

## Q&A - August 2011 - The Importance Of Asking Questions - "Jewish Life" magazine

Q & A launched three years, 32 editions ago, and over that time the Chief has answered 395 questions - why is asking questions so important in Judaism?

**The philosophy of this column has always been to question you about topical things, and for the next two editions, we are going to be taking questions from our readers? why?**

Questions are a crucial part of being Jewish because they are a critical part of Torah learning.

**Where do we get that?**

The Gemorah is all about questions. In it, the sages of the Talmud debate the Mishna. They compare, contrast, and raise contradictions between the different Mishnas. Take a look for example at Rashi's commentary on the Chumash. It's all questions! The whole process of Torah learning is driven through questions.

**Why?**

Good question! I'll answer that with a question. What is Torah learning?

**You tell me?**

It is about conveying Hashem's wisdom to us. So surely, one could say that any philosophy or belief system would have to tolerate questions, yes ? but Judaism does not just tolerate questions, it embraces them, and they actually form an integral part of the learning process.

**How so?**

Firstly, it shows that you are thinking. And when you are thinking you are applying yourself to the information you have just heard, rather than it being just a passive process. You are actively involved, and when you are participating actively, it becomes a much more intense experience. It also shows that you care. If you ask a question, you are interested in the answer. And interest and passion is the heart and soul of what Torah learning is about.

**If passionate and active learning is required, what about the rest of us?**

It says in the Mishna of Pirkei Avos that you should drink the words of our sages with thirst. Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky says that learning Torah is like drinking water. You can drink water because you can't survive without it, and so too can we not survive spiritually or morally without the Torah. Or you can drink the water because you are thirsty and water is the only thing that can adequately quench that thirst. So the Mishna is saying that we mustn't learn Torah merely to be spiritually healthy. But rather because we actually want to. And Hashem wants us to enjoy that process. The blessings of learning Torah say that Hashem should make the words of Torah sweet in our mouths.

**How does He do that?**

That is part of the fact that there is mystery in the world. Mystery is what piques a person's interest ? when you have total access to something, you lose interest in it. So it is part of a journey of discovery made interesting by seeing new things all the time. Rashi in

his commentary on the Gemora describes the process of learning Torah as 'revealing the secrets'.

### **But are there ever answers?**

Torah is endlessly deep. The answers are multi-layered, which is why the process of questioning never ends. Here is a question: why is it that the highest accolade for a Torah scholar is to call them a 'talmid chacham' - a wise student - as opposed to a master, or a doctor, as in secular learning? Because the greatness of Torah learning is exemplified by great questions.

### **But surely the questions run out eventually?**

There are endless layers of depth to Torah, because it is from Hashem, whereas all other wisdom in the world is flat.

### **What does that mean?**

This is an idea I heard from Rabbi Reuven Leuchter when he was here in Johannesburg. All bodies of wisdom of the world, some of which are very complicated, are all in fact flat, with one layer of meaning. Take Einstein's theory of relativity. It is complex, yes, but it is not deep. You either get it or you don't. But Torah is endlessly deep, and that is the amazing thing about it. Depth relates to the same text or concept being understood on multiple levels. For example, a child in grade one can learn the pasuk of Bereishit, and the greatest Torah scholars of the generation, almost a hundred years old can be learning the same verse. Both learning it on their own level.

### **But how does questioning fit in here?**

The challenge is to keep going into it, deeper and deeper - and we can only do that by asking questions. If we stop asking questions then we are happy with the level of our understanding. That is why a talmid chacham still looks at the same verse he has learnt for decades and can be bothered by something new, begging a deeper look.

### **I always thought questions connote doubt?**

There are cynics in the world who claim they are asking such important questions, but really, they are making a statement. Real questions are within the framework of faith, and there is so much to probe within that to deepen one's faith, by asking the right questions and understanding the depth and clarity of the existence of Hashem in the world and the fact that He gave us His Torah. Cynics come to undermine, but then there are those who cannot even be bothered to ask. And that is even more detrimental. Questions show that it is relevant and interesting to you. And those questions can be about Torah and about life. Looking back on all Q&A columns we have done, many of the questions were simply about life issues. 'Turn it over and over and everything is in it?' - the Torah helps us to understand our lives, and the Q&A has been an all-encompassing journey reflecting on life through questions. That's why I am looking forward to receiving readers' questions and doing my best to answer them in the coming issues.