

You Don't Have All the Answers—And It's OK

Some of my earliest memories are of sitting in the sanctuary of our synagogue in New Jersey in the town where I grew up. I remember the beauty of the building, but beyond its splendor, I remember the feeling of peace I had when I entered the building and sat on the bench with my family. It seemed the synagogue was the only place I felt peace.

My world, like most of my friends', was a swirl of emotions and fears. I was dealing with the turmoil of the loss of my father, who died from cancer when I was 7 years old. On top of that, like most of young people of my generation, my childhood memories outside the synagogue were filled with the swirl of the early '70s. The television was filled with reports of the war in Vietnam, the impeachment and sudden resignation of President Nixon and the radical changes that were taking place culturally in the United States. My days in school were just as confusing because, in between lessons in math and history, I remember the sirens blasting and rushing to crawl under our desks to practice hiding in case the Russians fired nuclear missiles at us.

In the middle of all of the drastic changes taking place all around me, the one place that was consistent in my life was my synagogue. That is not to say that nothing was swirling or changing at the synagogue, or that the synagogue itself was an oasis of calm in the middle of a world that was changing at what seemed to be breakneck speeds. The peacefulness I felt at synagogue was not because the synagogue was free from the storms that were taking place all around me. The peace I felt was actually because of those storms. I was experiencing "peace in the midst of the storm."

The reason that I felt this peace is what I wanted to share

this week. As I said above, I didn't feel peace because the synagogue was free from problems. It has been said often that as long as people are present, problems will be present. Our synagogue, like most of that day was filled with people dealing with broken families, divorce, death, war, cultural revolution, and political upheaval. So, my peace wasn't because the synagogue was perfect. In fact, it was just the opposite. My peace was based totally upon a lack of perfection.

Let me share one of the most important lessons that I learned in my early years in synagogue. It is a lesson that would be a huge blessing for many in the body of Messiah to learn today. The lesson is simply that it was okay to not understand something or even a lot of somethings. One of the differences between Judaism and Christianity is that in Judaism, we are taught from a very young age that our search of the Holy Scriptures is not about finding answers to our questions—it is about finding more questions. We are taught that the only one who has all of the answers is G-D, and for us to have all of the answers, we would have to become G-D. As a matter of fact, the simple act of trying to find the answer to every questions can become an act of idolatry.

In school, I was being taught to find the correct answers to questions on quizzes and exams. Outside of school, I was being encouraged to find the answers to all kinds of moral and ethical questions. My only place of solace, rest and peace was in the one place where I was encouraged to not expect to know every answer. It was perfectly fine for things to be mysteries. Not knowing something was not failure. Synagogue taught me that the only way to keep going deeper is for the answer to every question to be another question.

It has been nearly 50 years since I first felt that feeling of peace. That feeling and understanding of it has been the grounding rod to my entire life and ministry. It is okay to not understand. It is okay to not know everything.

My goal as a rabbi is not to provide answers to all the questions people have about G-D, the Bible and life in general. My goal is simply to help them find questions that will lead them to the one who does know all the answers. Because, while it is totally OK when someone doesn't know everything, it is never OK when they don't know the one who does. {eoa}

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