

# Are You Who You Wanted To Be?

Rabbi Steven Kushner

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5778 / September 20, 2017

In case you have not gotten the memo, I am retiring as the rabbi of Temple Ner Tamid at the end of this year. Tonight commences my 38th consecutive series of High Holy Day sermons here. Thirty-eight years of knots in my stomach. Thirty-eight years of weeks upon weeks of hand-wringing, worrying, contemplating. Thirty-eight years of looking for nuggets of wisdom in some of the most inane things you can imagine. Thirty-eight years of thinking and writing and re-writing. And re-writing. Thirty-eight years of final exams. Thirty-eight years of dreaming about delivering a sermon that everyone walks out on. So, when someone asked what will I look forward to the most when I retire, the answer was simple: August.

No self-respecting congregational rabbi has ever enjoyed the month of August. We may go away on vacation. We may post beautiful photos on Facebook. We may say we had a great time. But it's not really true. The month of the August, the weeks leading up to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, are filled with — to quote Soren Kierkegaard — “fear and trembling unto death.”

Even the best of us, the most erudite and polished teachers and preachers, struggle with finding the right message, or the perfect story, agonize over how to say it just right. And don't let anyone fool you, it is inextricably tied up with ego. We live in abject terror of the congregant who comes up to us after the service and says, “Rabbi, your sermon was very...interesting.”

Every rabbi prays to deliver the perfect sermon, the one people will remember for the rest of their lives. Every rabbi hopes to nail it, to become the one that people will send letters into the New York Times about. We will never admit it. We might not even be aware of it. But deep within every rabbi knows that these moments of pulpit-time are what we are judged on. These are the rabbi olympics. And we live in a constant state of fear.

Yet I would not trade a single minute of these past thirty-eight years. Because the reward is the privilege — magnified by the truly awesome responsibility — of speaking to you. Of hopefully making a difference. Even if it's offering words which touch just one person. (Of course I was hoping for a few more.)

And here's the thing: It is the proximity of August — or to be more precise, the Hebrew month of Elul, the four weeks which immediately precede these *Yamim Noraim*, these Days of Awe — which gives it its meaning. Put another way, while it may be true that all these years of end-of-summer vacation-time have been ever so modestly tainted with the anxious anticipation of the World Series of “rabbi-ing”, without that expectation of what comes next, without that fretting over sermons and scorecards, August would really be nothing more than August. It would be devoid of meaning. And maybe that's what we all seek — and deserve — from our summer vacations. Maybe that's what August is supposed to be. A month without meaning. Serious down-time.

But Elul is another story.

Know this: This is not just about me and writing sermons. The fear factor is something with which we should all be struggling. The real judging is not what you think of what I say up here, it's the stuff we should each be saying to ourselves but somehow can't figure out how. That's the import of these *High* Holy Days. That's the implicit meaning in their formal Hebrew name

— *Yamim Noraim*, Days of Awe — which, the truth be told, really do need to be understood as Days of (literally) *Fear*.

We should each be filled with a measure of spiritual angst as we enter these days. We should each experience at least a bit of “fear and trembling”. It’s not by coincidence that we will read over the next two days two stories which shake us to the core. There’s a reason why the rabbis selected the “*abandonment of Ishmael*” and the “*binding of Isaac*” for us to listen to on the mornings of Rosh Hashanah. Because we’re supposed to be unnerved. We’re supposed to be uncomfortable. We’re supposed to be wondering what or whom we are taking out into the wilderness and leaving there to fend for themselves. We’re supposed to be wondering if we’re tying our own selves up, if we’re binding our spirit or those we claim to love as a result of misplaced priorities.

“Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life...” These are the opening words of Charles Dickens’s classic, “David Copperfield”. Am I the hero of my own life? Will I become who I am supposed to be? This is what each of us should be asking tonight. Like the story of Reb Zusya, my constant companion these many years of preaching, God will not ask me why I haven’t been Moses. Or Larry Kushner. Or Harold Kushner. God’s only concern will be whether or not I have been *Steven Kushner*? Have I been authentic to myself? That question should make each of us shake just a bit in our metaphorical boots. And if it doesn’t, then let’s be honest and admit we’re just here for the apples and honey.

Torah’s very first story. Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden. You all know what happened. They messed up. They ate from the wrong tree. The only one God had prohibited. They could have eaten anything they wanted except from that one tree. The Tree of Knowledge. And so, on the very first Rosh Hashanah, Adam was called for an accounting. *Ayekah*. Where are you? God calls out. And how does Adam respond? He hides.

