

**Who, Me??: The Complexity of Responding to God's Call**  
(Genesis 31:1-13; Exodus 3:2-6; 1 Samuel 3:1-10)

I had just bought a pair of shoes on Sunday when I noticed that I had parked near a store specializing in beauty products. I popped in, quickly found what I needed and offered my credit card. It was rejected. Odd, since I'd used that same card not five minutes earlier. By the time I returned home, there was both a call and an email from the credit card fraud monitor. I dutifully called back and explained that, yes, that attempted purchase was mine. Yes, I had my credit card in my possession. Then they asked about a charge from a gas station in Southern California on the day before. Since I had not been in Southern California nor do I spend money on Shabbat, I knew that **that** charge wasn't mine. I proceeded to look at my account online and discovered that for over two weeks, someone had regularly been charging my credit card at different gas stations around Southern California, \$75 here, \$100 there—to the tune of \$2500! So two weeks of nearly thirty discrete charges for gas 500 miles away didn't trigger the fraud monitor—but one purchase for face cream did! Clearly my credit card company believes that I'm a gal who drives a lot and doesn't worry too much about beauty!

Upon dealing with the credit card fraud bureaucracy, I found myself thinking about identity theft, about the peculiar presumption that we know who and where people are by what they carry. Like the tracking bugs in spy movies or the app where you find friends based on where your cell phone is or the GPS function that puts you on the map, where we are supposed that we are one with our plastic and with our gadgets. Yet, devices that proclaim our presence can be misleading. The bug has been discovered and removed. The

cell phone has been left behind. The GPS does not function in the backcountry—(I learned that one the hard way.). Here I am. Or not.

Yet, where we are and who we are, is far more consequential than our possessions. There are times when we must stand up and proclaim, “Here I am.” When our ancestors in the Bible proclaimed, “*Hineni*, “Here I am,” they were responding to a call to be present, to be ready, to be aware of the fullness of the moment and its responsibilities. When our ancestors in the Bible proclaimed, “Here I am!” they were responding to God’s call.

Think of how often when we are called, we try not to respond. “Sorry, someone is pretending to be me.” “That’s not my responsibility.” “You have the wrong number.” “I’d love to but I’m too busy at the moment.” “Who me?”

Yet there are moments, what I call, “*Hineni* moments, when we are utterly, fully, unquestionably present, metaphorically stripped of the possessions that might otherwise identify—or misidentify—us. Twenty-year old Daniel Hernandez might have been stopped and questioned in Arizona about his identity and citizenship based on his looking, and being, Mexican-American. But when, amidst the chaos in front of a Tucson Safeway, this newly hired young intern, trained as a nursing assistant, cradled Representative Gabrielle Giffords, applying pressure to her head wound and lifting her head so she would not choke on her own blood, he was utterly, fully, unquestionably present. His quick response was as complete an embodiment of *hineni*, “Here I am” as possible. His *Hineni* moment was unplanned. Others are carefully designed and anticipated. I think of a wedding, carefully planned, that I officiated at several years back for a Stanford graduate I came to know

through our Grief and Bereavement workshop. She was marrying her high school sweetheart, the young man with her on the evening when she received word that her brother had been killed in a traffic accident in New York City. Everyone in that small town attending the wedding had been felled by the tragedy of his death. Each person present understood the power of the psalm, “You have turned my mourning into dancing.” And on this night, this community, which had mourned an untimely death, danced with passion and pleasure. They were utterly, fully, and unquestionably present in their celebration. This too was a *Hineni* moment.

Ritually, in the highest moment at the afternoon service on Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, the chazzan, the musical leader who prays on behalf of the congregation, walks slowly forward through the congregation, from the back of the sanctuary, his head covered by his prayer shawl, his voice chanting an ancient, plaintive melody, a prayer called simply, “*Hineni*, Here I am”.

*Hineni beani mimaas*

Here have I come,

Poor in deeds but rich in awe,

To present Your people’s case before You

Though I am hardly worthy of my task.

Let others not suffer for my failings

Nor be blamed for my transgressions.

Accept my prayers for my brothers and sisters

As though they poured forth from lips schooled in devotion,  
From a person of noble mien and flowing locks.

Let no stray thoughts distract me.

May I offer up my prayers without stumbling.

(translation from “On Wings of Awe” page 298)

This *hineni* moment, a ritual moment of grave responsibility inspires precisely because the chazzan is all too aware of his own limitations, even as he is accepting the yoke to fulfill a sacred responsibility. “Here I am, poor in deeds, but rich in awe.” He is saying, “Who me??” even as he is answering the call to voice the yearnings of those gathered in prayer.

Moses, too, answers *Hineni* even as he asks “Who me??” God calls to this simple, speech-impaired shepherd out of the burning bush and declares, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” In response, Moses hides his face. Moses knows his limitations; God knows his capabilities. God tells Moses to go to Pharaoh so that he shall free the Israelites from Egypt. But, Moses keeps raising objections. “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?” “What if they don’t believe me? What if they don’t listen to me?” “Please, Eternal One, I have never been a man of words...I am slow of speech and slow of tongue...” “Please, Eternal One, make someone else Your agent....” There may be a clear, clarion call from God, but Moses’ response is far from “ready, set, go.” So why Moses? And what can we, so

many generations after him, learn from his story about the complexity of responding to God's call?

