

*Hineni, Mah L'Cha Po—Behold Why We Are Here*¹

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Congregation Shir Shalom of Westchester and Fairfield Counties

Ridgefield, Connecticut

Hineni, I am here.

I am here to inspire a vibrant future, to make our world a better place.

I am here to find meaning and purpose, to know that my life matters.

I am here because I proudly connect with the narrative of our people.

I am here because words of Torah are in my heart and on my lips.

I am here to help repair our broken world.

I am here because I cannot do this alone.

I am here to be inspired by the teachings of our sages and prophets.

This evening (Erev Rosh Hashanah) I am inspired by the teachings of the prophet Elijah, the harbinger of the messiah, a symbol of our hopes for a better future, whom we call upon and pray for at Passover *Seder*, at a *Bris*, and during *Havdallah*.

In our sacred Scriptures, the prophet Elijah wanders in the wilderness, hungry, lonely, and afraid—can these words describe us as well? We are hungry for meaning, spirituality, and connection. We are lonely in a virtual world where Facebook and Face Time have supplanted the face-to-face. We are afraid, fearful of the direction of our country—whether we support President Trump or not; fearful of the despoliation of the earth; fearful of a nuclear North Korea.

Elijah wants to have hope; he pleads with God for a sign—an affirmation of God's presence. A powerful wind blows, moving mountains, an earthquake shakes the land, and a searing fire scorches the earth—it sounds familiar in the midst of hurricanes, earthquakes, and wildfires. When the wind, the earthquake, and the fire subside, Elijah hears a "*kol d'mama dakab*—a still small voice," and the question: "*Mah l'cha fo?* What are you doing here?/Why are you here?" Elijah experienced God's presence only when he was alone in the wilderness. Consider: before Elijah could lead the Israelites, before he could make a

¹ I am grateful to my editor, Aron Hirt-Manheimer for his guidance, insights, an support and to my wife for her patience throughout the preparations.

difference in the world, he needed to understand the purpose of his presence. He needed to understand his “Why.”

In a popular 2009 TED talk, “How Great Leaders Inspire Action,” Simon Sinek observes: “People don’t buy what you do, they buy *why* you do it.” Pointing to the success of Apple Inc., Sinek explains that while competitors focus on end products, Apple is guided by the idea that in “Everything we do, we believe in challenging the status quo, we believe in thinking differently. The way we challenge the status quo is by making our products well designed and easy to use. We just happen to make great products...”²

As an Android/PC user, the only Apples I purchase are the ones we dip in honey, but I appreciate the importance of knowing the why of what we do at Congregation Shir Shalom. Understanding “why” enables us to connect with each other in a new way. We have a great “product” -- uplifting music, spiritual worship, dynamic adult learning, excellent youth education, meaningful Social Action and so much more. But we need to understand “why,” for, as it is written in the Book of Proverbs: “*b’ein chazon, yepara am*—when there is no vision, the people will perish...”³ Or, in the words of motivational speaker Tony Robbins, “If you don’t know where you are going, you won’t know when you get there.”⁴

Making personal choices is a good beginning. My wife, Ashley, reminded me of an old forwarded e-mail with the subject “Synagogue High Holy Day Seating Request Form” Yes, many congregations have reserved seating! The form reads “During the last holidays, many members expressed concern over the seating arrangements. To be placed in a seat which will best suit you, please complete the following questionnaire...”

1. Would you prefer to sit in the talking or no-talking section?
2. If talking section, I would like to talk about: Stock market, real estate, sports, general gossip, the rabbi, the cantor, what others are wearing, the government (democrat), the government (republican), the government (independent).
3. I would like to sit near the following for free professional advice: Dentist, nutritionist, psychologist, child psychologist, podiatrist, cardiologist, internist, accountant, financial advisor, attorney—civil, attorney—criminal, attorney—estate planning, architect.

² *How Great Leaders Inspire Action*. Simon Sinek. TedxPuget Sound. September 2009. https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action/

³ Proverbs 29:18

⁴ Reform Judaism magazine

4. I want a seat located: on the aisle, near the exit, near the window, near the bathroom, near my in-laws, far from my in-laws, in Aruba, (and Ashley's favorite) I want a seat where no one will notice me sleeping during the rabbi's sermon.

All kidding aside, the "why" of our presence in this sanctuary at this sacred time has deep roots.

Some of you are here for Bubbie and Zeyde who came to this country with nothing but the prayers in their hearts. Some are here for family who lie in a bed of pain, to pray that they may heal speedily. Some are here to be with friends—our temple family. Some are here to express the meditations of their hearts, their hopes and wishes for a brighter future. Some are here to connect with our God in the language of our people, to be part of something greater.

We are a congregation of individuals, each entering this sacred space with a different perspective, each with our own reasons and responses to the question: "*Mah l'cha fo?* Why are you here?"

A still small voice began our Rosh Hashanah worship with the "*Haẓẓan's* chant":

"*Hin'ni*—Here I am, one soul within this prayer community, trembling and afraid, overwhelmed and apprehensive...I bring my own concerns and yearnings...I pray for myself and my community, hoping we will find expression in the time-hallowed words of our people and in the traditions cherished by generations before us."⁵

We will hear echoes of this voice tomorrow, when Abraham repeats the word *Hineni*—Here I am, when responding to God.

