

Rabbi Karen S. Citrin
Yom Kippur Morning 5772
***Hineini* – Responding to the Call**

About a year ago, a teenager who works in our education programs as a *madricha*, a teaching assistant, came to me with a question. She had been assisting in one of the classes that meets in our preschool rooms and had come across a toy she didn't recognize. "What is this?" she asked, holding up a plastic toy phone with a dial and cord. "That," I answered, "is a rotary phone." "A what?" she said. Fortunately, my rabbinic training had prepared me to explain the meaning of ancient objects. I immediately embarked on a sermon about the simplicity of life before cell phones, smartphones, and iPhones. Being prisoners to the cord, and at the whim of the busy signal, we made fewer calls and were called upon less frequently than we are today. "And I know this is hard to believe," I told her, "there was life before texting."

The fact is, no matter what kind of phone we have, people find ways of calling each other. And answering the call, actually, has nothing to do with the phone. We all receive calls in life. For some, the call may come at work - from a patient, a boss, or a colleague. For others, the call may sound like this, "I'm thirsty, I'm scared" at 2 am, or 3 am, and perhaps again at 4 am. Or, the call might sound like this, "I need you to clean up your room now!" "Please share with your brother." "Can you come over now? I need a friend." The call may come from a stranger. Or the call may come from someone close - a spouse, a sibling, a parent, a grandparent who needs our help, our support, our care.

And then there are the calls we don't expect, the ones we haven't prepared for, or know will come but don't know when. Two years ago I received a call, and I knew my life would not be the same.

The call was from my stepfather in Marin. For several years, my sister and I had watched our mother face several challenges, one of which was the diagnosis of Parkinson's disease she had received while in her late 50's. But over time, we couldn't shake the unsettling feeling that something else was going on. Then my stepfather called one afternoon as we were driving to temple for Simchat Torah services. He told me that my mother had received a different diagnosis – Lewy body dementia, a devastating neurodegenerative disease that attacks both the body and mind. While similar to Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, Lewy body dementia causes stark fluctuations in cognition and vivid hallucinations. Since that day, life has been a bit of a roller coaster as my family and I have been called upon to be there for my mother.

After one especially difficult episode last May that landed my mom in the hospital, I stood near her while I thought she was sleeping. In a rare moment of complete clarity, she opened her eyes, looked at me and said quietly, "The roles are reversed. You are caring for me." Then she said with tears in her eyes, "I'm sorry." "That's ok, mom," I replied. "This is where I should be right now. Do you need anything? And looking a little scared she said, "Just stay with me." "Ok mom, I am here."

The experience of caring for my mom, for my two young children, my husband, and the needs of our congregation has made me think about the many ways we are each called upon in life and our ability to respond to these calls. It is hard to share this story about my mother, especially when the

person who always responded to my call no longer can. But I know that many of you have a similar experience, whether it is a parent, another family member, or being a caregiver for a beloved spouse. I know my experience is not unique. We are all called. Many of us here are part of what has become known as the sandwich generation. Sorry, I didn't mean to mention food, but this is the name given to those of us in adulthood who are called upon to be present for both younger and older members of our families.

Lately, I have discovered that Judaism is less interested in the *kind of calls* we receive and more interested in *how we respond*. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great philosopher and social activist sums up this pattern of call and response best. "Faith comes out of awe, out of an awareness of our being called upon. Religion begins with a consciousness that something is asked of us. People are not innocent bystanders in the cosmic drama. The souls of people are candles of God, lit on the cosmic way." (*Man is Not Alone*)

Going back to the beginning of Jewish tradition, the Bible introduces a powerful response to the call encapsulated in one word: "*Hineini*." "*Hineini* - here I am." Truly present. Truly in the moment. Truly awake and ready to listen, ready to serve and do my part. In the words of Woody Allen, "80% of success is showing up." *Hineini*, however, is not merely a statement of location. *Hineini* is an attitude, a spiritual presence, a way of being in the world. Every time the word *Hineini* is spoken, it signifies a turning point, a potentially life-changing moment requiring reflection, decision, and action.

These Holy Days are about "*Hineini*." Last night and on Erev Rosh Hashanah, we began the service with the *Hin'ni* prayer, the profound meditation of the prayer leader which asks that he or she be present and open and humble in the sacred task of leading a community in prayer. *Hin'ni* is not about being perfect; it is about being human, vulnerable and ready. These Holy Days ask all of us to measure our "*hineininess*" – how present we are, how ready we are to respond to the most important calls in our lives.

Ten days ago, when we read the dramatic passage from Genesis, Abraham responded, "*Hineini*." First, when God called to Abraham, then when Isaac turned and called out to his father and finally, when an angel called from heaven telling Abraham to stop from raising his hand against his son. On each address, human and divine, Abraham responded: "*Hineini* – Here I am." And it was a good thing Abraham paid attention. Rabbi Laura Geller suggests, "What Abraham learned on the mountain is that God doesn't want us to sacrifice a part of ourselves in order to serve God. God wants us to pay attention, to be present, to bring the fullness of our selves into our relationships." (Norman J. Cohen, *Hineini in Our Lives*)

Generations later, a simple shepherd named Moses, responded, "*Hineini*". When Moses turned aside to behold a bush aflame but not consumed, God called out to him, "Moses! Moses!" "*Hineini*," he answered. Our tradition imagines that Moses needed to receive the double call. When he first heard the call he was speechless. God had to call his name twice before Moses could respond, showing how reticent, or really how human he was. Moses' *Hineini* teaches us that when we respond, our faith may still waiver. We need not wait for perfection, or perfect faith, to respond. Moses did not. Think about what would have happened if Moses hadn't paused and looked; if he didn't say *Hineini*. The story of our people would have been very different.

