of our own DNA and our extraordinary and expanding accumulation of experiences that together form the foundation for our choices. Our choices.

On Rosh Hashanah, we are blessed to have this holy space and time to consider this existential question. We are fortunate to have generations of teachers and texts to bolster our confidence and guide us in this work.

On Rosh Hashanah, when we celebrate the beginning of all Creation, let's pause from our everydayness and remember what it means to be a unique human being.

Who am I, indeed? What makes me whole? What is my essence?

I admit these past six months I have not always felt like myself. I have been overcome by the choices, overwhelmed by all the new things I need to learn, concerned about everyone and everything I have had to give special attention. And other times I have heard the piercing call of my soul, telling me, this is your responsibility, this is your

unique contribution, this is your moment. Keeping up with these myriad emotions has taken every practice I know, from morning yoga to afternoon walks, from tears of sorrow to tears of joy, from prayer to study to self-examination, from reaching out to help others to finding hands reaching back to embrace me. All socially-distant, of course. But I keep on asking this question: Who am I? and trying to stay true to my own path.

And now, I have a second question for you on this Rosh Hashanah. *Ayeka?* Where are you?

This happens to be the very first question anyone asks in the Torah. God asks the first human, Where are you?

God is playing an existential game of hide and seek, a game that God always wins. No matter where Adam hides, God already knows where Adam is to be found. Adam, who does not understand the rules of the game, and does not yet know what it means to be human, cannot fathom the import of “where are you?” Adam has no answer because Adam is hiding from God and from Adam’s own soul.

Living in a stripped-down version of my life, sitting in my home in front of a screen, where am I, really? On Zoom we can be anywhere. But even on Zoom, are you here? Are you present? Do you care? Are you biding your time until the pandemic is over, until there’s a vaccine, until the election, until you wake up again?

We may yearn for that long ago Eden, whether a tropical paradise or the lost innocence of childhood, or the simple joys of singing together, visiting our parents, going to concerts, taking our children to school and heading off blithely to work. We do not think of God watching over us. But, like Adam, we may be hiding from ourselves nonetheless. And the question resonates across the eons, out of the myths of our origins and into your kitchen: *Ayeka.* Where are you?

Sometimes the answer is “I don’t know.” Some days the answer is I am lonely. I am helpless. I am confused. And some days the answer is I am paying attention. I am aware.

I am doing the best I can.

Where are you right now?

It’s Rosh Hashanah, the first day of a new year, a day full of possibility. This next week, see what happens when these two questions pop into your head:

Who am I?

Where am I?

Take them for a stroll. Chew on them over a meal. Dance with them. Argue with them. Embrace them until they embrace you back.

You have exclusive rights to your answers. In the midst of sorrow or rage, when others seek to capture your attention and drag you away from what you know is true, try to remain true to where you are and focus on where you want to go. Most important, try to pay attention, as Mary Oliver so lovingly reminds us in **The Summer Day**

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

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