

# Hinneni

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*Shana tovah u metukah.*

Jerry Seinfeld once observed, "According to most studies, people's number one fear is public speaking. Number two is death. Does that sound right? This means that, to the average person, if you go to a funeral, you're better off in the casket than doing the eulogy".

Unfortunately, that has not been the case in Israel this year. Most of us have attended too many funerals this year. Often of young people, many of army buddies, so many of fathers of children.

And yet, people step up. After October 7, 120% of reserve soldiers reported for duty. In the protracted conflict, people are weary, yet rarely seek exemptions. I saw a friend at *minhah* the other day who told me that his son was going in again (3<sup>rd</sup> time). We had Shabbat dinner last Friday with a family whose husband and father was in again. *Hinneni*. Here I am.

And it's not just soldiers who step forward. Those of you who have been to Israel this year saw people who volunteer in agricultural fields - some occasionally (as I did) and others on a regular basis. *Hinneni*. Here I am.

Some of you have heard of a *HaMa"l*, an acronym for *Heder Milhamah*, War Room. While *HaMa"l* usually refers to a military operations centre, the same name has been used for civilian command centres where volunteers sort and distribute household supplies, equipment for soldiers, diapers, games and toys for kids, clothing, many other needed items. *Hinneni*. Here I am.

There are *HaMa"l* initiatives to prepare meals to bring to army bases. I am part of a *HaMa"l Matok*, a sweet *Hamal*, called Bubbies Baking. We prepare *hallot*, cakes and cookies and deliver hundreds of these baked goods to soldiers throughout Israel. These are civilian initiatives. People step up. *Hinneni*. Here I am.

There are the volunteers who dedicate days to sit in Hostage Square outside the Tel Aviv Museum and across from the *Kiryah*, the centre for military

operations. Others have coordinated efforts to make sure that the situation of the hostages remains front and centre. *Hinneni*. Here I am.

Those who step forward are channelling Avraham who responded to God's call and said *Hinneni*, Here I am. They echo Yitzhak who said to his father, *Hinneni*, Here I am. They were like Yosef who hearkened to his father and said, *Hinneni*, Here I am. They had Moshe as a model. He heard the call of the Divine and responded, *Hinneni*. Here I am.

People ask me what it's like in Israel. I explain that instead of a single sense of reality, there is a split screen. One is typical daily life: kids have to get to school; people go to work; friends meet for coffee; a *minyan* gathers for *tefillah*; couples go for city walks or country hikes. Except life is in high speed, because you never know....

Then there is the other screen — almost in slow motion — families grieving or full of anxiety; small businesses on hold or failing; elders worried about how to get to a safe room when sirens scream; hospitals moving underground; young people preparing for army service, and anger at the Haredi community who won't.

What about here? We are no longer hearing, watching and experiencing **occasional** incidents of antisemitism. It is every day. Our media saturates us with criticism of Israel. And we all know about the hateful crowd that gathered last week outside the JCC, Hillel Lodge and OJCS.

My friend, Yossi Klein Halevi, believes that we are witnessing efforts to marginalize Jews in our society. The writer, Dara Horn, identifies a coordinated effort to push Jews out of public life.

The problem is not criticism of Israel. It is red paint on businesses associated with Jews. It is middle school kids being subject to protests. It is gay pride marches that exclude Zionists and book festivals that cancel Zionists. It is the need for police protection. It is the consequence of speaking up in our offices or among our colleagues.

**Jews are under pressure to erase ourselves.** Particularly if the Z word is used. Teens post constantly; many don't to avoid social media when they are in Israel or doing something Jewish, to protect themselves from an avalanche of anti-colonial anti-Zionist comments.

Only a particular type of Jew is subject to criticism. Those who say they are not Zionists may try to pass as “good Jews.” They are mistaken. If we succumb to this, we allow ourselves to be erased so that others will not feel uncomfortable by our presence and persistence.

We must be concerned for university life: young adults will become the thought leaders of the future. Those who are intolerant of proud Jews will weaken the fabric of Canadian society. And fearful Jews will weaken our community.

