

Rabbi Mark Cohn
Yom Kippur 5777/2016 Morning:
“Dayeinu: A question or statement?”

Dayeinu.

Feels funny to say that term right now, no?

In the middle of Yom Kippur and I’m talking about a Passover song?

But why not?

After all, Pesach is just six months away. And when you are in Pesach you know that you are just six months from Yom Kippur. The two holidays are tangentially connected in their demand that we remove chametz – the leavening from our pantries and the leavening from our hearts. Or the checking our homes and the checking of our souls. And I love to draw those connections.

However.

This morning as we go to sing Mi Chamocha, our song of redemption, I ask you to set your machzors aside for a moment and consider this word ‘dayeinu’ which we recite at the seder and of which we sing multiple refrains. I ask you to consider Dayeinu in light of creating a different connection between Pesach and Yom Kippur.

If on Pesach we are looking at the word Dayenu as an affirmation: It would have been enough! Any one of those miracles (being freed from bondage, splitting the sea, receiving Torah, being fed manna) would have been enough ... then on Yom Kippur we might state Dayenu as a question: Dayeinu? Have we done or had enough?

I got this idea of Dayenu-as-a-question from our temple trip to Israel this past June when we visited Hadassah Hospital. Our guide that day was a remarkable woman, affectionately known by one and all as BG – her name: Barbara Goldstein, who made aliyah nearly twenty years ago and is the Deputy Director of Hadassah.

She said that what drives Hadassah is that word ‘dayenu’ and seeing it as a question.

Has it been, did we do, enough?

The tour she gave us was not the perfunctory look at the famous Chagall windows in the chapel there or a chance to look at donor names on the walls but rather was a look deep into the soul and spirit of what drives Hadassah. And no, this is not a fundraiser for one of the most respected humanitarian institutions in Israel – indeed the world, though that tour surely could have been one of the most effective ever. BG introduced us to Neelah who is a Christian Arab and who is the head nurse for the ICU units. And she told us about how people drop all labels at the door of Hadassah – Palestinian, Jewish, Muslim, settler, liberal.

And she brought in D'vir, who was 13 when he was injured in a terrorist attack and has made it to his late 20s because of the excellence of Hadassah, where he works now. Each of these individuals in their lives reflect the beauty that is humanity and the beauty that lies behind the creativity of those Chagall windows. And when those Chagall windows, newly installed were injured mightily during the Six-Day war, Chagall returned to repair them – for that same reason why Hadassah excels as it does.

Because Dayenu is as much a question than it is a statement.

We can say Dayenu when we are living with gratitude as well we should each and every day. But we must ask Dayenu when there is more work to be done to solve humanitarian crises, resolve medical emergencies, demand peace among all peoples, and push our minds to their limits for creativity and allowing beauty and life to emerge.

I think that as Jews we live on and between those poles – seeing the miraculous and giving thanks while asking as well if we have done enough, if we have thanked enough, if we have created enough and if we have loved enough, if we have done enough.

And on this day of days, this Sabbath of Sabbaths, we must ask ourselves, “Have we done enough?” Whether in the field of our personal lives or in the realm of social justice, in the desire to create a safer planet for the next generation or in solving difficult tensions in how we relate to one another (whether our parents or children, spouses or partners, neighbors or bosses, employees or coworkers, whites and blacks, Palestinians and Israelis)? Have we done enough? Dayenu can be as much a question as it needs to be a statement.

This is the Day of Atonement and we, shortly, will enter into confession, when we state aloud in honesty: we have not done enough. Our transgressions occurred because we fell short, we missed the mark (al chet sheh-chatanu), we failed to be our best selves. We simply did not do enough.

And so we seek forgiveness, we seek atonement, we seek repair, we pledge to change. After all, repentance is about acknowledging, repairing, and changing. We acknowledge that not everything is a dayenu moment of satisfaction and that every moment may also be time to witness that we indeed, need to push further and do more.

Not being satisfied is a Jewish value. We joke about it all the time when it comes to the size of food portions at restaurants or whether or not our children become doctors – but it has been the Jewish drive to excel that has led to so much excellence in so many fields and arenas – and the size of sandwiches.

But how about in our personal lives?

How about in our relationship with God?

How about our understanding of God?

How about in taking care of ourselves?

How about in taking care of our souls?

How about in taking care of our loved ones and those whom we profess to love?

Have we done enough? Have we listened enough? Have we expressed enough?

Dayenu as a moment to wonder with awe and gratitude must stand where it is deserved. Dayenu can stand as a moment to ask if we have done enough – or if we are satisfied with the status quo of life.

Mi Chamocha is that moment, noted in Passover's Dayeinu, when we say: YES! That would have been enough ... to free us from slavery, to bring us across the sea. But as we know, that moment was only one of many more yet to come when we would both give thanks and dwell in awe for the grandeur of life and miracle. So too, many would be the times in our journey to the Promised Land when we would ask: Is this enough? Is this all? Might there be more? Our ancestors asked that at times to their detriment when it was said with anger or entitlement or a lack of understanding. But if we pose Dayeinu as a question in striving for betterment, excellence, integrity and authenticity – surely great blessing and beautiful outcomes are possible.

For the Dayeinu of gratitude with the Dayeinu of hope and imagination, let us sing our song of Freedom.