



Erev Rosh Hashanah 5783

Rabbi Kowalski

Once or twice in a lifetime
A [person] may choose
A radical leaving, having heard
Lech I'cha — Go forth.
God disturbs us toward our destiny
By hard events
And by freedom's now urgent voice
Which explode and confirm who we are.
We don't like leaving,
But God loves becoming.¹

A radical leaving—this is exactly what we encounter as we “[run] into the New Year”²—what are we leaving behind and what are we taking with us? What does this transition mean for you? Who are you, right now? What are you doing here? What does the New Year mean for you? Who do you hope to be and how will you accomplish that goal? How will you grow, learn, and develop?

An educator knows not to ask something of their students that they are unwilling to do themselves, so here goes:

As a rabbi, the New Year is a time for reconnection, recommitment. It is a chance to introduce myself to the Temple community as a whole. It sets the stage more ardently for the focused work of relationship building and meaning making that I seek out as a leader and representative of the community.

As an educator, the New Year means the din and organized chaos of a brand-new school year, of focused and concerted learning, growth, and development; a benchmark against which we measure our accomplishments and trajectory over the course of the year.

¹ Rabbi Norman Hirsh, *Mishkan T'filah* Shabbat edition, pg. 113.

² Lucille Clifton.

As an individual, well that's a bit harder, as the lead up to the New Year has been fraught with a lot of transition for me, a radical leaving, if you will: a new job, a new community, a new city (not to mention a new country!). It's a lot for any single individual.

Transitions are hard for everyone, especially to a new person finding themselves in unfamiliar territory. Who am I, to come here and offer my views on education, G?d, and the status of Jews around the world³? I say this not to extol my virtues as a rabbi and educator, but to share a secret with you: it is not only I who have something to teach and share with you, but you have something to teach me as well, as I adapt to this new city and community.

This experience of sharing information, of growing together and learning from one another, also occurs within the style of Jewish text study known as *chevruta*.⁴ *Chevruta*, coming from the Hebrew *chaver*, meaning friend, is a partnership between two individuals and the text they are studying. Each person has the opportunity to sharpen and strengthen the other member of the partnership by respectfully and assiduously questioning them regarding their interpretation of the text and how it applies to them. In fact, in the Talmud, there is a whole aside about how *chevruta* work together and enhance each other.⁵ In order to be a good *chevruta*, you must be mindful of who you are with, and be present with them, helping to guide them, and expecting they do the same for you. The quintessential example of this kind of partnership in the Talmud is Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish, or the rabbi and the former-gadiator. Their relationship is complicated—they even end up becoming brothers-in-law along the way—it's a long story. Their bond is so interconnected that the Talmud recounts that the slights of one upon the other caused physical distress and illness to them.⁶ *Chevruta*, thus, is not just a bond of study, since it says: “when two [people] sit together and share words of Torah between them, Shekhinah dwells amongst them.”⁷

We are in *chevruta* here, now, you and I, both in our new relationship as I begin my time as your new Associate Rabbi, and in particular as we are here together for the High Holy Days both in person and online.

³ Touchstone Pictures, Spyglass Entertainment, 2000.

⁴ For more on the style of *chevruta* and its significance: [A Philosophy of Havruta: Understanding and Teaching the Art of Text Study in Pairs](#) by Elie Holzer and Orit Kent (2013).

⁵ B.T. Ta'anit 7a-b.

⁶ B.T. Baba Metzia 84a.

⁷ Pirkei Avot 3:2.

Being present and accountable to one another in partnership can be summarized in one single Hebrew word: Hineini. The word hineini shows up a total of fourteen times in the TaNaKh⁸, and in the most proximal area, it shows up three times in the first half alone of chapter 22 of Genesis, which we will read tomorrow morning. One of my bible professors at Hebrew Union College⁹ told us that if a word shows up twice in proximity, it's a bit unusual, but not necessarily so; if a word shows up three times in proximity, though, that is something definitely to take note of. So, let us take note of it now, and explore what we can learn about being hineini, the becoming that G?d loves, from this text.