There are many Jewish students who hide their identities. They don't want to be harassed by hateful hordes on line or in person. But the best response is to be loud and proud. My cousin David, in Seattle, drives antisemites crazy by affirming his pro-Zionist Jewish identity and recording their reactions. Nothing drives the haters crazier than Jews who are not intimidated.

Wear Stars of David, Hai necklaces, Hebrew sweatshirts, go to Jewish activities, put up the mezuzah. Don't disappear. Don't erase yourself.

In the Purim megillah, Esther is reluctant to go to the king. But Mordekhai says, “Who knows, perhaps for this moment you were raised and brought here. This is our moment. *Hinenei*. Here I am. Step up. Step forward.

Jews don't fit into simple identity boxes. In the 2021 census, 282,000 people reported "Jewish" as their ethnic or cultural origin, compared with 144,00 in 2016. Why the difference? In 2016, "Jewish" was not listed as an option. Our community had to demand an additional check off for the last census. Jews don't fit into the framework of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives, because we predate concepts of religion, nationality and race. When trying to understand minority groups, Jews don't fit.

We must remind ourselves and others why Jewish civilization matters, what we have given and continue to contribute to the world. We should seek to inculcate in our children pride and humility, courage and compassion, knowledge and bravery. And, as adults, we need to begin a process of our own reeducation. *Hinenni*. Here I am.

Last spring, I reread *Why I am a Jew*, by Edmond Fleg. An Alsatian Jew who understood Judaism to be identical with the liberal French ideals of tolerance, equality, and freedom, Fleg became a popular writer, but distanced himself from Judaism. Then the Dreyfus's Affair occurred.

Fleg was stunned by the hate, the antisemitism unleashed. He became a Zionist. He affirmed his Jewish identity:

I am a Jew because at every time when despair cries out, I hope.

I am a Jew because the word of the people Israel is the oldest and the newest.

I am a Jew because the promise of Israel is the universal promise.

I am a Jew because, for Israel, the world is not completed; we are completing it....

I am a Jew because, above humanity, image of the divine Unity, Israel places the unity which is divine.

Fleg's commitment arose because of his shock at what was happening in French society. Many of us are going through comparable painful reassessments about colleagues, neighbors, and political parties.

I know of a university student who didn't object when her professor said something about Zionist settler colonialism. Subsequently she said, "I wish I had said something." But it is hard. It is easier to relinquish space. Rosh Hashanah ushers in a period of *heshbon hanefesh*, scrutiny of our souls. Would we have stood up? Would we have said *Hinneni*. Here I am?

What this student didn't know is that in the 1960s, the Soviet Union began to export certain ideas about Israel: Zionism is racism. Israel was established by settler colonialism. Israel is an apartheid state. Israel is guilty of genocide. All this propaganda is now recycled by those who want to erase Israel.

What this student might have said is that Jews are an indigenous people that revitalized an indigenous language in our indigenous lands. She might have said that Zionism is the national liberation movement of the Jewish people. Zionism was a resistance to the tyranny of empires.

She might have pointed out that as empires collapsed, national movements began. The first Zionist Congress of 1897 was followed by the first Arab national Congress of 1913. She might have said that the end of Ottoman rule was the beginning of modern Turkey, just as it led to the foundation of Israel.

To be a Jew is an act of faith, of courage, of hope. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg teaches that, after the Shoah, loyalty to covenantal hope can no longer be commanded. Responsibility for fulfilling the messianic promise has shifted to human hands.

*The choice to be a Jew can lead to a rich and fulfilling life, encompassing family, community and a higher purpose. But it may also involve pain, suffering and even death.*

I tell this to individuals considering Judaism, but it is true for those who are born as Jews. Hinneni. Here I am.

Hinneni also applies to our relationships with others. We have to step forward with family, friends, colleagues.

I'm here for you.

I'm listening.

I'll show up.

I'll help.

It need not be a response to a big ask and it doesn't happen all at once.