Herein is the essence of the human condition. We are imperfect beings, prone to failure. We can’t even get the simple instructions right. No matter how hard we try, we will mess up. This is what makes us human. Given the choice of Life over Knowledge, we will choose “knowledge” every time. Because that is who we are. *Inquiring people want to know*. We can’t help ourselves.

And the truth is, God knew this all along. I’m convinced the “Don’t Eat From the Tree of Life” was a set-up. God wanted us to follow our instincts. God wanted us to fail. God knew that life in a place of perfection (the Garden of Eden), in a world where there was eternal life but no knowledge was no life at all. A meaningless existence. And God knew that we had to learn this about ourselves. So God tempted us. And we fell for it. Because God knew we would. Because God wanted us to. God did not create us so that we could live. God created us so that we could give *meaning* to our lives.

Nevertheless, there still had to be an accounting. *Adam* — which by now we should all understand is not really a name but a designation: *Human* — by virtue of being created as sentient beings, must assume ownership, must take responsibility for his or her choices. Because, to quote Woody Allen’s perfect summary of existentialism: “We define ourselves by the choices we have made. We are in fact the sum total of our choices.” And if our choices are to have meaning, then there must be a point where we are forced to confront those choices. *Ayekah*? Where are you?

It doesn't take a lot of imagination to figure out that *Ayekah* is not a geographical query. My Confirmation students get this every time. God knows everything. If God knew that Adam ate from the prohibited tree, God certainly knew where Adam was hiding. *Ayekah* — Where are you? — was not a question of location. This wasn't a “Come out, come out wherever you are” moment — at least not in a physical sense.

For Judaism *Ayekah* is an existential moment: Where are you...in your life? What has become of you? Not what have you done, but who have you become? Or not become. And if we take this gift we call Life seriously, if we stop to consider that each day, each moment, each breath is a Gift, then we will know and understand that the *Ayekah* question is eternal. And by “eternal” I don't simply mean it will be there forever, but rather it is ever-present. And omnipresent. And while it may be difficult to answer, while it may be painful, enough so that we will instinctively — like Adam — want to hide from it, we also know that if our lives are to have meaning then the question is not merely necessary but mandatory.

So God calls out to Adam: *Ayekah*. And how does Adam answer? I know what some of you are thinking. You're saying to yourself, “Adam said *Hineni* — I am here.” *Hineni* is a remarkably powerful and uniquely Jewish idea. In a tradition where the central religious behavior is the performance of a *mitzvah* — not a good deed but a sacred dynamic of Divine challenge and human response — the affirmation *Hineni* is perhaps the singular articulation of what it means to be a Jew. God calls out to us. God calls out to me. And you. And, if we are willing, we say *Hineni*. I am here. I am ready. I am prepared to do.

But here's the thing. Adam never says *Hineni*. This powerful, one-word affirmation — *Hineni*, the response Moses gave to God, the same word Abraham had uttered when God called his name — is not here in the story of the Garden of Eden.

Perhaps that's the reason Adam got punished after all. Maybe because he wasn't willing to take responsibility for his actions, because instead of saying *Hineni*, Adam gave some half-baked excuse: “I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; so I hid myself.” Feh.

Maybe.

Enter Rosh Hashanah. This is why we are here today. Once a year we congregate to individually and collectively pose the question God asked Adam to ourselves: *Ayekah?*

Do you remember how we started tonight? We rose, Cantor and I stood before the open ark, and we prayed *Hin'ni*. Not *Hineni* — Here I am, but *Hin'ni* — Literally “Behold me.” Look at me. Consider me. *Hin'ni* is a request, while *Hineni* is a response.

These two words — *Hineni* and *Hin'ni* — look exactly alike when written without vowels, and while they are very similar, they are not identical. They are like two sides of the same sacred coin. *Hin'ni* is our way of saying I am in relationship with the One who commands. Only once you accept that there is a transcendent Voice that calls out to you will you be prepared to say *Hineni*. As the Hasidic masters taught, before we can go out and do *Tikkun Olam*, we first need to be prepared to do *Tikkun*. Personal repair. Of me.

Contextually, *Hin'ni* is the prayer leader's prayer. It is our acknowledgment — as your *sh'lichim*, as your designated representatives — that we are wanting. We are pleading with God not to take it out on you for any shortcomings we might have. But I've often wondered, why is it that we clergy recite this prayer out loud? If we are asking God to forgive us our own personal and professional shortcomings, why is this prayer not recited by us silently? Or in the

privacy of our offices? Why do we publicly humble ourselves before you? The answer, I think, is not merely to let you know we are human, but to remind you — through our willingness to set an example — that so are you.

