

Hineni: Toward a Confident Jewish Future

A professor was teaching a college class and he told the class that he was going to prove that there was not a God.

He said, "God if you are real, then I want you to knock me off this platform. I'll give you 15 minutes!"

Ten minutes went by. He kept taunting God, saying, "Here I am God, I'm still waiting"

He got down to the last couple of minutes and a BIG 240-pound football player happened to walk by the door and heard what the professor said.

The football player walked in the classroom and in the last minute, he walked up, hit the professor full force, and sent him flying off the platform.

The professor got up, obviously shaken and said, "Where did you come from, and why did you do that?"

The football player replied, "God was busy; God sent me instead!"

Here I am, is what the professor said. Literally standing on a soapbox, shouting out to the world about what he believes and does not believe.

In today's Torah reading, Abraham our ancestor says "Here I am", Hineni, when God calls him, calls him to take Isaac his son, his only one, the one he loves, and to bring him as an offering in the Land of Moriah. This is the story that we know well, the story of the Binding of Isaac. Unlike the professor's use of Here I am as a challenge, Hineni for Abraham is a yes, a statement of readiness. It assumes belief and trust in God, but it does not tell us what Abraham believed about God or revelation, nor does it tell us how he explained why bad things happen to good people and vice versa. It doesn't

tell us of the times that Abraham may have lost his faith for a time only to regain it later.

It doesn't tell us about how our ancestor Abraham felt about the possibility that his son and the future of the Jewish people, the people of Ado-nai, all would meet their end on the hill in Moriah. In 2009, some 3 thousand years later, some are predicting an end to the very Judaism we are practicing right here in the same way that all seemed to be coming to a swift end with the binding and sacrifice of Isaac. The binding of Isaac though is at its heart a story of strong faith and commitment to God's words, a shocking story on many levels, but still one in which Abraham demonstrates his faith and God recognizes and returns faith in him. Isaac leaves emotionally wounded, but physically unharmed.

Those who today would say that liberal Judaism, Conservative Reform and others will be consumed on the altar of history should be reminded that we are all one community under Ado-nai our God, and that our destinies are tied together.

Then let all Jews across the world respond to the naysayers with, *Hineni we* all say "Here we are", here we are in a synagogue, a house of worship, a place that is perhaps the most visible symbol of Jewish faith and the Jewish people here in the United States. Here we are engaged in a spiritual journey as we make the transition from one year to the next, examining our deeds and thoughts along the way, endeavoring to renew ourselves before God.

We are responding to God's voice, asking us if we have looked inward and know the feelings of our hearts, asking us if we are ready for this New Year. We find ourselves together in this space not by accident. We find ourselves sitting next to each other, all of us with different religious upbringings, different backgrounds.

About four months ago, Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, Chancellor of Yeshiva University, one of the most prominent of the centrist modern orthodox Jewish leaders and scholars had the following statement to make in an interview with the Jerusalem Post, "With a heavy heart we will soon say kaddish on the reform and conservative movements....The future of American Judaism is in the hands of the haredim/ultra-orthodox and modern Orthodox".

Perhaps Lamm was referring back to what the great German Jewish scholar Moritz Steinschneider said toward the end of the 19th century when he heard about early Zionist activities from one of his students and with a sad look at his vast Jewish library he replied sadly, "My dear fellow it is too late. All that remains for us to do is to provide a decent funeral." All this despite the advent of Zionism and new ways of practicing and thinking about Judaism were in their early years.

Over 1 hundred years after Steinschneider, and a mere 4 months after Rabbi Lamm's statement, is our way of practicing Judaism really bound on the altar now and ready to meet its end just as Isaac was in today's story?

To Rabbi Lamm, with due respect to a great scholar and writer, I repeat the words of our ancestor Abraham, Hineni, Here I am. And I ask you to say with

me (slowly), “Here we are.” The message of the High Holidays is that we have the power within us to determine the course our lives will take. We have the power to fulfill the potential and promise of the Judaism we practice.

Abraham was a human being and a Jew, a follower of Adonai, the God of Israel. Simply put, so are we, and so we should not let anyone but God tell us our fate.

This past year I have had the privilege to meet people who though their age and health began to fail, they far exceeded any suggestion of how long they could live.

A person is so much more than his or her condition. And we are so much more than a label. While we all may be right now in a synagogue connected to the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, we are first and foremost the members, families, and friends of a Jewish community that is so much broader and deeper than the label of “Conservative” or Reform, Reconstructionist, or liberal would suggest.

Rashi, Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, the great Torah scholar of the middle ages teaches us that Hineni is the response of the righteous ones, and it is a response of humility.

When I say Hineni, when we say it, we are living out lives that reflect our striving to believe and to follow the path set by God and the Torah. And we say it we say it in the spirit of humility just as Abraham did over and over again, not knowing what the future holds. We make a pledge of faith and service to a Jewish community that lives within the dramatic challenge and

opportunity of tradition refracted through the lens of the lives we live day to day in 2009.

The world has changed and Judaism has responded in a way that keeps our mission relevant. The Judaism we practice is one of the ways our faith has opened a dialogue with the changing world around us. It is one of many Judaism's, just as diverse approaches to Jewish law and practice have existed for centuries.