And later this afternoon, we will notice one *Hineini* that is missing. Rather than heed God's call to speak truth to the Ninivites, Jonah jumped a ship to Tarshish and it took three days and three nights in the belly of a huge and probably very smelly fish for Jonah to recognize what was being asked of him. Jonah teaches us that there are times when what is being asked of us is not easy, or convenient, but if the call is true we must draw on our courage to face it.

I know there is a large number of you who are listening incredulously, thinking to yourself, "But rabbi, I receive hundreds of calls a day, hundreds of texts and emails. It is impossible to answer all of them. It is overwhelming." And you are right. Jewish tradition also grants us permission to take a break sometimes from answering our calls. It is simply not always possible to respond to others with the full presence of *Hineini*. It is ok to take time for ourselves, to take a Shabbat from our phones, from texting, from all the demands placed upon us. Taking the time to care for ourselves will probably help us to better respond with *Hineini* when we really need to. And when we take a moment to step away from the barrage of calls that come in, we learn to discern the calls that matter most – from our family, our friends, and the still small voice within us.

When we answer the calls that really matter, we embrace the vision of *Hineini* spoken by the prophet Isaiah in this morning's *Haftarah*. Isaiah describes the Israelites seeking God daily, craving nearness to the Holy One. But they were unaware that their conduct was hollow. The Israelites were just going through the motions of starving their bodies, the fast merely an attempt to selfishly draw attention to themselves. But through Isaiah God challenges us, "This is the fast I desire: to unlock the fetters of wickedness, to let the oppressed go free, to share your bread with the hungry, to take the poor into your house, to clothe the naked, to not ignore your own kin." And Isaiah continues, "Then shall your light burst through like the dawn and your healing spring up; your righteousness will march before you. Then, when you call, God will answer; when you cry out, the Holy One will say: '*Hineini*.'" This ultimate call and response shows us that when we reach out to others, God will respond to us. When we respond with *Hineini* to one another, God says *Hineini* to us. *God says Hineini to us.*

What these texts teach us is that to live means to be asked; we make our lives meaningful by our response. "All that is left to us is a choice," writes Abraham Joshua Heschel, "to answer or to refuse to answer. Yet the more deeply we listen, the more we become stripped of the arrogance and callousness which alone would enable us to refuse . . . Life is a mandate . . . a flow of opportunity for service." (*Man is Not Alone*)

Rabbi Heschel's words have helped me realize that it is a blessing to be able to respond with "*Hineini*". This kind of response is hard work, and holy work. As I have watched the disease gradually strip away my mother's ability to be present, to be fully aware and able to respond to others, I am learning not to take the opportunity to say *Hineini* for granted.

This summer we made the very difficult decision to move my mom, at age 63, into a memory care facility. During one of our weekly visits to what my kids call "grandma's new house," I noticed a prayer hanging on the wall of the elevator that takes visitors up to the residential floors. This anonymous prayer speaks to all of us who are called upon to visit or be there for a loved one. It reads:

Please grant my visitors tolerance for my confusion,
forgiveness for my irrationality and the strength
to walk with me into the mist of memory my world has become.
Please let them take my hand and stay awhile,
even though I may seem unaware of their presence.
Help them to know how their strength and loving care will drift slowly
into the days to come just when I need it most
And please let them know, how very much their visits mean,
how even through this relentless mystery,
I can still feel their love.

What an honest and heartfelt message for all of us about our ability to respond to the call with *Hineini*, about the struggle to hold on to our own “hineininess” as we age, and about the kind of honor it is to truly be present for another soul.

To which calls will you say *Hineini* this year? You have said *Hineini* by being here today. *Hineini*, I am here, even though it’s been a hard year, even though I have a lot of other things on my plate. We can say *Hineini* to a new member or visitor – I’m here for you, we’re glad that you are here. We can say *Hineini* to needy people and to hungry people in our community. We can say *Hineini* to global calls for *tzedakah* or aid. We can say *Hineini* to our brothers and sisters in Israel. We can say *Hineini* to friends – to be there for them and to treat them with kindness. Kids, you can say *Hineini* to your parents – with a yes and no whining, with love and respect and a desire to be the best kids you can possibly be. Parents, you can say *Hineini* to your kids – to really listen to them, to give space when they need space, to give hugs when they need comfort, and to love them for who they are. We can say *Hineini* to our partner in life – to escort him or her through the ups and downs of each day. We can *Hineini* to ourselves – to allow ourselves to care for our own bodies and minds. And we can say *Hineini* to our loved ones who need us.

To the call of 5772 – *Hineini*, Here I am.