

Hineni – Here I Am: The Courage and Imagination to Change

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A father once shared with me how he and his small son would play "hide and seek" - The game always played out the same way.

Dad always counted to 100 by 5's and then would shout out, "Here comes Daddy to find you Tommy."

And Tommy would always hide in the same room and the same spot - but of course Dad always went through the motions of looking in just about every other room. He'd go into one of the bedrooms and loudly proclaim "I wonder if Tommy is under the bed?" Down the hall he could hear the barely suppressed giggles of his child as he lifted the sheets. "I wonder if he's in the closet?" Again, giggles from the other room. Making his way into the bathroom, Dad would say "I wonder if he's in the shower?" Giggles. "I wonder if he's in the toilet?" as he lifted the seat. The giggles were getting louder.

Out in the hallway now, the father proclaimed, "I wonder where Tommy could be?"

At that moment Tommy would burst out of his parents' bedroom crying "Here I am Daddy, here I am!" and throw himself into his dad's waiting arms.

Dad would always say, "Tommy, that's not how the game is played." But Tommy didn't care - that's how he played the game. For Tommy, the object of the game was to come rushing out into his father's arms proclaiming, "here I am!"

Here I am. Hineni. That single, powerful word is Abraham's response to God's command to take his son, his only son whom he loved, and offer him up on Mount Moriah. Later, as father and son are walking up the mountain together, Isaac calls out, "Avi? – Father?" And again, Abraham responds Hineni – Here I am. Then, at the climax of the story, as Abraham has his knife extended over Isaac, the angel calls out "Abraham, Abraham!" and once more, Abraham says, Hineni – Here I am.

The word Hineni occurs eight times in this morning's Torah reading and 178 times in the Tanakh. In each occurrence, the word Hineni conveys a deep and passionate commitment to show up, to be present no matter what, to be ready to serve the needs of the other and to place those needs even before one's own needs. Over this past year we as a congregational family have demonstrated our Hineni commitment by remaining active in synagogue life. Indeed, contrary to expectations, we saw exponential growth in the number of people who gathered with us virtually to pray, study, socialize and support those in need.

But the phrase Hineni seems to also carry with it a sense of dread. It embodies fear in the face of uncertainty, when one's fate may not be known, let alone controlled. Like when your phone rings and you know it is your doctor calling you with the test results you've been nervously waiting for. Or the moment right before a car crash when you realize something bad is about to happen and there is nothing you can do about it.

Surely Abraham felt that dread when God told him to sacrifice Isaac. According to the Midrash, Abraham was so taken aback by God's demand that he temporarily went insane. We might call this the terror of Hineni. Oh God, here I am.

We feel the weight of that Hineni during these difficult times of the virus. Oh God, here we are: bewildered, confused. Our world has been turned upside down and clouded by uncertainty about the future. In the springtime we were all hopeful that this pandemic was winding down and we would gradually get back to some semblance of our normal lives. Now as we confront the Delta variant and case numbers tick back up, we don't know what to think. We are exhausted and worn down.

And it's not just Covid. Many of us have been worn down over the past year by a drop in business or unemployment or financial hardship or the stresses of isolation and working from home. Others are grappling with tensions that are tearing relationships apart. For many a sudden accident or illness has turned their lives upside down. Still others are grieving the loss of a parent, a spouse, in some cases God-forbid, a child, feeling that they are emotionally adrift. Some are fighting the demons of alcohol or drugs, or struggling with their weight, or have become deeply cognizant of some state of mind or pattern of behavior that they know is destructive to themselves or others but just seems so impossibly hard to change.

We gather on these High Holidays precisely because we have great trepidation about what the future will hold. That is why the single prayer that most resonates with us at this season is the *Unetaneh Tokef*. "On Rosh Hashanah it is decreed and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who will live and who will die?" The power of that prayer does not lie in its literal meaning. Ultimately, we do not believe our fate is sealed on these days. God is ready at every moment to take us back in love. But the words of the *Unetaneh Tokef* reflect the fragile nature of our lives and our uncertainty about the future.

When there is so much that we cannot control, remaining hopeful is perhaps our greatest spiritual challenge. How do we do that? How do we maintain hope when we cannot see a clear way forward? When there is so much that we cannot control, how do we maintain hope in the future? Zen teacher Norman Fischer suggests that hope is rooted in our imagination.

He writes that imagination allows us to see beyond our current existence. It enables us to conceive of the impossible – pure goodness, truth, compassion, justice – and to yearn for it. It “expands the heart, causing us to understand others as ourselves and ourselves as not belonging to us.” It allows us to move beyond our own material and practical needs to loving care for another.

Imagination, he writes, is not an escape from reality. Imagination deepens and enriches reality. To go beyond the possible to the impossible, we need to imagine it. “We need ideals to propel us forward into better futures, to inspire us to be better people in a better world.”

To imagine a better version of ourselves, to imagine the world not as it is but as it should be, this is the challenge of Hineni.