The developments of the 21st century are scarcely the first time that forms of Judaism have adapted to their historical and cultural surroundings. To list the ways that Jewish tradition has dealt with changes in society, culture, law and continued to thrive we could begin with a yearlong course and then continue on. So just a few examples, the ketubah, document developed to protect the rights of a divorcee, heter iska, Torah teaches us we cannot lend at interest, but mercantile society required it, so the heter iska found a way to recast the transaction as a loan, the female teachers in the Talmud who wore tallit and tefillin and challenged the other voices in the Talmud saying teaching women Torah is pointless, to the development of the Liberal Jewish movements in 19th century Germany whose mission it was to maintain tradition while still remaining relevant to a society flush with progress and enlightenment. Even the great Orthodox Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch rallied the more traditional communities to keep the Torah at the center of their lives during that time. Brandeis Professor Jonathan Sarna reminds us that back in 1818 attorney general William Wirt predicted that Jews would disappear altogether in 150

years. In the mid 1870s many believed that the future of Judaism in the United States was in the hands of the Reformers, people such as the great Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise. In the early 1950s a study found that only 23% of the children of Orthodox families intended to remain so, that a full half plan to turn Conservative. Professor Sarna notes that all these predictions made sense in their day and assumed an inevitable progression of history, but that in the end they all proved utterly and wildly wrong.

When evaluating Rabbi Lamm's statement, it's also important to read on a bit to see how he responds to a later question regarding the ordination of female rabbis. He said he opposes it for social not religious reasons, quote, "Women have just come into their own from an educational perspective. I would prefer not to have this innovation now. It is simply too early..." I wonder what my Great-Aunt Norma would think hearing a statement like this, my Great-Aunt who graduated New York University law school in 1946 and was president of the New York Women's Bar Association in 1958 and 1959. For Rabbi Lamm to make such a statement, even about women in Jewish studies alone, is to make a serious mistake. Rabbi Dr. Judith Hauptman, has been teaching Talmud at Jewish Theological Seminary for more than 20 years, in addition to so many more scholars of Bible, Talmud, Midrash, Literature and more, we can even turn back the clock to Regina Jonas, the very first female Rabbi to be ordained in December of 1935.

And so instead of a Mourner's Kaddish, let us this year say a collective Hineni. We are ready to try out Abraham's shoes and move forward on our

journey of faith, the same journey that Abraham first made when God told him to leave his homeland and travel toward the Holy Land.

Abraham was neither Orthodox nor Conservative nor Reform nor Reconstructionist, he was a servant of God, full of life and full of hope on his first journey that he made with God's promise—just as we are today with the New Year ahead of us. And though the command to take Isaac to Moriah perhaps filled him with dread, he knew that God had protected him on a difficult journey before and hopefully would do so again. We should always maintain a healthy awe before God, but we must never allow fear of those who would tell us our fate to be the only emotion to determine our future. We are Abraham's descendants, and as we say our collective Hineni, Here we are, we tell the world that a religious label; a denominational label will not define us. We will define ourselves as the holy nation God hoped we would strive to become. Drawing lines between tradition and changed is always difficult, but we will meet this challenge always with respect and integrity as we say with pride that we are part of a community that strives to identify and clarify God's will as expressed in the Torah and mediated through the Rabbis and great thinkers male and female of our tradition, as our tradition wrestles to help us keep God and Torah in the center as our world changes faster than ever around us.

Let's share in the goals and visions we've set for our own community, and I invite dialogue on how we can best achieve these goals and visions—Allow me to share our G.R.J.C. mission statement with you.

Encourage meaningful connections with God and

Jewish living. Through prayer, meditation and reflection, we will connect with the eternal presence of God in our lives. We will help make Jewish living, through the observance of God's mitzvot, relevant to the lives of the Jewish community in the 21st century.

Educate our children and adults to value and be confident in the continuing pursuit of Jewish knowledge as they develop a mastery of the necessary skills.

Create a warm and supportive community in which all members feel that they have a voice and receive due appreciation for the contributions they make.

Nurture and support Jewish leadership among our young people and adults.

Cultivate a meaningful connection with the State of Israel. The synagogue will maintain a close relationship with our Masorti/Conservative congregations in Israel, and will strive to spark interest in learning about and visiting Eretz Yisrael.

Foster a congregational life that demonstrates a healthy balance and exchange between the Rabbi as spiritual leader and the congregation's lay leaders.

Maintain a balanced atmosphere of ritual and prayer that combines comfort, informality and a sense of humor, with respect for the importance and majesty of silence, reflection and Jewish ceremony.

Seek to heal the world through acts of tzedakah/righteousness and justice. Serve the greater good in the community and beyond.

It is to these goals and visions that we should give our attention. And pundits and prognosticators will come and go, but what will not change is the reality that our God, the Eternal One, transcends all labels, all institutions and programs, and has given us the Torah as a nachalah, an inheritance. *We*

have the burden and glory of sharing God's message with the world however we identify ourselves. Labels change, but our core commitments will remain the same.

And so let us rededicate ourselves to taking the messages that we pray and teach here beyond these walls, sharing the joy, debating the important questions, taking the time that seems to pass us by and grasping it with all our might as we bless it and make it holy, as we enter this New year of 5770 a year that we will say both Hineni, Here I am, I am ready, and L'chayim, to Life! As a colleague of mine said on the issue at hand this past year, "Let us instead of Kaddish say Shehecheyanu/ the prayer of thankfulness and hope", let us say it for all Jews across the globe.

Shana Tovah u'metukah. A good and sweet new year to all.