

## **Rosh Hashanah 5765**

Hineini-Here I Am

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Once again we enter the hallowed precincts of the Temple Beth Sholom sanctuary to begin the sacred cycle of our High Holy Days, walking together the holy pilgrimage from the awesome majesty of this Rosh Hashanah through the joyous celebration of Simchat Torah.

But this year is different, isn't it? This year is seasoned by the bittersweet realization that this is our last journey on this road together with me as your rabbi. Next year, another will have the blessing of standing here and addressing you. And that realization at once brings me a wistful sadness as I contemplate how much I appreciate my years as rabbi of Temple Beth Sholom and how much I will miss you all and, at the same time, I am filled with incredible excitement and anticipation as I imagine the wonderful future and its possibilities that lie ahead for our congregation under inspiring new and dynamic leadership, and the promises that await fulfillment for Wendy and myself in our new home in the Holy City of Jerusalem.

Our journey together has been one of great blessing for me. I owe this congregation so very much, beyond anything that words can express. I have given a great deal of thought to what I would say tonight. Wendy suggested that I might choose to give you 15 minutes of silence-a Zen sermon-one that she thought would be greatly appreciated. Or, someone else opined, I should deliver a gossipy tell-all expose of my rabbinate at TBS. Not only would that be unethical, it would be totally unlike me-as entertaining as it might otherwise be.

No, tonight I would like to reflect on something very basic, it begins with another journey, one that began long, long ago...

Journeys-existential, psychological and spiritual-very much inform the meaning of our Rosh Hashanah holy day. The Torah portion to be read on Rosh Hashanah, chosen by our rabbis millennia ago, chronicles the journey taken by our patriarch Abraham when God called him in a test of self-discovery. God commanded Abraham to take his beloved son Isaac as a sacrifice to an unknown mountain, there to offer his son to Adonai.

Together with Isaac, Abraham sets out on this tragic journey-one that was not extraordinary in his own time when child sacrifice was the norm in a pagan world where gods demanded such offerings routinely, yet which must have nonetheless ripped at Abraham's heart. We know the story, don't we? On the way to Mount Moriah-for so, we are told, is the mountain called-Isaac asks his father where the animal for the sacrifice is. Abraham, undoubtedly wracked by guilt and angst, responds that God will provide the lamb for the offering, and the two march on. He takes his son to the place ordained by God, there he builds the altar, binds young Isaac and places him upon the wood-laden pyre. Lifting the sacrificial knife, just as he is about to thrust and snuff out the life of his beloved son, a divine voice cries out, "Abraham! Abraham!" And Abraham responds, "Hineini! -Here I am!"

"Hineini! -Here I am!" The word occurs three times in the story of the binding of Isaac: once at the beginning of the story when God initially calls Abraham to the test and the patriarch

responds, Hineini; then, a second time as father and son are walking together and Isaac calls out "Father!" and Abraham replies, "Hineini! Here I am my son." After which Isaac asks about the absence of the sacrificial lamb. And, finally, when the voice of God's messenger, the angel, calls to Abraham to stay his hand and spare Isaac's life, thus ending the test. But here there is a critical difference. Here, Abraham's response does not come immediately after the call. His name must be called twice, "Abraham! Abraham!" Only after the second call does he respond, "Hineini! Here I am!" As if he is shaken awake out of some kind of trance, slapped back into reality.

For me, Abraham's test, and his whole journey to Mount Moriah is distilled into that particular "Hineini!" Our sages teach us that the purpose of that test was not for God's benefit. God, being omniscient, did not need to know the extent of Abraham's loyalty and faith. Rather, it was the patriarch *himself*-on his personal journey of self-discovery who had to plumb the depths of his own being and faith. This "Hineini" was not a matter of where he was in place, but a matter of where he was within himself. That is why it took two calls- "Abraham! Abraham!" - in order to get his attention. This was a call to his very being!

And this call came at a critical moment for Abraham personally and for his people. Personally, because this was at a time when his faith was being tested. His whole adult life was predicated upon his belief in one God, a God who could not be seen, a God who promised him a destiny focused upon the lad bound upon this altar.

And, bound upon that altar, was the destiny of the people as yet unborn, and only imagined. If Isaac dies, the people dies with him. What should, what must Abraham do? Caught up in the confusion and the enormity of his responsibility, it takes two calls to stir him, "Abraham! Abraham!" before he can respond, "Hineini."

Fascinated by this moment of personal and national crisis I explored our Torah for other such moments. Two more times I found our patriarchs faced with similar "Hineini" moments. I looked for other times when the patriarch was called not once, but twice before responding, "Hineini," and then explored the text for parallels to our Rosh Hashanah Torah portion. What I found was most insightful indeed.

