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Congregation Beth Jacob, Redwood City, CA
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Rosh Hashana – Saying “*Hineini*” to Israel

How do you instill an ethos of *Hineini* – *Here I am*, to Israel? For many of us, we were born with it. We feel like Brandeis University sociologist Shulamit Reinharz, who writes: “My attachment to Israel feels like a strand of DNA – deep, immutable, fundamental.” That’s how it feels to me. Love of Israel was central to my Jewish education and formative moments in life. It is my heart – deep attachment based on prayers of our ancestors, historic connections, engaging in Israeli life and culture and politics. It is in my head - making sense to me intellectually – belief that we need a homeland and safe haven, that Israel is a thriving democracy that helps create a strong Jewish people and a better world. It fuses my heart and head as I strive partner in creating a state where Jewish values live.

My love of Israel is part of my daily life, so times when the situation in Israel is difficult, I feel it. These days are truly difficult and important times. We stand at a moment in history where Israel is increasingly isolated, facing the dangers of Arab spring in terms of overturning long-standing peace with influences from forces of fundamentalist Islam, a nuclear Iran, ongoing terrorism, and the recent UN call by Abbas for a Palestinian state. My *Hineini* says these are times which call for support and advocacy for Israel.

Yet I know there are those in the Jewish community who do not share the *Hineini* I so passionately profess, or who feel that *Hineini* to Israel should be expressed in different ways. We know that there are Jews who question Israel and some who have lost

their ability to say *Hineini* at all. While my *Hineini* is so basic and visceral, I know that this moment in our history calls upon us to look thoughtfully at the reality that the connection to Israel in our community is eroding.

For me, it all comes back to *Hineini*- creating an environment where voice is lifted in response to Israel, and we are present to each other in our different responses. I believe we need a concerted effort to share and teach about Israel - create deep and strong connections and activism. I believe that we have a sacred obligation to fund Birthright Israel which brings young people to Israel. Right now, half of the people who apply are put on the wait list. Nothing creates connection more powerfully than traveling to Israel – we need to make sure it happens for our young adult!

I also believe that we as a community need to be able to say *Hineini* to the breadth of opinions within community about Israel, especially with those with whom we disagree. Rather than marginalizing or vilifying, I believe it is time to embrace the integrity of those who question and are frustrated with Israel. I'm not talking about those who would delegitimize Israel as a Jewish state, I am talking about those who feel disconnected because they believe that Israel has not lived up to key moral imperatives that they see as essential. It is time to take stock when committed, knowledgeable members of our community, who live engaged Jewish lives are increasingly disaffected regarding Israel. Tzipi Livni, the head of the Kadima party writes, "If we are to encourage a common sense of belonging, there must be a place for responsible criticism, without it being seen as an act of betrayal."

The intense polarization in the Jewish community does not serve us well as we seek to create a large group of Jews engaged with Israel. That implicit message of "agree

with me or the world may fall apart” – be it from the right or to the left - has resulted in people feeling estranged, or communities consciously and unconsciously deciding to avoid the issue. We have to create a situation where there is an ability to nurture a nuanced, sophisticated relationship and to engage with different viewpoints thoughtfully.

I am repeating a call you have heard from me in the past few years – to create a broad tent of people who connect to Israel in different ways - encouraging a variety of voices to be recognized, and passionate discourse to flourish.

Can we possibly do this? It has not been the norm in most Jewish communities. I believe that we can and must. The alternative is small communities of like-minded people, frustrated that others don't share their point of view- with true activism thwarted, and broad connection to Israel never achieved. We have taken dramatic steps to deepen this work here at CBJ. A cohort of members reflecting a range of viewpoints about Israel has come together, working in partnership with the Jewish Community Relations Council, the Federation and Board of Rabbis to learn the skills necessary to create a community where we can engage and disagree passionately about Israel, without the anger, rancor, lecturing, judging and dismissing that often characterizes these discussions.

This cohort is learning and teaching that when we truly listen to those with whom we disagree, we find places of connection and even agreement with those we may previously dismissed or judged harshly. Saying “*Hineini,*” and truly listening to someone with whom we disagree doesn't mean we let go of our strongly held positions – it means that we seek to understand. It does not mean rejecting the person just with a softer voice or calm demeanor. We engage with each other - asking questions to clarify positions, exploring assumptions, seeking to understand rather than convince. By hearing

the values that underlie the position, even if we disagree, we have created connection so that precious relationship is preserved. Ultimately, we share our viewpoint in a more compelling way, because the respect afforded creates an opportunity to listen.

