

Kol Nidre 5779

TBS Braintree, Sept. 2018

Hineini in our lives

There is a discussion in the Talmud about what is the most important teaching in the Torah. Rabbi Akiva (2nd C rabbinic scholar) taught: “Love your neighbor as yourself, this is the most important rule in Torah.” Ben Azzai (a contemporary of Akiva’s) suggests that the verse: Man [I would say humankind] was created in the image of God, has important ramifications and therefore greater significance.

The verse “love your neighbor as yourself” is fraught with complications, for me. How do we define “neighbor”? And what does it mean to “love your neighbor as yourself” mean? What would it look like? **Hillel** the elder said: "That which is **hateful to you**, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah." Jesus said: "Do unto others what **you** would have them do to **you**, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 7:12) And finally, like many of us, I don’t always love myself..... at least not as much as other people who love me, tell me I should.

On the other hand, you have heard me speak about our being created in the image of God. I’ve shared that I’ve had many experiences in which the “Divine spark in me, has connected with the Divine spark in you.” When we agree that each of us is created in the image of God, then it becomes clear that how we are to treat each other. Judaism insists that no matter how we feel about another we must treat all people with dignity, kindness and respect. Many of us regard the teaching that we are created in the image of God, as a mandate for how we should act toward and treat each other.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, (Modern Ortho. 20th C Rabbi) had a slightly different idea. He said: each of us is a *messenger*, created *B’tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. We each have a mission and purpose we are intended to fulfill while on earth. [quote]: “The fact that someone lives in a certain time, in a specific era, in a defined place and was not born in a

different period and [in] other circumstances-[can be understood] ... *if* we accept the essential concept that every human is a *messenger* [for God].” Each individual, with all her limitations and personal capacities, has her own unique mission on earth.

The Divine plan separates us from all the rest of God’s creation by giving us the ability to reflect about the direction we want our lives to take; why are we here on earth? What is the mission for which *my* life is intended? The question is not so much the impact we have based on what we do?” but rather we can affect the lives of others by virtue of *who we are*. We have spent countless hours in recent weeks, thinking about who we want to become? And how will we live in relationship with each other, with ourselves and with God?

My friend Sam Hanser z”l, said it perfectly: [We share our own individual gifts] “Not by doing anything, but just by being. *We are human beings, not human doings.*”¹

Here’s the thing: If we open our eyes and our hearts, everything in our world invites us *to be* in relationship. But, so often, we are not listening. We live fast paced lives. We communicate not face to face or even voice to voice these days, but through cyberspace, on a screen. We share our feelings by sending emojis. We type thoughts or questions and, sometimes without even proof reading, we hit “send” and move on to the next item on our “to do list”. (The “auto corrects”, I must admit, are sometimes the highlight of my day-bringing laughter and relief.) Everything and everybody in our lives calls to us: “Here I am”- but we are single-mindedly focused on what we have *to do*. Our so called “radar screens”, the ones that used to remind us of friends who might need our attention or homebound family members who would appreciate a visit, have morphed into tiny little 6 by 8 inch screens, allowing us to not see or hear the larger world around us. Self-reflection is something for which we have no time.

I read an article in what used to be called The Huffington Post. It was entitled: “**Are you living your resume or your eulogy?**” The author asks us to consider how we want to

¹ Many Blessings, pp.2-3

define success in our lives? Will we judge our success based on money? Or power? Or based on how many random acts of kindness we did during the course of a regular week?

Are we living our lives according to what really matters to us? It may be that the moments that come closest to defining the “who” we want to be, are precisely the ones that will *never* make it into our resumes.

A couple of years ago, I saw a YouTube video. A blind man was sitting on the sidewalk outside a busy shopping area. He had a can in front of him and a cardboard sign. The sign said: “I am blind. Please help.” Most people walked past him, trying not to see him. A few dropped coins in his can. One woman stopped *directly* in front of him. She took his cardboard sign and wrote something on the back of it. Meanwhile, he was feeling her shoes; the only way he could know her, a bit. She put the cardboard sign back and she left. Suddenly, people no longer walked by him. The coins and dollar bills literally poured into his can until it was overflowing.

