

Sermon by Rabbi Aviva Goldberg
Kol Nidrei (Tuesday, September 18, 2018)

A CALL WHOSE CALL?

I would like to share with you three very short anecdotes as a way of introducing my remarks this Kol Nidre evening.

When I was a child no matter which dilapidated car my parents owned there was always a small siddur, a prayer book, in the glove compartment and a kippah too. And when I would ask my father what was a siddur doing in his glove compartment next to the insurance and car ownership and the car manual he would say ‘Vivi, you never know when you’ll need it.’ – the siddur that is, not the manual which I never saw him open. And frankly even if he had opened it he wouldn’t have known what to do with it.

So in keeping with the Burke tradition, we too have a little siddur which over the years has moved from the Honda’s glove compartment, to the Jeep’s glove compartment, to the Toyota’s glove compartment and now to the Subaru’s glove compartment and there is always a kippah there too, because of course you never know when you’ll need them. This tradition resonates with me even more so as the little siddur which has been in each of the aforementioned cars was my father’s and has his name in the flyleaf.

To be honest with you, it has been several years since I have opened this particular siddur, but a couple of weeks ago while I was waiting for my daughter I wanted to check something about the car maintenance and leaned over opened the glove compartment and there lying beside the ownership papers, and the insurance and the manual was the siddur. So I opened it and there was my father’s faded signature on the flyleaf and the contents filled with all the daily prayers and psalms for weekdays and the Sabbath. And I looked at the back of the siddur and my eyes rested on a quotation – it read:

20 Behold, I send an angel before you, to protect you on
 הַנְּהָ אֲנֹכִי שְׁלַח מִלְאָךְ, לְפָנֶיךָ, לְשָׁמְרֶךָ,
 בְּדַרְךְךָ; וְלְהַבְיֵאֲךָ, אֶל-הַמְּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר הִכְנַתִּי.
 your way, and to bring you into the place which I have
 prepared.

And as I read it I felt that somehow this was a profound message for me that I must take to heart – but truly until the past week or so I was not sure what that message was.

Before I share with you my revelation however, of what it could mean, I need to continue with two more brief anecdotes.

This second actually took place in the summer of 2001. I was spending a week at the Jewish Renewal retreat center Eilat Chayim. I was there not only as a participant in the week-long seminars and workshops but as a participant observer as I was using my experience there as part of my dissertation. On the Friday afternoon of the closing of that week, the women at the retreat were invited to disrobe and submerge in the swimming pool on the property that became for that afternoon, the mikvah or ritual bath. We were each partnered with another woman and were instructed to immerse in the water four times. Each time focusing on a particular theme in our lives which connected to the Kabbalistic concept of the four worlds which I will not get into here but which are - being, intellect, emotion and action. After our respective immersions we were to share our reflections of this experience with our partner.

My own immersion experience was frankly rather minimal. I am not sure why, but I found that for me it was a non-happening – a failed ritual shall we say, and I hardly recollect my feelings around it.

But what I do remember, as if it was yesterday and not 17 years ago was the face of the woman with whom I was partnered as she emerged jubilantly, literally leaping out of the water after each immersion. Excited and moved though she was, she did not know or realize what I witnessed - that her face was transformed, that there was an ineffable glow which I could sense emanating from her being.

All that evening I kept returning in my mind to the expression on this woman's face. I felt for some reason uneasy and frustrated that I could not articulate what it was that I had seen. And when I went to bed that night it was to a fitful sleep. Until I had a dream, a dream in which I saw this woman's face as it looked at the mikvah. And suddenly in the dream I understood what I had such problems articulating. I awoke with the realization that the ineffable glow in her face was the same as the fire of the burning bush in the Exodus story – that the image and voice which Moses had heard and felt in that narrative the image he saw of the

וַיִּסְתַּח, בָּאֵשׁ בְּעַר סִינָה,

אֵשׁ בְּעַר סִינָה. – the bush that was burning but was not consumed was the same as what I witnessed on that Friday afternoon – that it was, it is the essence of the Divine that is in

all of us and I recognized that the voice that Moses heard in that burning bush that would not be consumed was the same as the still small voice that lies within us all – assuring us that we are made of, we are a part of the essence itself – if we only would take the time to recognize it.

Now my third anecdote is not nearly as dramatic or profound as the one I just relayed to you, and it is really more of a joke than a narrative - it comes from the Jewish comic, writer and director Carl Reiner who is now in his nineties. Last year he was part of a documentary which tracked down several celebrated nonagenarians, 90-year old's and a few who were over 100 and posed to them the following question, 'What is the secret to living into your 90s – and more importantly loving every minute of it?'

