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Temple Beth El of South Orange County
Rosh HaShanah 5778

Hineini: Heeding the Call

Hin'ni. Here I am. I stood in front of the open ark this evening and began my prayer with this word.

Hin'ni—Here I am. It is another form of the same word, *hineini*, famously uttered by our biblical leaders Abraham, Jacob, and Moses. When Abraham hears God's call to stop his sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham says: *Hineini*.ⁱ Jacob struggles to make a difficult choice—should he uproot his family and people to bring them to Egypt? *Hineini*.ⁱⁱ Moses experiences God face-to-face appearing in the form of a burning bush, unconsumed. *Hineini*.ⁱⁱⁱ

Hineini is a contraction of two Hebrew words, "*Hine*"—here or behold, and "*Ani*"—I. A literal translation would read, "Here I am", but our Rabbinic Sages explain that more than a statement of location, *Hineini* is a declaration of presence and willingness to engage with God.^{iv}

But I didn't begin my prayers this evening with the word *Hineini*, rather *Hin'ni*. "*Hin'ni, Heani mi'maas*—Here I am, so poor in deeds, I tremble in fear, overwhelmed and apprehensive..." Cantor Young and I began our High Holy Day worship with this medieval prayer that expresses anxiety on behalf of the *shaliach tzibor*—the service leader in representing the community before the God. "*Hin'ni, Heani mimaas*." It is a challenging role, attempting to represent a congregation before God. While I feel called to be present and engage with the Divine, I often find it hard to respond with a firm *Hineini* when representing our community.

This evening, as I stand here and deliver this sermon, I do so with my individual voice as just one rabbi, not with the goal of representing the entire diversity of our Temple Beth El community. I hope that my message will spark respectful conversation and perhaps inspire some to *do* Jewish in new ways. I am proud that Temple Beth El is a community that has space for a diversity of Jewish practices and perspectives, including your own rabbi.

Over the summer, American rabbinic leaders have engaged with an important question that I know has been on many minds in our own community: What role should politics have from the pulpit? The conversation was sparked by an op-ed written by influential rabbi, David Wolpe, who serves one of the flagship congregations of the Conservative movement, Temple Sinai in Los Angeles.^v Wolpe explained why he chooses to keep politics off the pulpit. "All we hear all day long is politics. Can we not come to shul for something different, something deeper? I want to know what my rabbi thinks of Jacob and Rachel, not of Pence and Pelosi!"

If you are interested in reading Rabbi Wolpe's words in their entirety, I have a [link to his op-ed and prominent rabbi's responses](#) already linked to the Temple website, but to summarize, Rabbi Wolpe

offers a number of reasons for keeping politics off the pulpit. He wants the synagogue to be a sanctuary from the stresses of everyday life, especially political divisiveness and he wants the primary focus of the synagogue to be on ritual life, text and tradition.

I agree with Rabbi Wolpe that there is no place for partisanship in our congregation. I stand with leaders of both the Reform and Conservative Movements who have argued against repealing the Johnson Amendment that bars clergy and houses of worship from endorsing or opposing candidates or political parties. Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, explains that the “repeal would turn synagogues into just another partisan tool, when in fact we should be moral goads, always free to speak truth to power and lift our voices to affirm our 3,000-year-old mandate to ‘Speak up, judge righteously, champion the poor and the needy’ (Proverbs 31:9).”^{vi}

I disagree with Rabbi Wolpe that politics do not have a place on the pulpit. In the way that I understand Judaism, it is difficult to detach Judaism from politics. Politics does not need to mean partisanship. Politics, in essence, are the activities associated with the governance of a country or community and I believe that Torah and our Jewish tradition is highly concerned with activities associated with governance.

Rabbi Sharon Brous, also a prominent LA rabbi, responded to Rabbi Wolpe, “can one really claim that Torah is not an inherently political document? This sacred scroll recounts the story of a band of slaves rising up before the most powerful and iconic ruler of the ancient world and demanding freedom and dignity. Is that not a political message? Four of the five books of Torah tell the story of the journey our people took from slavery to freedom, from degradation to dignity. And lest we think that is an abstract, theoretical or one-time journey, along the way, they are commanded to establish a society that would be the antithesis in social policy and political reality of Egypt. We are charged to build, in the Promised Land...a counter Egypt. A place in which human beings are free and tasked to honor their neighbor’s dignity through impartial laws, fair judgment, and acts of compassion and love that reach above the letter of the law.”^{vii}

Just like Rabbi Allen Krause’s pulpit here at Temple Beth El, politics were a part of my childhood rabbi’s pulpit too. Political engagement was a centerpiece of our synagogue. As you entered the building lobby, prominently displayed in a protective case, just like a sacred Torah scroll placed in an ark, were words of Torah carefully spray painted on a picket sign: “Justice, Justice, You Shall Pursue.”^{viii} My childhood rabbi, Norman Hirsch, held this sign as he marched for Civil Rights and was arrested as a Freedom Rider.

