

HIN'NI & HINENI: From Self to Self-Transcendence

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5764

For that last couple of weeks or so, as I've encountered Temple members for the first time since last spring, the conversation has gone something like, "How've you been? It's good to see you. Did you have a nice summer?" And then, almost without exception, comes the question that every Jew feels compelled to ask their rabbi in the month of September, "Are you ready for the holidays? Are you getting nervous?" Invariably I try to respond with an answer of coolness and nonchalance, but inside a silent voice is saying, "Well, I was doing fine—until *you* brought it up."

I confess the days leading up to and including the High Holy Days are for most rabbis a time of high anxiety. Just ask those who have to live with us. This is, after all, our *World Series* (except that it comes at the beginning of the season). It is sacred theater at its best. This is the time when everyone shows up. Families reunite. Kids come home from school. The grandparents fly up from Florida. Even the moms and dads will take off from work. And they're all sitting out there—looking at you—each with their own private scorecard, like an Olympic judge; as if these are the days when rabbis (and cantors) get their formal evaluations.

[Rabbi's sermon content: 8.5; delivery: 9.2; quality of jokes: 4].

The truth, however, is that there's nothing wrong with being nervous here and now. That's the way it's supposed to be. That's why our ancestors called these days *Yamim Noraim*, Days of Awe. Or, to borrow from the title of Soren Kierkegaard's essay on the Trial of Isaac—the Torah portion for the New Year, these are supposed to be days of *Fear and Trembling*. The only difference is that the cause of my angst is supposed to be because I am standing before God, not you. And I would hope by now you have all figured out that this primal anxiety is reserved not just for those who stand up on the *bimah*.

These are the days of judgment, when we place our lives—everything, the good and the not good—on the table. This is our annual *final* exam. This is the time when everything that counts is counted. We don't come here to see each other; we come here to look at ourselves. We don't come here to be excited by the sound of the *shofar*; we come here to be awakened by its harrowing vibrations. We don't come here to be entertained by the Cantor or the Rabbi; we come here to listen, to consider, to take pause—that we might become what God brought us here to do.

Last Saturday night, at our *Selichot* service, David Malchman—a meditation trainer—went around the room and asked each of us to share where we were going to be for the High Holy Days. Most people took his question literally (which I presume was the way he had intended it). That is, they said *where* they planned on worshipping the New Year. But somehow I heard his question not in a spatial but rather in an existential way. I did not understand his question physically but rather spiritually. So when it came time for me to answer, I replied, "I hope this year that I will be in a place—that is, a state of being—where I will be able to pray."

What, in fact, do we hope to discover here? What are we looking for? Even more to the point, *Why* are we here? These, of course, are questions only you can answer. What is more, the answers to these questions are nobody's business but yours. They matter only to you. Indeed, perhaps that is the *real* question: Do they matter at all? What does matter? What do we bring into this space this day? And what do we hope to take from it ten days from now?

Consider for a moment how it was we began these High Holy Days. We began with the prayer *Hin'ni*. It is an extraordinary text. It is a private meditation between the *shaliach tzibur* and God (except we get to eavesdrop). The Cantor, admitting her humanity, prays to God for strength and understanding. Don't let me ruin this for them. Don't allow their shortcomings to affect what I do. Be there for me God. And it is all consumed in the very first word: *Hin'ni*—Behold me.

I cannot imagine a more powerful way to enter the New Year. And it's odd, because you might think the High Holy Days should commence differently. After all, the primary theme of these days is God. God is King. *Avinu*

Malkenu. Maybe we should begin with that? But we don't. Or maybe we should begin with the sound of trumpets, as this day marks the anniversary of the Creation? Perhaps we should inaugurate this ten-day period with regal pomp and circumstance, befitting a coronation or glorious celebration? But we don't.

Instead we begin with just a single voice. Speaking personally, but truly on behalf of us all. Indeed, if anything we should be inspired by these words to approach God in much the same way. *Hin'ni*—Behold me. Take note of me. God, look at me. Is this not what we all seek? To know that we count? To know that we are not forgotten? That is why this day is also known as *Yom Hazikkaron*—the day of remembrance. The day wherein we ask God to remember us.

Hin'ni is our statement that we exist. You have brought us into life. For reasons we cannot comprehend, you have placed Your soul into us. *Hin'ni* is our acknowledgment of our relationship with God. And now we are here. *Hin'ni*—Behold me, God.

Hin'ni is our admission that we are human. We are not perfect. We have flaws and failings. *Hin'ni* is our statement of humility. We are not all that we could be. That we want to be. Forgive us. Do not allow our sins to fall upon others. *Hin'ni*—Behold me, God.

Hin'ni is our cry of pain. This life is hard. It is filled with disappointment and struggle, with anxiety and fear. *Hin'ni* is our prayer to God for understanding. To acknowledge that we are doing our best. Like the prayer of Levi-Yitzchak of Berdichev: Lord I do not ask You why I suffer; I ask only to know if I suffer for Your sake? *Hin'ni*—Behold me, God.

For all the joy of the New Year, for all our celebration of the turning of the cycle, as life is renewed, not a single one of us enters these walls without burden, without pain, without questions. All we really want to know is that we are not alone. That we have not been forgotten. That our lives do have purpose. *Hin'ni*—Look at me, God.