To illustrate his point, Fischer begins his book with the story of the French surrealist poet, Robert Desnos.

Robert Desnos was Jewish. During World War II he went underground, was captured, and sent to a concentration camp.

One day, he was rounded up and thrown on a transport truck with many other prisoners. Everyone knows what is happening. The trucks always leave the barracks full and come back empty. The mood is

grim. No one speaks. When the truck arrives at a gas chamber, the prisoners slowly and silently descend, as if in a dream. Even the guards fall silent.

But then the surrealist poet Desnos suddenly jumps up, grabs the hand of the man next to him, and with great enthusiasm begins to read his palm.

Desnos announces: "I am so excited for you! You are going to live a very long life! You are going to have three children! A beautiful wife! Wealth! So fantastic! So wonderful!"

His excitement is contagious. First one man and then another thrusts out his hand. Each one receives the same sort of prediction: long life, children, wealth, etc. As Desnos reads palm after palm, the atmosphere is completely transformed. The prisoners are smiling, laughing, clapping each other on the back, their burden lifted, their reality transformed.

Even more astonishingly, the guards are affected, jerked out of their dark stupor where marching men to their slaughter was a normal and acceptable daily occurrence. Confused and disoriented, undone by the absurd, jolly scene in front of them, they can't go through with the execution, so they march the prisoners back onto the truck and send them back to the barracks.

This amazing true story illustrates the power of imagination to change reality. Norman Fischer goes on to argue that the main purpose of spiritual practice is to imagine a world that does not exist. To posit values, norms, ideals, and actions that seem impossible, idealistic, out of reach. To, as the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. used to say, "find a way where there is no way."

This is the Hineni response. To stare uncertainty in the face and to respond with conviction by using our imaginations to set our course toward a better life, a better world, to our being a better person.

The Jewish people have been relying on the power of imagination for a long time. In every age and every locale throughout our history, imagination has played a crucial role in our ability to not only survive but thrive, and to contribute to society on the highest level.

Persecuted and expelled from almost everywhere we have lived, we imagined a new reality, new lives in new places, and recreated ourselves over and over again. For almost 2,000 years we imagined that we would return to our ancestral land. Who would have thought it would actually happen? And yet it did.

Theodore Herzl understood the power of imagination. When he could not get traction for his dream, he wrote a pamphlet, *Der Juden Stadt*, the Jewish State, that fired up the imagination of Jews and Gentiles alike and propelled his vision forward. When he convened the first World Zionist Congress in Basel, he declared today I have founded the Jewish State. It will take you 50 years to see it. that was 1897. He was pretty close. As Herzl famously said: *im tirtzu anyn zo Aggadah* – if you will it, it is not a dream.

In the same way, it is only the power to imagine that enables us to engage in teshuvah. Too often, we allow ourselves to get caught up in our own wants, needs, feelings, and perspective. When we are hurt or angry, we often will withdraw into ourselves. At such a time, we often are unable to see any way out of our conflict. We are sure that we are right, and they are wrong.

Yet the Torah commands us *v'ahavta l'reyecha kamocha* – love your neighbor as yourself. That is a great feat of moral and religious imagination! To love our neighbor as ourselves, we have to be able to see

what they see, to feel what they feel. Only by imagining what another person is feeling can we open ourselves up to them.

It's like the famous Hassidic story about a rebbe who asked his Chasid, "Do you love me?"
"Of course, I love you, said the Chasid."

Then the Rebbe asked, "Do you know what hurts me?"

"No, I do not," said the Chasid.

"Then the rebbe explained, "If you do not know what hurts me, how can you say you love me?"

Here we are entering a New Year. This is the time to seek to grow beyond the limitations of our current selves. It is also the time to put down a burden, to mend a relationship. To not only imagine but speak and act with a sense of could be, rather than the worn old story that remains stuck in our heads.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro teaches that with a little Hebrew slight of hand, Rosh Hashanah- which literally means Head of the Year, can be read as Rosh Ha-Sheenah – Head-changing day. He writes, "You can't have a new year with an old head. So, if you want a new year, you are going to need to get a new head. A new head is a story free head.

Your stories define you. If your stories are positive and loving, then you are optimistic and caring. If your stories are negative and fearful, then you are angry and afraid.

Rabbi Shapiro suggests, "if you want a new head, identify the stories you carry with you. Ask yourself, "Am I absolutely certain this story is true? How does telling this story make me feel? If you are telling stories, you do not know to be true, stop telling them. If telling your stories makes you anything other than just, kind and humble, stop telling them. Who are you without your story? You don't know. And not knowing is the key to having a new head."

It takes courage to say Hineni, to be fully present and honestly look at the stories we tell ourselves; and it takes imagination for us to change.

This year, may we all have the imagination to see beyond our current reality, to envision how we can be better, how we can heal our relationships and our world, and may we have the courage to get a new head, one filled with optimism, compassion, and love.