The chapter opens “*Vayehi achar had'varim haeileh...*,” “Some time later...,” but literally “And it was after these things...”¹⁰ When G?d first speaks to Abraham in this chapter, and Abraham answers with the first hineini, their relationship has already been well established. They have a confidence in each other, an understanding of where the other is coming from. They have a track record, and the events of the chapter unfold because their relationship is rooted in a sense of security and familiarity. G?d would not be able to ask such an insurmountable task of Abraham without this previously established camaraderie. This is the first element of being hineini within our new partnership together: familiarity.¹¹

So hineini, here I am, and I have to admit that I readily understand that I do not have this kind of track record here with you, yet. I do, however, have some experience in this area. I grew up in Albany, New York, at Congregation Beth Emeth “the fourth oldest Reform congregation in America,” the first American home of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, one of the founders of North American Reform Judaism.¹² I spent the last three years working at Temple Israel in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which celebrated its centenary a few years before I arrived¹³ and which proudly displays a yahrtzeit plaque for an individual who passed before Oklahoma even had recognized statehood¹⁴. These historic congregations have shaped my

⁸ Concordance.

⁹ Dr. Kristine Garroway.

¹⁰ Genesis 22:1.

¹¹ The sense of familiarity between G?d and Abraham is developed in detail in the lead up to this story in two ways. Firstly, in Genesis Rabbah 55:7, the midrash explains that the verse (Genesis 22:2) goes into so many details describing Isaac because after each descriptor, Abraham demurs, and states how that word could describe both of his sons. It is not until G?d explicitly names Isaac that Abraham must concede that is who G?d means. But how could we anticipate such a conversation happening? Because it is demonstrated previously when Abraham implores G?d to save the cities of Sodom and 'Amorrah, enumerating out detail after detail of how to save the city, even down to ten righteous individuals in Genesis 18:17-33.

¹² <https://images.shulcloud.com/3408/uploads/Documents/Mission--History/updatedhistory.pdf>

¹³ Temple Israel was founded in 1914.

¹⁴ Oklahoma was granted statehood in 1907. The plaque referenced marks a death date in the 1890s.

relationship with and understanding of Reform Judaism, steeped in rich history and tradition. While each of these congregations are unique and different, and I do not seek to transfer their customs and practices here to Montreal, it does mean that I am aware of what Temple's historic relevance and stature represent and demand of us. This common vocabulary of language and images that are relatable bring a sense of comfort and familiarity when amidst the unknown. I felt it as I sat in these pews here for the first time, noting the wooden arm rests softened by time, gazing curiously at the numbers and sometimes names assigned to each seat – who sat here? Who belonged here? What did they share with others, with you? It reminded me of my own chair in the sanctuary in Albany, which holds a special place in my heart and mind.¹⁵ I found the familiar in these chairs.

In this regard, familiarity will not breed contempt as the adage goes; quite the opposite: instead, it leads to a deeper sense of trust, which is a major element of the second aspect of hineini.

As they pack up camp and mosey merrily along, Isaac looks at Abraham along their way up the mountain, as he asks “Father?” to which Abraham replies “hineini.”¹⁶

Much has been written on this passage about Isaac by our commentators. Depending on his age and level of cognizance, is Isaac confused, unaware, pensive? The text, as is often the case, is remiss of motivations and emotional content. We do not know what Isaac is thinking or how he feels. What we do know is that he trusts Abraham, for the two of them proceed on together, *vayeilchu sh'neihem yachdav*,¹⁷ into the unknown.¹⁸

This is all well and good for the Torah, but what does it have to do with chevruta, with us?

Any teacher will tell you that the classes they enjoy teaching the most have next to nothing to do with the content of that class. The content could be anything, even the driest, most arcane dribble you could think of. The content does not make the class, the character does, the students do. When students are engaged, participating, involved, the reciprocal relationship between them and their teachers allows their growth and development to bloom and expand. It raises the level of learning from

¹⁵ Rabbi Kowalski explored this idea further in the sermon she delivered in Albany for Erev Rosh HaShanah 2018.

¹⁶ Genesis 22:7.

¹⁷ Genesis 22:8. The phrase is also repeated earlier in 22:6.

