

HINEINI

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5778— Thursday, September 21, 2017

Congregation B'nai Jehudah — Overland Park, Kansas

Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff

FIRST READING AND ALIYAH – GENESIS 22:1-3

Ah, come on. Do we really believe that God tested Abraham?

Aren't we all tested? There are little tests. When your spouse doesn't want to go to the party and asks you to say you had to work late when you didn't and you are being asked to lie. And there are big tests. When a loved one gets sick or dies. Or a child has walked down the wrong path and we have no choice but to practice tough love and deny them help or throw her a life line. Those are the ones that pierce our souls and we have no idea whether or how we will survive that test.

All of us are tested just as Abraham was.

But Abraham? God presented him with the hardest of all tests – God or child...to whom would Abraham be loyal? Abraham understood that there was only one choice...to be loyal to God. Because if something (even a child) can move us away from our relationship with God – however we understand God to be – then God always is second. Which means that ethics and truth and loyalty and even family can be compromised. If we do not love God with all our heart, with all our might, with all our being – the words of "V'ahavta" – then we deny God and...follow me here...then we deny that which God created...namely other people. When we look into the face of another human being, we are seeing...at the very least...a mirror image of ourselves...and at the very

most...God's image. And therefore, we cannot turn away when we are called. For it is God's...and humanity's voice...that call us.

Even though Abraham responded, "Hineini, here I am" when God called, he was not truly present. Remember what the text said...he took the knife, he took the fire, he took the donkey, he took the servants, he took his son. He didn't ask. He didn't understand their needs. He didn't consider even the consequences of his actions. He was completely self-absorbed.

And that is something God cannot tolerate. It's not ok to worry **only** about ourselves. It's not ok to live just in a "me-centered" bubble. Abraham was **not** the model of righteousness and caring that God needed for a leader.

So, why do we read **this** story?

SECOND READING AND ALIYAH – GENESIS 22: 4-8

As our story unfolds, Abraham is still self-absorbed. "You stay with the donkey," he says to the servants. They are no more important to him than a dumb ass. The same is true with his one-line conversation with his son. When Isaac imploringly asks his father what is happening, Abraham's harsh response is essentially, "It's not about you. Don't ask questions."

But it doesn't make sense. Just a few chapters earlier in Torah, Abraham is the model of caring and concern, of reaching

out to help others. He greets three strangers who come to his tent, welcoming them with audacious hospitality. In fact, his behavior is so generous, it is the model of mitzvah-giving that our tradition elevates for us to emulate.

But it does not stop there. Shortly after he cares for strangers who appear at his tent, Abraham stands before God and argues with God over the planned destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The text states: "And Abraham stood with God." And what does Abraham do, as he stands with God? He argues for the people of the towns. Abraham challenges and negotiates to save as many as possible. He argues that God should not destroy the good with the wicked. He successfully negotiates down to ten. If ten righteous individuals were to be found, God would not destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.

Now **that** is the Abraham I want to call my "forefather." That is the Abraham I want to emulate. The Abraham who is willing to stand up even to God and demand that what is right and true and good be done. The Abraham who is willing to speak truth to ultimate power. And the Abraham who gives readily to the stranger whom he encounters.

I like that Abraham. And so should all of us.

We do a pretty good job of imitating him in some respects. We feed hungry people with our "mitzvah meals" in downtown Kansas City or in Olathe. We do a great job with our Harvester's Food drive, taking grocery bags we will give you and filling them up and returning them. Last year, you contributed over 8,000 pounds – that's 4 tons of food – to help the hungry. Pretty good and pretty easy. The other part is a bit more difficult to do. But we hosted a refugee birthday party. We have spoken out against racism and prejudice. You saw on the screens this morning an announcement about an event on October 1 for our community to stand together and to say: We will not permit a Charlottesville to happen in our town. Our congregation

stands in the tradition of Rabbi Samuel Mayerberg, who fought the Pendergast political machine in Kansas City. This is part of our DNA. It's who we are.

Simply, it is our job to reach out beyond ourselves. It is to care for others – as Abraham did with strangers at his tent – and to advocate for others – as Abraham did with God regarding Sodom and Gomorrah. Yes, that is the Abraham I want to be. So...why read **this** story?

THIRD READING AND ALIYAH – GENESIS 22: 9-14

Hineini. Here I am.

Those are the words I was waiting to hear. This is why we read the Akekah today. For here, Abraham stands up and takes responsibility.

Hineini. Here I am.

God calls to Abraham two times: "Avraham, Avraham"...once, to reach out to others, which he does so well...and a second time, to reach in, to take care of his own.

Just as it wasn't easy for Abraham to know how to take care of his own son, it's not easy for us to take care of our own.

It's not easy to be there when a member of our community needs a meal today for her kids because she has to stay late for work and she is a single mom with no back up and it's absolutely the worst time for you to stop and help. But she needs it.

It's not easy when the older person in our congregation who we have never met and has no family needs just a phone call once a week to check in and to know that someone cares and that he is still alive but you don't know him and it feels awkward and when would you have time to call and you can't commit to anything on a weekly basis? But he is utterly alone.

It's not easy when the 60-year-old who lost his job because his company decided to outsource their IT to Indonesia and he has two girls in college and a spouse unable to work and he has sent out dozens of inquiries and no one wants to hire an older person and he needs contacts but you don't know him and you can't vouch for him and you don't know anyone in IT. But he desperately needs a job.

