

God put Abraham to the test. The Lord called out to him, “Abraham,” and he simply answered **“Hineni.”** (Gen. 22:1).

And Abraham later picked up the knife to slay his son. Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven: “Abraham! Abraham!” and he again answered, **“Hineni.”** (Gen. 22:10-11).

An angel of God appeared to Moses in the flickering flames of a burning bush. Moses said, I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight, why doesn't the bush burn up? When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him from the bush: “Moses! Moses!” He too answered, **“Hineni.”** (Ex. 3:2-4).

When God first charged Samuel with his mission, Samuel responded powerfully with the word **“Hineni,”** an agreement, a commitment to being there and being present.

Hineni. I am Here. At this moment. In this place. We are present.

The word “Hineni” is found 178 times in the Tanakh, in the Hebrew Bible. And with each time this word is said in scripture, it is more than just an acknowledgement of one's presence; it is an acknowledgement that we are interconnected. We are here, but we are not alone when we are here. We are responding to prophetic calls to make this world a better place. We are listening for the still, small, Divine voice, searching for understanding and answers. We are here together, linked with each other, as community. **“Hineni”** is not about saying that I am present and accounted for. **“Hineni”** is not about taking attendance. **“Hineni”** is about being committed to making change, to making a difference, to doing something, to being a part of community.

Hineni. We are here. But Why are you here? Are you here out of Jewish guilt? Out of obligation? For the sake of your children? For the sake of your parents? What are you spiritually searching for? What do you hope to find here?

I've been asked numerous times before I arrived at Beth El, once I arrived, and in the roughly eight weeks that I've been here, what was it about Beth El that I was passionate about, excited about? Why was I here? Why this synagogue? Why this community? What led me to Beth El and what was my vision for Beth El? Why be Jewish in the context of our community, here at Beth El, in the year 2014, in the year 5775?

What is it about this community that each of us wants to declare **Hineni**, Here I Am?

Beth El, like all synagogues, is an ever-evolving institution. A synagogue may change because our needs in a synagogue change and our goal is to meet each other's needs. So what is my vision for synagogue? What is my vision for Beth El?

I would say my vision is our vision - for those of you who have been involved and invested in our congregation's strategic plan over the past year, one thing is clear: each of us have different needs, each of us have a different vision. But together, that vision, that strategic plan, is the new Beth El. And it is my responsibility, our responsibility, to meet those diverse needs.

We come together for prayer, to worship, to wrestle with God, whatever our different ideas of God at this moment in time may be. We come together to learn, to ensure that our children learn, to teach our kids at the very beginning of their education at the Thelma K. Reisman Preschool, through our Jewish Learning Center, our new Teen Program and USY, and through our commitment to educate us all as adults, understanding that learning is a lifelong

pursuit, that the Torah is an *Etz Chayim Hee*, a tree of life, as long as it continues to have purpose in our lives.

Most importantly, regardless of how or why we come together, we come together. A synagogue, a shul, a temple, is first and foremost called a Beit Knesset, a place to come together. A house to come together. A home to come together. A home. That is synagogue. That is Beth El.

And what does this home look like? What will this home look like that we will build together?

Beth El is a spiritual center -- a place for us to worship, a place for us to cling to God, a place for us to challenge God, a place to feel comfortable declaring our beliefs and questioning our beliefs. For some, that is through traditional davening, through prayer, through the liturgy of the siddur, the prayerbook. For others, we find God in meditation, in song, in music, in conversation, in yoga. To meet the many spiritual needs of all of us, Beth El cannot have a single prayer experience, a single spiritual experience all the time, because we pray differently, we wrestle with God differently. We must have - we will have - multiple opportunities for engagement, multiple entry points, to experience prayer. You will find in the year ahead at Beth El, times for traditional prayer experiences and alternative prayer experiences, times to pray in sanctuary, times to pray outdoors, times to pray in English and in Hebrew, with traditional and innovative liturgy, times to reflect, to question, to grow. Beth El, literally Beit El, a House of God, is more than just a place for us to gather together.

It is a place for us to gather together with purpose, to feel comfortable here, each going on our spiritual journeys here, no matter where those journeys take us. That is my vision for Beth El.

Beth El is a Jewish Learning Center, not just for our children who study in the Jewish Learning Center, but for all of us. Beth El is a place where we are all students. It is a place where we are also all teachers, for we all have a great deal to teach one another. In the coming weeks, you will see a great deal of opportunities to learn together, from studying Talmud to beginner Hebrew reading classes. Our commitment to learning includes Beth El Book Clubs and a Film Series, lunch and learn classes, guest speakers and lectures about issues explicitly and implicitly Jewish, a place for those who were born Jewish and want to learn more and those of another faith who are part of a Jewish home and want to learn more. Beth El is a place where the Torah, our Torah, is a living Torah, because we are committed to learning Torah in our lives. That is Beth El.

Beth El is - and will continue to be - a part of the community, an institution committed to supporting community, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah to be an *Ohr LaGoyim*, a light unto the nations, to light up the dark corners of the earth and the darkest moments in people's lives. To not only be a community of prayer or study, but a community of action. To commit to help those in need. We do that already, with our involvement at the Interfaith Food Pantry of the Oranges which provides bags of food weekly to over 150 people. We do that through our involvement in the Interfaith Hospitality Network.