We haven't come to these lessons easily. As we practiced engaging with people whose opinions we passionately disagree, we found ourselves constantly triggered and reverting back to the modality of wanting to win the argument. We found ourselves heating up and by seeking to convince the person we were talking with to see that we are right and they are wrong. We tried to use their words to show that their logic proves us right. With some coaching, we saw that our attempts to convince, which usually got an angry response and in turn got us angry; never worked. We learned to listen differently, and gained the skills to defuse anger by acknowledging the emotion and integrity underlying the comment. We will share these lessons and skills at the study group on Yom Kippur.

As we sought to understand the reasoning and story of the person with different viewpoints we began to shift from a debate – win/lose orientation to a dialogue. We moved from anger and hurt to respect and connection. We began to see what those whom we passionately disagree have much to contribute to the discussion, and in fact may care about Israel as passionately as we do. We learned we could stand together.

The shift I am asking you to help create involves returning to Zionism's core. The essence of Zionism is to create a Jewish society where we ask: "What do we stand for? What do we contribute? How do our Jewish values play out in a modern state?" Zionism conceived of Israel as a country where Jewish values and aspirations were tested and lived under the most intense conditions. It is aspirational – demanding we face the

dilemmas of daily life in terms of competing values: How do we balance security and morality? Can we honor competing national claims? How can Israel be a secular state and a holy land? I believe it is these discussions and this type of engagement that will allow us to emerge with strength. The broader the discussion, the more thoughtful solutions will emerge.

As we create room for many people to say *Hineini*, what will emerge is an engaged community, where people respond to their unique interests and passions. My dream for the future of CBJ and the broader Jewish community is that we passionately educate and advocate for the vision and values we embrace. There will be a broad array of programs and activism. My hope is that through technology, travel and personal connection real relationships will grow, and an environment of *Hineini* will be self evident.

I believe that *Hineini – being present to another* becomes a prism where I analyze and respond to the political issues. Peace comes through those involved in the conflict sitting down face to face. My discomfort with the recent move by Abbas to approach the UN Security Council seeking statehood is that unilateral declarations move us away from the direct negotiations that are the only way to resolve this dispute. I understand that politics is theater, posturing, pressuring; but any step which pulls us away from the hard work of conflict resolution by the parties themselves is counterproductive. I worry about rhetoric that moves away from compromise and rejects the basic narrative of the person you are trying to come to agreement with. Particularly disturbing was Abbas' reference to the Christian and Moslem connection to the land, but not the Jewish. The only resolution will come when each side can understand the narrative of the other side.

While saying that a response of *Hineini* requires direct negotiations, I understand that the situation is in flux, and that American pressure and actions can help bring this goal to realization. For those of us who pray and work for a negotiated two-state agreement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the present challenge is to support efforts which will result in direct negotiations. The challenge for Prime Minister Netanyahu in these days is to find the elusive path back to the negotiating table, with bold courage necessary to make tough decisions in trying times.

I have no illusions about a speedy resolution to the complex reality of the Middle East, but I reject a dichotomy between despair which says all is hopeless; and naivete, which says that peace will come if only we will make certain concessions. I believe that the call of our time is to empower those willing and able to advance the two-state vision that will contribute to a more stable, secure and peaceful Middle East.

It's going to take a long time, but the foundation of coming together begins with relationship – with saying I am sure that if there is to be any resolution, that it begins with small steps of *Hineini* – *presence, connection, respect*.. Let me close with two stories of such efforts. Last year, we heard from a representative of the Hagar School in Beersheva, where Jewish and Arab children study together. The impact of programs like this are dramatic – skills are developed to listen to each other, seeds are planted for mutual respect and cooperation. Part of my tzedakah and contribution toward healing is financial support of organizations like Hagar.

This week's Sport's Illustrated had an article about the ability of sports to change entrenched conflicts. It points to the Peace Players International initiative in Israel where almost 6,000 kids have participated in a program that connects through soccer. The

program has Arab and Jewish children practice together and then combine into mixed teams with an Arab and Jewish coach. There is a curricula that helps the children understand why one side stigmatizes the other and how to change those attitudes. It's a tiny step – but it goes a long way when you realize that someone you thought was an enemy is a good teammate. Peace will come as we build the capacity to say *Hineini* one to the other.

I end today with a prayer from my heart:

May we together build a community where the response to Israel is *Hineini*. May our love and connection deepen every day.

May we stand with Israel during difficult times and engage with Israel regarding the sacred values that make her a Jewish state.

May we question her policies with humility and love, seeking to build a society of justice and compassion.

May we embrace those with different viewpoints from ours with respect.

May we create a community with vibrant connections to Israel.

May we work for peace and may we see the day when our dreams of tranquility come to fruition. To Israel, may we say *Hineini – Here I am*.