

Rabbi Rachel Joseph
 Congregation Beth Israel
 Erev Rosh Hashana 5776: Hineni

The moment I became a rabbi was like no other. Sitting with my classmates in Plum Street Temple, in Cincinnati, Ohio - the synagogue in which I grew up. The synagogue where American Reform Judaism was born. The synagogue where my father was ordained 36 years prior - each of us waiting our turn to stand in the open ark and receive ordination from the head of our seminary. But for me it was extra special. Not only was I lucky to stand on a bimah I knew well (at that moment of ordination), but I would also receive a blessing from my father - Rabbi Daddy, as I affectionately call him. When it was my turn, my father and I approached the ark together, he put his hands on my head and our foreheads touched. With tears streaming down his face, he said to me: Are you sure this is what you want? Are you sure, are you really, really sure? On one hand it was an absurd question, one I thought I had already answered many times. But what he was saying to me at that moment was profound - are you sure, are you really sure you want this responsibility - and I answered, Hineni.

Hineni.

Hineni. I am Here. At this moment. In this place. I said it a little over three years ago standing in the open ark and I have said it every day since.

Hineni is no ordinary word. It is found 178 times in the Tanakh, in the Hebrew Bible. And with each time this word is said, it is more than just an acknowledgement of one's presence; it is an acknowledgement that we are interconnected. We are here, but we are not alone when we stand together. We are responding to prophetic calls to make this world a better place. We are listening for the still, small, Divine voice, searching for understanding and answers. We are here together, linked with each other, as community. "Hineni" is not about saying that I am present and accounted for. "Hineni" is not about taking attendance. "Hineni" is about being committed to making change, to making a difference, to doing something, to being a part of community.

A community not only nurturing the individual soul, but also awakening in us a sense of connectedness to and responsibility for one another.

And all of this is happening in the very real context of a broken world, a world outside these walls that is spinning, sometimes out of control - a world of terrorism, hatred, and war - much of which is prompted by or justified in the name of religion. Given all of that, if you don't have answers to the biggest questions of the day, if you don't have a powerful counter-testimony to the religions and religious voices we see tearing the world apart, many say, count me out. Count me out of any religious community. Now this, I believe, is actually good news for us. Rachel Naomi Remen, a Jewish author and teacher, once wrote of the experience of walking up Fifth Avenue in New York City and noticing two tiny blades of grass growing through the sidewalk. She poetically compared them to the Jewish People: "Green and tender, they had somehow broken through the cement. Imagine the will to live of those two blades of grass - pushing up against the hard New York pavement! It is a sign of the vitality of our people that we refuse to cede to a religion of dead rock."

Even though we Jews are over five thousand years old, our Judaism is a radical faith. Torah and the Jewish people exist for one purpose and one purpose only: To provide a framework for all of us to understand that we are not alone and, in the process, to affirm that our lives have meaning, purpose and value.

Hinenu. We are present.

Hinenu. We are here. But why are we here? Are we here out of Jewish guilt? Out of obligation? For the sake of our children? For the sake of our parents? For what are we spiritually searching? What do we hope to find here?

What is it that brings us through these doors each year? What compels us out of our routines, to sit together, welcome one another and a new year with ritual - old and new? It never ceases to amaze me the sheer numbers of Jews who step out of their comfort zone and into the synagogue on these days.

What is it about this community that each of us wants to declare Hineni, Here I Am. Hinenu, We are here.

And you know what, it actually doesn't really matter what brought you here tonight. Regardless of how or why we come together, we come together. A synagogue, a temple, is first and foremost called a Beit Kneset, a place to come together. A house to come together. A home to come together. A home. That is synagogue. This is Congregation Beth Israel. And what does this home look like? And I am **not** talking about aesthetics. I am **not** talking about the buildings. I am talking about each one of us. What will this home, made up of us, look like in the coming year as we build it together?

It is in this home that we sustain and continue an ancient tradition that has defined us as Jews, comforted us through centuries of pain and given us the language of rejoicing in the most beautiful moments in our lives.

