



## Three kinds of question

Jewish education places substantial emphasis on asking questions. The Haggadah is a prime example of this. However, are all questions good questions, or the right questions to ask?! To answer these questions, we will examine in the passages below, three different types of questions, all taken from classical Jewish sources which we hope you will enjoy discussing on Shavuot or another time.

**Chag Sameach!**

### Relational questions – Naomi (Book of Ruth, Chapter 1 verse 19)

Sometimes questions can help build a relationship or can have the opposite effect. The Book of Ruth, which we read on Shavuot, opens with the story of Naomi and her family. Having left Israel wealthy, Naomi returns destitute and bereft of her husband and sons.

and the two went on until they reached Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole city buzzed with excitement over them. The women said, "Can this be Naomi?"

"Do not call me Naomi," she replied. "Call me Mara (bitterness) for Shaddai has made my lot very bitter. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. How can you call me Naomi, when the LORD has dealt harshly with me, when Shaddai has brought misfortune upon me!"

וּתְלַכְנָה שְׂתֵיכֶם עַד-בֹּאֲנָה בֵּית לָחֶם וַיְהִי  
כְּבֹאֲנָה בֵּית לָחֶם וַתִּהְיֶה כָּל-הָעִיר עָלֶיהָ  
וַתֹּאמְרָנָה הֲזֹאת נָעֲמִי:

וַתֹּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶן אֵל-תִּקְרָאנָה לִי נָעֲמִי קְרָאן. לִי  
מָרָא כִּי-הִמָּר שַׁדַּי לִי מָאָד:

אֲנִי מָלְאָה הִלַּכְתִּי וַרִיקָם הִשִּׁיבֵנִי ה' לָמָּה  
תִּקְרָאנָה לִי נָעֲמִי וַיְהוֹה עֲנָה בִּי וְשַׁדַּי הִרַע  
לִי:

*What was the intention of this question?*

*Do you think this was a good question?*

#### Suggested answer:

The intention was to express surprise at Naomi's appearance. Based on her reaction, this was an insensitive and poor question. Rashi notes that they remembered Naomi as a leading wealthy figure in the community. They could not hide their shock nor express any empathy with her current state. Naomi's moving reply demonstrates the extent of her torment. She teaches us the importance of asking empathetic and considerate questions, even when we are caught by surprise.

## Advocacy questions – Avraham (Bereshit Chapter 18)

Avraham and Moshe are two of our greatest leaders. Both advocated for others, Moshe after the sin of the Golden Calf, and Avraham for the people of Sodom and Gemorrah, as

Now God had said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do,

since Abraham is to become a great and populous nation and all the nations of the earth are to bless themselves by him?

For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of God by doing what is just and right, in order that God may bring about for Abraham what has been promised him."...

Abraham came forward and said, "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?

What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it?

Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?"

And God answered, "If I find within the city of Sodom fifty innocent ones, I will forgive the whole place for their sake."...

And he said, "Let not my lord be angry if I speak but this last time: What if ten should be found there?" "I will not destroy, for the sake of the ten."

Having finished speaking to Abraham, God departed; and Abraham returned to his place.

set out in the passages below.

[17] וְהָאֵלֹהִים אָמַר הַמִּכְסָּה אֲנִי מַאֲבִרָהּם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי עֹשֶׂה:

[18] וְאַבְרָהָם הָיוּ יְהִיָּה לְגֹי גְדוֹל וְעַצוֹם וְנִבְרָכוּ-בּוֹ כָּל גּוֹי הָאָרֶץ:

[19] כִּי יִדְעֹתִיו לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יִצְוֶה אֶת-בְּנָיו וְאֶת-בֵּיתוֹ אַחֲרָיו וְשָׁמְרוּ דֶּרֶךְ ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט לְמַעַן הֵבִיא יְהוָה עַל-אַבְרָהָם אֶת אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר עָלָיו: ...