But it's not enough. It's not enough to just come here and ask God to remember us. As Jews we believe more is required of us. Yes we want God to take note of us. To be our strength and support. But to grow, to overcome ourselves, that is something which depends upon us, and us alone. So that throughout these days, if they are truly to be of import, we need to move from asking God to take note of us to our taking note of God. From *Hin'ni*—Behold me; To *Hineini*—I am here. For if *Hin'ni* is the affirmation of our human frailties, then its partner, *Hineini*, is the articulation of our human potential.

Both words are derived from *hiney* meaning Behold (as in *Hiney mah tov*—Behold how good it is). And both have the suffix *-ni* which is an abbreviated version of *ani* or I. Behold—I. But the root of *hineh* can also mean here as in *heyna* (a common colloquial expression in Israel is *Bo heyna*—come here). So that in one way we are saying to God, “Come here,” but in its other state we are acknowledging that it is God who is saying to us, “Come here.” With the switch of a single vowel, from a *shva* to a *tzayray*, the meaning of the word goes from *Hin'ni*—Behold me to *Hineini*—I am here. And with that switch comes not just a different meaning, but an entirely different attitude.

One of the most important texts of Torah is also a single word. It occurs in the Book of Genesis. The story of creation. The event we commemorate this day. In the Garden of Eden. After Adam and Eve have eaten from the forbidden tree. God calls to *adam*—perhaps not so much Adam but rather *adam* / human being. God's call is simple. Not hard to understand. But it speaks volumes. *Ayekah*: Where are you?

Obviously God is not looking for man. Remember, God is omniscient. God knows everything. God doesn't need to know where we are. The question does not seek geographical information. It is not a spatial query. Rather, it is an existential request. Where are you? Do *you* know where you are? What are you doing with your life? Who are you? Are you *here*?

Abraham Joshua Heschel tells the story of a schoolboy who was forgetful. He was always losing things and forgetting things. So he worked out a system. Before he went to sleep at night he would make out a list of all the things he would need the next day. He wrote: my clothes are on the chair, my hat is in the closet, my books are on the desk, my shoes are under the chair and I am in bed.

The next morning he woke up and started to collect his things. They were all in the right places. The clothes were on the chair. His hat was in the closet. The books were on the desk. The shoes were under his chair. Then he came to the last item on his list. He went to look for himself in the bed. But he was not there. "Where am I," he asked.

Clearly this is how I understood David Malchman's question last Saturday night, *Where will you be for the High Holy Days?* And I was saying, "I want to be *here*." This, indeed, is the question we should be asking ourselves for the next ten days: Where am I now in relation to where I was last year? Where have I gone? What have I become? Am I here (or am I just taking up space)? Am I living up to my potential? Am I fulfilling my gift as a human being?

One of my favorite stories comes from Rabbi Dick Lehrman (z"l). It is about a place in the ancient Temple, a special room. The Mishnah identifies it as *Lishkat Cha-sha-im*: the Chamber of Secret Donations. Apparently, it was a space that poor people when, all else failing, could go to and privately, confidentially, secretly take from the pile of coins that was stored there.

Once it happened that a poor farmer had fallen on hard times. He was proud. He had never taken anything from anyone. But he knew the winter would be difficult without help. And so he left his wife and children and set out for Jerusalem. For the Chamber of Secrets. At first it was a rather solitary journey. Making his way through the Judean hills, he was entirely alone. But as he neared the city he began to see more and more people. First one here or there, then a couple, then a small group. All were converging on Jerusalem. Once through the city's gates, he headed toward the Temple. Now the people were most numerous. And they all seemed to be going in the same direction. Not just to the Temple, but to the Chamber of Secrets. And they were all *poor*. He was terrified. "They are all going to take from the Chamber of Secrets. Nothing will be left by the time I get there." Indeed, he waited in line for what seemed like an eternity. For hours on end he inched closer to the gate that entered into the Chamber. Finally, as the day was nearing its end, he was next in line. But he couldn't stand the anticipation. "Would anything be left?" So he peeked inside to see what was happening. To his surprise the pile was enormous. Absolutely enormous. These people were not *taking* money from the pile. As poor as they were, they were *putting* coins onto it! Now it was his turn. Standing before the pile, seeing all the wealth he could take, he stopped to think. "This is not a place for taking. It is a place for giving."

And so it is for us. We come into God's house saying *Hin'ni*—Take note of me. Take note of my struggle. Help me. Do not forget me. We come here focusing on ourselves. On our own needs and troubles. We come here seeking God.

And it is here that God responds to us. God responds to us by calling *our* name. And the real question is whether or not we are prepared to reply *Hineini*?

How often have we said *Hineini* this year? What of the times when we knew what was right and what was wrong yet stood silent? What of the people who called to us but we simply turned away? What of those in suffering throughout our world? Do we think that we are not being called? *Never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee* (John Donne). To be a Jew means to listen for it. *Ayekah?* Where are you?

Viktor Frankl, philosopher, psychologist, survivor of the death camps suggests how it is we are to find meaning in our lives. Not by immersing ourselves in our own problems. Not by inner struggle. But rather through self-transcendence. By being able to extend beyond ourselves. By reaching out to others. It's not that we forget who we are. On the contrary, by so doing, we become who we are supposed to be. From self to self-transcendence. From *Hin'ni* to *Hineini*.

Such is the nature of a covenantal relationship. Asking and offering. Needing and giving. When we say *Hin'ni* we imagine God as our parent. *Avinu*. But when we say *Hineini* we affirm God as our sovereign. *Malkeinu*. The One who commands. The One who challenges us to actualize our potential as human beings.

To be a Jew is to stand in waiting for God. To listen for the commanding Voice. Give us, God, the strength to listen for You even as we call out Your name.