And it is this reality, that we are broken, that we are imperfect, that we are human — a fact we so often try to evade — which could be all we need to transform these days from a celebratory new year to days of genuine, existential angst. *Yamim Noraim*. Days of Awe.

*Hin'ni* is my acknowledgment that I am not who I thought I was.

Alan Lew, in his book “This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared”, tells the following story:

Every year before the Days of Awe, the Ba'al Shem Tov held a competition to see who would blow the shofar for him on Rosh Hashanah. Now if you wanted to blow the shofar for the Ba'al Shem Tov, not only did you have to blow the shofar like a virtuoso, but you also had to learn an elaborate system of *kavannot* — secret prayers that were said just before you blew the shofar to direct the shofar blasts and to see that they had the proper effect in Heaven.

All the prospective shofar blowers practiced these *kavannot* for months. They were difficult and complex. There was one fellow who wanted to blow the shofar for the Ba'al Shem Tov so badly that he had been practicing these *kavannot* for years. But when his time came to audition before the Ba'al Shem, he realized that nothing he had done had prepared him adequately for the experience of standing before this great and holy man, and he choked. His mind froze completely. He couldn't remember even one of the *kavannot* he had practiced for all those years. He couldn't even remember what he was supposed to be doing at all. He just stood before the Ba'al Shem in utter silence, and then, when he realized how egregiously, how utterly he had failed this great test, his heart just broke in two and he began to weep uncontrollably.

“All right, you're hired,” the Ba'al Shem said.

Wiping away his years and trying to compose himself, the man almost inaudibly says, “But I don't understand. I failed the test completely. I couldn't even remember one *kavannah*.”

To this the Ba'al Shem explained, “What, after all, is the purpose of blowing the shofar but to draw us closer to God. What are these Days about but to reconnect us to our Source. And how do we do that? All that God seeks is for us to be authentic. God wants us to be who we are supposed to be. And the only path to our true selves is to crush the shell we hide behind — like Adam hiding in the Garden — to smash our fear of vulnerability and open our hearts. The broken heart, that which we try so hard to avoid, is actually what we need to help us become close to God, to help us become closer to our true selves. As it says in the Psalms, *God is close to the brokenhearted.*”

Alan Lew continues:

“Heartbreak is precisely the feeling that we have done our best, we have given it our all, but it hasn't been enough. Not nearly enough. And this is what we mean when we say, ‘*God is close to the brokenhearted.*’ And this is what we mean when we say at the end of *Avinu Malkeinu* — *ain banu ma'asim*—we have no worthy deeds.”

In other words, we're not there. And the process I need to bring me to this awareness — which necessitates an opening up, a making vulnerable, a ‘breaking’ of my heart — is called

*cheshbon ha-nefesh*: making a deep and honest examination of *me*. The High Holy Days are entirely about *cheshbon ha-nefesh*. This is what should be forcing me to lose sleep during the month of Elul. *Cheshbon ha-nefesh* is the work which from which there is no vacation — or retirement.

As I've been saying to Bar and Bat Mitzvah kids for thirty-eight years, "It's not how you do up on the *bimah*, it's who you are when you walk off of it." Performing is easy. Becoming is hard.

In the Japanese film *After the Storm*, the protagonist's mother asks him the question we should all be asking ourselves today: "Are you who you wanted to be?" And he responds, "Not yet."

I love this.

In much the same way David Copperfield commences his story — "Am I the hero of my life?" — "Not yet" is an affirmation that I am a work in progress. And this day, Rosh Hashanah, is the annual point in the cycle when I stop and ask, à la the late Ed Koch, "How'm I doin'?" The Hebrew equivalent is *Ayekah*. And so we commence this process by acknowledging our incompleteness — *Hin'ni*. And if we do it right, if our presentation is sincere, then there will be heartbreak. Or perhaps better put, heartache.

Yet it is this willingness to do serious introspection — and then act on it — that gives birth to hope.

If we have the courage not to hide (as did Adam), if we are prepared to open up our hearts and say *Hin'ni* — not just to God but to those we love, and if we truly wish to do the *cheshbon ha-nefesh*, the soul-searching work of becoming — then we will understand that our purpose is to do what we were created to do, and in that we will then be able to stand up and say, *Hineni*: I am now prepared to do what is necessary.

These might be my last High Holy Day sermons. And I might now finally get to enjoy the month of August. But there is no vacation from Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. There is no hiding — if, that is, I aspire to be the hero of my own life. I'm not there yet. I know this. But these days, each year, offer me renewed hope. All I have to do is take advantage of them. And as Hillel's words consistently reverberate in my soul — If not now, when?

It is never too late.