

The Challenge of Hineini Plus Rosh Hashanah

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We've all been watching the presidential campaign candidates' commercials on TV lately, so I feel it appropriate to begin my sermon this morning with the following statement: "I am Rabbi Jason Miller and I have approved this message."

[Cover face with hands] Peek-a-boo! Here I am." [Cover face with hands] "Peek-a-boo!" You don't seem to find this little game that funny. Well, my eight-month-old son sure does. And you probably got quite a kick out of it when you were a tyke as well. So, why is that? Why do babies find a game of peek-a-boo to be so much fun?

Child developmental psychologists have done much research to answer this question. The baby's brain, it seems, is not yet able to recognize what is known in the field as "object permanence." That is, when I cover my face, he really thinks I am no longer present. For that split second, he might be curious as to where I went, or nervous I won't return. But, when I remove my hands from my face and greet him with "peek-a-boo," I have surprisingly returned and he is giggling with delight. And of course, this can be repeated infinitely to the same excitement – or at least until I become bored with the game.

Now that you understand the psychological reason, the textbook reason that is, behind the laughs and giggles that emanate from a simple game of peek-a-boo, let me explain my own theory. I choose to believe that the pleasure a baby derives from "peek-a-boo" can be explained in the spiritual sense. Just like adults, babies crave attention. Not only do they want to be played with, or held, or spoken to, they want to know that you are 100% there – with them. Not just watching them or interacting with them, but completely present with them. They can't express it, but they want you to "be in the moment" with them. Total concentration. It's as if they are God in the Torah asking Adam in the Garden of Eden – "Ayeka" – where are you? They want you to answer as Adam did, "Hineini" – I am totally present with you.

Hineini – "I am here." It is not unlike athletes getting "in the zone." A new study that is considered "groundbreaking" by some experts shows that athletes who can get "in the zone" are better able to suppress or ignore negative thoughts, and have higher self-esteem and confidence. Researcher Dr. Roland A. Carlstedt, a clinical sports psychologist in New York City presented his findings recently. Carlstedt's study involved 250 athletes in basketball, baseball/softball, soccer, tennis, and golf. He compared brain activity coping abilities with 40 non-athletes. He analyzed their performance at key moments in competition. He also gave each a battery of tests to determine various tendencies, such as hypnotic ability, neuroticism, and ability to cope and repress negative thoughts. Those who were high in hypnotic ability showed an extraordinary capability to intensely focus on the task at hand. This ability pays off greatly in performance. Athletes who possessed this "in the zone" capability were by far more successful – they mastered the "Hineini" if you will. They were totally present and in the moment.

Has anyone ever asked you to totally focus? To soak up the moment. I recall the day before my Bar Mitzvah, my mother advising me that the day would be a fleeting moment. All this training and preparation, she said, and it would all be over in what would feel like a second. "Really focus... Take it all in" she said. Of course, this is not so easy to do. We keep our eyes open, we try to just be present, but it really does go by so quickly. So, as a 13-year-old, I did what 13-year-olds do. I said "whatever" and I went on my way.

But the question is a serious one. How do we really make ourselves present – in the moment? How do we really answer with a resounding "Hineini" when asked "Ayeka?" Even if the Ayeka is asked internally – by our own conscience? Rabbi Neil Gillman writes, "Sometimes, all it takes is one word, buried deep within a biblical text, to awaken a host of associations to form a significant theological statement."

To figure out why the Hineini feeling is so important in our lives and in our relationships and in our experiences, we first must get some background information on what is truly meant by “Hineini.” Lucky for us, Rabbi Norman Cohen recently wrote a book entitled “Hineini in our Lives,” in which we learn how to respond to others through texts from the Bible and personal narratives. The Hebrew word “Hineini,” literally “here I am,” standing alone, appears 14 times in the Torah. It appears eight times in the book of Genesis, uttered by Abraham, Esau, Jacob, and Joseph; once in Exodus by Moses in the presence of the burning bush; twice in the book of Samuel; and, finally, three times, uttered by God in the book of Isaiah.

