

Moving Toward Sacred Time
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This past Sunday, I was leading *T'fillah* or prayer for the 4th through 6th graders. After we prayed the *Barchu*, the call to worship, one of the students asked: “Why do we bow down to the Torahs?” I was very intrigued by this question and thought for a moment. Like every good rabbinical student, I reflected the question right back to them. “Why do you think we bow down in the direction of the Torahs?” One student raised his hand and remembered what we had talked about a few weeks ago. “We face east, toward Jerusalem,” he said. This student was right, but I realized we could still do more to answer this profound question. So, I asked them, “Why might the Torahs be placed in the eastern most part of the sanctuary, so that every time we bow down, we are facing the Torahs?” In other words, if prayer is meant to connect us to God, does the Torah help facilitate this connection? One student answered, “The Torah contains the ten commandments. This is how the Torah connects us to God.”

In our Torah Portion this week, *Vayigash*, we learn a part of the Joseph narrative. Joseph is now the Prime Minister of Egypt. His father, Jacob, thought he was killed years earlier. But here, Jacob has learned that Joseph is indeed alive and prepares to journey down to Egypt to reunite with him. As Jacob makes his way from the land of Canaan to Egypt the Torah teaches, “God called to Israel in a vision by night, Jacob, Jacob, he answered Hineni”¹

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים | לְיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִרְאֵת הַלַּיְלָה וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב | יַעֲקֹב וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי

¹ Genesis 46:2

In reading this verse of Torah, we can recall a few other verses of Torah with a similar structure. Earlier in Genesis, an angel of God calls out to Jacob's grandfather Abraham just as he is about to kill his son Isaac saying, "Abraham, Abraham" "And he answered, *hineini*."² Then in Exodus, God appears to Moses in the burning bush and says, "Moses, Moses" "And he answered *hineini*."³ All three of these verses have a few commonalities. What are they?... (pause to let *kahal* answer the question) Alliteration of name and character says, "*hineini*"

While both of these components unite each of the three verses, they can also help us to single out our verse as well. Each time a character says, *hineini*, one might think our text is referring to a physical space, perhaps one that is holy. But this is not the case. Abraham is on Mt. Moriah when God calls out to him. Moses is in Egypt. Jacob is in Beer Sheva. Perhaps *hineini* does not refer to a physical space at all, but rather being present in a particular moment with God.

Another difference between Jacob's verse and that of Abraham and Moses is that while Abraham and Moses are only called by one name in their dialogue with God, Jacob is referred to not only as Jacob but also by his new name, Israel. We read just a few weeks ago in *Parshat Vayishlach* that Jacob is renamed Israel. So why then, in chapter 46, does the Torah use both of his names? A few commentators suggest the name switch signifies Jacob moving from Canaan to Egypt. On its own, I do not find this interpretation very compelling. However, if we look further in chapter 46, this argument becomes much more convincing. The Torah teaches, "Joseph ordered his chariot and went to Goshen to meet his father Israel; he presented himself

² Genesis 22:11

³ Exodus 3:4

to him and, embracing him around the neck, he wept on his neck for a long time.”⁴ About this verse, a few medieval commentators are troubled by the same issue and draw a similar conclusion. Both Rashi and Radak are troubled by the fact that when Jacob and Joseph finally reunite, Joseph hugs his father Jacob and cries profusely on his shoulder. The verse, though, says nothing about Jacob crying or hugging Joseph at all. Is he not excited to see his long-lost son??? Both Rashi and Radak believe this omission in the text can be explained by the following interpretation: As Joseph was busy hugging and crying, Jacob was preoccupied by reciting the Shema in order to renew his special connection with God immediately upon settling in Egypt. While I am not sure exactly how accurate the details of this interpretation are, considering Sh’ma was likely written later than this story, I do believe this explanation is onto something important. Before Jacob arrives in Egypt to reunite with his son Joseph, God may have actually sensed Jacob’s fear of losing his special connection with God by leaving the land of his forefathers, Canaan. For the Torah teaches in the very same chapter, “I am God, the God of your father. Fear not to go down to Egypt, for I will make you there into a great nation. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I myself will also bring you back.”⁵ Our Torah portion has confronted a central question which I believe most certainly applies today. Can we truly be *hineini* and connect to God in any space, at any time?

Our ancient rabbis describe the following scenario which helps us probe our question: If one was riding a donkey, he should dismount from it while he prays. And if he is unable to dismount, he should turn his face toward Jerusalem. And if he is unable to turn his face, he

⁴ Genesis 46:29

⁵ Genesis 46:3-4

should focus his heart toward the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem.⁶ Now, let us frame this story in modern terms. Suppose you were driving on the 405. Traffic is even worse than usual, and you realize you are going to miss Friday night services at Temple Akiba! According to our ancient rabbis, do you have to miss out on the opportunity to connect with God when you are stuck on the 405? Absolutely not! Do we have to miss out on the opportunity to connect with God if we cannot exit our cars and face east? No! In fact, I would suggest not getting out of your cars while stopped on the 405 unless you absolutely have to! We can connect to God anywhere, provided we are *hineini*, present in the moment. This presence allows us to sanctify time by directing our attention toward the holy.

