

Rabbi Rachel Schmelkin

RH Day 2 5777

Hinenu: We are Here

It was four days before ordination.

I sat in a private mikvah (ritual bath) preparation room.

I carefully removed my nail polish,

slipped my rings off of my fingers,

and brushed and flossed my teeth.

I wanted to make certain

that there were no barriers

between the water and me,

so I removed every potential distraction.

I was ready.

It was a moment in which I felt the meaning of the word,

Hineni.

I am here.

I joined the rest of my female

rabbinical and cantorial classmates

around the mikvah waters.

Each of us faced the wall

cloaked by our large, soft white towels.

Our mikvah guide started to sing,

“Elohai neshama shenatata bi tehorah hi.”

My God, the soul you have given me is pure.

All of the women joined in,

the sound of our voices

swirling in the the room

with epic harmonies.

Our songs accompanied each woman
as she entered the warm, still,
mikvah waters.

The experience was unusual in many ways,
but mostly because

I was **completely** present
in each and every moment.

I could hear every splash.
smell the strong scent of chlorine from the water,
and visualize my own transformation
from rabbinical student
to rabbi.

And most remarkably,
I could feel the comforting presence of God,
surrounding me,
holding me.

I yearn for moments of being present,
and feeling presence,
especially during the High Holy Days,
a time of introspection and transformation.

But even during these sacred days,
moments of complete presence
are few and far between.

I don't know about you,
but I find it very difficult to be present.
As I walk through each day,
I encounter distractions around every corner.
Most often these distractions are on my phone.

To be clear,
this is not an anti-technology sermon,
or a sermon about millennials or generation z.
This is a sermon about being present,
and seeking presence.
Sometimes technology can help us do that,
and it certainly improves our lives in numerous ways.
I heard a story of a young woman whose parents live in Siberia.
She video conferenced them into her wedding
because they could not come to America.
Technology opens doors
for people who do not have access
to the kinds of opportunities
to which many of us have access
like education,
and even bank accounts.¹
But, like many things,
these benefits come with a cost.

At a recent youth group meeting,
I asked our high school students if their phones distract them.
I received a unanimous yes from around the table.
One teen told me that she feels most distracted by her phone
while trying to do homework.
It makes sense.
Research shows that an electronic interruption

¹ Tsao, Clara. "6 Ways Mobile Technology Has Transformed the World's Poor." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 8 Oct. 2013. Web. 20 Sept. 2016.

can continue to distract us for 25 minutes.²

Another teen said that it's frustrating
when he hangs out with a friend,
and the friend continually looks at his phone.

This is not just a teenage or millennial problem.

One parent of a high schooler told me that her kids tease her
about how much she loves her phone,
because she spends so much time on it.

Another parent told me that she feels stressed by the urge
to check her email,
and can't resist doing it right before bed.

In her book, *Alone Together*,

Sherry Turkle writes,

"People are skilled at creating rituals for demarcating the boundaries between the world of work and the world of family, play, and relaxation. There are special times, special meals, special places. Now demarcations blur as technology accompanies us everywhere, all the time. We are too quick to celebrate the continual presence of technology that knows no respect for traditional and helpful lines in the sand."³

Throughout her book.

Turkle suggests
that in today's world
it is harder and harder to focus,
be present,
and avoid distractions.

And while distraction may be a problem
prevalent in today's society,

² Rabbi Michael Holzman's Rosh Hashanah Sermon, Sullivan, Bob, and Hugh Thompson. "Brain, Interrupted." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 04 May 2013. Web. Sept. 2016.

³Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. 162. Print.

in part because of the constant
barrage of emails and text messages,
distraction is not new.

As I see it,
Abraham struggled with presence and distraction too.
Today we will read the Akedah,
the binding of Isaac.
As the story goes,
God calls to Abraham,
and Abraham responds assuring God
that he is present.
“Hineni,
I am here,”
says Abraham.

Modern biblical scholar, Nahum Sarna,
teaches that.

“Hineni expresses an attitude of attentiveness and receptivity.”⁴

Dr. Rabbi Norman Cohen,
a renowned scholar and one of my former professors,
points out that the word *hineni*
is used for the *first* time in this parashah.⁵
Never before has Abraham begun a task
with such focus,
and there couldn’t be a more important task.

⁴ Sarna, Nahum M. *The JPS Torah Commentary: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991. Print.

⁵ Cohen, Norman J., and Lester Bronstein. *Hineini in Our Lives: Learning How to Respond to Others through 14 Biblical Texts & Personal Stories*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Pub., 2003. Print.

After Abraham says *Hineni*,
 God instructs Abraham to take his son Isaac,
 and bring him to the land of Moriah,
 to be sacrificed.

Can Abraham maintain focus
 throughout his entire journey?

“Avi, My father,”

Isaac says.

“Hineni B’ni.”

“I am here, my son,”

answers Abraham.

Abraham responds to God *and* Isaac,
 with the same word.

From the text of Genesis itself,
 it seems that Abraham does remain focused
 when Isaac speaks to him.

But, Dr. Cohen makes an interesting observation.

He notices that Targum Yonatan,
 a translation of the Bible written in about 50 BCE,
 omits the word *b’ni*, my son.⁶

Dr. Cohen proposes
 that this translation hints at the possibility
 that Abraham did not give his full attention to Isaac.

Perhaps we can picture the scene,
 because we’ve been there before.

Isaac says his father’s name.

Abraham answers, “I am here,”

⁶ Ibid.

when what he really should say is,

“I am there,”

because his thoughts are somewhere else.

Once Abraham brings Isaac up the mountain,
Isaac places his son upon the wood of the altar,
and binds him.