[23] וַיָּגֶשׁ אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הָאֵף תִּסְפָּה צְדִיק עִם-רָשָׁע:

[24] אוּלַי יֵשׁ חֲמִשִּׁים צְדִיקִים בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר הָאֵף תִּסְפָּה וְלֹא-תִשָּׂא לְמַקְוֶה לְמַעַן חֲמִשִּׁים הַצְדִּיקִים אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבָּהּ:

[25] חֲלִלָה לָךְ מַעֲשֵׂת! כַּדָּבָר הַזֶּה לֵהֲמִית צְדִיק עִם-רָשָׁע וְהָיָה כַּצְדִּיק כְּרָשָׁע חֲלִלָה לָךְ הַשֹּׁפֵט כָּל-הָאָרֶץ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט:

[26] וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אִם-אֶמְצָא בְּסָדִים חֲמִשִּׁים צְדִיקִים בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר וְנִשְׁאֲתִי לְכָל-הַמָּקוֹם בְּעִבְרָתִי: ...

[32] וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-נָא יַחַר לָהּ וְאִדְבָּרָה אֶךְ-הַפֶּעַם אוּלַי יִמְצָאוּן שָׁם עֹשֶׂה וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא אֲשֻׁחִית בְּעִבּוֹר הָעֹשֶׂה:

[33] וַיֵּלֶךְ ה' כְּאֲשֶׁר כָּלָה לְדַבֵּר אֶל-אַבְרָהָם וַאֲבָרָהָם שָׁב לְמִקְוָמוֹ:

*To whom is God asking a question?*

*Why does Avraham use questions to advocate for the people of Sodom?*

### Suggested answer:

God is asking Himself a question, which is an unusual formulation in the Torah. Rashbam (1085-1174), one of Rashi's grandsons, explains that God asked Himself whether it was correct to destroy Sodom and Gemorrah as these areas would later be in the possession of Avraham's descendants, through the covenants God had made with Avraham. Therefore, God decided to involve Avraham in the fate of Sodom and Gemorrah. Perhaps God did this to be truthful and faithful to the covenants, rather than appearing to renege on them.

According to Ramban (1190-1274) in his commentary on the Torah, Avraham was concerned that God was applying a strict form of justice for these cities. It was

inconceivable for Avraham that these cities would lack even a small group of innocent people and that God would apply such strict justice in this case. Therefore, Avraham started to plead on behalf of 50 innocent people, since their merit would be enough to spare these entire cities. By agreeing to 'negotiate' with Avraham, God signals his agreement – perhaps God was testing Avraham and inviting him to ask questions. Once it was clear that not even 10 innocent people resided in these cities, the negotiation ends.

## Epoch-making questions – Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai (Gemara Gitin 56b: 5-6)

It's the year 70 CE, in besieged Jerusalem. Realising the futility of further military resistance by the divided Jewish defenders, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, one of the leading rabbinic sages, desperately tries to smuggle himself out of Jerusalem to negotiate with the Roman enemy despite opposition from those defenders. Abba Sikkara, his nephew, led a group of defenders but furtively agreed to help his uncle.

Abba Sikkara said to him: Pretend to be sick, and have everyone come and ask about your welfare, so that word will spread about your ailing condition. Afterward bring something putrid and place it near you, so that people will say that you have died and are decomposing. And then, have your students enter to bring you to burial, and let no one else come in so that the zealots not notice that you are still alive. As the zealots know that a living person is lighter than a dead person.

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai did this. Rabbi Eliezer entered from one side and Rabbi Yehoshua from the other side to take him out. When they arrived at the entrance of the city, the guards, who were zealots, wanted to pierce him with their swords in order to ascertain that he was actually dead, as was the common practice. Abba Sikkara said to them: The Romans will say that they pierce even their teacher. The guards then wanted to push him to see whether he was still alive, in which case he would cry out. Abba Sikkara said to them: They will say that they push even their teacher. The guards then opened the gate and he was taken out.

When Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai reached the Roman camp, he said: Greetings to you, the king; greetings to you, the king. Vespasian said to him: You are liable for two death penalties, one because I am not a king, yet you call me king, and furthermore, if I am a king, why didn't you come to me until now? Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai said to him: As for what you said about yourself: I am not a king, in truth, you are a king, if not now, then in the future. As if you are not a king, Jerusalem will not be handed over into your hand, as it is written: "And the Lebanon shall fall by a mighty one" (Isaiah 10:34). And "mighty one" means only a king, as it is written: "And their mighty one shall be of themselves, and their ruler shall proceed from the midst of them" (Jeremiah 30:21), indicating

אמר ליה נקוט נפשך בקצירי וליתו כולי  
עלמא ולישילו בך ואיתי מידי סריא  
ואגני גבך ולימרו דנח נפשך וליעילו בך  
תלמידך ולא ליעול בך איניש אחרינא  
דלא לרגשון בך דקליל את דאינהו ידעי  
דסייא קליל ממיתא

עביד הכי נכנס בו רבי אליעזר מצד  
אחד ורבי יהושע מצד אחר כי מטו  
לפיתחא בעו למדקריה אמר להו יאמרו  
רבן דקרו בעו למדחפיה אמר להו  
יאמרו רבן דחפו פתחו ליה בכא נפק

כי מטא להתם אמר שלמא עלך מלכא  
שלמא עלך מלכא אמר ליה מיחיבת  
תרי (קטלי) [קטלי] חדא דלאו מלכא  
אנא וקא קרית לי מלכא ותו אי מלכא  
אנא עד האי דנא אמאי לא אתית לגבאי  
אמר ליה דקאמרת לאו מלכא אנא

איברא מלכא את דאי לאו מלכא את לא  
מימסר אירושלים בידך דכתיב והלבנון  
באדיר יפול ואין אדיר אלא מלך דכתיב  
והיה אדירו ממנו וגו' ואין לבנון אלא בית  
המקדש שנקאמר הדר הטוב הזה  
והלבנון ודקאמרת אי מלכא אנא אמאי

that "mighty one" parallels "ruler." And "Lebanon" means only the Temple, as it is stated: "That good mountain and the Lebanon" (Deuteronomy 3:25). And as for what you said with your second comment: If I am a king why didn't you come to me until now, there are zealots among us who did not allow us to do this.

Understanding that Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was prepared to ask him not to destroy the Temple, Vespasian said to him: If there is a barrel of honey and a snake is wrapped around it, wouldn't they break the barrel in order to kill the snake? In similar fashion, I am forced to destroy the city of Jerusalem in order to kill the zealots barricaded within it. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was silent and did not answer. In light of this, Rav Yosef later read the following verse about him, and some say that it was Rabbi Akiva who applied it to Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai: "I am the Lord...Who turns wise men backward and makes their knowledge foolish" (Isaiah 44:25). Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai should have said to Vespasian in response: In such a case, we take tongs, remove the snake, and kill it, and in this way we leave the barrel intact. So too, you should kill the rebels and leave the city as it is.

In the meantime, as they were talking, a messenger arrived from Rome, and said to him: Rise, for the emperor has died, and the noblemen of Rome plan to appoint you their leader and make you the next emperor. At that time Vespasian was wearing only one shoe, and when he tried to put on the other one, it would not go on his foot. He tried to remove the other shoe that he was already wearing, but it would not come off. He said: What is this?

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai said to him: Be not distressed, for good tidings have reached you, as it is written: "Good tidings make the bone fat" (Proverbs 15:30), and your feet have grown fatter out of joy. Vespasian said to him: But what is the remedy? What must I do in order to put on my shoe? Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai said to him: Have someone with whom you are displeased come and pass before you, as it is written: "A broken spirit dries the bones" (Proverbs 17:22). He did this, and his shoe went on his foot.

