

**Your Presence is Requested – Rosh Hashanah 5780**  
**By Rabbi Eve Posen – September 30, 2019**

I want to try a quick exercise with you. I'm going to name a significant date in history, and I want you to think of where you were and what you were doing on that day. Try to recreate the scene in your mind with as much detail as possible.

*Ayeka (Where are you?):* For those over 70, where were you on D-Day? For those over 50, where were you when the Apollo 11 astronauts landed on the moon? For those of you over the age of 18, where were you on 9/11?

Early in the Torah, God asks a simple question to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God says "Ayeka?" Where are you? Well, we know where they are physically. Adam and Eve are in the Garden of Eden, and they have just broken the rules. They lost themselves in a moment of curiosity and adventure. They forgot the rules, and thus their safety, and it takes God to call them back into the present. So it's not just "Where are you?" It's "Where were you?" "Where was your mindset when this came to be?" And this question has resonated throughout generations.

Often we use location or movement-based language to describe emotional intent. Think about something as simple as saying "I'm going to do something." No, you're not actually going anywhere, that's simply how we show intent, with movement. "Where are you?" doesn't always mean I can't see you. Sometimes it means "Where is your focus?" or "Where are you in your life?"

The same goes for the response, the reassurance of "Here I am." "*Hineni.*" It's another concept that appears several times in the Torah, and it isn't necessarily referring to physical presence.

On Rosh Hashanah, when we read the terrifying tale of the *Akeda*, Abraham's answer to God and to his son, Isaac, is "*Hineni.*" Literally he's saying "Here I am," but this single word is more about Abraham being completely present for both God and for his son. He's present enough for God that he takes on this formidable task, and he's present enough for his son that he actually stops when the angel says stop. Whether it's "*Ayeka*" for Adam and Eve or the "*Hineni*" for Abraham, what does it mean to be aware of where you are? Of who you are?

When I was growing up, my family had a tradition of going out to a fancy dinner twice a year with all my aunts, uncles, and cousins to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, other milestones. My grandparents would plan it, and the restaurant they chose was called Opus One. It's not open anymore, but thirty years ago this was the premier restaurant in downtown Detroit. It had a maître d', fancy full-course meals, dimmed lights, and delicious steak.

I remember the first time I was old enough to join in on this fun night out. I can picture every detail. The dress I wore had puffy sleeves and flower print. I had socks with lace around the bottom and my fanciest patent leather shoes. I remember asking the waiter if they had A1

sauce to go with my steak. After dinner the waiter brought around a huge cart with samples of all the dessert offerings for us to choose from, and I remember seeing a chocolate mousse with large chunks of chocolate on the top and knowing I must have that “stuff in a cup,” whatever it was. To this day my family still calls chocolate mousse “stuff in a cup.” By the way, aren’t you glad this isn’t my Yom Kippur sermon?

The most vivid of all these moments was the trick my cousin and I pulled on my aunt. My Tanta was notorious for slipping off her shoes under the table wherever she went. After she took one of them off, my cousin Scott and I stole her shoe and passed it around the table. When she tried to get up to go to the bathroom, her shoe was nowhere to be found. She couldn’t go, she was stuck at the table. She looked everywhere and just about gave up until they brought out dessert, and under the silver cloche, there was her silk shoe. As if the shoe was saying, “Hineini – here I am!”

I happen to have an oddly accurate memory when it comes to day-to-day life, but this particular evening I remember down to the very last detail. I’d tell you to check my Facebook profile and look for the pictures to confirm, but this was in the early 1990s when there was no Facebook or selfie taking. We don’t have pictures of this moment, just my 8 or 9-year-old self being so fully present in that moment that I could savor each minute and hold the memory as a film in my own mind decades later.

Let’s go back quite a bit before that pre-Facebook night. In 1839, a dapper-looking Robert Cornelius set up his camera at the back of his dad’s gas lamp importing business in Philadelphia. He readied the camera, sprinted into the frame, and sat on a stool for a minute before returning to the camera. His reward for these few minutes of casual photography? The world’s first selfie.

From camera obscura to the digital camera, photography has come a long way. In the decades since its invention, it has helped shape both how we see the world and how we live in it.

The first photograph documented is from 1810, taken by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce. Using a camera he designed, he captured an image on a piece of paper that was coated in silver chloride.

Unfortunately, we don’t have the photographic evidence because the paper eventually darkened until the image disappeared altogether. From there, photography continued to grow and change, and thus was born a new method of visual story telling that used light and chemicals rather than paint and paintbrush.

Today, we’ve all become citizen archivists, and for better or worse our children and grandchildren will be able to see just how cute or hilarious or embarrassing any moment of their childhood was just by scrolling back through Google Drive.

Duncan and I are usually so quick to take out our phones to capture any given moment that it's fairly common for us to hear, "Mommy, take a picture of me!" We rush to record the school performances or that silly thing the three-year-old just said. And they really do become precious memories to look back on as the baby faces transform and mature into young adults. I've even been known to take a selfie or two. If it's a particularly great hair day or I'm in a beautiful location, I'm likely to take out the phone and snap a quick pic of me enjoying the moment.