Also in Genesis is the chronicle of the patriarch Jacob. Through his life's struggles he is given the name Israel-a metaphor meaning he struggled with that which is divine and mortal and prevailed. From Jacob/Israel we are called the people of Israel and we have been God-wrestlers ever since. Late in Jacob's life he is faced with a critical decision. There is famine in the land of Canaan-the Land of Israel. His son Joseph is now the vizier of Pharaoh in Egypt and there is promise of sustenance and security for his young nation in that foreign land.

He must have been overjoyed. Here he thought his son Joseph dead for the past twenty and more years and now he learns that he is alive and prosperous. However, he himself is quite old and might not survive such an arduous journey to Egypt. And, he must have worried. Should he go down with all that he possessed and leave the land promised by God to his ancestors-to Abraham and to Isaac? To Abraham there was given a prophecy that the people would go down to Egypt, there to fall into servitude, surely he was aware of this prophecy-did he dare lead his people into

slavery? We can only imagine his confusion, can't we? So the divine call comes-both from within him and from without-"Jacob! Jacob!" And he replies, "Hineini!" Then, in that moment, like Abraham before him he understands, he knows what he must do, and he takes his destiny and the destiny of his people into his hands.

In Exodus we encounter one of the most well known of the "Hineini" moments. It takes place on the barren, craggy slopes of a desert mountain, where a shepherd-a fugitive Egyptian prince-meets his destiny. Moses, seeing a bush burning without being consumed is drawn to the curious sight. Fascinated by the marvelous sight, perhaps caught in its hypnotic wonder, a voice calls out, "Moses! Moses!" And he replies, "Hineini!"

Moses' "Hineini" moment takes him somewhat by surprise. Perhaps he thought that he left the perils of Egypt behind him. He was now, safely among the people of Midian, comfortably assimilated into the people of Jethro; he is shaken back into the realization of who he was, Moses-once, the prince of Egypt-the descendant of Hebrew slaves. His "Hineini" moment was a call back to his own reality, to his own destiny. For, it is from the burning bush that he is given the charge to return to Egypt and his career as the agent of God's liberation and as the Lawgiver-as Moshe Rabbenu, Moses our Teacher-begins.

Abraham, Jacob and Moses, each was faced at a crucial point in their lives with a moment of decision to face or flee from their destiny-to embrace the reality of who they were or to hide from it-and each responded "Hineini! -Here I am!" in existential affirmation.

For each of us sitting here on this Erev Rosh Hashanah tonight there is a divine voice calling. It may take a bit of prompting to hear it. It calls upon us to acknowledge who we are, to accept our destiny. For most of us, in truth, this is a rather benign call. We are not put in life or death situations, challenging us to take stands. We do not think of ourselves holding our destiny or the destiny of our people in our hands at any critical moment. But, what if we did-how would we respond?

I pose this question in light of a book which appeared this past year entitled I Am Jewish: Personal Reflections Inspired By the Last Words of Daniel Pearl. Daniel Pearl, you may recall, was the *Wall Street Journal* correspondent who was brutally beheaded by terrorists in Pakistan in February of 2002. In the horrific videotape of his execution, Pearl made a last statement in which he said, "My father is Jewish, my mother is Jewish, I am Jewish." Was it a kind of confession forced upon him by his captors to somehow perversely justify his death?

Was it a brazen and bold defiance of their anti-Semitism on his part? We may never ultimately know. But Danny Pearl's words did more than stoke the flames of world-wide anti-Semitism, they struck a deep and resonant chord for Jews around the world, and inspired them to consider what being a Jew means to them. For Danny Pearl, his execution-*Al Kiddush HaShem*-for the sanctification of God's Name-was his "Hineini" moment when he chose to stand up for who he was-a Jew, not because of his executioners, but despite them.

Inspired by his last words, a Bat Mitzvah, in Rockville Center, New York, designed a Mitzvah project in which she asked family and friends to contribute their thoughts to a booklet on what

being a Jew meant to them. She passed that booklet on to the family of Danny Pearl, and to the Daniel Pearl Foundation. The foundation was established to perpetuate Danny's memory through countering the forces of hate, bigotry and ignorance at the root cause of his death and to help people of all faiths and backgrounds to better understand Jewish people and Judaism. To that end, the Foundation published I Am Jewish this past year edited by Danny's parents Judea and Ruth Pearl.

In it, a cross section of Jews from religious to secularist, from teens to elders, from famous to obscure, share their reflections on what it means to them to be Jewish. It is of particular importance for us to listen to this chorus of Jewish voices today in this world filled with a recrudescence of the ugliest forms of anti-Semitism from the hate-filled mullahs of the Middle East to the sophisticated salons of Parisian society. We live in a world in which, as a Jew, it is sometimes difficult to stand up proudly and say, "Hineini! - Here I am!"

A constant theme throughout the reflections is that we are a generation of Jews who have a choice whether or not to *be* Jews and to *live* Jewish lives. In a sense, we are *all* Jews-by-Choice. What that means is that we can all escape being Jews-if that is what we choose-unlike any other generation before us. As one of those voices, Ruth Wisse observed, "We may choose to live as Jews, visably and vitally, or else slip anonymously into the gentile mainstream."

