

Hinenu: Here We Are

A Sermon by Molly Housh

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You may be pleased to learn that I am not the sort who is inclined to hear the voice of God.

But I love the story I've just read you, because I *am* the sort who yearns to feel the life buzzing in all my millions of cells, to hear that resounding note that rises up from a sound too deep inside to be heard. I long to be awakened and brought to joyful tears by the call of the spirit. And I long to answer that call by giving myself over to it, by saying "Here I am, I am ready."

Basically, I desire no less than to live the word "Hineni." Hineni is the word that appears and reappears over and over in the biblical narrative when a wise and courageous soul answers the call of God. "Abraham! Abraham!" says God. "Hineni," responds Abraham. "Moses!" calls God. "Hineni," Moses replies.

It means "here I am." But it carries so much more weight than that. It is an answer befitting of God's call. It holds in its three short syllables humility and courage and love and passion. It means "here I am, ready and committed." "Here I am for you." "Here I am; send me!" It means more than just existing; it means being fully present, expectant, aware. "Mary!" called the Angel Gabriel. "Hineni," Mary replied.

No tall order, right? I mean, all you really have to do is hear the deepest call of your heart and soul, distinguish it from all the other internal and external voices

demanding things from you, locate the courage inside you to say yes, and then travel a path that may or may not be the right one and that may or may not interfere severely with the demands of your life.

It's no wonder that Moses tried to pass his call off to someone else, that the Hebrew prophet Jonah heard God's call and ran as fast as possible in the other direction. It's no wonder that Swain Hammond kept his big mouth shut as long as he could.

Jewish tradition recognizes that answering the call-- being fully present, aware, and committed-- is as difficult as it is imperative. Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year and beginning of the high holidays, is dedicated to reminding us of the importance of our various calls and to bringing us back to our spiritual center. The holiday wisely recognizes that humans need to be called back again and again-- back to God, back to the cries of the spirit, back to the still small voice inside, back to the deep connections between us.

Yes, this tradition recognizes the difficulty, but it also recognizes the immense importance. As one of the holiest of days, Rosh Hashanah recognizes that if we don't start out the year by finding a place of Hineni, of presence and commitment, we just drift: moving half asleep through life feeling only what essayist David Foster Wallace calls "the constant gnawing sense of having had and lost some infinite thing."

Today is the second day of Rosh Hashanah, and so, as we gather, my hope is that we too, may be reminded of and recommitted to the calls and commitment of the spirit and of this community May reconnect with that infinite thing, whatever it may be.

One tool used on Rosh Hashanah for the difficult and essential task of reminding and re-orienting us is the shofar, the ram's horn that is sounded every year during this time and is meant to literally *call* us back. The sound of the shofar is intended, says Rabbi Jason Miller, to awaken the listener from his or her "slumber." It is meant to pierce the soul, to startle the heart into returning to its center. I am always moved by the deep wisdom of this millenniums old Jewish tradition that humbly recognizes it is in our nature to get distracted.

Despite our best intentions, it is natural to turn away bit by bit from the orienting spirit of our lives. I see this habit of our nature as being sort of like an old fashioned kitchen timer, we wind ourselves up (turning all the way around) and then we start clicking away, tick, tick, tick (turn slowly). Before we know it, we're facing southeast instead of North and the heart and soul within us lie silent and confused. The shofar is sounded every year to pull us back. To remind us to tick on around back to center.

So, having been *reminded* to return to center, we must then learn to *reorient* as well. In other words, where is center anyhow? Well, Hineni has some clues for us there. You see, there are two main ways to say "Here I am" in Hebrew. "Po ani" is the way you answer role-call, like in school. Molly? Po ani. Here. "Hineni," we already know, is the way you answer God or the cries of the spirit. The lesson that follows, then, is that we want to be re-oriented, not to Po-ani questions, but to Hineni ones. If we seek to be spiritually present, expectant, and committed, and I think we do, then we need to distinguish the role-calls from the soul-calls.

This act of distinguishing is also known as discernment, and as any seminarian mid-way through can tell you, discernment is not a comfortable place to be. It's where some element of risk comes into the equation, because you see, as Billy Collins reminds us, we are each a *house* of voices. This sanctuary houses an entire *city* of voices. Voices calling out to themselves; to each other; and many-- far too many of them-- calling out to each of you.

After the sound of the shofar, there is some silence, because you have to listen hard.

More often than not, the important voices, the soul-calls, do not come like a loudspeaker over the hill, or from a burning bush or a hedge. When we're lucky they might come to us like a humming note of music, but they are more likely to rise up quietly. The important calls *inside* us tend to come as whispers or shuffles or sometimes muffled sobs. And perhaps even more difficult to discern, the important calls *among* us and *between* us tend to be silent ones, calls quieted by the heaviness of grief, calls muted by exhaustion, calls marginalized and silenced by the pressures of society.

