

Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon – 5775 / 2014

Ayeka? Where are you? Hinei – Here I am

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When I was a little girl we lived out in the country. I had a huge yard – 2 acres upon which my parents converted the concrete block structure already there into our house. There was “the woods,” a wooded area with lots of pine and cedar trees, gooseberry bushes, and scrub oaks; the “front yard” where my mama had her flower beds of beautiful bulbs, irises, azaleas, and camellias, the bird bath and bird houses; the “back yard” where there were blackberries along the fence, a plum tree, a grape arbor, a mint patch, hydrangeas and hibiscus; and “lower 40” which was kind of a weed patch, although there were wild roses that grew along the fence. The “garden” was the area where my parents planted all kinds of vegetables: beans, peas, squash, cucumbers, watermelon, collard greens, turnips, peanuts, tomatoes, and corn. Its entrance was guarded by a gnarled apple tree that always produced tiny, tart, green apples. There was even a chicken house. My yard was like a microcosm of Gan Eden, the Garden of Eden, with all kinds of places to play, explore, and ride my bike. It was fenced in, and we drove onto the property through a large gate that swung wide open. I was NOT allowed to go out the gate, and I was NOT allowed to walk or ride my bike down the road.

As you listen to me describe this, you’re probably thinking I contrived this story just to fit in with my sermon, but it’s really the truth. My yard was a wonderland, and Mama saw no reason for me to leave it. The problem was that I DID want to leave it – oh, so terribly! My friend Barbara lived down the road from me, across a pond. I wanted to walk over there SO BADLY – just for a little while...just for a LITTLE while. On this one afternoon when I was in second grade, after we got off the school bus, Barbara walked

with me up my driveway. I put my books on the counter and told Mama I was going to walk Barbara back down the driveway to the gate. As I got closer to the gate I heard Mama call me, but I pretended I didn't hear. "Kim..." she called. Barbara and I walked closer together. "Kimberly..." We walked faster. "Kimberly Renee..." We got out the gate and down the hill just to the point where our road met the two-lane highway that we'd have to cross to walk over the little dam to Barbara's house – to PARADISE, I thought.

That's when Mama caught up with us. OY! She didn't miss a lick bringing me back up the hill and all the way back through the wide gate up the long driveway. I didn't go out the gate again, at least not without permission.

We find a similar story in the opening chapters of Genesis. Not tomorrow, but on the second day of Rosh Hashanah we read the story of Creation, of man and woman created in God's image. The man and the woman are placed, as was I, in a veritable paradise, where the entire world lay at their fingertips and was there for the taking – all but for one little bitty tree – The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. God gives just enough information about this tree to make it interesting and forbids them to eat of it. Just as Mama instructed me not to leave the yard "because I said so," so did God instruct Adam and Eve.

So we know the story of the serpent and how the man and woman eat of the fruit. Upon eating the fruit their eyes are opened and they rush to clothe themselves. **"8 Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. 9 But the LORD God called to the man, "Ayeka? Where are you?" 10 He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."**

So the eyes of Adam and Eve were opened to all that the world has to offer, the good and the bad, and overwhelmed with their new insight, they run and hide. God calls out to Adam, “Ayeka? Where are you?” Sounds really familiar to me... “Kim... Kimberly...” Did God really not know where the man and woman were? Ayeka... Where are you? Ayeka? This is the first question in the Torah, and to me, the most important, not only for God to ask of us, but for us to ask of ourselves. For to answer God, we must answer to ourselves first.

Throughout our Biblical narrative, we read of numerous moments when we fallible humans are called upon by God. Adam admits that he was afraid when he heard God’s call, so he hid. Was he afraid of what God would do to him or maybe he was afraid that he had let God down, been a disappointment. Have you ever been afraid to confront God? You know the right thing to do, the truth has been revealed, your eyes are opened, but you just can’t take the steps needed to act? The consequence? A fall... banishment from Gan Eden. A soul, like Adam’s new reality, filled with thistles and thorns...

The prophet Jonah whose story we will read on Yom Kippur afternoon, was enjoined to send God’s word to the people of Nineveh, but, like Adam, he, too was afraid – afraid of the responsibility. He hopped on a ship going the opposite direction. Unlike Adam, who as the first man was perhaps a bit clueless and didn’t understand the ramifications of his actions, Jonah knew the expectations but did not wish to heed them.

Then there is Moses – Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our teacher, the epitome of God’s chosen servant. At the burning bush, Moses, a lowly shepherd, meets God who enjoins him to go to Egypt to work with God to free the enslaved Israelite people. We imagine that Moses enthusiastically agrees with no hesitation, but this is not the case.

