

## Story #1

There once was a small synagogue that fell on hard times. They ran out of kiddush wine, and had no money to buy any more. “But how can we celebrate Shabbat without Kiddush wine?” They wondered. The community thought and thought, until one volunteer came up with a brilliant plan. They said – let’s put a barrel outside the synagogue doors and ask that any time someone passes through the doors of the synagogue, they pour a flask of their own kiddush wine from home into the barrel. That way there will be enough for everyone, and a virtually unlimited supply of kiddush wine for the shul.

Everyone agreed that this was a great idea, and so they set up the barrel, and reminded all of the people in the community of their obligation – any time you visit the synagogue, bring a little flask of wine, and add it to the barrel.

And so they did. Anytime someone came to the Shul – whether it was to speak with the Cantor, attend a class, participate in a committee meeting, or to do anything at all, they brought a flask and emptied it into the barrel on their way in. Everyone was so thrilled to see how well this plan was working. No one ever came into the synagogue without adding to the barrel – and as a very active little shul, that barrel filled up very quickly. The community felt assured that they would never be without kiddush wine again.

Well, shabbat finally came and the Cantor decided to make a big show of retrieving the kiddush wine from the barrel for the first time. As the service was nearing a close, she invited the entire congregation out to the front doors to collect the wine and say the blessing together. She finished the blessing *porei p’ri hagafen*, and took a big gulp of the community Kiddush wine.

As the wine touched her lips, it took everything in her power not to spit it out. The taste was not what she had expected. Rather than the strong, sweet, syrupy

Manischewitz she loved, this wine was bland, thin, and quite flavourless. Confused, she opened the barrel and looked inside and invited the congregation to look as well. And what they saw was pure, plain, water.

The congregation started murmuring amongst themselves, until finally they realized what had happened. It turns out that each person thought to themselves “if everyone else is pouring in wine, what difference will my little flask make? I will pour in water instead, I am sure no one will notice if there is just one flask of water among all that wine. I’m sure the wine I have to contribute isn’t as good as what everyone else has, and I wouldn’t want to ruin everyone’s kiddush wine.” Everyone in the synagogue made the same calculations. Everyone assumed that the contributions of others would be more valuable than theirs.

## Story #2

Once upon a time, a *tzaddik* – a righteous, wise person decided to go on a journey. So they packed a small bag, said goodbye to their family, and set off. They traveled all day without meeting anyone. When it was evening, they finally came to a small village. “I think I’ll stop here for the night,” they said to themselves.

Near the centre of the village, they met a group of people. “I’m a simple traveler,” they said, “looking for a safe place to sleep and a hot meal.”

“We’d be glad to offer you a place to sleep,” the villagers responded, “but we have very little food. Our crops were very poor this year, and there’s not much to eat in the whole village. Most of us are just barely getting by on scraps.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” the traveler said. “But you needn’t worry about feeding me. I already have everything I need. In fact, I was thinking of making some stone soup to share with all of you.”

“Stone soup?” the villagers asked. “What’s that? We’ve never heard of stone soup.”

“Oh, it’s wonderful,” said the traveler. “Best soup I’ve ever tasted. If you bring me a soup pot and some water, I’ll make some for all of us.”

And so the villagers rushed back to their homes. When they returned, one was carrying a large soup pot, another had wood for a fire, and others brought water.

When the fire was going and the water had begun to boil, the traveler took out a small silk pouch. With great ceremony, they reached in and pulled out a smooth, round stone, and carefully dropped the stone into the boiling water. The villagers watched eagerly. The traveler began to slowly stir the pot, sniffing the aroma and licking their lips in anticipation. “I do like a tasty stone soup,” the traveler said. “Of course, stone soup with cabbage—now that’s really special.”

“I might be able to find a bit of cabbage,” one villager said. And off she went to her house, returning with a small cabbage she had stored away in her pantry. “Wonderful!” said the traveler, as they added the cabbage to the pot. “This reminds me of the time I had stone soup with cabbage and a bit of salted beef. It was unbelievably good.”

After a moment of silence, the village butcher spoke up. “I know where there’s a bit of salted beef,” he said. And off he went to his shop to get it. When he returned, the traveler added the beef to the soup pot and continued to stir.

“Can you imagine what this soup would taste like if we had a bit of onion...and perhaps a few potatoes...and a carrot or two...and some mushrooms. Oh, this would be a meal fit for royalty.”

And before they knew it, the soup pot was filled to the brim with vegetables of all kinds— carrots and potatoes, mushrooms and onions, turnips and green beans, leeks and celery—all brought – little by little - by the people of the village. Not only that, but the village baker came out with some fresh bread.