“And Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son,
and an angel of God called to him from heaven, and said
Avraham, Avraham...

do not lay your hand upon the boy,
or do anything to him...”⁷

Abraham looks up and notices
a ram for sacrifice stuck in the thicket.

How does Abraham not notice the ram in the thicket?!
If it was stuck, wouldn't it have struggled loudly?
Perhaps the ram appears
only after the angel stops Abraham in the act.
But, I can't help but wonder,
was the ram there in the bushes all along?
After all, the angel says,
“Avraham, Avraham,”

It could be,
As medieval commentator Rashi suggests,
that the angel calls the name twice
as a sign of affection.
But Radak,
another medieval commentator,

⁷ Genesis 22:11-12

teaches that the angel repeats Abraham twice
to be sure that he will listen immediately.

Perhaps Abraham's presence declined
after his initial conversation with God,
and on the mountain he was distracted,
not aware of his surroundings,
lost in some other world.

Maybe he didn't even hear his name the first time,
a mistake that was nearly fatal.

Our distractedness can also be fatal-
fatal to our relationships,
fatal if we're driving a car,
fatal to our inner equilibrium and well-being.

In the book *Martin Buber's Life and Work*,
Author Maurice Friedman
recalls a personal story
that Jewish philosopher Martin Buber shared with him.
When Buber was a professor,
an unknown young man name Mehe
came to his office with questions.
Buber was polite,
but he wasn't really there.
He answered the questions,
without giving the man his full attention.
Two months later,
Buber found out that the man had died
on the battle front of World War I.
Maurice Friedman writes,

“What made Buber personally guilty... was that he withheld himself, that he did not respond as a whole person to the claim of the situation, that through this withholding he injured the common order of existence which he knew to be the foundation of his own and all existence... With the best intention in the world and with all the resources he could muster at that moment, he still was not ‘there,’ for Mehe, who had come to him in that hour. It is not that he did not say the right thing, but that he failed to make real, insofar as it was up to him, the possibility of genuine dialogue that that hour offered.”⁸

Buber’s story is not just a story of regret,

but of turning.

Freidman explains that Buber’s experience motivated him

to evaluate his own actions,

and make a change.

Going forward he vowed to be more aware *of*,

and more attentive *to* others.

Maybe some of can recall similar stories-

times that we were not present for our partner,

or didn’t listen to our child,

or failed to focus on the needs of a friend,

or a student.

Perhaps we can think of times that we became so distracted or busy

that we didn’t make it to yoga,

didn’t do our daily meditation,

didn’t go to synagogue to pray.

And maybe we can think of times in which we physically made it

to these activities,

but the entire time our minds wandered.

These were our opportunities

to center ourselves,

or even connect to something greater than ourselves,

⁸ Friedman, Maurice Stanley. *Martin Buber's Life and Work*. London: Search, 1982.162. Print.

to something that we might call God.

These were our chances to have mikvah moments,
but we let them go.

We are in the Days of Awe.

These days invite us to focus-
to focus on our relationships,
to focus on our behavior.

As we sit in services,
are we able to say

I am here,
and really mean it?

Can we focus on the words of the prayers,
what they mean to us or teach us?

Can we focus on the things buried deep within us,
so deep that we hardly ever go there?

Over the next week,
can we give ourselves the space to sit and reflect,
to figure out how we can be better,
where we have hit or missed the mark?

Can we find the time to call those we love,
reconnect,
or even say I'm sorry?

I know this won't be easy,
because it requires presence.

Many of us will go home this afternoon,
and meet our distractions at the door.

Which distractions will meet you?

For many of us it will be 10 new messages,

and 30 new emails.

We may feel *very* tempted to open them.

Or we might have the urge to turn on the news,
complete a task for an upcoming work deadline,
or check something off of a to do list.

But maybe we don't want to do these things.

Not on Rosh Hashanah.

Not when we have the opportunity to pay attention to our families.

Not when we could call a friend and say Shanah Tovah,
or I'm sorry.

Not when we could be giving ourselves time for introspection.

I want to put my phone,
my biggest distractor,
away.

Sherry Turkle writes,

"The networked culture is very young. Attendants at its birth, we threw ourselves into its adventure. But these days, our problems with the Net are becoming too distracting to ignore. At the extreme, we are so enmeshed in our connections that we neglect each other. We don't need to reject or disparage technology. We need to put it in its place. The generation that has grown up with the Net is in a good position to do this, but these young people need help. And as we, ourselves enchanted, turned away from them to lose ourselves in our email, we did not sufficiently teach the importance of empathy and attention to what is real."⁹

Next week on Yom Kippur,

I am going to "put my phone in its place,"
by fasting from it.

Maybe some of you already do this,
but I am not just going to silence my phone,
I am going to turn it off,

⁹ Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. 295. Print.

for all of Yom Kippur.

I want to be able to say hineni and mean it,
every minute of such a significant day.

I want to be present,
for myself and my family,
present enough that I might feel the presence of God.

If you want to,
join me,
eliminate *your* biggest distraction,
whatever it may be.

Fast from it for just one day.

Maybe it's homework,
or errands,
calendar scheduling,
or endless lists.

Maybe it's thoughts about the past,
something that won't change
no matter how long we think about it,
or incessant worries about the future.

Or, perhaps some of us are the ones
affected by others' distractions,
longing for their attention.

Can we find a way to tell them we need them?

Can we ask them to give us their attention,
just for a little while?

Right now,
at the head of the new year,
we have the opportunity to be present

and seek presence.

Let's be present together,

so that we can look at each other,

during these days,

and for many days to come,

and say hinenu,

we are here.