These are the calls that need answers. *These* are the calls that need Hineni. This is where the word faith comes in and courage takes its cue, because these quiet calls will only grow in volume and strength once we move toward them, once we begin to answer them. At the exact the moment each of us says Here I Am, we are starting down a path with little assurance. Only the hope that when we follow where it leads we'll get a deep, resonant sound like a cello that echoes and sustains and tells us that we are just where we need to be.

Hineni takes courage because any given path could be the wrong one. It takes courage because answering the call of one's own spirit can take us places we're not so sure we want to go. It takes courage because committing ourselves to others makes us vulnerable and committing ourselves to justice often makes us unpopular. But I think the resonance is worth it. The deep peace of integrity and the joy of connectedness are worth it.

Amelia Earhart, I was recently stunned to learn, was a poet as well as a pioneering woman pilot, and she wrote a poem entitled Courage that seems appropriate to share here.

She writes:

Courage is the price which life exacts for granting peace.

The soul that knows it not, knows no release

From little things;

Knows not the livid loneliness of fear

Nor mountain heights, where bitter joy can hear

The sound of wings.

How can life grant us boon of living, compensate

For dull gray ugliness and pregnant hate

Unless we dare

The soul's dominion? Each time we make a choice we pay

With courage to behold resistless day

And count it fair.

It gives me chills to hear that poem and think of the seemingly impossible call that Amelia Earhart answered with gusto. How can life grant us boon of living, she says, unless we dare the soul's dominion? *That* is the call of this new year, *that* is no less than the challenge of Hineni. To dare the soul's dominion. To walk down the path that beckons to our spirits. And the reward is peace, is the sound of wings, is life, is that resonant note of pure joy that Swain Hammond heard in bed.

Traveling this path is worth the courage, but it is also not a *only* a leap of faith, because resonance involves more than just our hearing. It involves our feeling as well. Our intuition can scout out the way before us. Our feet can feel vibrations building along the path and know that we are entering holy ground.

On a pilgrimage to Israel with a group of congregants, Rabbi Robert Dobrusin asked his group to keep in mind that word Hineni, and to "find the one place (or two, three or four places) which they felt was the place that made them shout out "Hineni." I have come to the land. I am here. I understand the impact of my being here, and I want God to see me standing in this place because this is the place of greatest meaning."

In relating this story during a Rosh Hashanah sermon to his congregation, Rabbi Dobrusin encouraged them to similarly find a few metaphorical places this year that feel like holy ground, that inspire them to say Hineni.

This is what we, too, can do this new church year. We can walk with courage and intuition toward the places that resonate for us, that send vibrations up through our feet and into our hearts. These places are the soul's dominion. They are the calls for us to answer.

Our true job then, the next step and the work of the spirit and of this congregation is to turn that vibration into voice, into Hineni. And I want to let you know today, that I am feeling some good vibrations from this place, standing here on this ground. In meeting many of you last week and in meeting some of the leaders among you in planning for the year, I must say that I find the energy here moving! The spirit of this congregation has begun to resonate with my soul. It makes me want to say, here I am! Humble, ready, expectant, committed to you.

Committed to you. Which brings me to my last point, which is this... we don't just say Here I am to the air. We say it to our own spirits, we say it to each other, we say it to the community writ large. Because here's another difference between the Po Ani "Here I Am" and Hineni "Hear I Am." It's the difference between saying I am here and saying I am here *for you*. That difference is love. That difference is mutuality. It is the generosity of giving of ourselves to one another.

Hineni contains the sentiment that the choir sang so beautifully this morning: "And I am thine, I rest in thee, Great Spirit come, and rest in me." Part of our call as a community is to say here I am with love, not only to our own spirits, but also to each other. It is to say we belong to each other, not in the sense of ownership, but in the sense of shelter. We work together to provide spiritual home, inspiration, and rest for each other, and for all who enter this place. And we also work more effectively for spiritual and societal transformation when we stand *together*. The plural of Hineni is Hinenu. Here *We* are. And a community that says Hinenu together stays together, finds shelter in each other, rests together, stands together, transforms together.

My prayer for us all as we enter this new year together is this: when we hear the still small voice calling us to rest and contemplation may we respond: here we are; when we feel a deep longing calling us to risk loving and to risk kindness to another may we turn to each other or to one among us and respond: here we are; when we are moved by faith out of our seats and into the streets may we proclaim to the world: here we are! And when each of us knows that we are on holy ground, when the spirit tingles in our toes, and passion bubbles in our bellies, and joy and courage take hold of our hearts, may we say it all together: Here we are!