¹⁸ Walt Disney Pictures, 2019.

mere information input, like that picture you see of the skull opened up and a mysterious external hand dropping information on top of it, to a spiritual exercise. “Jewishness is not simply a function of the intellect, but an expression of heart and soul, of psyche and senses.”¹⁹ This can be summed up in the teaching from Pirkei Avot: *asei l’cha rav u’kinei l’cha chaver*, make for yourself a teacher, and acquire for yourself a friend.²⁰

So hineini, here I am, and I am well aware that as we are only at the beginning of our journey together. I do not yet have a built-up account in the bank of trust from which to draw on with all of you.²¹

Part of this trust is also a willingness to do the work, to get down into it, and develop these pieces of relationship building and meaning making. The two-way street of trust needs to be paved with intentional input and output, the give and take of chevruta, exploring how we do, think, and be in a Jewish mindset.

And then what? Because I said there were three elements, three occurrences of hineini. If we’re already doing the work, what’s next?

In the final utterance of hineini in this story, at the apex of the drama, just as he has picked up the knife to offer his son, when the angel cries to Abraham... and suddenly, he stops and he replies “hineini.”²²

We miss many opportunities for hineini moments because we are not permitting ourselves to be present. In the following verse, Abraham raises his eyes and notices a ram, which he sacrifices instead of Isaac.²³ Who is to say how long the ram had actually be there, caught in the thicket, waiting... waiting for the opportune moment²⁴, for Abraham potentially did not see it until he needed to; but that does not mean it was not there.

So hineini, here I am, and well, I almost missed the hineini moment, big time: I was not ready for this. Between moving, and bureaucracy, and the delays with my belongings arriving, and the massive amount of boxes to unpack, I was not mentally

¹⁹ Living a Jewish Life: Jewish Traditions, Customs, and Values for Today’s Families by Anita Diamant (2007), pg. 8.

²⁰ 1:6.

²¹ See also habit 5 of The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change by Stephen Covey (2017).

²² Genesis 22:11.

²³ Genesis 22:13.

²⁴ Walt Disney Pictures, 2003.

prepared for the arrival of this New Year. By the time I started to truly focus on the High Holy Days, it was already the middle of September! And I asked myself “What do you even have to say to anyone right now? How do I focus?” The realization that I missed the mark in this way—that I was so focused on the start of Torah School and the syllabus for the Introduction to Judaism class, and felt off-balance having to live without the vast majority of my belongings for two whole months!—that I was not being focused on all of the elements that allow me to say ‘hineini’ to all of you.

Then, I was in a learning session, a chevruta with some friends and colleagues, and it was like the big cartoon lightbulb went off over my head, *ding* (or the hammer came out of nowhere and went *boing*, I’m not sure which). It’s all about chevruta. The relational aspects, the familiarity and trust, drive the whole process. Within the process, we are able to come more fully, more openly, more vulnerably into the space of chevruta, and in turn allow it to affect us in utterly profound ways. Confiding in the other, “this is me, here I am,” with all of our flaws and lapses (of which we are keenly aware this time of year), we come to the table and offer ourselves to one another, not as a gift to be unwrapped, but as a favorite book to be fondly leafed through, with well-worn beloved pages, familiar in our hands. When we say hineini in this regard, we share ourselves as another text to be learned by our chevruta (and I love a good text study). And we don’t need to be perfectly prepared. The High Holy Days are never late, nor are they early, they arrive precisely on time²⁵, every year, and very rarely are any of us (especially Jewish professionals) completely prepared for it. Instead, what I hope we, all of us, remember is simply to be present with, and for, each other, in this moment, in all the moments we have together moving forward, and all they will bring us, all they will teach us, all we will teach each other.

I asked you initially who will you be in the New Year? Who are you be-ing or be-coming? Additionally, who will we be or be-come together? The most interesting visual aspect about a page of Talmud is how the central text is surrounded, hugged, by all the commentary and notes clinging to it. Who are we, as we embark in this journey of a New Year and a new partnership? We are the empty page, waiting to be filled. We’ll find out together, through our growing familiarity, a mutually reassuring trust, and our work together; as we say not only *l’shanah tovah u’metukah*, but also hineini—I am here, here I am.²⁶

²⁵ New Line Cinema, 2001.

²⁶ Michelle Citrin.