But I'm curious, what does that mean for those special moments like the ones I remember so vividly? How does snapping a photo affect *Ayeka*? Can you fully answer *Hineini* if you're focused on the picture? There's no photograph that could have retold the shoe story with as much detail as I remember in my head. I suppose we could have had a video of the moment when Tanta's show was revealed on the serving platter, but then someone would've had to have been behind the camera, not fully enjoying the moment themselves. With each innovation of the camera lens, with the increasing ease of holding your memories through pictures and film, what happens to our brain's ability to connect and store information?

When you compare studies done in the last few years, there's some debate as to whether taking as many pictures as we do helps or harms our memories. Some research suggests that photography acts as a surrogate memory, meaning we actually remember less, while other experiments show that taking photos – or even just having a camera on-hand – means you remember more of what you see, but less of what you hear.

But carrying around expensive cameras with us every day doesn't just have these intangible, debatable effects. It also can have real and devastating physical consequences. Last year NPR did a study of news reports between October, 2011 and November, 2017, which concluded that in those six years there were 259 selfie deaths reported globally, with the highest occurrences in India followed by Russia, the United States, and Pakistan.

While 259 people dying over the course of six years is a pretty small percent of the planet's population and total deaths during that time, I still find this number to be absolutely mind-blowing. We're not talking about cancer or car accidents here. We're saying that 43 people died each year simply trying to take a picture of themselves. It is something our brains are already built to do: be present and remember. *Ayeka*?

Besides the life and death safety issue, which, again, is pretty rare but crazy that it happens at all, being present has other benefits. It's not just for us, it's for the people we're being present for. Rabbi Rachel Wiesenberg, a rabbinical colleague in Long Island, teaches that the gift of your attention is a precious one. And the choice to withhold this gift can have major repercussions in our relationships. *Hineini*

Similarly, Rabbi Brett Krichiver from Indianapolis writes, "When we miss the chance to be present with our closest loved ones, we may not notice the damage done until it is too late to repair. We may not notice the distance that begins to grow, the hurt born, hope lost. Our

distraction causes those we love to withdraw, the Divine presence that once lived in the space between us starts to fade.” Check in- when you’re with family- Ayeka? Can you respond Hineini?

A colleague, Rabbi Sue Fendrick reminded me of this teaching. The rabbis tell us in the Talmud in *Masekhet Sotah* that just as God is merciful and gracious to human beings through acts of kindness and generosity and caring, so are we called to be kind and generous and caring to each other. *Mah hu rahum v’hanun, af atah rahum v’hanun*. And I would suggest that our obligation to act in God’s ways extends to the act of presence, of being present. Just as God is ever-present to us, so may we be ever-present to each other, not because we’re trying to emulate God’s omnipresence, but because it’s part of our humanity. With all our imperfections, our struggles, our failings, giving our attention, our presence, is one of the greatest gifts we can offer. *Hineini*

Jewish tradition even commands that we be there for one another. We have determined that particular occasions or tasks require a a minyan, to proceed. For things like *Kaddish* and *Barchu*, we need 10. For a *beit din* or a *mezuman* at the beginning of *Birkat Ha-mazon*, three are required. For *havruta*, we just need two. *O havruta, o metuta*, the rabbis tell us. Either thoughtful partnership or death. In other words, connection equals life.

Being completely present is hard. With all the distractions in the way today, it is perhaps the hardest thing for any of us to do, to put other things aside and be present. We even have apps that remind us to be mindful. How strange is that – one of the causes of our daily distractions is also attempting to offer a solution. But as the gates begin to close, the challenge is one of both *Ayeka* and *Hineni*. Mindfulness means asking each other “where are you?” and being able to answer “here I am.”

I’d like to leave you with some words of poetry that beautifully illustrate what human to human presence means. The end of Marge Piercy’s poem “The Low Road,” provides a set of images of the various *minyanim* that can enable various gatherings and actions. Her words begin at the level of *havruta*, two people, and move towards an ever-widening definition of who we consider our “we”—a worthy challenge to us.

The Low Road by Marge Percy

*Two people can keep each other sane  
can give support, conviction,  
love, massage, hope, sex.  
Three people are a delegation  
a cell, a wedge.  
With four you can play games  
and start a collective.  
With six you can rent a whole house  
have pie for dinner with no seconds*

*and make your own music.  
Thirteen makes a circle,  
a hundred fill a hall.  
A thousand have solidarity  
and your own newsletter;  
ten thousand community  
and your own papers;  
a hundred thousand,  
a network of communities;  
a million our own world.  
It goes one at a time.  
It starts when you care to act.  
It starts when you do it again  
after they say no.  
It starts when you say we  
and know who you mean;  
and each day you mean  
one more.*

*Ayekah? Where are you?*