

Rabbi Steve Cohen
 Rosh Hashanah morning 5778
 Thursday, September 21, 2017
 Congregation B'nai B'rith, Santa Barbara CA

Long ago and far away, in the old world, before we crossed the sea to America, a Jew woke at sunrise to greet the day. It might have been a freezing cold morning in a small village in Romania. Or perhaps an already warm morning in Morocco, and quickly becoming hot. It was anywhere in the old world. The Jew woke and washed his face and hands, and began the early morning prayers.

First, a prayer thanking God for restoring his soul to his body.

Then, another giving thanks that his body was still functioning.

Next, a series of blessings tracking the slow but steady return of consciousness.

A blessing taking note of the crowing of the rooster.

Followed by others paying close attention to the simple acts of opening the eyes, of taking the first steps of the day, of getting dressed.

A blessing for each one of these moments, nothing taken for granted.

And then, every morning, still half asleep, the old world Jew would read, or recite by heart, a story. The story we just read, **the Binding of Isaac**. Every single day of his or her life, from early childhood until the day he or she died, the Jew began the day with this story.

This is an historical fact. In century after century, in every corner of the globe, Jews began every day of their life by reciting the story of the Binding of Isaac. What a strange and terrifying way to start the day! Here is the story, distilled down into a single sentence: God tells Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son and then at the very last moment says "Stop. Don't do it."

That's it!.....Have great day!!

What happens to a people who for one thousand years reads this story every morning, upon waking up, before starting their day? How does a story shape a people? How can a story change our life, even today, on Rosh Hashanah in Santa Barbara, California?

This morning I would like to consider the power of stories, and in the end, I would like to speak about this story, and about one single word at the heart of this story which has animated Jewish history for four thousand years.

My view is that stories and storytelling are fundamental to our existence as human beings. Each one of us needs strong, complex, deeply true stories to survive and to thrive, just as surely as we need food and water. For most of the 100,000 years of human evolution, we homo sapiens have gathered in our families under the shade of a tree, or around the fire, and told each other old stories. Myths and legends. Folk tales and fairy tales. For tens of thousands of years. We walked together out of Africa, across Europe, across Asia. And as we walked we told each other stories. At the end of every day, we put our children to bed, and told them stories.

Our stories connected us to each other, to our ancestors, to our own sub-conscious mind and to the divine. Human beings, all of us, are storytellers and story lovers. Storytelling must be embedded in our human DNA.

In our particular case, the Jews, the stories of the Torah—Adam and Eve, Noah and the Flood, Joseph and his brothers, Jacob's Dream, Moses in the bulrushes and perhaps most shockingly and most fundamentally, Abraham and the Binding of Isaac --these stories held us

together as a people, across the centuries as we spread out across the continents. Everywhere we went, we told these stories. We passed them down to our children and grandchildren. They were our treasure, our heritage, our shared language and our eternal source of meaning.

In every generation, our own physical bodies eventually grew old and died. But our stories remained vibrantly alive. Our stories lived forever.

But then we came to America, where the technology and commerce of modern life have shattered the traditional rhythms of Jewish life. We no longer begin our day with prayer or with story. The first hours of our day, in fact all the hours of our days, are consumed by email and smartphones, by Facebook and by television. What has become of our stories?

We are story-starved, desperately hungry for old stories, homegrown stories, sweet and spicy, even bitter stories. Stories that rise up from the depths of the human soul, rich with mystery and ambiguity, resonant with unanswered questions and the strivings of the human spirit. This is our hunger. The vast majority of stories offered by popular American culture are the literary equivalent of Twinkies, processed potato chips, and candy bars. Narrative junk food is everywhere we turn. Reality TV. Simplistic, formulaic movies created for the sole purpose of making money.

Now let me be clear, I watch junk TV every day at the gym! I'm happy to watch Law and Order, or NCIS, or Friends, or whatever installment of Rambo or Rocky or Iron Man or Bourne or the Matrix happens to be on the movie channel. I enjoy them....but I also enjoy candy bars. Ask anyone who knows me!

We consume all this junk because we are starving for meaningful stories...but they fill us with empty calories. They do not satisfy our spiritual hunger.

I wonder whether this spiritual hunger might partly explain why our national political discourse has become so shallow, so empty, and so angry. Starved for meaning and nourishment, we snarl and snap at each other. Our physical bellies are full, but a deeper hunger makes us miserable.