The two most notable human uses of the term. In Genesis 22, God calls to Abraham; Abraham answers, “Hineini,” and God commands him to offer Isaac as a burnt offering, the section from the Torah we read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. In Exodus 3, Moses turns aside to behold the bush that was burning and yet not consumed. God calls out to Moses from the bush, and Moses also responds, “Hineini.” What did God want from our ancestors? He wanted exactly what the little baby wants, what the athlete seeks to achieve, what I was told to feel at my Bar Mitzvah. To attain the “Hineini” moment. To attain this, we must be fully present, responsive, and receptive to the other in our lives, be it God or relatives or friends or a stranger or to our own selves. The Biblical characters are being called by God in the same way that we are called by those we love who want us to be “in the moment” – “in the zone” with them – giving them the attention and care that they crave. We seek that same attitude, the same feeling, in turn.

Rabbi Cohen suggests that in the Bible, the word can convey three sentiments: It can mean to be present and available to the other. It can be a readiness to act on behalf of the other. Or, finally, it may be a readiness to sacrifice on behalf of someone or some higher calling. Some might prioritize one of these sentiments above another. I see them all as carrying equal weight in our lives. Think for a moment about a time in your recent memory that either you needed someone to be present and available to you, or you were needed by someone else. Think about a time you had to act on someone’s behalf. Or a time you had to make a sacrifice for a friend. Why did you do it? Or conversely, why do you think they did it for you? You were asked “Ayeka.” What made you respond “Hineini?” How did you feel after the moment?

We often try to characterize our interpersonal relationships. We question the validity of our friendships. I would always be there for so-and-so, we think, but is the feeling mutual? Would my friends answer “Hineini” if I were in a bind? Rabbi Harold Schulweis explains that “this is what Hineini is all about – the initial willingness to respond to the other, the readiness to act on the other’s behalf no matter what is being asked. When trust has been built up and we have lived in a committed relationship over time, then each of us has to be ready to respond and act when the other, to whom we are committed, calls.”

That advice – to be in the Hineini zone – is valuable at this time of year. The season when we traditionally look introspectively and perform what is known as a cheshbon hanefesh – an accounting of the soul. What better way to perform this annual personality and spirituality checkup than by asking ourselves “Ayeka” – and doing some serious soul searching before responding with a true and certain “Hineini.”

And that is where most rabbis would leave you. They would deliver the time honored Rosh Hashanah message of Hineini – be present in each other’s lives, be a good listener, be caring, be a true soulmate, be a dependable friend, be an attentive child. Soak up the moments. But it is not enough to just “be.” I won’t stop at the Hineini message. There’s more. I have great faith in you. I know you can achieve the Hineini – you can be in the zone in your relationships. You can be good, upright, moral citizens. But I’m going to suggest that when you perform your cheshbon hanefesh – your personal reality check, you aim higher.

Therefore, on this day of new beginnings, this birthday of the world, I am proud to unveil my plan for serious Jewish living called [drum roll please] “Hineini Plus.” Let me explain.

You have already set your sights on achieving the “interpersonal Hineini” – being a better person in your relationships. Now, in this New Year, I encourage you to resolve to enroll in Hineini Plus and get in touch with your Jewish self.

Now, you could certainly argue that I am preaching to the choir. You are the Jews who obtained the tickets to High Holy Day services, who took off work, who skipped class, and who came to be a part of the Jewish community on this day of awe. But that is precisely why I am addressing this plan to you... you are primed for Hineini Plus. Hineini Plus is all about asking yourself Ayeka B'yahadut – where are you in Judaism? What is your place in the Jewish world? What do you do for the betterment of society that is part of the Jewish ideal of justice, and tikkun olam, and our ethical code of mitzvot? After asking those questions, you must make the necessary changes in your life so that you can honestly answer your own call with Hineini.

Judaism has much to offer. But you won't know until you investigate. So many of you are here as students. Your chief job in life right now is to investigate – to explore – to learn new and interesting things. Hineini Plus is all about taking it to the next level – finding out how you can enhance your Yiddishe neshama – your Jewish soul.

Rabbi Barry Kogan explains that you don't need Judaism to experience life's moments. You can go through the entire life cycle, holidays, milestones, etc. and you don't need Judaism to live those moments. However, he clarifies; you do need Judaism to understand, to make sense, out of those life experiences. We are truly blessed to be Jewish. Our religion, our heritage, has so much to offer.

Years ago, when I taught seventh grade Hebrew school, I would give the same assignment year after year. I would ask the students to answer the following question: “If it were illegal to be Jewish, how long would it take for you or your family to be caught.” Many of course would respond that it would be immediate once the mezuzah on their front door was spotted. But I asked them to consider what one would find in their home or more specifically in their bedroom were one to use all their senses – what outright Jewish sounds, sights, and smells might one encounter in their home. Would they smell Jewish food, would they hear Jewish or Israeli music or Hebrew or Yiddish words being spoken, would they see Jewish books and ritual objects, might they see a tzedakah box or someone writing a check to an organization, would they come across people debating the Jewish issues of the day or studying Jewish texts?

