

The Questions You'll be Asked When You Get to Heaven

Michael Strassfeld, Rabbi Emeritus, Society for the Advancement of Judaism

When they escort a person after his death to the heavenly tribunal, they ask:

Did you conduct your business faithfully?

Did you set aside time to study Torah?

Did you create relationships?

Did you hope for redemption?

Did you delve into wisdom?

Did you learn from experience?

Adapted from Tractate Shabbat 31a

This is a striking list of what the heavenly tribunal thinks is the measure of a life.

Are you surprised by what is asked first about faithfully conducting your business? Faithfully connotes honestly in this context, that is faithful to ethical principles. It also suggests being faithful to your own sense of how to conduct your business whether it is the treatment of customers or those who work for you.

How many questions are universal and how many are specifically Jewish?

What might you have added to this list of questions? What might you have omitted? How might you have reframed some of these questions?

The question of did you create relationships in the original text says did you engage in having children? Some of the traditional commentators understood that to mean did you help others have children, for example help an orphan find a mate. It can also be understood to mean did you create a legacy that will continue after your death. Often children were thought to be that legacy, but it could be the relationships you had with other people, or the impact of your accomplishments etc.

I am struck by the sense of growth and change underlying many of these questions. Did you live your life hoping (and working) for a better world? Did you seek to grow in wisdom and understanding of yourself and how to be in the world? The last question is literally did you learn one thing from another meaning did you learn from your mistakes and successes throughout your life.

These all suggest that life is about change and growth. These questions are useful to think about long before you face the heavenly tribunal. What are the values and principles that shape your life. It is always possible to strive to better live up to these values. As we get older, we gain a perspective from our experience that can lead to wisdom about what is important in the time we still have.

These questions would be useful framing questions in the context of What Matters. How do I think about my life? What do I want to share with my loved ones in the last stages of that life? What is the legacy that I want to give expression to while I still can? They will help shape the answer to what would you wish for in order to comprise good days in the last stage of your life.

Rabbi Michael Strassfeld