And as the soup simmered slowly over the fire, the wonderful aroma began to waft over the villagers. And they began to relax and talk together, sharing songs and stories and jokes.

When the soup was finally done, the traveler ladled it out into bowls, and they all shared a delicious meal together. There was more than enough for everyone to eat their fill. Afterward, they all declared that it was the best soup they had ever tasted. The mayor of the village pulled the traveler aside, and quietly offered them a great deal of money for the magic stone, but the traveler refused to sell it.

The next morning, the traveler woke early and packed up. As they were beginning to leave the village, they passed by a group of children playing at the side of the road. The traveler handed the youngest one the silk pouch containing the stone, and whispered, “It was not the stone that performed the magic. It was all of us together.”

*Hineini.* Here I am. This simple phrase that we have been repeating throughout our high holy days, holds within it a profound and potent message. It signifies an awareness, a presence, and a readiness to respond to a call. *Hineini* says that I am here to consider the needs of others, to step into my own potential.

In the first story no one felt the need to show up because they assumed that everyone else would do it better. And in the second story, the traveler made it possible for the villagers to show up in small yet significant ways. Ways that they didn't think would make a difference until they saw their efforts combined. In the first story, we end up with a barrel of water – useful, but not fulfilling the need. In the second we end up with a delicious, hardy, nourishing soup.

*Hineini.* Here I am. Throughout the Tanach, we find many stories where people responded to God's call with this word. Abraham, Moses, and Samuel are just some of our ancestors who stepped up and enthusiastically proclaimed their

readiness to listen, to engage, and to act. By saying "*Hineini*," they demonstrated their complete presence, surrendering themselves to the Divine will and accepting the responsibilities set before them.

Throughout these high holy days, we have been hearing stories and lessons of how the people in our congregation have said "*Hineini*." On *Erev Rosh Hashanah*, Randi taught us about showing up even in the face of adversity. Of the power of faith and faithier faith, and how having that faith can help you show up for yourself, advocate on your own behalf, and know that you will be ok. On *Rosh Hashanah* morning, George taught us about taking what we have been given in this life, learning from it, and using it to show up for others. Making our voices heard. Not allowing injustice to go by unnoticed. He taught us that we are all capable of change, in ourselves and in our world. On the second day of *Rosh HaShanah*, Dorothy taught us that *tikkun olam*, repairing the world, and specifically repairing our planet, takes work. It takes showing up. And that's work that is very worth doing. And last night, Rabbi Goldberg taught us that we must share our stories. We must show up for each other and for strangers, for that is the only way to make a difference. What a blessing to have such inspiring lessons and stories to guide us into this new year.

*Hineini*. Here I am. A sacred answer to a sacred call. In our *Rosh HaShanah* liturgy, we read the *Hineni* prayer. Traditionally, this text is chanted by the Cantor on behalf of the entire community. The prayer begins with the words "*Hineni be'ani mima'as*" or "Here I am, poor in deeds." The prayer continues with the prayer leader emphasizing their awareness of their own personal inadequacies. The leader begs God not to punish the community for their own personal failings, saying "my deeds are my own, my sins are my own. Do not let them be ashamed on my behalf." The leader acknowledges the weight of the job set before them, and asks for grace and for acceptance for the community, and asks God to forgive their trespasses, and accept their prayers in the spirit in which they are intended. The

leader asks God to turn all of our troubles and afflictions into happiness and joy, life and peace, despite our many shortcomings.

*Hineini.* Here I am. But how can I answer a call, how can I step up, show up, represent a holy congregation, when I know how deeply flawed, how broken I truly am?

This year we learned two new songs during our High Holy Day services that address this idea of brokenness. The first was an interpretation of the *Hineni* prayer itself by Beth Schafer, called “Here I Am”

Here I am, oh, here I am, I got Your invitation to return.

I traveled quite a distance just to hear You, to be near You, and to learn.

Here I am, oh, here I am, Naked in the mirror of my days.

Even though I’m broken will You take me? Don’t forsake me, I can change.

God Most High, I will be what I will be. May my prayers come before Your throne.

Here I am, oh, here I am, Thank You for the patience You have shown.

I know that along the way I’ve fumbled, and I’ve stumbled, but I have grown.

The second piece - that our ensemble helped introduce this year, is an interpretation of the prayer *Asher Yatzar*. Traditionally, this prayer is said every morning and thanks God for making bodies that work. The composer of this piece, Dan Nichols, wanted to acknowledge that sometimes our bodies don’t work. That we are not flawless vessels – physically or spiritually. That we are perfect the way we are, and a little broken, too - and even that is worth being grateful for.

*Hineini.* Here I am. Perfect and broken.

