

Cheat Your Way into Heaven

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It's back to school. Remember being nervous about having to take a test and praying you would pass it? But now imagine that the teacher distributed a study guide with the questions that will be on the test. You'd undoubtedly feel more confident about your chances. Well the teacher has already distributed the questions that you will be tested on, when you take your final, final exam, the admissions test to qualify for *Olam Haba* (the World to Come).

According to the Talmud (Shabbat 31a), the exam will be made up of the following six questions:

1. Did you conduct your business faithfully?
2. Did you set a fixed time to study Torah?
3. Did you participate in the commandment to be fruitful and multiply?
4. Did you anxiously anticipate the redemption?
5. Did you engage in the pursuit of wisdom?

6. When you learned Torah, did you infer one thing from another?

Let's look at these questions.

When we think of Jewish life we tend to think about *mitzvot* (commandments) which make Jews distinct, such as Shabbat and Kashrut. Yet, surprisingly, the first question, "Did you conduct your business with *emunah* (with faith)?" focuses on neither. The point the Talmud is making is that it is not enough to be a one tablet Jew. The two *Luchot* (tablets) which comprise the *Aseret Hadibrot* (Ten Commandments) are distinct from each other. The first tablet deals with the *mitzvot bein adam l'makom* (commandments between man and God), and the second tablet deals with *mitzvot bein adam l'chavero* (between man and his fellow). By beginning with a question that focuses on interpersonal relationships, the Talmud is reminding us that the way we comport ourselves in our relations with others is just as important as how we comport ourselves in our relationship with God.

It should be noted that the very same page of Talmud that contains these six questions also contains the famous story of the individual who told Hillel that he would convert to Judaism if Hillel could teach him the entire Torah while he stood *al regel achat* (on one foot). Though this individual very well may have been mocking Hillel, Hillel responded, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the entire Torah. All the rest is an elaboration [on that one point]. Now go learn it!" In other words, the goal of the Torah is to teach us how to treat our fellow well. You may be surprised that

Hillel didn't mention God in his summation of the Torah, but if you think about it makes perfect sense. The Torah begins by teaching us that humanity was created *B'tselem Elokim* (in the image of God). That is to say, we are all created by the same God and are all his children. Therefore, by treating your fellow well you are treating God's other children well. Parents love when others treat their children well. Want to make someone happy? Give their kid a gift. You want to make your creator happy? Treat someone else well.

By conducting our business with *emunah* (faith), we also demonstrate our faith in God. Because we trust in God to care for us, we have no need to cheat in business. Now, of course, we all understand the value of honesty, but simply being honest is not enough. You can be quite upfront with someone who is vulnerable about how you intend to take advantage of him. Honest Abe himself when speaking about character didn't focus on honesty but said, "If you want to test a man's character, give him power." Unfortunately, this past year's endless stream of stories about clergy of various faiths abusing children and of figures such as Harvey Weinstein reminded us just how easy it is to abuse a position of power.

For that reason, Pirkei Avot 4:1 teaches that the one who is truly strong is the one who *hakovesh et yitzro* (conquers his own desire). True strength is not measured by your ability to impose your will on others but rather to conquer your own *yetzer harah* (evil inclination) that tells you it is okay to take advantage of others. The most frequently cited *mitzvah* (command) in the Torah has nothing to do with *kashrut* or *Shabbat* observance; it is the command to treat the

vulnerable (orphan, widow, stranger) with kindness. This first question of conducting business faithfully can be boiled down to another, “Were you a *mensch* (good person)?”

Let's look at the second question "Did you fix a time to study Torah?" We can understand why we are asked if we studied Torah; after all, the word Torah means “teaching,” and we would be wise to study the teachings of our creator. But why are we asked if we had a fixed time? Upon reflection it is obvious. As we know when we simply say that we’re going to get around to doing something eventually, when we have the time, it often never happens. We become busy with other things. This question is reminding us of the importance of prioritizing Torah study.