Vespasian said to him: Since you are so wise, why didn't you come to see me until now? Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai said to him: But didn't I already tell you?

Vespasian said to him: I also told you what I had to say. Vespasian then said to Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai: I will be going to Rome to accept my new position, and I will send someone else in my place to continue besieging the city and waging war against it. But before I leave, ask something of me that I can give you. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai said to him: Give me Yavneh and its Sages and do not destroy it, spare the dynasty of Rabban Gamliel and do not kill them as if they were rebels, and give me doctors to heal Rabbi Tzadok. Rav

לא קאתית לגבאי עד האידנא בריוני  
דאית בן לא שבקינן

אמר ליה אילו חבית של דבש ודרקון  
פרוץ עליה לא היו שוכרין את החבית  
בשביל דרקון אישתיק קרי עליה רב  
יוסף ואיתימא רבי עקיבא משיב חכמים  
אחור ודעתם יסכל איבעי ליה למימר  
ליה שקלינן צבתא ושקלינן ליה לדרקון  
וקטלינן ליה וחביתא שבקינן לה

אדהכי אתא פריסתקא עליה מרומי  
אמר ליה קום דמית ליה קיסר ואמר  
הנהו חשיבי דרומי לאותיבך ברישא  
הנה סיים חד (מסאני) [מסאניה] בעא  
למסיימה לאחרינא לא עייל בעא  
למישלפיה לאידך לא נפק אמר מאי האי

אמר ליה לא תצטער שמועה טובה  
אתיא לך דכתיב שמועה טובה תדשן  
עצם אלא מאי תתנתי לית איניש דלא  
מיתבא דעתך מיניה ולחליף קמך  
דכתיב ורוח נכאה תיבש גרם עבד הכי  
עייל אמר ליה ומאחר דחכמיתו כולי  
האי עד האידנא אמאי לא אתיתו לגבאי  
אמר ליה ולא אמרי לך אמר ליה אנא  
נמי אמרי לך

אמר ליה מיזל אזילנא ואינש אחרינא  
משדרנא אלא בעי מינאי מידי דאתן לך  
אמר ליה תן לי יבנה וחכמיה ושושילתא  
דרבן גמליאל ואסוותא דמסיין ליה לרבי  
צדוק קרי עליה רב יוסף ואיתימא רבי  
עקיבא משיב חכמים אחור ודעתם יסכל  
איבעי למימר ליה לשבקינהו הדא זימנא

Yosef read the following verse about him, and some say that it was Rabbi Akiva who applied it to Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai: "I am the Lord...Who turns wise men backward and makes their knowledge foolish" (Isaiah 44:25), as he should have asked him to leave the Jews alone this time.

And why didn't Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai make this request? He maintained that Vespasian might not do much for him, and there would not be even a small amount of salvation. Therefore, he made a modest request, in the hope that he would receive at least that much.

וְהוּא סָבַר דְּלִמָּא כּוּלִי הָאִי לֹא עֲבִיד  
וְהַצֵּלָה פּוֹרְתָא נִמְי לֹא הוּי

***Why do you think Vespasian asked such a generous question?***

***If you were Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, what would you have answered? Why?***

**Suggested answer:**

Perhaps Vespasian felt Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai genuinely sought peace and would accept Roman rule. Vespasian may also have been impressed with Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai's leadership and have felt this would influence the other Jewish defenders.

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai faced a significant dilemma. If he asks for Jerusalem, the obvious choice, he may have stretched Vespasian's generosity too far. He may also have been wary of being used as a political tool by the Romans. By asking for Yavneh instead, a town with many Torah scholars who could continue to teach and preserve Judaism, especially in a place considered insignificant by the Romans, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai hoped to achieve the survival of Judaism rather than just the Temple and the physical city of Jerusalem.

**Gemara Berachot 28b: 8-10**

When Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai fell ill his students entered to visit him. When he saw them, he began to cry. His students said to him: Lamp of Israel, the right pillar, the mighty hammer, the man whose life's work is the foundation of the future of the Jewish people, for what reason are you crying? With a life as complete as yours, what is upsetting you?