It's the extra phone call you make to a friend even though you're tired, but you know he needs to talk so you just do it. It's the item you slip into the grocery cart for a friend or family member; the text you send a coworker when going on a coffee run; the part of the salad you leave aside without tomatoes because your sister/lover/roommate just can't abide by those vegetables. (Rishe Groner)

Another Hinneni can begin with a decision to light Shabbat candles when on vacation, or to avoid commerce, lawn work or laundry on Shabbat at home.

Howard Zinn observed in *The Optimism of Uncertainty*:

Revolutionary change [may come by] ...moving zigzag toward a more decent society. We don't have to engage in grand, heroic actions to participate in process of change.

But saying *Hinneni* doesn't mean that we must all join the choir. There are some powerful Israeli poems, elicited by the pain of October 7, that express the anger and disappointment of Israelis.

Assaf Gur wrote:

*Yitgadal v yitkadash sh mei raba:*

And no one came.

Many thousands called to Him on Shabbat morning

Begging Him with tears just to come

But He ceased from all His work

No God came...

Only Satan celebrated uninterrupted  
Dancing between kibbutzim and the slaughter festival

Later this month, we shall return to Simhat Torah. Israelis are still struggling to regain their footing. The calendar seems to always read October 7.

Recently, a Koolulam gathering took place near Jerusalem. One song is learned and sung as a multi-voice by a stadium of people. This gathering involved families that have lost so much. It was based around the Naomi Shemer song. The message was clear:

מבראשית  
את עולמך בבוקר תמיד לברוא  
העשב וכל המאורות, האדמה  
בצלם אנשים, ואז מן העפר  
לקום מחר בבוקר ולהתחיל מבראשית.

From the beginning  
Each morning, your world must still be created  
The earth, the grass and all the lights  
And from the dust, the image of humanity  
Get up tomorrow morning and start from beresheet.

For you too,  
The time is over.  
At midnight,  
finding the way home  
is hard to see  
in the darkness -

Get up tomorrow morning and start from beresheet  
It is hard to start from beresheet, to say Hinneni. Here I am.

As I said yesterday, we need to hope onto the rope of hope. Gabriel Marcel, who wrestled with the question of hope during the German occupation of France wrote "Hope is situated within the framework of the trial..." Consider the challenges faced by Avraham and Sarah. Consider your own experience.

**To hope means to remain humble and uncertain,** Avraham doesn't know what God wants, but he trusts the Divine. We don't know what events may mean.

**To hope means to keep on going.** During the three day journey, Abraham creates space when hope gestates.

**To hope means to act as if you can see the outcome you desire.** Avraham rarely speaks, but he tells Isaac: “ God will see to the sheep for the offering, my son.”

**To hope means staying true to your character.** From the beginning of Abraham’s relationship with God through this final test, Abraham does not despair. He gives the same response: “*Hinneni*, Here I am.”

Sometimes, all you can do in a difficult situation is try to remain true to your values and essential character. We may not be able to exert any control over the larger situation, so our hope focuses on struggling to maintain our ideals. *Hinneni*. Here I am.

In 1973, during the Yom Kippur War, Leonard Cohen traveled to Israel to support the IDF. He stepped up, returned to his music, and had many more years of creativity. But in 2016, as his life ebbed, Cohen pushed back against fluffy beliefs in God. Yet, as he felt the pangs of mortality, he still sang, “Hinneni, hinneni: I’m ready, my Lord.”

I have witnessed individuals in the last stage of their lives, remaining true to their desires for their family, composing ethical wills, offering blessings, comforting those who will remain in life. I have supported parents patiently maintaining hope for reconciliation with children. And I have been with adults, injured as children, who seek ways to build lives of purpose and meaning. They step forward: *Hinneni*. Here I am.

Human history is a history not only of cruelty but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness.... If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember... where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act.... in defiance of all that is bad around us....(Howard Zinn)

You can do this. Accompany others. Give direction and support. Be with the HaMa”L healers and helpers. Step forward. *Hinneni*. Here I am.

On the Jewish anniversary of the Hamas attacks, on Simhat Torah, we will read words from the book of Joshua three times. Remember them: **יְהוָה אִתָּנוּ**. Be strong and of good courage.

And say *Hinneni*. Here I am.  
Am Yisrael hai.

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