When God calls to Moses, Moses responds, “Hineini...Here I am.” But when God assigns Moses his task, “hineini” becomes “Uhhhhh...Who am I that you should send me? Who ARE you?” God doesn’t give up and explains exactly what will happen. “But...but...but...I don’t speak well... I can’t do this.” Moses the great leader, was consumed with self-doubt, but with some encouragement he grows into the confident leader that we know and respect.

Another of God’s chosen was Abraham – Avraham Avinu – Abraham our father. Abraham is known as the first Jew – the first to proclaim and believe in one God. Like Moses, God asks great sacrifice from Abraham. He calls upon Abraham to leave the land of his birth, to leave his family and follow God, which Abraham does without question, with no doubts. One of the poignant moments of the entire Torah comes in the story of the Akeidah – the sacrifice of Isaac - that we will read tomorrow morning. God calls, “Avraham, Avraham.” Abraham replies, “Hineini – Here I am. Unlike Moses, Abraham’s reply is one of surety and confidence. Here I am. I am here. I am ready to serve.

And lastly we have the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah has a vision in which he sees the throne of God. The angels and seraphim are calling one to the other, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of Hosts, The whole earth is filled with God’s glory!” The voice of God calls to Isaiah, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” Isaiah replies, “*Hineini, sh’lacheini*. Here I am, Send me.”

How will you answer when God calls upon YOU? What about when your community calls upon you? What about when your cantor or a congregant calls upon you? Like Adam will you hide? Like Jonah will you run in the opposite direction? Will doubt consume you like Moses? Or will you answer with conviction like Abraham and Isaiah: HINEINI. Here I am. I am here. Send me.

The word "HINEINI" is really a combination of two words: "*hinei*" which means "here is" or "behold, see" like "Hinei mah tov umah naim..." and the word "*ani*" which means "I." So, HINEINI literally means, "Behold me, see me." When we respond, "HINEINI," we demonstrate that we are present for and receptive to another person, that we have a readiness to act on behalf of another, and that we are willing to sacrifice for someone or something higher than ourselves.

This year I would like to implement a call-to-action program that I am calling "Project Hineini." It's a way for all of us here at B'nai Chaim to feel like we are heeding the call to serve in the way that best fits our schedules, talents, and interests. There are all kinds of different ways that you can answer HINEINI. From a simple donation of a few dollars to getting your hands dirty to a couple of phone calls to bringing a friend to services, there is something for everyone. Let's explore some of them. Listen for and take note of what interests you. When you go downstairs for refreshments following the service, there will be a slideshow playing to remind you of the projects I'll be talking about plus a few more. Then you will see chart paper with the various projects posted around the room. In your name tag you will find some little labels. When you see a project you are interested in just stick your label onto the chart. That's it! Then we'll know how you'd like to get involved. It's that simple to answer Hineini. Here we go...

I call these first projects *Darchei Ezra* – Ways to Help...

Bagels for Sunday Mornings – Donate gift cards or cash to purchase bagels to be sold by the youth group to support their projects. Easy!

Better yet... **Get involved with the youth group.** Our youth group has been struggling over the past couple of years, but research has demonstrated that kids who are involved in Jewish camp and youth group have a stronger and more positive Jewish identity than those who do not. You can help us get our kids motivated and active Jewishly!

Shabbat set up – Preparation of the sanctuary is an important part of Shabbat. Wine needs pouring, challah needs to go on the plate. Is the sound system on? Are the chairs neatly placed? Are the prayerbooks out? Does the foyer look warm and inviting? Volunteer for this rewarding and helpful task.

Onegs – Oneg Shabbat means Sabbath Delight. I know it's a delight for me to go downstairs and see all those yummy treats that help us bring out the joy of Shabbat. You can sponsor an oneg in honor of a birthday, anniversary, or other special occasion. Have your friends bake goodies and join you at services! Receive special honors at the service like candles and Kiddush, opening the Ark, etc. Stick one of your labels on the ONEGS chart downstairs.

Greeters and Ambassadors – Probably the most important role in the temple is to roll out the welcome mat! You can be that person! Adopt a new member family and invite them for Shabbat and to services. Welcome our friends and guests when they come in. You can be the face that represents the warmth of B'nai Chaim.

Another essential way to help B'nai Chaim is to give to one of our congregational funds. These funds are vital to the operation and sustainability of our congregation, and tzedakah is one of our most important Jewish values.