In this time of famine, I think that here at Congregation Bnai Brith, we can feed each other. We do feed each other, in Mashey Bernstein's short story group, in our Netivot classes, in the many book groups around town (at least the ones where they actually talk about books!), and especially in our Shabbat Torah study, we are diving down into the old stories of our people, stories that some of us have been reading together for thirty years. And the stories bind us together.

We are Jews. We know the spiritual power of story. This year at CBB, we are stepping up our efforts to provide alternatives to the American narrative junk food diet. This will be "the Year of the Story." We will come together here in this building and in each other's homes, to tell stories. The old stories of our people. And the stories of our own lives. Watch for details.

We need everyone. Women and men and children. Jew and non-Jew. Cynic and mystic. Socialist and capitalist. Buddhist and orthodox Jew and non-believer. Zionist and anti-Zionist. We need your voice, your memories, your imagination. This is spiritual work, but we do not care whether you believe in God. Even completely non-religious people become connected to each other, and to the community and to the Jewish past when they begin to read and to tell our stories.

Which brings me back to Abraham, and our story this morning. One could dive deep, deep down and study the Binding of Isaac for an entire lifetime and never touch bottom. The story is shrouded in mystery, yet every word pulsates with meaning.

This morning, let us take just one word. Abraham's response when God calls to him: *Hineini*. Here I am. Abraham speaks the same word two more times, as the story unfolds. Each time, in the face of overwhelming pressure, Abraham holds his ground and declares: *Hineini*, Here I am. In a completely different story, Moses speaks exactly the same word when God calls to him out of the burning bush. *Hineini*, Here I am.

By contrast, when the charismatic but reluctant prophet Jonah is called by God, he flees from the presence of God. Jonah boards a ship bound for a distant land, and descends into the dark hold of the ship, where he falls fast asleep. Rabbi Elijah the Gaon of Vilna, in the 18th century, said about the story of Jonah, "everyone flees from God's presence; we are all reluctant to stand before Him." This is precisely Abraham's greatness. Tempted to flee just as much as any of us, Abraham stands fast and says *Hineini*, *Here I am*.

I believe it was for the sake of this single word that our ancestors chose to recite this story every day at dawn. This story and this word *Hineini* define the Jewish response to the human condition. What does it mean, in our own day and age, to hold our ground, to stand in God's presence and to say "*Hineini*, *Here I am*"?

To say "*Hineini*, *Here I am*" means to identify proudly as a Jew, even in a time when neo-Nazis have stepped out of the shadows.

To say "*Hineini*, *Here I am*" means to speak only the truth, when the truth has been degraded.

To say "*Hineini*, *Here I am*" means to stand in defense of the most vulnerable among us: the poor, the sick, the undocumented, the refugee.

To say "*Hineini*, *Here I am*," means to listen, to remain fully present and open, to people who see the world differently than we do. Including our political adversaries.

To say "*Hineini*, *Here I am*" means to resist bigotry and hatred—both the hatred that marches in the streets and the quieter hatreds in our own hearts.

Furthermore, to say "*Hineini*, *Here I am*" means to stop rushing. To take the time to nurture our relationships, with our family, with our friends, and also with the lonely person at the edge of the room, out on the periphery of our vision.

Finally, to say "*Hineini*, *Here I am*" means to embrace silence, to carve out a space for holiness, and for the divine presence that comes to dwell in our midst.

All of this is much easier said than done. As the Gaon of Vilna observed "we all flee from the presence of God." But to be a descendent of Abraham means to read his story with every fibre of our being. A descendent of Abraham must rise up early in the morning, and declare "*Hineini*, *Here I am*."

As we begin this New Year, let us strengthen one another as we each speak our own *Hineini*.

Let us feed each other with stories.

Let us declare unkosher the narrative junk food that leaves us starved for meaning. Let our congregation become a farmers' market of homegrown, organic, heirloom stories. Stories

grown from the dark rich soil of truth. Stories born in grief and in hope. Stories we heard from our grandparents, and stories we might tell our children.

Let us learn to listen to each other, with love and compassion.

Let us learn once again to begin each day with a story.

A story to fortify us, and prepare us to face the day.

In this New Year, may we each hear the voice of God, calling to us at dawn.

And this year may we answer, "*Hineini, Here I am.*"

L'shanah tova.