וְכַשְׁחֲלָה רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן בֶּן זַכַּאי נִכְנָסוּ תַלְמִידָיו  
לְבַקְרוֹ. כִּיּוֹן שָׂרָאָה אוֹתָם הַתְּחִיל לִבְכּוֹת.  
אָמְרוּ לוֹ תַלְמִידָיו: "נֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל, עַמּוּד  
הַיְמִינִי, פֶּטִישׁ הַחֲזָק", מִפְּנֵי מָה אַתָּה  
בּוֹכֶה?

**Rabban Yochanan's answer:**

Now that they are leading me before the supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He, Who lives and endures forever and ever; if He is angry with me, His anger is eternal; if He incarcerates me, His incarceration is eternal; and if He kills me, His killing is for eternity. I am unable to appease Him with words or bribe Him. Moreover, but I have two paths before me, one of the Garden of Eden and one of Gehenna, and I

וְעַכְשָׁיו שֶׁמְלוּכִים אוֹתִי לִפְנֵי מֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי  
הַמְּלָכִים הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא, שֶׁהוּא חַי  
וְקַיִים לְעוֹלָם וָלְעוֹלָמֵי עוֹלָמִים, שָׂאֵם כּוֹעֵס  
עָלַי — כָּעֵס כָּעֵס עוֹלָם, וְאֵם אוֹסְרִנִּי —  
אִיסוּרוֹ אִיסוּר עוֹלָם, וְאֵם מְמִיתִנִּי —  
מִיתָתוֹ מִיתַת עוֹלָם, וְאֵינִי יָכוֹל לִפְיִסּוֹ  
בְּדַבָּרִים וְלֹא לְשַׁחֲדוֹ בְּמַמּוֹן. וְלֹא עוֹד, אֲלֹא  
שְׁנֵי לִפְנֵי שְׁנֵי דְרָכִים, אַחַת שָׁל גֶּן עֵדֶן

do not know on which they are leading me; and will I not cry?

His students said to him: Our teacher, bless us. He said to them: May it be His will that the fear of Heaven shall be upon you like the fear of flesh and blood. His students said: To that point and not beyond? Shouldn't one fear God more? He said to them: Would that a person achieves that level of fear. Know that when one commits a sin, he says to himself: I hope that no one saw me. If one is as concerned about avoiding shame before God as he is before man, he will never sin.

ואחת של גיהנום, ואיני יודע באיזו מוליכים אותי, ולא אבכה!  
אמרו לו: רבינו, ברכנו. אמר להם: "יהי רצון שתהא מורא שמים עליכם כמורא בשר ודם". אמרו לו תלמידיו: עד כאן? אמר להם: ולואי, תדעו קשאדם עובר עברה אומר: "שלא יראני אדם".

***Do you think that Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai's unease was because of the answer he gave to Vespasian? Why might he have felt uneasy?***

***What might this teach us about Jewish history?***

**Suggested answer:**

Everybody has a mission to perform through living their life. As one of our greatest leaders and religious personalities, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was acutely aware of this. He knew that the ramifications of his answer to Vespasian were huge and might affect the Jewish people for many centuries afterwards. Like everybody else, he could only try his best and hope that with God's help, he would make the right decisions. He had seen Jerusalem destroyed and many Jews killed as Jewish sovereignty was ended. His intentions were sincere in trying to serve God as well as possible but how could he be sure at this juncture in history that he had been correct? As the end of his life approached, he reminded his students of our fundamental belief in the World to Come and of being aware of the ramifications of our actions. He hoped and prayed that he had fulfilled his crucial mission successfully and even as his end approached, wanted his students to think of their own mission and fulfilling it properly.

We can learn from Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai the importance of realising that we too have a mission to perform, in which we can change our lives and the lives of others.

*Text taken from sefaria.org*