

Rosh Hashanah 5774, 1st Day

September 5, 2013

This past Saturday night at Selihot in the prayer known as Shema Koleynu, and in the Shema Koleynu prayer we will repeat over and over again come Yom Kippur, and at the end of every Torah service we hear those familiar words: Hashivenu adonai elekha v'nashuva, hadesh yameynu k'kedem, Return us to You Adonai and we shall return, renew our days as of old.” I have said these words a thousand times in my life, probably more, and I never really thought until recently of the inherent contradiction in them. Do we want our days to be new, or do we want them to be old? This is not an academic question. The interplay between new and old has animated Judaism from its very beginnings, and the echo of that interplay is heard in our Kiddush conversations to this day. I am willing to bet each of us has heard – at some point -- in our shul or in another, grumbling that the prayer service was too rote, that they used the same old tired melodies. And I am sure

each of us has also heard at some point equally sincere muttering that, “They used tunes I didn’t know!”

I would like to speak about our shul, Agudat Achim. The first thing you should know is that when I speak to rabbinic colleagues about our congregation, they are often envious. On a typical Shabbat morning, we have 50-70 people, and a large number of children to follow the Torah procession. In many Conservative synagogues around the country – especially smaller ones -- one sees few children at services. We have enough Jewish literacy here that we can cover all prayer leadership and Torah reading just from our members. Many Conservative shuls need to engage outside help, or the rabbi is expected to do an inordinate amount. A stereotypical experience of being a Conservative rabbi is you and your family being the only ones who walk to shul on Shabbat. My family has a bunch of people to walk with. And the fact that we are able to run a thriving kosher caterer and put on the carrot festival with minimal paid staff elicits the admiration of many Jewish professionals I speak to. Nevertheless, like Jews

often have, we wonder about our future. We are significantly smaller than we were when this building was dedicated forty years ago. Like almost every Conservative synagogue, our membership skews older. And we confront uncertainty about the Jewish demographics in our area and a shifting relationship between American Jews and Jewish institutions.

You may be noticing that some weird things are going on here at Agudat Achim. Tonight, following Tashlikh at Blatnick Park, we will be saying our evening prayers at the park instead of coming back to the synagogue. A couple times this summer, we tried having Shabbat Minchah -- Saturday afternoon davening -- at a congregant's home. Our religious school gave families the option this year to choose any afternoon Monday thru Thursday to send their kids, and if you can't make it there are online options to get students up to speed. We are asking Bar/Bat Mitzvah parents to come with their children to religious school once a month to explore the meaning of Bar/Bat Mitzvah and the Shabbat service together as a family. All of this may seem odd to those of us who

expect services to be in the synagogue building, and that Hebrew school is for children, whose parents will send them on the days they're told. These innovations, however, mirror attempts all over the country to meet Jews where they are – sometimes literally – and tap into a culture that is always wired and has unprecedented choice.

This season's edition of *Kolot*, the magazine of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, is titled, "How Can Synagogues Evolve?" In it, my colleague Rabbi Charlie Savenor writes of his advice to a synagogue whose best-attended program is a Zumba class. He suggests the rabbi go to the class and teach about the Jewish attitude towards physical fitness. Perhaps he could even give a "D'var Zumba;" that is, a Zumba-related D'var Torah. The lesson of, if the Jews won't come to you, you go to the Jews is cogent. However, the comment in the magazine I think is most significant is that of my friend Rabbi Rachel Ain, who writes that she often asks herself, "Am I in Hineni mode?" Hineni, "Here I am," is the classic Biblical response with which one puts him or

herself at God's disposal. It is the response of Abraham when God calls him at the beginning of the Akedah story we will read tomorrow. It is the humble prayer of the Hazzan standing before God as sheliah tzibbur – messenger of the congregation. And it is the opening word of the kavannah – declaration of spiritual intent – which many Jews say before performing a mitzvah. In today's new and complex world, we who are Jewish teachers and preachers may be more willing to come to you than in the past, but you must be willing to say "Hineni."

If you are put off by some of the innovations I mentioned a moment ago, I ask you to say "Hineni," to participate in the new and see where it leads us. We will not be able to maintain as vibrant of a congregation for the next generation without "thinking outside the box." If you are a parent in the religious school who did not count on having to attend school with your child sometimes, I ask you to say "Hineni," to adjust your schedule and expectations to send the message that Jewish learning is not just something a child does to prepare for one ceremony. A few

months ago, I called for volunteers for a “Tefillah Enhancement Committee,” to discuss ways to get more out of our prayer services. Ten people said, “Hineni.” The discussions this group has already had are bringing new ideas into our worship, but we have found that having the conversation itself is equally important, for it allows people with different expectations about prayer to understand how their fellow congregants think. If we try new things at Shabbat services that are too innovative for your taste, or if you think we are not being innovative enough, I ask you, too, to say, “Hineni.” Together let's help steer Agudat Achim as we navigate the shoals of engaging as many congregants in prayer as possible, while at the same time holding true to the standards that attract people to Conservative Judaism.

I ask every member of this congregation to say, “Hineni.” Here I am with my dedication, here I am with my love for this shul, here I am with my willingness to meet people where they are – and to be met where I am, here I am with my time, here I am with my input, here I am with my money, here I am with whatever

openness I can muster to new ways of doing things. The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard made Abraham into the classic existential hero. Asked by God to do the unimaginable, to sacrifice his son, he plods forward in response to a voice only he can hear. I would humbly suggest that is not the model to follow. Instead, I ask each of us to respond “Hineni” as individuals, yes, but also with the constant knowledge that we are part of a dynamic community, each individual of which has responded similarly to the call of God, our people, and our shul.

Hadesh yamenu k’kedem, Renew our days as of old. The translation in Mahzor Lev Shalem of those words reads, “make our days seem fresh, as they once were.” The commentary says: “‘Make our days seem fresh’ should not be seen as a plea for restoration of a formerly perfect condition; we were never perfect. Rather, it is a plea for resilience, a plea for the ability to renew ourselves after moments of crisis and dislocation.” And then the Mahzor quotes Elie Wiesel: “God gave Adam a secret – and that secret was not how to begin, but how to begin again.” We have a

strong congregation here and we do not have to start from scratch.

But all of us who care about American Judaism must see ourselves in some way as beginning again. In a few moments, the Hazzan will recite, “Hineni,” basically saying, “Here I am, putting myself out there for the sake of my people and my congregation.” In a time of rapid change and some measure of uncertainty, I hope many of us are ready to say the same. Let each of us be willing to respond when called upon this year. May we overcome our natural discomfort at the new and different to embrace necessary change. Let each of us be a part of the conversation and of the solution. We humbly ask God, in the words of the Hineni, Heyeh na matzliach darkenu asher anu holkhim, “Grant us success on the way we tread.”