Our worship on Rosh Hashanah begins in the first person singular: *Hin'ni*, Here I stand and continues through the response of Abraham. But over the course of worship our language is transformed, inspiring us to fulfill what Rabbi Janet Marder describes as "The central purpose of our religion: to expand our awareness and lift us out of the closed circle of self-concern..."⁶ We move from the first person singular to dramatic prayers written in first person plural: *Avinu Malkeinu*, the Great *Aleinu*, and *Ashamnu*.

What does it mean in our tradition to move from the first person to the we?

We read in *Pirkei Avot*, an ancient collection of rabbinic teachings, that there are four attitudes describing the relationship between self and others: The evil person says, "What

⁵ Adapted from pages 16-17 of *Mishkan HaNefesh*

⁶ *A Rabbi Responds to Atheism*. Sermon. September 12, 2007. <https://www.betham.org/sermon/rabbi-responds-atheism>

is mine is mine and what is yours is mine.” The simpleton says, “What is mine is yours and what is yours is mine.” The ideal person says, “What is mine is yours and what is yours is yours.” The average person says, “What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours.”

Evil people take without giving anything in return. They care only about their own needs and desires, and while they may experience financial success, they will ultimately be lonely and alone. They say “What is mine is mine and what is yours is mine.”

The rabbis express displeasure with the attitude: “what is mine is yours and what is yours is mine,” labeling one who thinks this way an “*am haaretz*” – naïve or pedestrian. If this describes your attitude and you have Red Sox season tickets that you want to share, please call me after the weekend.

The rabbis describe as pious the attitude of those who say, “What is mine is yours and what is yours is yours.” Piety, the quality of being religious or reverent, is expressed when we give of ourselves without seeking anything in return. Rabbi Israel Salanter, writing in nineteenth century Lithuania once said: "A pious Jew is not one who worries about his fellow man's soul and his own stomach; a pious Jew worries about his own soul and his fellow man's stomach." Members who continue to generously support our synagogue after their children have grown up and moved away, even when they only attend services once or twice a year display this attitude: what is mine is yours and what is yours is yours.

Others join a congregation for their child to become Bar or Bat Mitzvah. They buy into a product. When that product is no longer needed, they walk away. Their attitude is “What is mine is mine and yours is yours.” The rabbis describe this attitude as “average,” and then they proceed to explain that this was the attitude of people in Sodom. You may recall that Sodom was destroyed by God after Abraham was unable to find ten righteous people. This is an attitude of isolation: neither giving to nor taking from others. The troubling impact of isolation is present in bystanders who do not intervene in the presence of violence and bigotry and hatred. It is also the embodiment of an attitude our teens abbreviate as MYOB—Mind Your Own Business. They focus on feeding their stomachs—their needs and wants—rather than feeding their souls.

Fortunately, many pious people join and continue to support our congregation with the attitude of “what is mine is yours and what is yours is yours.” These generous people know the “why.” Our challenge as a sacred community is to convince those who join us for a product that we are so much more. And as I share these observations I am thinking about those former members in our midst who have chosen to discontinue their membership,

and I recognize that it is not so much you who have failed us, but we who have failed to inspire you.

The key to transforming our congregation is to help people move from a first-person singular attitude to the first-person plural and to encourage them to consider why they are supporting our congregation. To amplify that still, small voice within, we need to hear from our members why they joined and how they are inspired and feel connected. Throughout the High Holy Days we have invited several members to share their Jewish journeys, as we did last year, to encourage everyone to consider their response to God's question for Elijah: *Mah l'cha po.*

Over the summer I began a listening campaign with a similar goal. These sessions have and will continue to help me learn about how we can better inspire and help our members connect. I have heard from some, and I want and need to hear from everyone. I hope that during Rosh Hashanah everyone will take time to reflect on your presence in our congregation, what is unique about this experience, and what gets you up in the morning. Monday morning you will hear the still small voice of an incoming e-mail asking these questions. Your responses will help us hear and understand the direction for our congregation and our communal vision for the future of Congregation Shir Shalom and will be presented on Yom Kippur as an opportunity for further reflection and future discussion.

Elijah answered the still small voice: "I am moved by zeal...the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and put Your prophets to the sword. I alone am left, and they are out to take my life"⁷ God replies "*Leich, shuv l'dar-k'cha*—Go back the way you came." Elijah returns to his people, his focus shifted from his own needs to those of his community.

Hungry or sated, happy or afraid, lonely or connected, we will find inspiration, we will find meaning, we will find connection, "by joining hands and marching together."⁸

Hinenu, We are here.

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We are here to find meaning and purpose, to know that our lives matter.

We are here because we proudly connect with the narrative of our people.

We are here to help repair our broken world.

We are here because we cannot do this alone. *Amen.*

⁷ I Kings 19:14

⁸ *Mishkan T'filah*, Introduction to *Mi Chamocha* Prayer