

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5777
***Hineini* – Responding to the Call**
Rabbi Karen Citrin

Last year, when we were interviewing at Temple Beth David, Micah and I immediately felt at home during one of our visits. We met a third grade boy named Jacob, who had a joke book with him at temple. We recognized it because it was the same joke book that was sitting on our boys' shelves back in Tulsa. In fact, we even knew some of the jokes. I'll share a few with you, and you have to help me. (*Laugh Out Loud Jokes for Kids*, Rob Elliott)

Knock, knock. Who's there? Hatch. Hatch who? God bless you.

Knock, knock. Who's there? Wendy. Wendy who? Wendy you think we'll be done with these knock knock jokes?

Well, there's one more: Knock, knock. Who's there? Knock, knock. Who's there? No, that's it. It's no joke. That's the question.

Nine year old boy humor aside, this one is not a joke, it is real. It is the fundamental Jewish question on our New Year. Who's there? Who among us is here and truly present? Who will be inscribed for another year? It's the oldest question in the world, going back in time to the Garden of Eden, when God said to Adam, "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:9) Are you there? As we began our Days of Awe last night, Rabbi Micah taught that this season is about reconnecting with our "why", what it is that we live for, what gives purpose to our lives. We begin to do this when we learn to be truly present.

Kathleen Dowling Singh writes in, *The Grace in Aging*, "If we look even a tiny bit below the surface of our robotic habits of body, speech, and mind, most of us would have to admit that we feel lost much of the time... Most of us are so rarely *here*. Our attention is so rarely at home in *now*. And yet, here and now, in our depths – in intimacy, vulnerability, presence – is where we find the grace we long for... Imagine what it would be like simply to be present with the mystery and the immensity and the glorious, shimmering impermanence of this experience of life. Imagine what it would be like to live with a courageous heart, to not turn away, to stay open to what is difficult to face."

The New Year calls us: Who's there? How will we answer? This is the message of these holy days.

Last night at the beginning of the service Jenny chanted the *Hin'ni* prayer, the profound meditation of the prayer leader asking that he or she be present and open and humble in the sacred task of leading a community in prayer.

Hin'ni sounds a lot like the Hebrew word, *Hineini*, which we just heard three times in the Torah reading. *Hineini*, "Here I am." When a word is repeated three times in one passage, something important is going on. We should pay attention. When God called Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, Abraham responded to God's call with one word: "*Hineini*." Then, when Isaac turned and called out to his father on their way to Mount Moriah, Abraham answered,

“*Hineini b’ni* – Here I am, my son.” And finally, when an angel called from heaven telling Abraham to stop from raising his hand against his son; to each address, human and divine, Abraham responded: “*Hineini* – Here I am.” (Genesis 22:1,7,11)

Rabbi Laura Geller writes, “What Abraham learned on the mountain is that God doesn’t want us to sacrifice a part of ourselves in order to serve God. God wants us to pay attention, to be present, to bring the fullness of our selves into our relationships.” (*Hineini in Our Lives*, Norman J. Cohen)

Generations later, a simple shepherd named Moses, responded, “*Hineini*.” When Moses turned aside to behold a bush aflame but not consumed, God called out to him, “Moses! Moses!” “I am here, I am ready to respond, I am present.” “*Hineini*,” Moses answered. (Exodus 3:4)

These Holy Days ask all of us to measure what I like to call our “hineininess” – how present we are, how ready we are to respond. *Hineini* is not about being perfect or present all the time; it is about being human, vulnerable and ready.

Perhaps you have heard of a new book that speaks to the heart of these questions by author, Jonathan Safran Fore, called *Here I Am*. His novel came out just in time for these High Holy Days.

Weaving in our Genesis text about Abraham and Isaac, Foer raises contemporary questions about how we fulfill our conflicting duties as parent, spouse, child and adult? Jew and American? How we navigate our own identity when our lives are linked so closely to others? And all this while managing soccer practice, grocery shopping, laundry, minimizing the time we put a child in front of a screen, and keeping our house respectably clean!

In the story, the protagonist’s son studies this Torah portion for his bar mitzvah. Although convinced that his bar mitzvah will be a “colossal waste of time,” the young Sam comments, “Most people assume that the test is God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. But I think it could be read that the test was when God called to him. Abraham didn’t say, “What do you want?” He didn’t say, “Yes?” He answered with a statement: “Here I am.” Whatever God needs or wants, Abraham is wholly present for Him, without conditions or reservations or need for explanation.” Like many insightful and truthful commentaries heard from the mouths of Jewish thirteen year olds, the young Sam goes on to say in his speech, “My bar mitzvah portion is about many things, but I think it is primarily about who we are wholly there for, and how that, more than anything else, defines our identity.”

I think Woody Allen summed it up well when he said, “80% of success is showing up.” *Hineini*, however, is not merely a statement of location. *Hineini* is an attitude, a spiritual presence, a way of being in the world. It is a seemingly simple idea that is the root of many religions. Judaism, especially, teaches us to take notice of the awe, the mystery, the challenges, and the blessings of life.

Every time the word *Hineini* is spoken, it signifies a turning point, a potentially life-changing moment encouraging reflection, decision, and action. *Hineini* is a Jewish response to the unpredictable calls and questions in life.