But we all must be more aware of -- and more connected to -- the community around us. Beth El is a community institution that serves those in our community, a synagogue committed to making this world a better place, a synagogue committed just as much to acts of justice and loving kindness as we are to acts of worship and study. We are a community that not only believes in justice, but pursues justice. We are a community that rolls up our sleeves and understands that we cannot sit around and wait for the world to become the world that we dream it to be. Instead, we - as God's partners in creation - must do our part to make this world a better place.

As it was once said about Bobby Kennedy and Eleanor Roosevelt, we must be prepared to light a candle instead of simply cursing the darkness. We pursue justice in Ferguson, in Newark, in South Orange and Maplewood. We pursue justice in Israel, in Europe, in California. We take a stand for justice in our own backyard, and on the other side of the world. We are a community of action, not just by volunteering, but through petitioning, and marching, through protest and political action. We are a community committed to change.

We read in the High Holy Day Amidah: *V'yaasu kulam agadah, achat laasot ritzoncha b'levav shalem*, that we are all intrinsically bound together and thus, bound together as community, and must carry out God's will, to complete the utopian world - the Garden of Eden - that God set out to create, and to pursue justice, wholeheartedly.

And Beth El is also a community that continues to look out for our own, to lift each other up in chairs during the highest of highs, at moments of joy and celebration, and to lift each other up when we can no longer stand, at the lowest of low points, at moments of sorrow, heartache, and mourning. Beth El is about being together inside this building and outside this building, looking out for one another.

Beth El is a synagogue that is not bound to the walls of our institution, of our synagogue building. Beth El is a community that creates meaningful spiritual experiences, holiday experiences, Shabbat experiences, meaningful moments, in the sanctuary and in the park, in bookstores and around bonfires, in the public square and by the pool. Beth El is a community that doesn't just invite you in, but meets you where you are, literally and figuratively, to say **Hineni.**

The new Beth El is a home for all who walk in our doors, whether we have walked into this building hundreds of times before, haven't been here in quite a while, or we are walking in this

building for the very first time. Beth El is a synagogue for all who are interested in community, in being part of community, in building community, regardless of our past, whether we are Jews by birth, Jews by choice, or a part of a Jewish home. Beth El is home. Beth El is our community. But it is only community if you are willing to say **Hineni**, Here I Am, and become immersed in community.

In the coming weeks and months, we will begin implementing our strategic plan. In some areas, we have already made impactful, lasting changes to meet the needs of our ever-evolving Beth El.

But more so than programs, than activities, than entry points, more so than classes, lectures, or events, certainly more so than the rabbi, Beth El, community, is about those who are a part of community. The late Lubavitcher Rebbe, taught that “a container was defined by its contents. A pitcher of water isn’t a pitcher... a pitcher of water is water. A crate of apples isn’t a crate, it is apples. A house, and a house of worship, a house of assembly, is also defined by what is inside it.

We are here because we are here. A synagogue is not defined by its architecture, as beautiful as our building is. A synagogue is not about sanctuary or office space, playgrounds, social halls or classrooms. A synagogue is defined by its contents. Beth El is about us. Each and every one of us. Community is about us. Each and every one of us.

Hineni. Here I am. A part of Beth El. Each of us, saying these words, a sacred statement, becoming a sacred link, an important cog that keeps the wheels of Beth El turning, moving, growing, evolving.

Most of all, a synagogue is called a *Kehillah Kedoshah*, a sacred community, a holy community, a separate community, a unique community, a community where each of us finds purpose, each of us has value and is valued, a community where each of us depends on each other and relies on each other.

Wendell Berry, American author and poet, wrote that, "A proper community, is a commonwealth: a place, a resource, an economy. It answers the needs, practical as well as social and spiritual, of its members -- among them the need to need one another."

The Talmud offers a similar take: In Tractate Sanhedrin, 17b, we learn that a Torah scholar cannot live in a city unless it has a *beit din*, a court of law, a Tzedakah fund, a synagogue, a bath house, a bathroom, a doctor, a craftsperson, a blood-letter, and a teacher.

Essentially, the Talmud is telling us that a community - true community, a thriving community, a *kehillah kedoshah* - a sacred community - is one that meets the physical and spiritual needs of all. It is a community in which we take care of all, support all, and look out for all - those who are a part of our institution and those who are not. That is my vision for Beth El. That each of us is valued, that each of us is an essential part of this community, and that each of us recognizes the *kedusha*, the sanctity, of one another.

Each of us made a conscious decision to be a part of this community during this High Holy Days. Each of us made a conscious decision to be present, to say **Hineni**, to say "I am Here." We come here for community, but we also come here to grow, as individuals and as community. We come here to say **Hineni**. That is my vision for Beth El. That is my answer to "Why Beth El." In the year ahead, may we each answer this question for ourselves. Why be Jewish in the context of our community, here at Beth El, in the year 2014, in the year 5775? May we each find meaning, understanding, change, and growth, in the year ahead. But may we not do it alone. May we find that in community. And every step of the way, as we grow

together as community, may we say **Hineni**. May we make our voices heard. May we make our presences felt. And may we each find purpose, find meaning, and find God, in each other, in community, at Beth El, in the year ahead. Shana Tova.