If our connecting to God and holiness is not limited by space, what does that mean for us? When Jacob leaves Canaan for Egypt, he at first feels challenged by leaving the land of his fathers, but when he reaches Egypt and reunites with his son, the Torah commentaries suggest he is able to direct his attention toward God once again and feel at home. We too have the opportunity to experience God in a way that transcends space. We do so each week by celebrating Shabbat, by sanctifying time.

One of my favorite books is called *The Sabbath* by Abraham Joshua Heschel. In this short work, Heschel reveals the power of Shabbat or holy time. He says, "Time and space are interrelated. To overlook either of them is to be partially blind. What we plead against is man's unconditional surrender to space, his enslavement of things. We must not forget that it is not a thing that lends significance to a moment; it is the moment that lends significance to

⁶ Mishnah Berakhot 4:5

things”⁷...All week long we are called upon to sanctify life through employing things of space.

On the Sabbath, we are invited to share in the holiness that is in the heart of time.”⁸

Shabbat is an opportunity that we have each week to leave our space dominated lives behind and to be *hineini*, fully present in the moment, connected with the eternal truths of time.

Think for a moment about a meaningful Shabbat experience. How did that experience allow you to leave your space filled lives of school, jobs, bills, projects, etc and move toward the eternal time of God where we spend time with family and friends and contemplate the most important things in life? Speaking from my own experience, it is not easy to leave our space filled lives and sanctify time. Humans are motivated by being productive, by subjugating space. There are, though, many ways we can help ourselves to reach the potential of sacred time.

Shabbat has always been an important part of Temple Akiba. This year, we are embarking on a new initiative to help us to enhance both our individual and communal Shabbat experiences. Think of the Shabbat experience at Temple Akiba as a box. Inside that box are all the things we do at Temple Akiba to experience Shabbat, to sanctify time and connect to the eternal truths that God reveals to us. Right now, these things include Friday night services, Saturday morning Torah study and B’nai Mitzvah celebrations. The Shabbat Initiative seeks to expand the Shabbat box at Temple Akiba to provide more ways to experience and enter into Shabbat, more ways to help us move away from space and into sacred time. One way we are planning to expand the Shabbat box as a part of the initiative is by having our first “Shabbat At Home” at the end of May. Experiencing Shabbat is not limited to this space. We can sanctify

⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 6.

⁸ Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 101.

time and feel a divine presence anywhere including our homes. That is why on May 31st, the lights at temple Akiba will be turned off and the lights in your homes will shine brightly. The event is meant to encourage as many members as possible to either host or attend a Shabbat dinner. If you are interested in hosting a Shabbat meal for fellow Temple Akiba members, please see me after the service and I will connect you to our Shabbat at Home chair Yvette Joffe. Over the course of January and February, I hope to speak to a cross section of Temple Akiba members to learn how you might dream of experiencing Shabbat so together we can enlarge the Shabbat box at Temple Akiba and all have an easier time disconnecting from our weekly spaces and sanctifying time in all places.

As one of my wise students said last Sunday, the Torah contains the ten commandments, and so it connects us to God. Just as the ten commandments are about to be received by the people of Israel, we read in Exodus, “On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone forth from the land of Egypt, on this very day, they entered the wilderness of Sinai.”⁹ About this verse of Torah, Heschel says, “Here was an expression that puzzled the ancient rabbis: on this day? It should have been said: on that day. This can only mean that the day of giving the Torah can never become past; that day is this day, every day.”¹⁰ When we sanctify time, we transcend space and continually experience the revelation of God’s eternal truths.

Two weeks ago, I was at Temple Beth Am for Shabbat evening services. Every other week Temple Beth Am has a special service called Shabbat Sovev, a musical service that happens a round. I love this service because it helps me disconnect from all of the spaces I

⁹ Exodus 19:1

¹⁰ Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 98.

occupy during the week and enter into the sacred time of Shabbat. Across from Temple Beth Am, on the other side of La Cienega, there is a large Christmas tree lot during the month of December. At night, the lot is lit up by an array of Christmas lights. When we stood up to pray the *Barchu* and faced east, we saw the ark, holding the Torahs within it. When we looked past the ark, through the windows, we could see the Christmas tree lot. After services, the rabbi joked, "I wonder how many people noticed that tonight we were actually bowing down to Christmas trees." I laughed, because I certainly had noticed. However, it did not matter one iota. My heart and soul were directed toward the prayers and the community. I felt connected to sacred time, this eternal gift of God. May we all overcome our fear of leaving our space filled lives. Specifically, may we work toward not being limited by them. Instead, may we all find inspiration by the potential of sacred time. When we sanctify time, we can move beyond the realm of space and build our own special connection to God.