And here at *Adas Kodesch Shel Emeth*, it’s easy to do so. You can join us for *Parsha* and Pizza on Wednesday nights or for our new class *Saks on Sacks* in which I will be leading a study of Rabbi Jonathan Sack’s new curriculum, *Ten Paths to God*, on Thursday evenings. By doing so you’ll also be able to answer two other questions affirmatively: question five, “Did you engage in the pursuit of *chachma* (wisdom)?” and question six “Did you engage in the pursuit of *da’at* (knowledge)?” Studying with others helps you to increase your *chachma* (wisdom) because you learn from each other. Pirkei Avot 1:6 famously teaches *aseh l’cha rav, ukeneh l’cha chever* (accept a teacher upon yourself; acquire a friend for yourself). It also helps you increase your *da’at* (knowledge), which is defined as being able to infer one thing from another, because you’ll have the opportunity to deduce practical teaching from our ancient texts.

Question three “Did you participate in the commandment to be fruitful and multiply?” is problematic because for a variety of reasons many people never have children. Does that mean that they are doomed to fail this final exam? The word for parent in Hebrew is *horeh / horah* and for teacher it is *moreh / morah*. It’s not an accident they sound similar; they have the same *shoresh* (root). The point is that you become a parental figure to someone by teaching him or her. Parenting isn’t an issue of biology; it’s an issue of raising someone. This question is really asking “Did you enhance the lives of others by sharing your wisdom and knowledge with them?”

We now come to our final question: “Did you anxiously anticipate the redemption?” We now have come full circle. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we learned that the Jewish response to an imperfect world is *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world). We shouldn’t just anticipate *Geula* (redemption); we must do our part to bring it about. And we can start right here, right now by ensuring the wellbeing of our beloved *Adas Kodesch Shel Emeth*. Sure the future is uncertain, but that has never dissuaded us Jews before.

Ask your non-Jewish friends what percentage of the population Jews make up in America. They’ll probably guess about five, even ten, percent. The truth is we make up fewer than three percent. Why do people think we are so much more numerous than we really are? Because our contributions to society are so great! In fact, there is a prohibition on counting Jews directly. Why, because if we simply looked at our small numbers we would become discouraged. So instead in ancient Israel people were counted indirectly though the

payment of their half *shekel* yearly tax. The message is it's not enough to be passively counted; you must stand up and contribute. And when we all stand together and contribute, our contributions far exceed our small numbers.

The Jewish people as a whole and we here at AKSE should remember what Moshe said in his farewell to the nation, "Not because you are more numerous than all the peoples did Hashem desire to choose you, for you are the smallest of all peoples" (Deut. 7:7).

Yes, the future is uncertain, and, yes, we are small. But our contributions to this community are herculean, invaluable and irreplaceable.

We provide the community at large with:

- Multiple nights of adult education a week and with our annual AKSE Academy
- Daily services
- A communal standard for *Kashrut* through the supervision by the *Vaad Hakashrut of Delaware*, which includes a *Kosher L'Pesach* deli at Shoprite
- Our members are among the most active in Israel advocacy
- And most importantly we provide the community with a welcoming inclusive centrist community committed to the integration of Torah values into the modern world. And these are things that this community just can't afford to lose. You do not want to picture this community without AKSE.

Over time demographic realities have changed, so I can't promise you a return to the good old glory days of Gewirtz. But by standing together we can take control of our future, and we can create new good old days! We may be about to recite *Yizkor*, but let's not forget that Judaism celebrates life and hope. Our song is the *Hatikvah*! Over Rosh Hashanah someone who requested to remain anonymous stated, "AKSE not what your shul can do for you, but what you can do for your shul." Now that's the spirit.

So now you have the exam questions in your hands ahead of time. When people asked you what your rabbi spoke about over Yom Kippur, you can tell them that he told you to cheat, that is, to cheat your way into heaven. You can explain to them that your maker expects you to do so, for He has placed the test questions in your hands ahead of time. Now make sure you're ready to answer.