Dvar Torah, Minyan Tehillah

Yom Kippur 5773, September 2012

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We are about to begin Musaf, and embark on this service by listening to the hineni prayer of our hazzan.

In reflecting on this prayer, I’ve been remembering the occasions in my youth that my grandmother – my Baubie – joined my family for the High Holidays. She often expressed her disappointment when we reached the part of the service when hineni was chanted.

Although the shul in which I grew up hired a hazzan for the high holidays, it was a very simple shul, and the temporary hazzan was relatively unassuming in his style. My grandmother was disappointed because she missed the hazzanut in the synagogue where she had lived for much of her life, and where she had raised her family. There – she told me – the hazzan had a powerful presence. She used the language of theater to describe his recitation: He would begin to chant from the back of the large sanctuary, and would then proceed to march slowly down the aisle bedecked in flowing white robe, and in a large silky white hat. He would hold out his hands like this - my grandmother demonstrated –and chant with great fervor and emotion.

I myself have never been witness to such a dramatic performance of the hineni prayer. But even in the modest synagogue in which I grew up, and in this very down-to-earth minyan were I now daven, this part of the service still clearly stands out as a very special and unusual moment. Indeed, there is no such prayer like this in any of our liturgy, where members of the congregation focus their attention upon a single person, who pleads with Hashem in a most intimate voice, on his own behalf.

 What is the *hineni* prayer about? What is it doing here? And how might it inspire our own prayers?

Let me begin by speaking a bit about the prayer as a cultural anthropologist might. Let’s look at it as a powerful symbolic ritual that resonates with the experiences of the Jewish People many centuries ago.

The Yom Kippur Mussaf service is framed by two prayers: The hineni prayer at the beginning, and the “Mareh Kohen” poem towards the end. There is a powerful connection between these two points in the service.

Mussaf has the congregation recall the Yom Kippur service as it was enacted during the days when the Temple stood. At that time, Yom Kippur was the only day on which the Kohen Gadol would enter into the Holy of Holies. He alone was permitted to do so, and only on at this one point in the whole year. It was a powerful and dangerous moment – as he came as close to anyone could into direct contact with the Divine. To do so, the Kohen Gadol had to prepare himself to be sure that he was pure in thought and that he could totally concentrate on the holiness of his actions. For if he stumbled, he would not make it out of the Holy of Holies alive.

With stakes so high, it’s not difficult to imagine that prior to beginning this part of the service, he must have felt great fear and trepidation. Likewise, when he emerged, having completed his task successfully, he must have felt tremendous relief and exuberance.

Our service today – so many years from the time that the Temple stood – echoes this progression. Our hazzan who leads our prayer here is akin to the high priest. He begins with fear and trepidation. And we hope that when the service is over we - together with him - will feel that we had a connection to the Divine, and that our prayers were accepted. With relief and exultation, we will sing Mareh Kohen evoking images of the radiant High Priest upon completion of his worship.

So, the hineni prayer connects us to our most ancient traditions. But what is going on right now, here in this room? Since the hazzan is about to have our rapt attention momentarily, is it is worth considering why. What is his role here?

I must pause for a moment with a brief intrusion:

I am struggling with the gender pronoun here. So too, I struggle each year (both as a member of the congregation, and as a prayer leader) with the position of the woman as prayer-leader in our services here at Tehillah. Here, we have a woman and man lead the tefillah side-by-side. Yet, the hineni prayer is recited by the man alone. Over the years, I’ve been giving thought to this complicated and loaded issue. At this point, though, I fear it will distract us. So, for now I will leave simply leave the pronoun as “he” with the hopes to speak on gendered aspect of this topic at some other time.

In Ashkenazi synagogues, someone always stands before the congregation to lead services– whether it is for a holiday, Shabbat or an ordinary day. When the hazzan approaches the bima, he does not publicly reflect upon, or articulate what it is he is about to do. There is no need to explain or justify the purpose of his presence because the kahal seems to intuitively know and understand what he is doing there.

That said, I’d like to spend a moment unpacking the role of the prayer leader:

* The hazzan’s role is to keep the congregation together - so that we pray at the same pace, and when we sing, that we do so on the same key
* The hazzan carries our own prayers in the event that there are segments with which members of the kahal are not totally familiar, or stumble over.
* And finally, the tunes, the voice and the demeanor of the hazzan is meant to inspire our own prayer. We hope, in other words, that the person who is leading us in prayer can serve as a model and leader to help us set our own mood, concentration and intention.

I’d like to focus on this last aspect of the hazzan’s role. If he is to model for us members of the congregation how we are to direct our thoughts during prayer, it is useful for us to understand the nature of his own prayer. The hineni prayer actually spells this out for us. If we look at it closely, I think it can help us to gain insight into how we ourselves might pray.

Let’s first examine the structure of the hineni prayer. It is divided into three main parts:

In the opening segment, the hazzan introduces himself before God. In this introduction, he does not say his name, or the names of his forebears. He does not say what he does for a living, where he lives and or whether he is married or single. Here, before God at this moment all he is, is a person who is “poor in deeds, trembling and frightened.”

The hazan moves from this introduction to an explanation of what he is doing here. He has come before God, he explains, “to plead for the people.” But how can he presume to do this task given the fact that he has just presented himself as poor in deeds? I should note that he does not shy away from this characterization here. Indeed, he actually re-iterates that he is unworthy and unqualified to do so.

This quandary in which he finds himself (presenting himself as the prayer leader and simultaneously as unworthy of the task) leads to the third – and most substantial part of the prayer: Here, the hazan pleads that the Divine will overlook his flaws, and will assist him in his own efforts to help the congregation deliver a pure, beautiful, complete prayer.