At the end of day, the woman came back and stood directly in front of the man. Again, he felt her shoes. He asked her “What did you write on the sign?” “The same thing you wrote, I just used different words.” Then the camera went to the sign. She had written “This is a beautiful day and I can’t see it.”

So why did that woman stop and do what she did, anonymously, and on behalf of a total stranger? She was on her way to do *something*... but still, she was able to be totally present. She saw another human being who was vulnerable--and she responded.

We have a word for such moments in our tradition: moments when we stand up and do what we suddenly feel called to do: We call them "הִנְנִי" moments. Literally, הִנְנִי translates as “here I am”, but it is much more than a simple statement of our whereabouts. It means “I am fully present and available for what you ask.” What is significant about הִנְנִי **when God is involved**, is *not* that God is reaching out to us but rather, that ***we declare we are available to God.*** הִנְנִי is a word that appears only 14 times in the Torah. The story of Avraham is resplendent with it.

Avraham's relationship with God begins decisively. God commands him to leave his past and to go to an unnamed place that God will show him. The text tells us only that God spoke and *immediately*, Avrum, as he was known then, obeyed. He responded to a קִרְבָּנִי moment.

Fast forward to the Torah portion for the second day of Rosh Hashana. We read: "God tested Avraham and said to him: "Avraham!" and Avraham responded "קִרְבָּנִי". God spoke again: "Pray take your son, your only-one, whom you love, Yitzchak, and go you forth to the land of Miriyya and offer him up there as an offering upon one of the mountains that I will tell you of." (Fox) Immediately after God's command we read: "Avraham started-early in the morning..." When God called his name, Avraham's mute but immediate response speaks for itself.

The power of קִרְבָּנִי moments is not limited to our relationship with God. They also apply to our willingness to respond and be present in our human interactions. The story of the binding of Isaac, involves not only God, but also Avraham's interaction with Isaac, his son. Listen and tell me, whether you think Avraham was as present for his son, as he was for God.

"The two of them walk together. Isaac said to Avraham his father: 'Father!' He said: קִרְבָּנִי my son. 'Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the offering?' 'God will see for God's self to the lamb for the offering, my son'. Thus, the two of them went together." (Gen.22:6-8)

What do you think? [pause] Was Avraham totally present for his son? Did he understand what Isaac was asking or what he needed? Or did he hear Isaac call him but wasn't listening to the depth of what his son was asking?

Given the season of the year, let's be honest with ourselves: being totally present is not as simple as it sounds. Surely there are more times than we can count, when we think (or maybe we fool ourselves to think) we are present and listening to loved ones in a deep way, especially our children and our partners. But really our thoughts are a million miles

away? A friend of mine, also a Rabbi, told me that she had recently hosted at her home, the first meeting of a very important new Women's group she was trying to establish. As she was delivering her opening remarks, her 6 year old son wandered into the room and said "Mom, am I going to get to have supper tonight?" She castigated herself silently: "Laura, Laura," she said. "You were so focused on God's work that you forgot to feed your son!"

The lesson of *תענית* is particularly poignant in the problematic text of the akedah: God does *not* want us to sacrifice a part of ourselves in order to serve God. God wants us to pay attention, to be present, and to bring the fullness of ourselves into *all* our relationships. We miss encounters we might have had on a train or a plane because *what we expect to happen*, occurs either in the place *from which* we came or the place *to which* we are going.

But perhaps it is *the journey itself, that is the real point.*

Help us to not miss our lives, even as we are living them;

To have the courage to live according to what *really* matters to us;

To think about and be fully present, where we are; and to let the people closest and most important to us, hear us say "*תענית*", early and often.

I hope you have a meaningful fast. *G'mar chatimah tova*-May you already be written in the book of life and may it be sealed.