Another project we can do is a **fundraiser** of some kind, maybe institute a big fundraiser that becomes an annual event. It could be a BINGO night, a Jewish music concert, a silent auction, or a combination of several things. You probably have a lot of ideas, so if you're interested, just stick one of your labels on the FUNDRAISER chart.

This next group of projects I'm calling Darchei Midrash v'Avodah, Ways of Learning and Worship.

The first of these is **Adult Choir** – Jewish music is the perfect way to express your Jewishness, and now you can participate year-round! Join us in learning the music of prayer and Israel, old and new, choral and folk. Be thinking of a name!

Do you play an instrument? Join our new **temple band**. Whether it be guitar, trumpet, cello, or flute... piano, violin, drum, or bassoon, we need you! Be thinking of a name! Both the choir and the band will be an active part of services, so stick one of your labels on the TEMPLE BAND chart.

Shabbat Out and About – Periodically we will experience Shabbat in a different venue – Clement Park, Bear Creek Lake Park, on a hike, or in someone's home. Have some ideas? Want to host? Where would you like to spend Shabbat? Let us know!

Another program I'd like to do is called "**Wednesday Walk and Torah Talk.**" We can meet at Clement Park on the first Wednesday of the month, walk around the lake, grab a bagel and talk a little Torah. If it sounds interesting, stick one of your labels on the Wednesday Walk and Torah Talk chart.

One of the names for a synagogue is “Beit Midrash” (House of Study) – Study and learning are great ways for all ages to get involved. As part of our Beit Midrash, in addition to our wonderful Hebrew classes, this year we will host six-week explorations of Jewish subjects taught by me, Brian (Mr. Cantor Harris), Rabbi Joel and others. Do you want to teach some sessions? Do you want to learn about a variety of Jewish topics? What interests you? What have you always questioned? Let us know! Stick your label on Beit Midrash.

The next category in Project Hineini is Darchei Tikkun, Ways to help our world.

One of these is coming up soon. You can help out in the **Pumpkin Patch** to support Jeffco Partners for Interfaith Action in building homes for the community. Our date is Sunday, October 12 starting at 1:00. I can’t wait to do this. It’ll be so much fun. You get to be with your friends, upgrade your Sukkah decorations... It’ll be great!

One of the things I fell in love with about B’nai Chaim is the obvious commitment that there is to tikkun olam, to making the world a better place. How much stronger our commitment would be with YOU? We build houses with Habitat for Humanity, keep our roadside safe and clean with “Adopt a Highway,” visit soup kitchens and more. So what are YOUR ideas? What more could we do? Let’s do it together! Maybe we can start a Tikkun Olam committee... Let us know how you’d like to help. Stick your label on Tikkun Olam!

Now let’s explore Ways to Enjoy Being Together (Darchei Kef):

One of our groups here at the temple is the **Tummeliers**. – “Tummeler” is Yiddish for one who makes things happen or an entertainer. With our Tummeliers you can participate in a variety of fun and interesting activities each month. Let us know if you have any ideas for great places to go or to help coordinate activities.

We have the **Acoustic Alley at B'nai Chaim series** – Some of the area's finest musicians perform right here at our temple. It's great entertainment, and part of the proceeds benefit our congregation! Just in a couple weeks we'll host Hal Aqua and the Lost Tribe, so come on out, have some fun, and support B'nai Chaim.

Wine and Dine – This bi-monthly program allows us to get to know each other outside of the temple. Join your friends for wine and hors d'oeuvres, then visit a local restaurant for great food and conversation.

Something new this year is what I'm calling "**Sunday Walk and Talk**" – Join your fellow religious school parents on a walk around the neighborhood every Sunday during religious school. It's a great way to get to know each other and get some exercise, too.

So this is Project Hineini – ways to help out the temple, to be together, to have fun, to learn and worship, and to repair the world. It's a lot to think about, but perhaps we've only begun to scratch the surface. You can probably think of ways to be a part of the temple that I've not thought of. No matter how small, how crazy, how huge it sounds, I'd love to hear about it, and the most important thing (*v'ha ikar*), the most important thing is that you are willing. We want to see you, to be with you and your families, and B'nai Chaim wants to be here FOR you.

Tomorrow we will observe the commandment to hear the sound of the shofar, the shofar whose blast is the quintessential call to wake up from our slumber of indifference, to listen to the needs of our community, our congregation, and the world around us. When the shofar asks, "*Ayeka? Where are you?*" will you answer, *HINEINI?*