



"Final Humility"

Yom Kippur Sermon

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September 26, 2012/10 Tishrei, 5773

Each year, on Erev Yom Kippur, I stand at the back of the sanctuary and try to quiet my heart, which always seems to be pounding in my ears. It's a bit of excitement, and of course some nervousness, but for me there is another dimension of these services that raises my blood pressure. Thankfully, once I get through the first prayer, I start to feel a bit calmer.

At the open ark, the Cantor and I begin with the prayer called *Hineni*. Written by an anonymous medieval cantor, it is a statement of humility.

Hineni, Heh-ah-nee Me-mah-as - here I stand, empowered to lead this congregation in worship. I, like everyone, have flaws. Please don't blame this community for the places where I have missed the mark in word or in deed. Accept me as though I were exactly the leader this congregation needs at this moment. I pray I will rise to the occasion, but if I don't get there, I ask for God's compassion, understanding and forgiveness - and yours.

There, I said it. I acknowledged my limitations and asked for acceptance despite my imperfections. I can breathe a little more deeply. I feel my pulse return to a more stable rhythm.

Early on in my rabbinate I didn't like this prayer; it did little to calm the anxiety that comes with leading such an important service. I thought it was about kicking ourselves for our inadequacies. But now I understand that the true purpose of the *Hineni* prayer is for us to strip away our egos and acknowledge and remove our self-centered defenses so that we may stand, fully present before God and before each other. I have come to rely on this prayer because I believe that its theme, humility, is an essential dimension of forgiveness and repentance. We need humility today to do the work of Yom Kippur. Let me go further, we need humility everyday – it is an essential spiritual trait that is often absent in our lives and very much missing in our greater society.

Perhaps you might agree that humility is in too short supply in our world. Our culture's preference seems to be for those individuals who display strong egos and unbridled self-assurance. In high school and college, we get lessons in how to build a resume, how to sell ourselves and make ourselves seem great and important. These days one can blog or videotape oneself into an odd sort of prominence. 'Looking out for number one' is seen as the most sage advice and so



it's no surprise that it's hard to find very many people interested in humility.

While underrated in our culture, humility or *anavah* in Hebrew, it is a pre-eminent virtue in Jewish tradition. It is considered the character trait that sits at the foundation of all other attributes. Humility, according to our sages, leads to everything else: tolerance, honesty, responsibility, openness and much more.

As the New Year begins and we are asked to try once again to change for the better, I'm imagining how our world, our country, even our congregation would change if more of us embraced this quality. In my mind's eye I see greater acceptance, longer slower conversations, deeper friendships, fewer walls and more doors. There is more room for quiet and listening; there is a pace that leaves space for all to join in the journey.

Perhaps this is a far-flung dream – to ask our community to embrace a more humble stance. But maybe this hope resonates with you? Perhaps there are times when you feel that too many people see their needs and themselves at the center of the world.

I admit that just last month as I was beginning my preparation for this very sermon I came face to face with such a moment (although I was on the other-side of the story). There are a few perks that the clergy receive for working here – you know... these beautiful white robes, all the Kiddush wine we can drink and our most treasured perk – our parking spaces. After spending the morning in the library, I pulled into the little circle to find that someone was parked in my spot. The big lot appeared quite full but nonetheless my first thought was – *The nerve, what self-centered person would take my spot? I have an appointment and how could this person think his or her own needs were more important than mine.* Of course, looking back, I see my own conceit in this story. I had no idea why this individual had come to the Temple. Who was I to judge - not knowing their situation? I parked in another space and at the end of the day that car was gone. Of course I don't know what motivated that person to take my spot, an emergency, a self-important matter, they might have thought I was on vacation? But I find myself ashamed of my response. Just after studying the value of *anavah*, humility, I displayed the very arrogance of which I accused someone else.

I later came across a Talmud text makes an insightful connection to the problem of space and humility. Rabbi Chelbo says: *Kol Hakove'a makom l'tfilato* – Anyone who establishes a fixed or permanent place to pray in the synagogue, the God of Abraham, helps that person and when he or she dies, people will say: "this was a humble individual." Now you may wonder where the humility is in sitting in the same place

every time you pray in the synagogue. The answer is that by fixing yourself to one spot you free up all the other space for the rest of the congregation to use. A humble person knows her place and takes up only her rightful space, no more and no less.

There is great wisdom in this teaching. The exemplar of humility is not the one who stands at the back and makes himself invisible. The exemplar of humility is the one who claims a regular seat, thereby letting others know where he is and similarly, where he isn't. It is in taking his regular seat that he actually frees up every other seat in the room – making needed space for others. Surely this text applies to much more than the physical. It is a metaphor for all of the dimensions of our lives. Living each day with humility means occupying your rightful space - which is physical but which is also verbal or emotional- it may even be applied to the space in a parking lot.

Was there a time in the past year when you took up too much space – at a meeting, the dining room table, on the street - when you crossed the bounds of the dimensions God set for you?

Hineni, Heh-ah-nee Me-mah-as – here we stand, shoulder to shoulder with family, friends and even strangers. Allow us to fill the right amount of space today, leaving room for the prayers, the ideas, the feelings and the needs of others. Let none of us dominate this sacred place, let no one feel crowded out. May there always be a space for all who want to reside within this community.