We all receive calls in life. For some, the call may come at work - from a patient, a boss, or a colleague. For others, the call may come from a young voice at 2 am, or 3 am, or again at 4 am. Or, the call might come from a friend - "Can you come over? I need to talk." The call may come from a neighbor or a stranger. Or the call may come from a spouse, a sibling, a parent, a grandparent who needs our help, our support, our care.

And then there are the calls we don't expect, the ones we haven't prepared for, or know will come but don't know when. Six years ago I received such a call. The call was from my stepfather. For several years, my sister and I had watched our mother face the challenges of Parkinson's disease while in her late 50's. But over time, we couldn't shake the unsettling feeling that something else was going on. Then my stepfather called one afternoon and told us that my mother had received a different diagnosis - Lewy body dementia, a devastating neurodegenerative disease that attacks both the body and mind, causing fluctuations in cognition and vivid hallucinations. In that moment, my family and I were called up to be there for my mother.

After one especially difficult episode that landed my mother in the hospital, I stood near her while I thought she was sleeping. In a rare moment of complete clarity, she opened her eyes, looked at me and said quietly, "The roles are reversed. You are caring for me." Then she said with tears in her eyes, "I'm sorry." "That's ok, mom," I replied. "This is where I should be right now. Do you need anything? And looking a little scared she said, "Just stay with me." "Ok mom, I am here."

The experience of caring for my mom, for my two young children, my husband, and the needs of a congregation has made me think about the many ways we are each called upon in life, and our ability to respond to these calls. It is hard to share this story about my mother, who died three years ago. But I know that many of you have a similar experience, whether it is a parent, family member, or being a caregiver for a beloved spouse. Many of us are part of what has become known as the sandwich generation, adults who are called upon to be present for both younger and older members of our families. I know my experience is not unique. We are all called upon in different ways.

I have discovered that Judaism is less interested in the *kind of calls* we receive and more interested in *how we respond*. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel sums up this pattern of call and response best. "Faith comes out of awe, out of an awareness of our being called upon. Religion begins with a consciousness that something is asked of us. People are not innocent bystanders in the cosmic drama. The souls of people are candles of God, lit on the cosmic way." (*Man is Not Alone*)

Perhaps some of you who are listening are incredulously, thinking to yourself, "But rabbi, I receive hundreds of calls a day, hundreds of texts and emails. It is impossible to answer all of them. It is overwhelming." And you are right. Jewish tradition also grants us permission to take

a break sometimes from answering our calls. It is simply not always possible to respond to others with the full presence of *Hineini*. It is okay to take time for ourselves, to take a Shabbat from our phones, from all the demands placed upon us. Taking the time to care for ourselves will probably help us to better respond with *Hineini* when we really need to.

Judaism teaches us that to live means to be asked; we make our lives meaningful by our response. “All that is left to us is a choice,” writes Abraham Joshua Heschel, “to answer or to refuse to answer. Yet the more deeply we listen, the more we become stripped of the arrogance and callousness which alone would enable us to refuse . . . Life is a mandate . . . a flow of opportunity for service.” (*Man is Not Alone*)

Rabbi Heschel’s words have helped me realize that it is a blessing to be able to respond with “*Hineini*.” As I watched the disease gradually strip away my mother’s ability to be present, to be fully aware and able to respond to others, I learned not to take the opportunity to say *Hineini* for granted. My family made the very difficult decision to move my mom, at age 63, into an assisted living facility. During one of our weekly visits to what my kids called “grandma’s new house,” I noticed a prayer hanging on the wall of the elevator. This prayer speaks to all of us who are called upon to visit or be there for a loved one. It reads:

Please grant my visitors tolerance for my confusion,
forgiveness for my irrationality and the strength
to walk with me into the mist of memory my world has become.
Please let them take my hand and stay awhile,
even though I may seem unaware of their presence.
Help them to know how their strength and loving care will drift slowly into the days to
come just when I need it most . . .
And please let them know, how very much their visits mean,
how even through this relentless mystery,
I can still feel their love.

What an honest and heartfelt message for all of us about our ability to respond to the call with *Hineini*, about the struggle to hold on to our own ability to be present as we age, and about the kind of honor it is to be present for another soul. To live the life of *Hineini* means to face and respond to the sacred moments and opportunities in our lives. It means to grasp hold of special moments in time and be there. “Who’s there?” may be one of the oldest questions in the world. “*Hineini*” might be the single most powerful response.

To which calls in your life will you say *Hineini* this year? Micah and I so honored to be here, at Temple Beth David, with all of you. You have said *Hineini* by being here today. We can say *Hineini* to a new member or visitor – I’m here for you, we’re glad that you are here. We can say *Hineini* by being present for our congregation throughout the Jewish year. We can say *Hineini* to our neighbors, and to our brothers and sisters in our streets and communities who are in need. We can say *Hineini* to friends – to be there for them and to treat them with kindness. Kids, you can say *Hineini* to your parents – with a yes and no whining, with love and respect and a desire to be the best kids you can possibly be. Parents, you can say *Hineini* to your kids – to really listen to them, to give space when they need space, to give hugs when they need comfort,

and to love them for who they are. We can say *Hineini* to our partner in life – to escort him or her through the ups and downs of each day. We can *Hineini* to ourselves – to allow ourselves to care for our own bodies and minds. And we can say *Hineini* to our loved ones who need us.

To the call of 5777 – let us say: *Hineini*, Here I am. With the beginning of the New Year, thank God, we are here.