So what does it mean to be perfect and broken? What does it mean to acknowledge our shortcomings yet show up anyway. For many years, I pushed back against the idea that any of us were broken. I didn't like the language of brokenness - mostly because it seemed like being broken meant we either needed to be fixed, or simply thrown away. This year, as you can probably tell by some of the musical choices I've made, I've embraced the idea of brokenness. I think it's important to acknowledge not just our shortcomings, but the places where each of us truly can be a little bit broken. The places that might improve over time with work, but that still remain part of who we are.

I'm a little bit broken because sometimes I react too quickly. And I'm a little bit broken because sometimes I don't react quickly enough. I'm a little bit broken because sometimes I don't care enough about how other people are feeling, and I'm a little bit broken because sometimes I care way too much about how other people are feeling. I'm a little bit broken because I don't set up good boundaries to protect my spirit and my time. And I'm a little bit broken because sometimes my boundaries are far too rigid. I'm a little bit broken because I can be cold, distant, and unkind. And I'm a little bit broken because sometimes my warmth and openness allows people to walk all over me. These are things that I have worked on and will continue to work on, and while they have improved, and I hope will continue to improve, they are and likely always will be a part of who I am.

All of us are a little bit broken. Each one of us in here, no matter how much self-care, self-improvement and therapy we do... and please keep doing all of those things, they are vital to your wellbeing... We all have broken parts, but our brokenness doesn't make us disposable...it makes us human. We're not toys from Dollarama - we don't stop working just because one little part breaks. We aren't destined to a landfill simply because we don't function as perfectly as we were designed to function. When something in us breaks we adjust, we find new ways to incorporate our breaks into our lives and we forge ahead. Being broken isn't a fatality. Being broken is a part of life. We break. We heal. We recover. We break

again. The places where we're broken sometimes never fully seal back up, and that's OK. What matters isn't what breaks, what matters is how we approach that brokenness.

On Yom Kippur it is said that we are supposed to be atoning for our sins, not the sins made against each other, but the sins made against God. For those of you who were here last year, you know that when I mention God, I'm not speaking of some external entity, but of the holiness within each of us. So keeping that in mind, when we atone for the sins we've committed against God, we are really atoning for the ways that we did not honor the holiness within each of us. Our broken parts are a part of that holiness. And when we treat our brokenness as a failing and neglect to care for our pain points, we are neglecting the holiness within us. We cannot show up and give of ourselves if we're not also caring for the parts of us that need love.

And so when we come to understand that we have broken parts do we approach them like something that makes us disposable? Or do we approach them with kindness. With love. With support. We cannot ignore the broken parts of ourselves. They need care, they need attention. Your broken parts might remain, but with that care and attention, they can be a new part of who you are. A broken bone left alone will not heal properly, and might cause more damage – but a bone that is reset, put in a cast, can heal and even become stronger. When I was 10 years old, I broke my leg in three places – and the places where the bone broke still ache from time to time... the pain is a reminder of that break, even though medically it is fully healed. My leg works just fine, but the pain, the brokenness remains. When I feel those aches, I use it as a sign that I need to rest. It tells me that I've done enough, it's time to stop. I don't get angry at the pain or bemoan the once-broken bone. I am kind to it; I care for it. Our brokenness does not define us – it simply contributes to the richness of who we are. Just like the Japanese art of Kintsugi, where gold is used to fill broken crevices of pottery to create an even more



beautiful pot or vase. We must embrace our broken places and find ways to honour them.

So back to our stories – of the barrel of water and the pot of soup. In the first story, the people did not believe that what they were bringing was of any value. They assumed that others would be bringing their best and so they didn't need to bring theirs. They brought water instead of wine because they felt like their contributions simply wouldn't matter. They allowed the broken parts of themselves to overshadow their own holiness. Their self-doubt, their feelings of insignificance stopped them from doing what they knew was right. In the second story no one believed that they had anything to contribute either. But when they were shown that the small things that they had - a little bit of cabbage, a tiny bit of beef could, when put together, make something whole and holy, they contributed willingly. And instead of saying “I have so little to give, so I'm not going to give at all,” they said *Hineini*, and by doing so proclaimed their willingness to embrace their brokenness, embrace their situation, and show up anyway.

The beginning of a new year is a wonderful opportunity to think about how each of us can embrace our brokenness and show up anyway. We all have causes that we care about –some political, some environmental, some social – and for some of us the places where we want to focus this year are more personal – our friends, our families, ourselves. No matter what you're striving for in 5784, know that your broken places do not need to stop you. As Leonard Cohen so profoundly taught us – there's a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.

On this Yom Kippur, ask yourself. When I show up. When I say *Hineini*.  
Will I bring water? Or will I help to make soup?

G'mar Chatimah Tovah – May you be sealed for goodness.