**Erev Rosh Hashanah 2015 PCS** **Hineni -Here I Am**

**Rabbi Dr. Julie Hilton Danan**

**A proud young mother sees off her son to school on the first day.**
**“Be a good boy, my boobaleh! Be careful and think of mommy, tateleh! Come right home on the bus, yingele! Mommy loves you very much, my zisseleh!**
**At the end of the day, she’s waiting for the bus and sweeps him into her arms. “And what did my bubbaleh zissele learn on his first day at school?”**

**“Well, Mommy, I learned that my real name is Steve.”**

**Knowing our name and asserting our own identity are important parts of growing up. Sometimes we take attendance in Hebrew school, be hearing our name called, and responding,** Hineni**, “here I am,” “I am present.”**

Hebrew words and phrases fascinate me. Unlike English, where the beauty comes from having such a large choice of words to describe what we mean, in Hebrew the power comes from all the centuries of texts and associations with each word. Also, Hebrew is an economical language and you can often fit a phrase into one word. So *Hineni,* in one word we mean: here I am, present focused, ready to help

The first question which God asks Adam in the Garden of Eden, is “Ayeka? Where are you?” We have been answering this ever since. On a spiritual level every child of Adam is asked daily: “Where *are* you in your life?” Jewish tradition gives us the word to answer: *hineni.*

In the dramatic story of the binding and near sacrifice of Isaac, which we read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, the word-*hineni* is repeated three times: first, when God calls to Abraham and commands him to bring Isaac as a sacrifice. Then, when Isaac turns to his father. Finally, when an angel calls from heaven and tells Abraham *not* to sacrifice his son, for he and all his descendants will be blessed because of his unswerving faith in God. To each address, Abraham answers: “*Hineni*-Here I am.”

As the Biblical narrative progresses, fathers call to sons, who answer hineni, and there are many incidents of God calling people by name: Jacob, Moses at the burning bush, Samuel and Isaiah. When G-d calls, there is really only one answer: “Hineni, here I am.”

But Hineni goes far beyond the Bible. Kabbalists gave us the idea of a Kavannah, a sacred intention said before doing a ritual. Classically this begins with the word, “Hineni,” behold, look, I am fully present, doing a seemingly simple deed with awareness of its cosmic implications.

Tomorrow after the Torah service, our Cantor will lead us in Musaf of Rosh Hashanah, the most powerful and magnificent prayer service of the year. This profound prayer, with its majestic melodies, intersperses the primal cries of the shofar with great themes of God’s sovereignty, memory, and the call to action. During Musaf tomorrow, I will also share brief meditations from Reb Zalman to guide us in hearing the shofar. Musaf also includes the deepest *piyut,* prayer-poem in Jewish history, *Unteneh Tokef*, with its stark depiction of the human condition, which Prof. Sarah Tauber and I will discuss with you on the second morning of Rosh Hashanah.

 Musaf is like the Grand Canyon of Jewish prayers; it’s that awesome, and there she is, our Cantor, charged by the community to lead us to the bottom and back to the top. (Kind of makes you want to stay for Musaf tomorrow, I know.)

So how can the Hazzanit even dare open her mouth for Musaf of Rosh Hashanah? She begins by chanting a personal prayer, a prayer before the prayer, a prayer expressing her humility and awe at this spiritual opportunity. Her pre-prayer for Musaf is“**Hineni,**” here I am, here I stand. This is who I am and whether or not I feel worthy, my self is what I have to offer. I’m bringing my all, so please help me, God.

So Hineni says, “I am present. I am here, ready to answer the call. Like Moses, I realize that where I stand is holy ground. I am here, I bring my whole self to my task whether it seems small or impossibly large.”

This year, my first at PCS, I hope that we can take the word **Hineni** as our motto.

**Hineni.** First, be present for your own soul. This Season of Renewal, take some time to consider how you care for your inner life through Shabbat, prayer, meditation, time in nature, and so on. I hope that I will always model self-care because you can’t show up and help others if you are exhausted and burnt out. Keeping days of rest and renewal is a **requirement** of our religion. I am here as a teacher, guide, and rabbinic pastor to help you to be present for yourself and your family first and foremost. From there I ask your presence in our PCS community.