Engagement in politics was not only a part of Rabbi Hirsch’s understanding of a Jewish obligation to work to create a “counter Egypt,” but also the synagogue community at large. As a child in the 1990s, I remember our synagogue serving apple juice for Kiddush, participating in a national grape boycott to raise awareness for the rights of migrant workers. Our community was taking on the sacred obligation taught in our Torah that “You shall not wrong nor oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”^{ix}

Our Jewish community in South Orange County is more politically diverse than the community in which I was raised in the North End of Seattle. *Hin'ni*. Here I am to lead our community in learning and living Torah and Jewish values, but I have been hesitant to lead our community into the realm of political activism. I have been reluctant because it is incredibly challenging to represent our community's diverse perspectives, especially while being committed to our synagogue's current focus on 'strengthening our community.' *Hineini*. This past year, I decided to heed a personal calling and be present to represent my personal understanding of Torah in the political realm.

Working with the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism, the Reform Movement's office of Social Justice, I engaged my core understanding of Torah through political advocacy. Just as our Torah advocates for legislation to help build "a place where human beings are free and tasked to love their neighbor's dignity," I went to our capitals in Washington D.C. and Sacramento to lobby for legislation that I believe upholds core values of Torah.

In Washington, D.C., I met with a local congressional representative and shared words of Torah from the book of Leviticus: "when the stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do them wrong. The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."^x I shared my understanding of Torah and asked for this representative's help protecting DREAMers, immigrant children who came to the United States illegally as children and have never known another home. In Sacramento, I met with my state congressional representative and my state senator and shared more words from the Levitical Holiness Code: "You shall commit no injustice in judgement; you shall not favor a poor person or defer to a great man; you shall judge your fellow with righteousness."^{xi} I shared my understanding of Torah and asked for their help to reform California's money bail system. On any given day in our state, 60% of individuals awaiting trial or sentencing are in a county jail, simply because they cannot afford to post bail like someone who is more affluent.^{xii}

I hope the words I shared with you this evening help you think more deeply about how Torah and Jewish tradition can inform your political engagement and the role politics can play in your life as a Jew. I know that some will choose to separate your religious practice from politics. Each of us has a right to stand for ourselves and choose the ways in which we interpret Torah, including if and how we interpret Torah into legislation. If you are interested in thinking more about how to engage Jewish values through political advocacy, I want to invite you to join me in being present and representing Torah in our larger world with the hope of bringing about more justice.

We'll have an opportunity to learn together on Yom Kippur day. Please join me at 2 pm, next Saturday. We will study a selection of Jewish perspectives on criminal justice and forgiveness and we will take a look at proposed California State legislation seeking criminal justice reform.

Hineini. Tomorrow morning, as we read from our Torah, we will hear Abraham utter these words as a declaration of presence and willingness to engage with God. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who

famously marched arm in arm with Dr. Martin Luther King for Civil Rights, told this story about hearing the Akedah for the first time as a seven-year-old.

Isaac was on the way to Mount Moriah with his father, Abraham; then Isaac lay on the altar, bound, waiting to be sacrificed. My heart began to beat even faster; it actually sobbed with pity for Isaac. Behold, Abraham now lifted the knife. And now my heart froze within me with fright. Suddenly, the voice of the angel was heard: "Abraham, lay not thine hand upon the lad, for now I know that thou fearest God." And here I broke out in tears and wept aloud. "Why are you crying?" asked the Rabbi. "You know that Isaac was not killed." And I said to him, still weeping, "But, Rabbi, suppose the angel had come a second too late?" The Rabbi comforted me and calmed me by telling me that an angel cannot come late.^{xiii}

Heschel would use this story, decades later, to say to us, "an angel cannot be late, but we, made of flesh and blood, we may come too late." Just like Abraham, we too are called to listen to "our still small voice" and not hesitate to say *Hineini*: Here I am, heeding my calling.

ⁱ Genesis 22:11

ⁱⁱ Genesis 46:2

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 3:4

^{iv} Cohen, Rabbi Norman J. *Hineini in Our Lives*. Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003.

^v Wolpe, Rabbi David. "Why I keep politics off the pulpit," *Jewish Journal*, 7 June 2017.

^{vi} Jacobs, Rabbi Rick. "A 'politics free' pulpit is an empty pulpit," *Jewish Journal*, 13 June 2017.

^{vii} Brous, Rabbi Sharon. "What you call politics, we call Torah," *Jewish Journal*, 6 July 2017.

^{viii} Deuteronomy 16:20

^{ix} Exodus 22:20

^x Leviticus 19:33-34

^{xi} Leviticus 19:15

^{xii} [ACLU](#)

^{xiii} Heschel, Rabbi Abraham Joshua. "The Moral Outrage of Vietnam," 31, January 1967.