It is in this home that we address the fact that we live in a world that is increasingly isolating. The more complex and innovative our technology becomes, the more we hide ourselves behind addictive glowing screens that give us the world at our fingertips while, at the same time, dulling our senses to the real world that exists beyond our devices.

It's hard to say Hineni when we are alone.

It is in this home where we find the holiness that 21st century life, with all of its technological advances notwithstanding, has systematically stripped away from us.

We are the sacred community committed to making this world a better place, a synagogue committed just as much to acts of justice and loving kindness as we are to acts of worship and study. We are the community that not only believes in justice, but pursues justice. We are the community that rolls up our sleeves and understands that we cannot sit around and wait for the world to become the world that we dream it to be. Instead, we - as God's partners in creation - must do our part to make this world a better place. We read in the High Holiday liturgy that we are all intrinsically bound together and thus, bound together as community, and must

carry out God's will, to complete the utopian messianic vision of the Garden of Eden that God set out to create, and to pursue justice, wholeheartedly. Hineni. I am here. **Hinenu. We are here. We are in this together.**

This is our story. Like it or not, comfortable or not, convenient or not - your story is my story, your struggle IS my struggle, your destiny is my sacred responsibility.

We're here for a reason today: we are brought together by a sacred urge to make sense of the chaos of our lives so we can live more meaningfully, more aligned with our purpose in the world - as Jews and as human beings - in sacred community.

My life looks nothing like I imagined three years ago and I have shared my struggles with you over these years. This is what sacred community looks like. We can all be vulnerable.

We lift each other up in chairs during the highest of highs, at moments of joy and celebration, and we lift each other up when we can no longer stand, at the lowest of low points, at moments of sorrow, heartache, and mourning. We are about being together inside this building and outside this building, looking out for one another. Bikkur cholim, literally taking care of the sick, cooking meals for each other. Our synagogue is not bound to the walls of our institution, of our synagogue buildings. We are a community that creates meaningful spiritual experiences, holiday experiences, Shabbat experiences, meaningful moments, in the sanctuary and in the park, in living rooms and around bonfires, in coffee shops and restaurants. Congregation Beth Israel is a community that doesn't just invite you in, but meets you where you are, literally and figuratively, to say Hinenu.

We are a home for all who walk in our doors, whether we have walked into this building hundreds of times before, haven't been here in quite a while, or we are walking in this sanctuary for the very first time. We are a synagogue for all who are interested in community, in being part of community, in building community, regardless of our past, whether we are Jews by birth, Jews by choice, exploring Judaism, or a part of a Jewish home. Beth Israel is home. Beth Israel is our community. But it is only community if WE are willing to say Hineni, Here I Am, and become immersed in community.

When we are talking about Jewish communal life, it is easy to slip into the model of "Membership" as it relates to the synagogue community - like it would be the same as joining a gym. In this case, you pay your dues to the synagogue, I get a salary, and you get a powerful and inspiring *Rosh Hashanah* sermon. Don't we all feel good?

Yeah, not so much. I'm not saying you don't deserve a killer sermon, but I am saying playing the numbers game isn't very satisfying. You may wonder, "This is what I get for my money?" Or begin to tick off the ways you don't use the synagogue, and then maybe you become the person who scribbles a note on the dues renewal form saying, "The synagogue doesn't meet my needs anymore."

I think all of us want more than that. And as responsible as a synagogue is to create a community of which we want to be a part, each of us has a responsibility to make it that kind of community. To be co-creators of that type of community, to be partners in creating that type of community.

We want to come together and feel our time together is deeper, more meaningful, than when we are apart.

Fifteen years ago, Steven M. Cohen and Arnold Eisen researched American Jewish attitudes and behavior in order to understand the discovery and construction of Jewish meaning in contemporary America. The results of their study were collected into the book, *The Jew Within*.

The essential conviction of Cohen and Eisen was that American Jews enact and express their decisions about Judaism predominantly in the private sphere, among family, friends, reflection. They claim the institutional arena was and sometimes still is no longer the primary site where Jews find and define who they are, and who they want to be. That the synagogue is near extinction.

They were wrong. The synagogue is not extinct. Like the blades of grass pushing up through the pavement, we are vital and refuse to cede to dire predictions.