Moses sees a small, unimpressive bush on fire. The rabbis emphasize the miracle of Moses's awareness of his surroundings, of his openness to God. But scientists seek explanations, and focus on the burning bush. Nogah Hareuveni in *Tree and Shrub in our Biblical Heritage* (p. 30) describes a semi-parasitic plant covering acacia trees whose fire-red blossoms appear like a flame from a distance. An Israeli rancher recently told me about a fragrant plant that exudes a lot of essential oil. The oil can catch fire around the bush but the flame will not touch the bush. Whether or not there exists a natural explanation, that bush stirred Moses' imagination, causing him to look more closely at something at once familiar and unfamiliar. And, as my Israeli friend points out, science can't explain how God might speak from the bush! Notice that God speaks to Moses only after he takes the trouble to turn aside from the familiar path, to be open to surprise. God calls to him, but Moses, overwhelmed by how inconsequential, how flawed, how uncertain he is, does not respond. And so God calls his name again, "Moses!". After he hears, "Moses! Moses!" he slowly comes to understand that, if God can make the bush burn, if God can call to me, isn't it possible that God could also make me a leader? Are there times when we, too, have been drawn off the beaten path, tentatively inquiring about a new direction, aware of an important responsibility, yet filled with a sense of our own smallness? Like the chazzan's prayer, sometimes we push ourselves to do what is substantive and sacred, even as we acknowledge our limitations, hoping for grace, aspiring for greatness.

The Biblical Jacob, like Moses, also answered *hineni*, “Here I am,” but for him, God called in a dream. Jacob was oppressed, a tired laborer working twenty years for a pittance in his father-in-law’s house. In his dream, an angel of God called to him and Jacob replied, “Here I am.” Then, in his dream, God gives Jacob a genetics lesson—showing Jacob how to reproduce speckled, streaked and mottled goats, to increase his personal flock.

Imagine what it must have been like for Jacob. For twenty years, he lived in his father-in-law’s house without hearing even one word from God. And then he has this powerful dream. Can he trust it? Once, long ago, he had another dream. Then, he saw God’s angels ascending and descending on a ladder. He trusted that dream—he believed that God would be with him. And so he acted upon it—he erected a monument to that moment and that place—to Beth El, the House of God. How often does an insight or epiphany come to us in a dream? Do we trust it or ignore it? Is it God’s call or the siren’s call? Can one, who for too long has not been a master of his destiny, grasp the chance to follow his dreams? Like a graduate student taking her lab in a new direction, how easy it is to second-guess her findings. Like a worker deciding whether to join and protest for a union, how familiar it is to remain enchained by the past, by a poverty of vision. Like a leader who has lost an election, how much courage it requires to commit to a direction that departs from the conventional wisdom or common orthodoxy, an insight that might turn a field upside down, or create a path through pathlessness or reach out to those who have been forgotten or silenced. But Jacob’s “Here I am” reminds us to follow our own dreams.

Which brings me to Curious George, the beloved monkey with a knack for getting into trouble and ultimately, making his way out of it. Hans and Margret Rey—two German

Jews, living in Paris in the late 1930's wrote and illustrated whimsical children's books. In June 1940, a scant few days before the Nazis entered Paris, the Reys gathered as many of their drawings, manuscripts and belongings as they could transport by bicycle and pedaled for three days, until they could board a train that would take them to Lisbon. An official ominously checked their papers on the train, suspecting that the two were spies. But as he thumbed through their possessions—including drawings of a mischievous little monkey, the official smiled. "Ah, a book for children," he said, as he handed their papers back to them. The monkey borne of Hans and Margret's imaginations had saved them. Their dreams propelled them from the darkness. The Reys travelled from Portugal to Brazil, and, four months after they bicycled out of Paris, they found a new home in Manhattan. A year later, their monkey, known in France as Fifi, debuted in America as Curious George. Like Jacob, who finds a way to support himself by trusting the images in his dreams, Hans and Margret Rey found a way to put their images on paper, embodying their own story of getting in and out of trouble, in the antics of a monkey. Amidst the fear and turmoil of war and the distance and difficulty of exile, Curious George burst onto the scene to create hope and happiness. "Here I am!" he emphatically declared.

What are the ways that we will proclaim: "Here I am" in our own lives? Will it be to transmute fear into joy, as the Reys did? Will it be to follow our imagination, as Curious George does? Will it be to move from oppression to independence, as Jacob did? Will it be to overcome our insecurities, as Moses did? Will it be to accept leadership, even as we recognize our human frailty, as the Yom Kippur chazzan does? Will it be to dance with joy? To act quickly in a crisis? What will be our *bineni* moments? How will we proclaim our presence and practice our purpose?

As poet Mary Oliver asks, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do/  
With your one wild and precious life?”

As we reflect on that question, may we find a way to embrace our own wild and precious life. May we dream of possibilities and awaken to a life of purpose. May we proclaim unequivocally, knowing who we are and where we are, *Hinemi!* Here I am.