I’d like to draw attention to two very odd contradictions here:

The first is the complicated nature of the relationship between the hazzan and the kahal.

The hazzan speaks in his own voice, in the singular and in a very personal and intimate way. Yet he does not presume to be standing before God on his own. He explains that the congregation has sent him, and he presents himself as standing before God as their messenger. He pleads, “Please do not hold them to blame for my sins and do not find them guilty of my iniquities.” This request is as if to say: *Don’t regard me for whom I am*. With this, he effaces his own individuality, presenting himself as a mere tool or a framework through which the congregation can achieve their prayers.

Yet, he does not lose himself. In just the next sentence, he requests: *Let them not be disgraced by me, and let me not be disgraced by them.* With this statement, he separates himself out, distancing himself from the same congregation that he has come to represent.

The other, related contradiction to which I’d like to draw attention brings me back to my grandmother’s description of the hineni prayer, with which I began this talk. I believe the tradition of the theatrical performance that she described, can be traced back to the work, “Matte Efraim.” (According to one source that I found on line, **מיכאל ריגלר**) this is the only halakhic work in which a discussion of the Hineni prayer can be found. The work, written by Efraim Margaliot and published in 1905, is a compendium of traditions and laws related to the High Holidays.

Offering a description of the *way* in which the hazzan should lead the hineni prayer, he writes, “He should be careful to say it with great intention [*kavana*], from the depths of his heart, and with much crying.” He then continues to describe a recent custom of hazzanim who would raise their voice at punctuated moments during the tefillah, “in order to stir the hearts” of those sitting in the congregation.

Perhaps it is not coincidence that from the same time that description was printed in Matte Efraim, we also have a description of a talented and influential composer and hazzan chanting the hineni prayer in a dramatic fashion. This portrayal of Joseph Altchul’s performance – set in early twentieth century Eastern Europe, resonates with my grandmother’s depiction of the hazzan in her synagogue in Chicago in the 1950s.

I paraphrase here from (Macy Nulman’s book, Encyclopedia of Jewish Music)

It is said that before he [Joseph Altchul] was to begin Musaf, his choir stood at the bimah, while he would wait alone at the entrance to the sanctuary. A choir member would sing out, “Where is the hazzan?” From the back of the room he would answer, “Hineni – Here I am.” Again, a choir member would sing out, “Why are you standing at the doorway?” To this, the hazzan would answer, “he-ani – I am poor.” The choir would then sing together, “Is he in need of money? And the hazzan would reply, “He’ani mima’as – I am poor in good deeds.” With this introduction, Altshul would then make his way up the aisle to the prayer desk while chanting the rest of the hineni prayer.

This is a very odd, tension-riddled performance. On the one hand, the hazzan professes to be poor in good deeds and a lowly sinner. He is trembling and he is frightened. Yet, he parades down the aisle of the sanctuary, bedecked in flowing garb, singing at his finest, drawing attention to himself in the way of a leading actor.

(It is very interesting, by the way, that if you have a look on youtube to see how many videos are up there of hazzaim performing this piece in concert).

I love this contradiction and all that it represents. If the hazzan is meant to serve as a leader for us in the congregation by modeling for us the intentions and manners of prayer, we may take important cues from his words and dispositions in this prayer. In essence, he shows that there is room in our service for approaching God in two very different ways at the same time – although they stand in contradiction to one another.

Yom Kippur is a time when we each of us comes before the Divine humbled and vulnerable. We are hungry and realize more than ever our dependence on food. We wear slippers, flip flops, canvas shoes rather than leather shoes, which are more substantial. Among other things, this is to remind ourselves that we are close to the ground and little separates us from the earth. Many have the custom not to wear jewelry, to help us recognize that we come before God stripped of our materialism. Bare. He’ani. Poor. In our prayers, we call out, “Our days are like passing shadows.” We are here now and gone in the blink of an eye.

As each of us sits here today, look around at the sea of 200 people amongst whom you sit. Imagine how many other congregations and Jewish people around the world are gathered together davening on this day. Now think of the whole of Jewish history. How many people have said the mussaf Yom Kippur prayer. Who are each of us really? Nothing, but fleeting specks.

And yet, this is not where the message ends. Perhaps I speak for others when I tell of my own experiences. It is very hard for me not to view myself as the leading actress in the world around me. And much more often than not, what I bring to my prayers are my own personal feelings. *My* experiences, *my* travails and *my* joys. I stand here and before God with my own self-interests, and my own strong individuality.

Indeed, our tradition also teaches us of the infinite value of each and every single person. “He who has saved a single soul, it is as if that person has saved a whole world.”

The beauty of the hineni prayer is that the hazzan models both for us. He reminds us that to come before God as a humble and lowly being on the one hand, but also as a strong individual actor on the other. Both aspects of the self must be present in the tefillah. The strong individual actor, as well as the creature of humility and lowliness.

The hineni prayer also models for us how we might pray in the individual voice as well as in the plural community voice. Just as the hazzan merges into the kahal, so we too pray and sing in the plural, joining with the other voices of our community and am yisrael. Yet, just as the hazan reverts to the singular in his prayer, separating himself from the kahal, so to we may think of our own selves, our private efforts, fears and hopes.

As our prayer leaders open the mussaf service with the hineni prayer, may we see their efforts as a model. May this model serve to help us embrace the many aspects of the tefillah, in such a way that will help us to all pray with a full and complete heart.