So, yes, today some people like to meditate or do yoga, take long walks, hike, or run, which bring them to a place of spiritual connection - me too - but our own spiritual connection in it of itself is not enough. We cannot be Jewish alone. We cannot say Hineini alone. Yes, we want community that IS personally meaningful but we also want the power of community to reach beyond ourselves. When we stop to consider the value of the *minyan* - the ten people needed for certain communal acts like reading Torah or saying mourners kaddish, our need for community is palpable.

Jewish communal life can offer us a shelter against the perfect storm that is the intersection of hyper-individualism and challenging economics. The point of a synagogue community is that we are meant to support each other - it's a place where we can bring our entire selves - all of our emotions - all of our strengths and weakness - our hopes and fears - our noblest self and our pettiness. We can bemoan what is broken or we can do something. **We actually can have a vision of a communal future that is inspiring and engaging.**

And more so than programs, than activities, than entry points, more so than classes, lectures, or events, certainly more so than the clergy, Congregation Beth Israel, is about those who are a part of the community. It is about US. The late Lubavitcher Rebbe, taught that "a container was defined by its contents. A pitcher of water isn't a pitcher... a pitcher of water is water. A crate of apples isn't a crate, it is apples. A house, and a house of worship, a house of assembly, is also defined by what is inside it."

Earlier this summer, the cast of our famous Purim schpiel held a viewing party at Rabbi and Cantor Cahana's house. I was sitting on the side with Max, my four year old, and he began pointing to everyone - one at a time - declaring: she's from temple, he's from temple, and he's from temple, and she's from temple, etc, and you (mommy) are from temple, and me (Max) is from temple, and we are all friends.

We are here because *WE* are here. Our synagogue is not defined by its architecture, as beautiful as our sanctuary is. Our synagogue is not about sanctuary or office space, playgrounds, social halls or classrooms. Our synagogue is defined by its real contents. Congregation Beth

Israel is about each of us. Each and every one of us. Community is about us. Each and every one of us.

Hineni. Here I am. I am a part of CBI. Hinenu. Each of us are a part of CBI, saying these words, a sacred statement, becoming a sacred link that keeps Beth Israel turning, moving, growing, evolving.

Wendell Berry, American author and poet, wrote that, "A proper community, is a commonwealth: a place, a resource, an economy. ..." The ancient wisdom of the Talmud mirrors this idea, in Tractate Sanhedrin 17b as it says: "that a Torah scholar cannot live in a city unless it has a beit din, a court of law, a Tzedakah fund, a synagogue, a bath house, a public lavatory, a teacher...."

What Berry and the Talmud teaches us is that a community is beyond the sum of its part because a real community 'answers the needs, practical as well as social and spiritual, of its members - **among them the need to need one another.**"

That is my vision for CBI. That each of us is valued, that each of us is an essential part of this community, and that each of us recognizes the kedusha, the sanctity, of one another. That each of us will say Hinei. And we can't say Hineni alone.

As you entered the synagogue this evening, you were given a piece of paper. I want you to fill it out and hand it back to an usher. We are re-invigorating our efforts to care for each other. Through the leadership of Ilene Davidson, we are creating "Hinenu" - an intentional congregational community where we engage in acts of bikkur cholim, taking care of the sick: cook meals for one another, visit those who are sick; we are ambassadors for our community: we greet people at Shabbat services, bring dinner to families with new babies, welcome new members; and much more. Undoubtedly, you have already been introduced to one aspect of this through the initiative of Bob Kravitz and Bobbie Goldstein and the Caring Community who sent out surveys over the summer asking for your ideas and your involvement. Now it's your turn. This is your chance to say Hineni: what will you commit to this year? How will you be our partner in creating our holy, sacred community?

As I stood in the ark - the most sacred place - three years ago with my father, tears streaming down both our cheeks, I said Hineni. Yes, to being partners in creating a sacred community that matters. Now, I turn to you, be my partner, be our partner.

Through these sacred acts, may we each find purpose, find meaning, and find God, in each other, in community, at Beth Israel, in the year ahead. And every step of the way, as we grow together as community, may we say Hineni.

Shana Tova.