

Are we living our resumes or our eulogies?

Hanokh of Alexander taught: Once there was a stupid man who each morning had a difficult time remembering where he had left his clothes the night before. So one day he got a pencil and a piece of paper and wrote down where he was placing each article of clothing. He placed the note next to his bed and thought to himself “Tomorrow I will have no trouble finding my clothes!”

He awoke the next morning, quite pleased with himself, took the note, and followed it to the letter, finding each piece of clothing exactly where he had set it down. Within a short period of time he was fully dressed.

Suddenly he was seized with a terrible thought! ”But where am *I*?” he cried. “Where in the world am *I*?”

He looked everywhere but could not find himself.

“And so,” taught Hanokh of Alexander, “so it is with us.” (The classic tales, p.557)

The divine plan has given us the ability to reflect about where we are in our lives, not with regard to physical location, but in relation to **who** we want to be and **how** we want to live in relationship with God, with others and with ourselves. Often however, we are focused on our career objectives, on what we have *to do* but we often forget to ask “who am I, really? and why am I here.”

The Huffington Post recently published an article entitled: “Are you living your resume or your eulogy?” The author asks us to consider how we want to define success in our lives? Will we judge our success based on money? Or power? *Or* based on how many random acts of kindness we did during the course of a regular week? Are we living our lives according to what really matters to us? And if not, can we change?

It may be that the moments that come closest to defining how we want to live are precisely the ones that will never make it into our resumes. I recently saw a YouTube video. A blind man was sitting on the sidewalk outside of a busy shopping area. He had a can in front of him and a cardboard sign. The sign said: “I am blind. Please help.” Most people walked past him,

trying not to see him. A few dropped some coins in his can. A woman stopped in front of him. She took his cardboard sign and wrote something on the other side of it. Meanwhile, he was feeling her shoes; the only way he could know her, a bit. She put the cardboard sign back and she left. Suddenly, people no longer walked by him. The coins and dollar bills literally poured into his can until it was overflowing. At the end of day, the woman came back and stood in front of the man. Again, he felt her shoes. He asked her “What did you write on the sign?” She said “The same thing you wrote, I just used different words.” Then the camera went to the sign. She had written “This is a beautiful day and I can’t see it.”

So why did that woman stop and do what she did, anonymously, and on behalf of a total stranger? She was on her way to do something... but she was totally present and saw another human being who was vulnerable--and she responded. We have a word for such moments in our tradition: moments when we stand up and do what we are suddenly, and unexpectedly, called to do: We call them "הִנְנִי" moments. Sometimes saying “hineini” is about responding directly to God, but sometimes it is about being present to the needs of other people in our lives – whether of a complete stranger or of those closest to us. . **Mostly**, it is about knowing who we are and the God is within each one of us.

הִנְנִי is not a simple statement of our whereabouts. It means “here I am, fully present and ready to do what you ask.” The word הִנְנִי appears only a few times in the Torah. In most cases, God calls out to a person in a pivotal moment, and their response is an act of total focus, a complete readiness to encounter the Divine. What is significant about a הִנְנִי moment is *not* that God is reaching out to us but rather that we have declared that *we* are available to God.

Please imagine with me, for a minute, the profound awareness of God with which we can only surmise Abraham *avinu* lived. When the text tells us “God called his name”, imagine not that Abraham actually heard God’s voice, but that he was so totally present and open to God, that he knew, at the very core of his being, that God was there and wanted his attention. *That* is a הִנְנִי moment.

From a literary perspective, הִנְנִי tells the reader that something important is about to happen. Something is about to change! *That*, I propose, is the message of הִנְנִי in *vayeshev*, this week’s parsha. In this case, when Joseph responds הִנְנִי his response is not to God but to the call of

another *person*; to his father. Consider the possibility that in saying *הִנְנִי* to his father, Joseph may in fact, have been responding to God. Although Joseph may not yet be a willing accomplice, with *this* response of *הִנְנִי* to Jacob, he becomes the first violin in the orchestra that will fulfill the Divine symphony that creates the Jewish people as a nation.