Wouldn't that make things so much easier? If for just once we *didn't* have to say "Hineini!" and stand up as a Jew, but could just blend in like everyone else. "For once," we might demand of God, "couldn't You just choose someone else?" But then, what would we lose? If being just like everyone else is such a wonderful goal, what is to be gained by maintaining our particularistic identity as Jews? In other words, why be Jewish?

Natan Sharansky, the former prisoner of conscience during the days of the struggles for Soviet Jewry, now the Minister of Jerusalem and Diaspora Affairs for the State of Israel, said this, "Only a person who is connected to his past, to his people, and to his roots can be free, and only a free person has the strength to act for the benefit of the rest of humanity."

So, to be truly free as an individual, you have to have a sense of who you are-that means your roots, your history, your identity. But more-it means that you *actualize* that identity by living it. *You live your Judaism*. But that isn't always easy, is it?

Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, one of the foremost voices of Judaism and Jewish spiritual practice on the modern scene suggests that we look at the word Jew as a *verb*. He asks, "What benefit do I get from being a Jew, from 'Jewing' regularly and with intensity? It remains"-according to Schachter-Shalomi-"the most real of all questions. And perhaps the very reality is why the asking can cause such discomfort."

Are you? Are you uncomfortable by such questions as how Jewish you feel you ought to be? Because, especially on this Rosh Hashanah, we might ask ourselves the question that must have gone through Daniel Pearl's mind a hundred times as he faced his executioners before he made his statement, "Why am *I* a Jew?" How do we answer "Hineini!" if at all?

Over the years, as I have asked people why they are Jewish and why they affiliate with Temple, often they tell me it is for the future-for their children and for their grandchildren. That is why our synagogues are driven by their Religious School calendars, youth programming and family activities. Of course, these are all vital needs of the Jewish community-but dropping your child off at Hebrew School does not insure the survival of Jewish civilization. Nor does a parent's volunteering for a committee, absent of any religious observance at home, instill a passion for Jewish living in a teenager's heart. Why be Jewish for someone else?

So, tonight, I would like to suggest a more self-centered, a more selfish view-to be Jewish for yourself, for your own fulfillment, satisfaction and challenge. In response, our challenge as a congregation must be to help each other and to help ourselves to bring Jewish celebration, observance and commitment into our lives-to educate and nurture meaningful Jewish living. We have the sacred obligation to help Jewish individuals and families to live Jewish lives. This will insure a Jewish future for our people and it will make Judaism our means to make this world a better place for everyone. Because, the more Jewish you are the more engaged with the world you will be, because as Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso expressed so well, "Ultimately, Judaism realizes that injustice and suffering are not divine problems but human responsibilities, that human acts of goodness bring God's presence into the world. Judaism recognizes God in small acts of heroism, in deeds of compassion and courage, in the hands and hearts and voices who work to bring healing and justice to the world."

And so, having listened to the response of others, I ask myself, how do I respond, personally to the Danny Pearl-inspired question? What is my "Hineini" answer?

For me, to be a Jew is to be locked in loving covenant with a people, a heritage, a land and a destiny. I don't why we Jews-so insignificantly small in number-have played such an important role in the drama of human history. But I believe with all my soul that we are destined to be a light to the nations and proof that a faith born four millennia ago still lives because individual Jews and a people together choose to live it.

For me, being a Jew is a montage of memories and experiences, it consists of the smells from my mother's kitchen and the wisdom from my grandmother's pen. It is the clang of the knife on the water glass as my Uncle calls us to Passover order and it is a forty-five year old picture of me in Indian headdress posed on the pulpit of Temple Israel in Hollywood passing the rabbi canned peas to publicize our Thanksgiving Tzedakah food drive. It is the journey we have traveled together as rabbi and congregation these past thirteen years, and it is the aliyah-fulfillment of my Zionist dream.

I am a Jew, not because of what I am willing to die for so much as what I want to live for. I am a Jew because I believe that Judaism is the moral and ethical-shaping language that gives me voice to be heard in the world in an echo of the divine call of our prophetic tradition.

For me, I am a Jew because I truly believe in destiny and the ability to shape destiny. I am a Jew by accident of birth and by deliberate daily choice.

In the challenges and trials of this world, we stand-each of us-at a kind of "Hineini" moment. How do we respond? What does it mean to each of us to be sitting here this High Holy Days? Are we merely taking up space or are we prepared to take up a challenge? Allow me to make this suggestion. During this Rosh Hashanah and during your Rosh Hashanah family gatherings tomorrow, amidst the food and schmoozing, take some time to discuss what it means to you to be a Jew in the modern world, and how you would have responded were you asked to submit a reflection to the Pearls' book in Danny's memory. For you, what would follow those words-"Hineini, I am Jewish"?

Listen!

Abraham! Abraham!

Jacob! Jacob!

Moses! Moses!

-And now God is calling your name.

Will you answer, "Hineini"?