**Hineni; here I am**. I have moved across the country to be here, not because I needed a job but because I am ready to grow and to serve and guide a dynamic community that has developed a vision and is likewise ready to grow, inwardly and outwardly. I sought a community that shares my values of welcome, inclusion, and meaningful, joyful worship, meditation, and study. That’s why I have moved to Pleasantville, close to our synagogue, and strive to be present for you. (Not continuously—no rabbi can be on duty 24/7 and still be present to herself and her family—but to be accessible and welcoming.)

We are in a time of transition, as I wrote in my newsletter column, and during times of transition we may experience sadness over endings and temporary uncertainty about the future.

Transitions lead some people to draw back, to disengage. Instead, I ask you make the commitment of **Hineni**, of being here. Over the past month I have already met well more than a hundred people and over and over had heard how much this community means to you, how easy it was to become involved, how joyful and welcoming and unpretentious.

Too much of synagogue work today is getting people to show up. I’ve even taken a class on “marketing as a mitzvah.” We are competing with so many attractions in the secular world. Consider the wonderful experiences that you have had when you have showed up for PCS, the energy and excitement of being together in community, of experiencing special times with the congregation. If you have those warm feelings to the congregation, or you are new and attracted to our community spirit, I invite you to decide this Rosh Hashanah how you will say your **Hineni.** What is your unique contribution? It could be playing music, working with kids, teaching a class, or leading a Tikkun Olam project.

Our Vision Committee found this year that one of our top goals for the future is to be there for one another in times of emergency. Sometimes people are reluctant to visit the sick or to visit mourners, because they are worried about saying the “right thing.”

There are no magic words to say, but you are speaking volumes by just being present, giving a hug, or just sitting there for a while.

In fact, when someone is in mourning, our tradition tells us not to say anything until the mourner opens the conversation. The emphasis is all on presence-**Hineni**, I’m here. You president Amy Gutenplan and I are seeking members for a new Caring Community Committee, to help us develop ways to make sure that people who are in a crisis have what they need, be it visitors, help at home, or chicken soup. You might say, “we do those things anyway,” but if we want to grow we have to make sure that every member, old or new, has someone showing up for them. From there, we need to be present for the broader community by renewing our Tikkun Olam activities.

Then there is showing up for services. (You knew I would get to that.) Tradition tells us that just because a minyan-10 people, show up to pray, we feel God’s presence more directly and we can sanctify God’s name in a way that we cannot accomplish as individuals. Kabbalah takes it deeper and teaches us that the *Shechinah*-the Divine Presence in every soul, can be felt many times more strongly when souls gather together. As a rabbi I feel the energy shift in the room the second that the 10th person walks in. I also feel the energy multiplied so dramatically when many *more* people show up.

One of most important **Hineni** commitments for each PCS member is to show up is at Shabbat services, not just b’nei mitzvah or special events, but regular, ordinary- extraordinary Shabbats. That is when visitor often check us out, ordinary Friday nights, and the amount of participation that they see or don’t see is often their only impression of our community. Your commitment to be a regular participant in our joyful prayer experiences this year will help our community grow and thrive.

We accepted the Torah at Sinai and made a covenant with God, not as lone individuals, but as a community. “Don’t cut yourself off from the community,” said our sages. I used to tell my college students about my attendance policy in words attributed to Woody Allen: 90 percent of success is showing up. There is so much in our tradition about the value of showing up, of being there. I remember that once a family member was having a very hard time and a sibling traveled hours to just show up unannounced at her door. I think of a couple of evenings last year evenings when I would rather have stayed home but I just showed up for the African American community or the Arab American community in my town during a crisis so that they would know that a Jewish rabbi cared. I think of when someone in my own family went through health issues or bereavement and people showed up for us so generously.

In the age of virtual interactions, being present is the biggest present you can give.

**As we begin the New Year, in the call of the Shofar, let us hear the first Jewish question: *Ayeka?* Where are you? Where are you this moment, this year, in your inner life, your personal mission in the world, and in your commitment to our congregational community?**

**And let each of us respond, in our hearts and by our actions:**

**Hineni-Here I am.**