Joseph's brothers are in Shechem tending their father's flock. Jacob requests that Joseph go to Shechem to see about the well-being of his brothers. Joseph responds *הִנְנִי*, here I am (ready to do as you ask). (Gen. 37:11-14)

We know that Joseph's brothers hated him and not without good reason. It is possible that they have taken the flock to Shechem for the purpose of making a plan to rid themselves of him. Why would Israel send his favorite son on a mission that was nearly impossible-not to mention potentially very dangerous? And why did Joseph respond with *הִנְנִי*? Jacob's request did not require a response of any kind. It called for action. Rashi says Joseph's *הִנְנִי* is *לשון ענוה וזריזות*, the language of humility and enthusiasm. Joseph was very aware of the potential danger but was nevertheless, enthusiastic about carrying out his father's request. The Almighty works in mysterious ways, doesn't She? Despite that we may not be aware of God's plan for us, there are a variety of ways that each of us can bring the Divinely inspired power of *הִנְנִי* into our lives. They will be moments of focus, of being present, open and available to invite God in, to make ourselves available to God or to be totally present for another human being. Despite that *we* will see in them great personal growth, our actions in these moments are not the type that will ever show up on our resume.

Not infrequently, people I haven't seen in a while tell me 'You haven't changed a bit!' – and while I know it is intended as a compliment and I want to take it as such, it misses the point. *I* know how much *I have* changed.

הִנְנִי moments can come when we least expect them. On June 16, 2011, I had a regularly scheduled mammogram. The radiologist saw something, in her words "irregular". I had a biopsy in the afternoon. At 6:00 that evening I received a diagnosis of breast cancer.

As incredible as it sounds, *that* was my *הִנְנִי* moment. I was in my third of six years as a rabbinical school student. Feeling God's presence in my life was an intense but elusive desire. Even today it sounds crazy to me but in that moment, I had a profound awareness of God's

presence. I became exquisitely aware of the Divine spark in myself. I prayed that God would bless me with the ability to survive this experience with grace. I simultaneously expected and fervently hoped that this test would deepen my compassion and strengthen my ability to hold both the pain and the joy of others.

Don't get me wrong. I am *not* suggesting that a cancer diagnosis, or any other dark moment in our lives, will be our opportunity to connect with God. Most often those are times when we pray that we will, somehow, just get through it. When or whether a *הַנְּיָה* moment comes, is entirely unpredictable. The key is to be open and available to that *possibility*. In what I perceived as my *הַנְּיָה* moment, I prayed; and for the first time that I could remember, it felt like I knew to whom I was praying. I have no idea where the words came from or exactly what I said. I remember only that I prayed with a profound humility that I would become a more effective, albeit "wounded healer", a better pastor and teacher.

A *הַנְּיָה* moment can be upon us even, maybe especially, at a time of profound darkness in our lives. It will undoubtedly change us forever; even if *only we* are aware of the change.

Recently, I read a sermon by Rabbi Joseph Braver z"l. In it, he also wondered whether 'you haven't changed a bit' is a compliment. "If God were to look at us today God would probably say to many of us: 'You are in bad shape. You haven't changed a bit.'" Rabbi Braver recalls a sign that used to sit near the cash register at the checkout line in many stores. 'Count your change before you leave' the sign said. "That is good advice not only about money," the rabbi suggests. "It is good spiritual advice as well." "...Let us count our change on a regular basis" he advises. "Let us make sure that when God sees us, we will hear, 'You look great! You've changed a lot.'"

When I die, I hope that my eulogy will celebrate my life in a manner very similar to how I would define success in my everyday existence.

May each of us as individuals and all of us as a community, be blessed with the wisdom and insight to find balance between doing and being. Help us not to miss our lives even while we're living them.

May we learn to live by our values; to be present and available to discern our own ^{הַיְיָ} moments. May we share the best of who we are with one another. And may we “count our change”-regularly.

I am grateful for the opportunity to have shared these thoughts with you. Shabbat shalom.