Over the last few months, *anavah* - humility has been very much on my mind. I've been studying an increasingly popular Jewish spiritual practice called *Mussar*. Its goal is to help an individual to work on his or her own personal character traits or soul traits in order to bring out the sacred in life. There are so many of these character traits, called *middot*, to address – compassion, generosity, simplicity, truth, responsibility – but I find myself returning time and again to humility.

Perhaps this is because humility is one of those qualities that we can't easily define or prescribe but we definitely recognize it when we see it. Just think, for a moment, about the most humble person you know. (I mean a real person here.) He or she is likely not meek or self-effacing; he or she is likely confident and has many accomplishments. But, achievements and opinions don't define or dominate the experience we have with this person. Perhaps we sense modesty in their tone of voice; maybe they ask us about our ideas before launching into their own, maybe they readily admit to not having all the answers or experiences or facts. It feels good to be with

these people; if only there were more of them I imagine the tenor of our society would be different.

At a funeral this past year, a brother spoke beautifully about his deceased sister. She had numerous graduate degrees – I never knew. She wrote a book – I never knew. He said that she “never thought less of herself than anyone else did, she just thought about herself... less.” I felt I was getting closer to understanding humility.

When others look at us, what do they see, and what by our choice, do we keep within?

Hineni, Heh-ah-nee Me-mah-as – Here we stand, visible to many but entirely exposed to You O God. You know our achievements, You know our strengths, You know our limitations and our deepest hopes. Help us to choose modesty over pride so that all people feel comfortable in our presence and we, as well, in theirs.

A few weeks ago a very brave student asked me about my sermons. When I told her I was speaking on humility she said: “I know what that is! That’s like when you don’t brag about a good thing that has happened because you don’t want other people to feel bad.” Then I asked: “but then what happens to the good thing?” “Well,” she explained, “you can still enjoy it and think about it, but you keep it inside of yourself.”

An excellent answer for a young person but really its even a bit harder than that. Humility means you stop labeling your accomplishments. Your life’s assignment is to greet your neighbor, colleague or even a stranger with the assumption that they have a good thing inside of them that you are curious to discover, no matter who they are. Your narratives, your history, travels with you, but you have stopped worrying about your rank. Each person is unique and there is no need for comparison. Humility is the great equalizer.

Humility is the great equalizer. Wouldn’t it be a wonderful world if everyone walked on the same horizontal plane, level, equal, valued, available – humble?

Humility is the great equalizer and that understanding is critical not only to our actions in the outside world, but also to that which we are called to do today – Yom Kippur – to forgive, to atone and to change. It is nearly impossible to engage in true *teshuvah*, that unique Jewish journey of repentance, when we see ourselves as better, smarter, or even kinder than the person who seeks our forgiveness. Our arrogance is often the greatest barrier to finding wholeness and repairing relationships on this day.

I recently heard about a woman who was on her way out of town. At the airport she had bought herself a bag of cookies and sat down to wait for her plane. A few moments later, a man sat in the

next seat over. To her great surprise, he reached over and opened the bag of cookies that was sitting on the seat between them and ate one! Shocked – and not sure what to do – the woman reached in to the bag and took a cookie as well. The man took another and so did she... (still a bit baffled)... and on it went. When one cookie was left they reached into the bag at the same moment, bumping their hands, they both pulled away. The man offered this woman the last cookie (which she ate, of course.) Finally she boarded her plane. She settled into her seat and took out her book, and there in her purse she found... her unopened bag of cookies.

We are all imperfect. Humility teaches us that there is always the possibility that we are wrong. When I acknowledge that I am flawed, when I see that I have (hopefully unintentionally) caused another person harm in my words or deeds, I can better understand how someone else could (hopefully unintentionally) do the very same thing. Humbled by that realization, I meet that person - my spouse, my child, a friend - in our shared imperfect place. With the playing field even, without hills to climb, we find the ability to forgive not only one another but also ourselves.

Nurturing humility starts in the small private corners of our lives. Where we had previously been cut off from others by the armor of self-importance, humility puts our lives back into proper perspective. Where pride prevented us from feeling remorse and so from taking steps to improve ourselves, humility opens us to the possibility of our own growth. *Anavah*, this soul trait that sits at the foundation of all others, opens our hearts and enables us to embrace change, and change is the essence of this season.

Who is waiting for our apology and who for our forgiveness? Who is ready to meet us in our shared imperfect place?

Hineni, Heh-ah-nee Me-mah-as – here we stand before you O God, reciting this prayer of humility in one shared voice. Not our leaders alone, but all of us united in our desire to change ourselves and to change Your world. Empty us, Adonai, of the pride that has grown too full and keeps us from our obligation to right our own wrongs. Allow all us to see one another as equally valuable, equally loved friends – as one family doing Your will. Each of us is responsible for our own teshuvah. Help us to remember that without recriminations. Each of us is flawed, but all of us have the potential to change, to grow, to love and to heal. Humbly we ask for Your guidance on this Yom Kippur. Humbly we ask for forgiveness from You, from one another and from ourselves.

Amen