

From AYEKA to HINEINI!
All Saints Church Pasadena
By Rabbi Heather Miller
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Thank you so much for inviting me to share some words with you today during the holy season of Lent, where I understand that Christians around the world are deeply engaging in introspection. We have a season for heightened introspection in Judaism, as well. It is called Elul, and it comes just before the Hebrew Calendar new year.

At introspective times like these, sometimes we hold up the mirror and look at ourselves— and we barely recognize our own face. We harshly judge ourselves and wonder, “My God! What have I become?” There can be great shame in those moments. But it is important to remember that shame will not move us to where we need to be. It will just serve to have us freeze in place. We must resist the urge to shame or belittle ourselves or crawl under a rock at those times. We are still made in the image of God, and salvation is possible.

Here’s a 2,000 year old story from the Talmud that conveys this point:

Once upon a time, a newly ordained rabbi was riding a donkey back home. As he was passing by the shore of a lake, he encountered an exceedingly ugly man. And, he said to the man, “MY! What an UGLY MAN you are!!?!?!” Without skipping a beat, the man replied, “Why don’t you tell my Creator what an ugly creation He made!”

Now, you can read this story as a newly minted rabbi being epically checked by a random passerby. And that story would hold weight— sharing the values that we should not judge a person by their looks, and we should not embarrass another person. A person should not denigrate another human being.

But, you can also look at this story from another angle.

What if there was never really another person at all. What if, instead, the rabbi was looking down at the lake he was riding alongside, and he caught his own reflection in the water. He reflected upon his own unworthiness to receive the honor of ordination, and he exclaimed, “My! What an Ugly Man you are?!?!?”

Fortunately, the reply, perhaps from heaven, was, “Wait a minute!!! You are a creation of me, God!” At that moment he realized, wait a minute, what good will it do if I berate myself in this moment?

At that moment, it became clear to him that he would need to both hold space for the harshness within him as well as the holiness within him.

900 years ago, Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, of Spain, told us that we should not regard ourselves as more good or more bad, but rather *beinoni*/somewhere in-between. And, for that matter, the whole world is *beinoni*/ somewhere in-between.

At any given time, it is true that everyone has done good deeds and everyone needs a bit of fine tuning. Our actions have the power to tip the scales one way or another. What we do matters profoundly.

Jewish tradition tells us that everyone has a Yetzer HaTov and Yetzer HaRa— an inclination toward goodness and an inclination toward evil. Like those cartoons with a little angel and devil on our shoulders. Religious reflection provides us with the opportunity to interrupt our behaviors, to take an accounting of our souls.

To stop the script that is in progress and contemplate: am I feeling the strength of my inclination toward goodness or my inclination toward evil in this moment?

How can I strengthen my actions through good intentions to fulfill my highest values?

This season, we are all looking to answer the question posed in this week's lectionary reading, in Genesis chapter 3 verse 9. The Hebrew word is: *AYEKA*. *Ayeka*— it means "where are you?" It is an invitation to reflect upon where you are in your life. Not just where you physically are situated. But where you are spiritually? Bending toward your inclination for goodness? Or evil? And, that is indeed what God is asking of Adam with this one word. "Adam, *AYEKA*?" Where are you?

Remember Adam was the one that God formed from the *adamah*— the red earth— and breathed life into? The one who was created *b'tzelem Elohim*/ In the Image of God, male and female, God created Adam. Adam was this beautiful creature. And God placed Adam in this beautiful and idyllic Garden of Eden.

Then, in Genesis 2 verses 16 and 17, God told Adam that he could eat of any of the trees in the garden, but he may not eat of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil, or else he will immediately die. This was the first command in the Bible. But Eve had not yet been created. When when she was finally formed by separating her from Adam, now, it was up to Adam to relay the prohibition. So, what did he tell her?

Here's where it gets interesting: a rabbinic commentator known as Rashi, 1,000 years ago in France realizes that Adam must have expanded this prohibition when he relayed it to Eve. How do we know this? Because Genesis 3 verses 2 and 3 tell us that she understood the rule more expansively than what he was told before her creation. She thought that not only were they not supposed to EAT of the tree, but they were also not supposed to TOUCH it either. The Midrash Rabbah relays that all the cunning snake had to do was push her into the tree, which he did.

