

Ten days ago, our Rosh HaShanah services started with the word 'Hineni'. This same word, Hineni, was recited by Moses 3,000 years ago, on behalf of the Israelites as they began their journey towards freedom and liberation.

It is a word of affirmation. Confirming to others, and more importantly to ourselves, that we are fully here in this moment. We acknowledge that this life is a gift and that we will not take it for granted.

'Hineni - Here I am' is a response to the existential questions of life: 'do you commit to living a full and meaningful life? Will you treat others and yourself with the understanding of the fragility and preciousness of life?'

We have a choice in how we respond. We can either say 'I am just one person, what does it matter if I am here?' Or we can say 'Hineni - here I am; my presence matters and so does yours!'

This is the word which inaugurates our Yamim Noraim - our Days of Awe. As we look back on our actions from the previous year, the question is asked: "who will show up and live fully in the year to come? Who shall be inscribed in the Book of Life?"

Hineni - Here I am. Inscribe *me* in the Book of Life!

This phrase is filled with both hopes for more sincere and thoughtful living, and with also contrition for our carelessness in the previous year. To say 'Here I am' takes both *chutzpah* and also humility. It is to say 'I request further blessings even though I acknowledge that I have squandered previous ones.'

The *chutzpah* and humility of 'Hineni - Here I am' is most evident in one of the earliest utterances of the phrase. After striking dead an Egyptian task-master, Moses flees to the desert to escape near-certain retribution.

At this very perilous moment in his life, unsure if he has been inscribed in the Book of Death by the Egyptian royal court, Moses meditates on his past and his future.

While deep in thought, he wanders past a cave with a burning bush inside of it. Moses goes to look further, only to have the voice of God call out to him.

If he receives a second chance at life, will he make the most of it?

To which Moses replies 'Hineni - Here I am'.

With feelings of humility and *chutzpah* in his heart, Moses decides to act on his Hineni by helping his fellow Israelites to say *Hinenu* - here *we* are - not as slaves but as full human beings tired of persecution and ready to live fully.

Earlier this year, my grandmother Radema passed away.

A woman of fierce determination who lived fully and passionately.

She was a well-respected pediatrician in the Soviet Union. She worked hard, was a good neighbour, and a loving mother to two.

Despite these characteristics, she was also a Jew living in Soviet Russia, and that trumped any other accomplishments that she was able to achieve.

As a result, my grandmother (along with my entire immediate family) fled to the United States leaving behind her culture, language, friends, and her world as she knew it.

While we were met with open arms by the American Jewish community, I still wondered if it was worth it to my grandmother to leave behind so much?

I was surprised by her straightforward answer. Without hesitation, she replied in the affirmative, saying that it was worth it.

She explained to me that simply moving to the United States added at least a decade to her life expectancy - as the average American life went about 10 years beyond that of the average Russian's.

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She was given a chance at a second life, one with dignity and free from persecution. With *chutzpah* and humility in her heart, faced with a new opportunity in a strange land and an unknown future, she responded Hineni - Here I am, I am ready.

Thankfully, she lived well beyond either of those life expectancies and continued to live a full life up until earlier this year.

I am reminded of her answer every year on Yom Kippur morning when we read from the final chapters of the Book of Deuteronomy. Facing an unknown future in a strange land, the Israelites stand on the precipice of change and transition. Nearing the end of one journey and slowly approaching the beginning of another one they are faced with a choice.

God spoke to the Israelites saying:

הַיִּים וְהַפְּנוֹת נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ - הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה

I have placed before you life and death, blessings and curses.

Uve'charta Ba'Chaim - Choose life.

During these Days of Awe, to choose life is to say "here I am. In this year to come, I shall *really* live."

At the beginning of each new Hebrew month, aside from this current month of Tishrei, we intersperse our regular liturgy with special selections from the Book of Psalms.

One of these special monthly additions declares with a bit more *chutzpah* than humility:

לֹא אָמוּת כִּי אֶחְיֶה

פֶּתַח לִי שְׁעֵרֵי צֶדֶק - אֲבֹא בָם

"I shall not die, but live...

Open the gates of righteousness for me so that I may enter them."

Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl says that the ability to choose is the most profound expression of our humanity.

"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

Blessings over curses, hopefulness over cynicism, a meaningful life over complacency.

In each moment of our lives, the choice is ours.

On Rosh HaShanah and in this month of Tishrei, we do not recite these verses from Psalms affirming our commitment choosing life.

Instead of reciting the words of others, this month, we are called to declare this choice ourselves.

Affirming our choice to live may seem like an insignificant transformation for such a revered day as today, but if the prayers of Yom Kippur achieve their stated purpose, then our declaration of 'Hineni' will not be for nothing.

The change may be noticed when we hug our family a little tighter or kiss them goodbye at the beginning of the day with hearts free of resentment and full of love.

Does there exist a greater transformation than this - than acknowledging the gift that is *this* life and recommitting ourselves to living it fully?

If not last Yom Kippur, then certainly this year amidst fires and pandemics, that the reminder to 'choose life' will be ever closer to our hearts and at the forefront of our minds.

In these final hours of Yom Kippur as we recall the lives and the memories of our friends and family that are no longer with us, what better way to honour their lives, than for us to choose life?

G'mar chatimah tovah!