A twelve-year-old girl named Alana Frey, who was not a student of mine, but I wish I could claim her as one, came up with an inspiring idea for her Bat Mitzvah project. She asked friends and relatives what being Jewish means to them. She then compiled the answers in booklet form and sent it to Adam Pearl, the son of martyred Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl who was brutally murdered in Pakistan. Alana's idea was of course triggered by the final words uttered by Daniel Pearl before he was killed. With a gun to his head he proclaimed: “My father is Jewish, my mother is Jewish, I am Jewish.” Young Alana sent this booklet to Adam Pearl so that “he would have an understanding of his heritage and his father's words would always comfort him.”

What do Daniel Pearl's words mean to you? “My father is Jewish, my mother is Jewish, I am Jewish.” Do they scream “Ayeka B'yahadut” – where are YOU Jewishly? From Alana's poignant gift to Adam Pearl, came the motivation for Daniel Pearl's parents to compile a book of personal reflections inspired by Daniel Pearl's last words. There are dozens upon dozens of contributions in this book from Jewish celebrities and politicians to rabbis, philanthropists, Jewish professionals, and young children. The words I'd like to share with you however come from Michelle Pearl, vice president of the Daniel Pearl Foundation and beloved younger sister of Daniel. In response to her brother's dying words, she responds proudly with Hineini. She writes, “When the time came to feel a connection beyond ourselves, we drew strength from our Judaism because it enhanced our humanity... I didn't choose to be Jewish, but it is intrinsic to who I am.”

How will you respond to the question “Ayeka” on this Rosh Hashanah? Some suggestions:

Jewish ritual – light candles, have a Shabbat dinner – it doesn’t have to be at Hillel, start keeping kosher in your dorm room, apartment, or house. Take a Jewish Studies course in the university, learn to speak and write in Hebrew. Hillel has two Hebrew classes this Fall and many exciting once-a-week Jewish learning classes.

Become involved in social action causes. Are you following what is happening in Sudan where the government is responsible for “ethnic cleansing” of the people of Darfur. Look into what you can do to help the men and women in Darfur who are dying at unbelievable rates due to this mass genocide.

Choose a cause that speaks to you and help mobilize others to help. It might be Domestic Abuse, which has not been dealt with enough in the Jewish community. Contact Jewish Family Services to learn how you can help. Pick an organization like Mazon if you are concerned about feeding the hungry, of paramount concern in Judaism. Help protect the rights of gays and lesbians and other minorities. Help get citizens to the polls on election day.

Be an advocate for the Jewish homeland. There are so many ways that the State of Israel can benefit from your activism. Travel to Israel with a birthright israel trip, volunteer on a kibbutz, join one of the university’s many Israel groups, stand up strong against protesters who question your love of Israel or who promote anti-Semitic rhetoric equating Zionism with Nazism.

Increase your sense of Jewish pride. Educate yourself. The Christian proselytizing group Jews for Jesus has targeted our campus with their “Behold Your God” campaign in an effort to convert as many Jews to Christianity as possible in a two-month period. Why are Jewish leaders, rabbis, and community professionals so concerned about this matter? It is because too many Jewish young people do not feel that sense of Jewish pride, do not know enough about Judaism or the Torah to avoid or challenge the claims made by this group. Take this negative and turn it into a positive. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we could say that because Jews for Jesus came to town, more Jewish young people have committed themselves to learning more about the joys of being Jewish and to increasing their sense of Jewish pride?

So, make the Hineini Plus pledge and urge your friends to make the Hineini Plus pledge as well. Don’t sit back and be passive. We have enough passive young Jews already. We need proactive, aware, and proud young Jews.

Whether it’s a game of “Peek-a-boo” or “getting into the zone” or “being in the moment,” when you ask yourself “Ayeka,” what will you answer? I hope you’ll say “Hineini Plus.” And if I ask you “Ayeka” and you respond “Hineini Plus,” I promise to respond as if I were a little baby and you just came out of hiding from behind your hands and surprised me with a “peek-a-boo.” Our Jewish community could use some giggling.

May you have a sweet and healthy new year and may you be inscribed for another year of life - Shanah Tovah v’Shalom al Yisrael.