No, it isn't easy. But God calls us. Not once, but twice. We are called to reach out **beyond** ourselves. And we are called also to reach in **to** ourselves. It is the reaching in that really pulls at us. It reminds us of our own vulnerabilities, our own frail circumstances.

As a B'nai Jehudah community, we are called to care. Today, I am pleased to announce that we have heard the call and we are responding.

To begin, we are disbanding our Social Action/Social Justice Committee. As of today, it is gone. In its place is not a committee. It is not a task force. It is not a program. It is a congregation-wide effort. We are calling it **Hineini: Reaching In/Reaching Out**. Just as we committed large amounts of energy and talent to our tefillah efforts, just as we have and are committing huge resources to our education efforts, it is time to embrace fully our call to care. It is time for each of us...for all of us...to respond: "Hineni. I am here."

We are calling each person here today – and those who are not here – young, old, new member, multi-generational member – to step forward and join us. Reach in. Reach out.

Here is how it will work.

The first aspect will be **Mitzvah Moments** - those mitzvah opportunities we do so very well. This includes our Mitzvah Meals in Kansas City and Olathe; our ongoing support of the JFS Food Pantry and Harvesters, our annual school supply drive, our holiday gift program, Mitzvah Day,

Mitzvah Marketplace, blood drives. All of these we will continue as one facet of Reaching Out.

The second function will be **Social Justice Advocacy**. This is a relatively new arena for the congregation...from a volunteer perspective. But, it is woven deep into the fabric of Reform Judaism. We will find those areas of advocacy that are not Democratic or Libertarian or Republican or any other -ic or -an. We will focus on that which unites us, as we care for the well-being of our world. Such advocacy work might be in the areas of reducing gun violence, in advocating for better environmental stewardship of our planet, or in promoting more mental health services for our community. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, upon reflecting on his participation in the now-famous Selma Civil Rights march, wrote, "I felt I was praying with my feet." We are obligated like Heschel. We must be willing to stand with one another, to stand with God...and be willing to argue. That is what I am asking you to do on October 1, to stand together with Kansas City. We must be willing to pray with our feet in order to help our world.

The third part...the hardest and probably the most important: we must begin to reach in. Our community is a precious organism. It needs to be loved and nurtured. Each person in this congregation deserves our attention so our efforts will be to extend the work of our rabbis and professional staff, in **caring for our congregants**. Whether it is a visit that can occur; a meal that can be prepared and delivered; a ride offered to the grocery store, a doctor's appointment, or to services; or just a phone call to a member who would like someone to check in with him/her, we will develop tools to permit an ever-growing circle of caring congregants to participate. Each possibility has two parts – those who could use help and those who can give help. We need both. This is a new and - as such - will take some time to develop. But it is part of our vision. Over the next several months, you will hear of different opportunities to help one another.

It will be up to each one of us to say,
"Hineini. Here I am."

If we are able to do all three – mitzvah work, advocacy work, caring work – then it will be as the last line of Torah I just read: "It is on the mountain, that God is seen." In other words, when we see one another – when we reach in and out – that is when we have reached the mountaintop, when we have reached the Divine and we see God in one another...and even in the stranger in our midst.

This is why we read this Torah portion today. To teach us to respond: Hineini.

FOURTH READING AND ALIYAH – GENESIS 22: 15-19

God blessed Abraham as he embarked on this journey. And we need our own source of blessing, our own guide that keeps us true to what we are doing and why, some thing that can make sure we align ourselves continually to our north star, our core purpose: to nurture Jewish meaning, connection, and continuity.

So, the fourth and final aspect of this new initiative will be a **clearinghouse and sounding board for any other way we can better serve our membership**. This will be a chance for everyone in the congregation to be creative. Perhaps a new way to care for one another. Perhaps a cause for which we should take a stand. Perhaps another good deed we might do. If you have an idea, our clearinghouse/sounding board advisory group wants to hear about it. This small group will vet whatever ideas percolate up. No longer will the rabbis or chairs of committees be the sole deciders of what our congregation does or endorses. From time to time, they will meet and help us focus on those projects a) that meet our core purpose and values; b) that we have the capacity to undertake; and c) that will strengthen – and not – divide us. Once our advisory group makes such determinations, our various other groups...and we want you to be a part

of them – our outside mitzvah groups, our advocacy groups, and our inside mitzvah groups – will do the holy work of Tikkun Olam...of healing that brokenness which exists in our lives and our world.

Our Torah portion ends by saying "va-yal-chu yach-dav," and they – Abraham, the servants, and Isaac – went home together. No longer were they isolated individuals. Now, they were "yach-dav," they were together. They were family. And family cares for family.

To help us achieve our goals of reaching in and reaching out, we need to rely on each other. First, we need people – we need you – to do the holy work before us. Much of what we have been doing, we will continue. But we will be doing much more and that requires – that needs – you to help us.

Over a decade ago, I spoke on Kol Nidrei about the need to care. Some may recall my telling the story of meeting a congregant in the grocery store. She confronted me and told me that no one cared. Recognizing that the conversation was more than one that could be resolved at the frozen food section, I visited her at her home. I listened to her accusations against ourselves and our community. When she finished, I said in defense, "That's not true. There are a lot of people who care." She looked me square in the eyes and said, "Well, if that's so, name some of those people."

Standing on this bimah a decade ago, I said the following:

"I paused, not knowing who to list.

Can I give her your name.

Can I?"

Sometimes we have to hear a call twice to listen.

This year, may each of us respond to her question by saying: "Hineini. Here I am!"