

RH 2018 – Day 1

Hineni – Showing Up for the World We Need

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Hineni chant – Here I am.

It takes the Torah all of three and a half chapters - from the unfolding of the entire cosmos, to the creation of the first humans - and wham! the first murder takes place. Cain kills his brother in a fit of jealousy. Where Abel succeeded, Cain failed. What Abel has, Cain wants. Cain allows his jealousy to overtake him and he kills his brother.

With Abel's blood spilling out on the ground, God asks Cain a question - a question that is not really a question – “Where is Abel, your brother?” God is not asking where Abel's body is. The question is inviting Cain to be accountable and to show remorse for what he has done.

But instead of meeting the call to show up in truth and responsibility, Cain answers with a question that is not really a question. “Am I my brother's keeper?” In that moment, his response, filled with denial and dismissal, is a real failure! But, it is a question that echoes from Cain to this very day. And right now, it feels like a particularly live question for all of us - “Am I my brother's keeper?”

Am I the keeper of my fellow human being? Am I the guardian of other people's protection and dignity? Am I a steward of this planet and the lives that depend on its well-being?

At a time when children are being separated from their parents by United States Immigration Officials, while the Rohingya people of Myanmar are being slaughtered and are fleeing for their lives, while thousands of people are endangered by hurricanes on a planet that is warming and unable to absorb the rising floodwaters, while a renaissance of hate is newly alive in public words and actions and government policies, the question echoes:

Am I my fellow's keeper?

Judaism is clear in giving a resounding YES! to our shared responsibility and responsiveness. Our tradition directs us with concrete actions to pursue justice to protect the vulnerable, to ensure that resources are shared, to take a holy pause every week from constant consuming and producing, and to affirm every life as sacred. There's no question that Judaism holds high standards for not causing harm and for actively loving our neighbor and stranger and parents and future descendants.

But right now, in this climate of greed and deception and suffering, I am struggling with **how** to show up. And I'm going to guess that I'm not the

only one in this room wrestling with this question.

How do I live into what this wise tradition is asking of me?

How do I personally say – *Hineni* – Here I am, awake and ready to respond in a painful and complicated world?

I love that our tradition is demanding and clear in its values. I love that as our world changes, as our understandings change, that Judaism evolves its vision of justice as well. That's the big picture. But then there's the mess of me, and the mess of you. How do we actually, apply these values into our lives?

Let's acknowledge that there are so many ways that each one of us already shows up in actions of compassion and justice. You already have a big heart. You already have wisdom and skills.

What I want to explore today, are the edges where we feel our limits – where we are blind and unskilled; where we get stuck feeling like we can't do anything more; where we feel that the problem is so big, so intractable that there is nothing we can do that would make a difference; or, where we look at the commitment and actions of others, and decide that we can never measure up to their effort, and so, we do, nothing .

This year, I want to us to learn how to help each other stretch beyond what

we're used to. There's no one model or method, but, to use Naomi Klein's phrasing from her book No is Not Enough, together we might "grow wiser and more effective, united and focused on a rigorously hopeful vision to win the world we need."

Let's make a jump in Biblical history from Cain to Moses. More than any other biblical archetype, Moses becomes the corrective to Cain's apathy, "am I my fellow's keeper?"

Moses learns to answer YES through 3 qualities that I think, are important for us to learn – **readiness, reluctance and relationship.**

First - readiness. When Moses says, "*Hineni*" - the Torah's powerful affirmation of presence and readiness, with this one word, he pulls himself out of a bubble of oblivion. Prior to his encounter at the Burning Bush, Moshe, the future great liberator of the Israelites, hasn't been doing much. He has not been taking workshops on organizing or studying the politics of intersectionality. He has not been reading the works of Rabbi Heschel or Dorothy Day or Sol Alinsky. Moses has been living in the wilderness among the Midianites, tending sheep and building a family – a quiet, private life cut off from the oppression and suffering from which he fled.

Then one day, a wondrous burning bush sparked his attention and he woke-

up. Moses was tending sheep in the wilderness and he noticed a bush that was all aflame but the bush was not being consumed. He said, "*Asura nah ve'er'eh* – **I will turn aside and see** - what is this marvelous site?" That turning was the turning point. Moses opened his eyes. He observed something that broke through his expectations and pulled him to look more closely.

According to Midrash, the bush had been burning for generations, waiting for someone to notice and respond. Learning to pay attention is a radical practice and it houses the seeds of liberation. **I will turn aside and see.**

Sometimes what we need to see is painful and hard to take in. Sometimes what we need to see is a beauty that recasts this world with wonder and precious importance. The decision to turn and see is a commitment to ask - what am I currently **not** seeing? And then, deciding to turn, looking up from the four walls of my personal life to see, suddenly, a wider reality and know that this is what I am called to respond to.