We see Reiner at the beginning of the documentary sitting at his kitchen table in the morning hours, reading the newspaper and he slowly puts the paper down, folds it in two, looks up at the camera and says, "you know I figure if you don't read your name in the obituaries in the morning its okay to go ahead and eat breakfast."

Now what do these three anecdotes have to do with tonight, the most holy night of the Jewish year and how are they connected?

My answer lies in the word we repeat on each of the High Holy Days – "HINENI – HINENI here I am," the chazzan says on our behalf, "here I am standing painfully aware of my flaws but taking on the responsibility to lead this congregation in prayer. HINENI here I am."

As Jewish author and educator Erica Brown states that word suggests one's presence in a situation that is freighted with tension and responsibility. It is repeated eight times in various places in our sacred texts. Abraham responds to the angel who calls out to him in the story of the binding of Isaac with the word HINENI. Jacob responds to the call of the Divine to return to the land of his people with the word HINENI, and Moses upon hearing the voice in the burning bush says HINENI. Here I am, they each say – here I am, I am ready to go on with the purpose of my life.

Here we all are today – are we ready?

Is that not the message of the High Holy Days – HINENI - are we ready – ready to take the next step in our lives – ready to make significant steps to alter the negativity in our lives – ready to change our reality? Is this not the time to realign the destructive patterns of our lives, to alter the repeated damaging messages we give ourselves. I am unhappy, I am stressed, I am depressed - nothing will change – is this not the time to take the chance to attempt to change those messages we give ourselves– is this not time to say HINENI I am here I am ready I will challenge myself slowly but surely - I will make changes to my life.

I am not so naïve as to realize that this does not happen over night – that there is no pill one can take to transform oneself – there is no panacea, no magic cure to personal pain -

And I would suggest that the Torah understood this psychic reality. For it is significant I think that in each of the instances from our sacred texts when the call is given for the HINENI response - the I am ready moment - the persons name is shouted out not once but twice: ABRAHAM ABRAHAM STOP DO NOT HARM YOUR SON – MOSES MOSES STOP DO NOT COME CLOSER - Why if the response of each is HINENI here I am – why are their respective names repeated and emphasized?

I would propose that it is because the authors of the text knew and understood that a HINENI moment, a moment in one's life where we commit to make change is more than difficult – we have to be reminded - we have to remind ourselves that we are only human that we often fail and fall, but that we nonetheless can get back up and take charge of our lives.

And what does all of this have to do with the three anecdotes with which I began this talk – well as to the first – the quotation I found in the siddur which read

20 Behold, I send an angel before you, to protect you on your way, and to bring you into the place which I have prepared.
 כ הַנִּיחָ אֹנְכֵי שְׁלַח מִלֶּאֱדָ, לְפָנֶיךָ, לְשִׁמְרֶךָ,
 בְּדַרְךְךָ ; וְלְהַבְיֵאֲךָ, אֶל-הַמְּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר הִכְנַתִּי.

Perhaps it was meant to show me and us that in our HINENI moments we must realize that we are not alone that when we move forward in our lives there is if not an angel

showing us the way friends people to whom we can go and ask for help – and as my father said about the siddur in the car, you never know when you'll need it.

And as to the second anecdote, perhaps it is that in our HINENI moments we can feel strength in knowing that we are made in the Divine image and that ineffable sense permeates our being even though we may not always see it or hear it.

And what of the third anecdote – the, if you do not read your name in the obits it is okay to eat your breakfast. Well, in an essay entitled *The Ever Dying People* the late American author Simon Rawidowicz asserts that we as Jews have what he calls a collective uneasiness, what I would call a kind of Jewish malaise of anxiety – and he does not mean the stereotypical and frankly somewhat demeaning jokes we have about Jewish mother's who worry all the time about their children or the Jewish children who are therefore neurotic – rather he means the following, that we are to quote his article “a people that has been disappearing constantly for the last two thousand years, exterminated in dozens of lands all over the globe, reduced to half or a third of our population by tyrants ancient and modern.” And yet, as he says, Jewish life still “exists, falls, and rises, loses all its possessions and reequips itself for a new start, a second, a third chance — always fearing the end, but never afraid to make a new beginning” – and this I would add this reality is the same for each of us.

HINENI we are here - that is the message of our high holy days – we are taking stock of who we are and where we are and the world we live in and we know that we will survive that we will, we can begin anew in caring for ourselves, for other people, for the world and for the future. And yes we can then eat breakfast.