When she touched it and didn't die, naturally she reasoned that there must have been a mistake. Maybe this tree was a different tree than the prohibited tree? Maybe the prohibition had expired? Maybe the warning was misunderstood? So, why NOT eat of the tree? And why NOT share it with Adam? After that incident, God came looking for Adam like any good parent, seeking first to understand.

To Adam, God said, “Ayeka?” “Where ARE you?” As if to say, “Take a moment of reflection, What happened here? Why did you feel the need to relay an expanded version of my prohibition to Eve? Why did you set her up for failure? And, why did YOU eat of the tree?”

Now, here is where Adam could have used this moment of reflection. A moment to consider what went wrong. To reckon with the fact that he let his *Yetzer HaRa* / his evil inclination get the best of him.

That he didn’t have faith in Eve’s ability to hear his warning. That he wanted to dominate and control her behavior. That he enjoyed the thrill of power over her and speaking for God. And that he was wrong for doing that. This reflection would have prompted repentance and return to relationship.

But, instead, he allowed his *Yetzer HaRa* to continue to dictate his life choices. He listened to that little devil on his shoulder, and he hastily replied in Genesis 3:12, “The woman whom you gave to stand with me, she gave me fruit from the Tree, and I ate!”

I can only imagine what the omniscient power that is God felt in this moment— I know I want to grill Adam with a different kind of *Ayeka*. More like: what are you doing, man?!— Where are you?! God’s creation is now unrecognizable.

And that is why God expelled them from the Garden. The answer to the word *Ayeka* “Where are you?” Should always be met with the Hebrew word— *Hineini!* “Here I am!” *Ayeka* is a call to pause and reflect. To wake up and ask “what AM I doing?”

The Hebrew word *Hineini* indicates that a person is showing up with the fullness of who they are to respond. To be spiritually present. *Ayeka? Hineini!*

In those moments when we have missed the mark, and no longer recognize our actions as being reflections of the values that we espouse, it is time to show up. To proclaim: *Hineini!* Here I am. Ready to do the hard work of introspection. To search out: What went wrong? What led to that mishap? How can I repair it? And how can I prevent it from happening again?

Proclaiming *Hineini* means we are showing up with our sleeves rolled up. Ready to do the work to redeem the situation. And that is what religious introspection is about. It is not about self-flagellation. It is about repair.

Hineini is what Abraham and Moses responded when God called them. And because they were able to be present in the Presence of God, they were able to humbly do the work required of them. When you show up to heed God’s call, you give yourself the chance to fulfill your purpose.

And this works on an institutional level, too. During this Women’s History Month, we are called first to ask “*Ayeka?* Where are we in our work to ensure gender equity in the world?” We ask: how do we assess where we are? How do we do an accounting of the current state of affairs? Then, how do we identify what areas we need to work on? And how do we embrace that

kind of feedback to enter into a creative process of communal problem-solving? Finally, how do we implement change to lead to greater fulfillment of the vision we have for gender equity?

This task of attaining equity is not easy. And the work is never truly done. Every year, you will have the period of Lent, every year we will have the month of Elul. Reflection and working to fulfill the best of who we can be will always be a useful practice. So, how do we get motivated to do the work?

First we can remember the stern warning that if we keep going on a path that veers away from our values (in this case, of gender equity), eventually we will become unrecognizable to even ourselves. But, there is also something immensely valuable to gain if we only do the work to get there.

In the lectionary she prepared for Lent, The Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney paired the Genesis reading with Psalm 96. This Psalm is a beautiful vision of what the world could be if we all learned to dance to the beat of a different drum and if we each learn to lift our collective voices to sing a new tune. Psalm 96 begins: *Shiru L'Adonai Shir Chadash, Shiru L'Adonai, Kol ha'arets*. Sing to the Exalted a new song. Sing to the Creator all the earth.

If we can sing a new song, together, lifting up all of our voices in splendid harmony together, we can achieve salvation.

But, that's what I love about All Saints Church of Pasadena. You know this to be true. You are a deeply introspective community who looks to include and validate the full array of God's humanity. Though it isn't easy, may you again this year answer the call of *Ayeka* with *Hineni*! AMEN!