Then, from the heart of the bush Moses heard the voice of the Holy One calling, "*Moshe. Moshe.*" And Moses answered "*Hineni*". Here I am - waking from habit, from a dream, from a self-induced coma. I practice seeing as a conscious act. I feel called because **now** I see, and **then** a heart of readiness arises.

Friends, waking up can happen in an instant. *Hineni*.

This New Year, can we be students of this lively seeing and responding?

The second quality is **reluctance**. I find it such a relief that Moses' next step was NOT to throw on a superhero cape and leap to the rescue. He may have said *Hineni* with awakened clarity, but as soon as he heard what was being asked of him, a flood of excuses pour out of his trembling mouth.

'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites?' 'What if the Israelites don't believe me or listen to me?' 'Who am I supposed to say sent me? 'I am not a man of words. I'm heavy-tongued and slow of speech.'

'Please send someone else.'

One second Moses thinks he's having a mystical chat with a thorn bush and the next thing he knows, he is told he will have to do everything that scares him most - go back to Egypt; challenge an entire system of abuse and greed; lead a people who feel broken and hopeless. Everything in him cries out - 'Don't make me do this.' Maybe you know this feeling. I do.

I want to learn from Moses' reluctance because I think that it is very wise.

He knows exactly what he fears most and he says it out loud. Insightfully, he knows the mess of his own heart. This step is essential. Who doesn't wrestle with feeling like a fraud sometimes? Who doesn't feel

overwhelmed by our smallness next to the enormity of the work? In order to show up for the world that we need, we're going to need to do what we **don't** feel ready for. A community organizer once said to me, "The causes of the crisis are very large. The solutions will have to be large, too. We will have to do more than live careful lives."

We need to attend to the resistance in our hearts, because if we don't, we either won't try at all, or we will clumsily muscle our way into trying to be good, or trying not to feel like frauds, and our actions may come out as harsh and self-righteous.

As Moses offers to God each thought of inadequacy and fear of failure, it stops being his private shame and self-defeat. His fallible humanness is held with compassion.

And with this vulnerability out on the table, God can offer a way to move forward despite the fears. God tells Moses, "Gather the elders. Take Aaron with you – he will be your mouth. I, Adonai, I will be with you as you speak. I will instruct you what to say. *Ki eheye imach* - because I will be with you." (Exodus 3:12)

What powerful words: I will be with you. The God of liberation, the God of moral courage, the holy intimate Whole of Life is with you, every step of the way.

And that brings us to the third quality – **relationship**. Who will you need with you, to show up with you, arm in arm, so that you can step forward, brave and clear? How will you nurture your connection with the deep and vast current that carries you, the sacred Presence that walks with you, the Great Love that guides you?

Moses learns relationship by remembering who he is. He is being called by the God of his ancestors, called into relationship that reaches back generations before him and extends a promise ahead of him. He is reminded that he's part of an unfolding story that's so much larger than his singular life, and it's time for him to step into it with both feet. He needs to recognize that he is an Israelite and the people who are suffering are his family. He also needs to recognize that he grew up in Pharaoh's palace and the oppressors are his family.

Friends, this is always true. Those who suffer are our family. Those who oppress are our family. We all have the capacity to do terrible things when we feel threatened or hurt or when we are cut off from relationship with

one another. To help create the world we need, we must shake off the delusion of separateness, and awaken to the realization that we are interconnected, interdependent, *Echad* – One.

We are all so fragile and vulnerable. I can **say** that every human life is sacred and worthy, but it's another thing to **behave** every day, rooted in the tender-hearted empathy and vigorous justice of that truth.

It is a conscious practice to see each other through this lens. To do this, we will need to build close and strong relationships. We will need to connect our lives with people from all kinds of ethnicities and beliefs and class backgrounds. We are going to need to see each other, listen to each other, and know each other's lives. We're going to have to get up in each other's business, and not give up on each other, and love the hell out of each other. And then we'll need to challenge each other to love more. Sadly, the bad stuff is going to keep happening. And it could very well get worse.

Here's my proposal for the New Year – let's make a commitment to be our fellows' keeper in braver, fiercer and big hearted ways. Let's turn and see and be alive with readiness. Let's feel all the resistance but refuse to let it stop us. Let's do what we don't feel ready for and let's get ready together so we can grow the world we need.

I will be with you. You will be with me. Hineni.

Hineni chant – Here I am