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**Chag
Sameach!**

Here I am- Signed, Sealed Delivered—I'm Yours

By Rabbi Uri Gordon

Much has been written about how within the word "*Hineni*", one discerns the steadfast commitment of the one obliging him/herself to the Call. No less in the discussion over reasons for the commandments, many suggest that obedience in response to a reason offered is actually a wisp less of a commitment; one who is truly committed trusts the command, and its source - no reasons asked.

Abraham, Esau, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Moses are all recorded in the Torah to have at least once uttered "*Hineini*" – "here I am", to the call, be it from God, an angel, a child, or a parent. Interestingly, whenever it is in response to God's call, God is referred to as "*Elokim*", usually understood by our sages to reflect the God of law, He of objectivity, perfection and of infinite power. This, as if to underscore that responding obediently is in and of itself a statement of fortitude and of full acceptance of God's will.

Moreover, all such responses appear at the beginning of the interaction, when the respondent has no context for the call, and has no idea what will be asked of him.

Not so, Joseph. Jacob had just admonished him for sharing bizarre dreams reflecting Joseph's lordship over his siblings and parents. In the course of just eleven verses we witness seething hatred and envy directed at Joseph by his brothers, a response to a seemingly oblivious Joseph tattling and teasing, provoking and patronizing them. And memories are not short; Scripture deliberately records how the grudge was maintained, and how the jealousy infected his brothers.

And lo and behold, Jacob, witness to all the sibling strife and enmity directed at Joseph, decides to tell his son something to the effect of "Joseph, I know your brothers hate you. By the way, they have gone traveling on a business trip; why don't I send you to them - go". And to this, we hear only one word, the last word any family member of his will hear for twenty-two years, "*Hineni*" – here I am.

Joseph's response is not a cheery response to an initiation of a conversation; it is a closing reply to a sentence of misery. Yes, this may have been God's plan to found a nation in Egypt, ultimately redeeming them and bringing them to Sinai. But to believe that Joseph believed this? Indeed he would have had to be a dreamer in defense against his deepest anguish to go along with the fateful turns his life was about to take..

More likely, Joseph – or Joseph the Tzaddik as he is known in Rabbinic literature – was not secure in the knowledge that this was the beginning of the fulfillment of his dreams. If anything, coming on the heels of the rage and jealousy it stirred up, he may well have experienced it as a humbling reorientation to reality, perhaps a punishment for haughty musings.

So what do we now make of his "*Hineni*"?

Joseph's response of thorough commitment to the call, especially after hearing full well what the call entailed, is in sharp contrast to Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac, or Moses at the burning bush. They knew not at all what they were being asked to do. Joseph knew everything in advance.

And this is his distinguishing characteristic. Joseph affirmed a fidelity to his father's wishes, not because of them, but despite them. He heeded his father's directive, but on a much deeper level than that of the mere "Yes, sir". Joseph embodies in this singular experience an abiding faith in reason over the absurd, in adherence to principle over abandonment to wicked fate. He conveys the message that tzedek/justice, his identity in our literature, emanates not from the goals one seeks, but from the foundation of belief one holds fast to and most dear.

Joseph's "*Hineni*" is a triumph of commitment to a principle over a capitulation to panic and dissolution of belief in a system and moral code of life.

May we be so inspired.

Rabbi Uri Gordon is the past Director of Edah's The Jewish Teacher Corps, as well as former Chairman of the Talmud Department at the Ramaz Upper School. He presently serves as both Program Officer and Fellowship Director for Legacy Heritage Programming, LLC.

Menorah Yes, Creche No

By Dr. Tzvee Zahavy

Like handshakes and holiday greetings -- seasonal trees and lamps can represent religion on a surface level. Nativity scenes and Torah Scrolls, however, always symbolize faith in a more serious manner.

So says the U.S. Supreme Court in a classic decision in 1989 that allowed some displays of religious symbols on government property while prohibiting others. At that time many expressed dismay over the ruling. Conservative Roman Catholic scholar Michael Novak, for instance, argued that the ruling represented a governmental aversion to religion, that the court was saying that, "The religiousness of Jews and Christians is to be shunned as if it were an infectious disease."

Novak believed the court incorrectly differentiated the scene of the Christmas Nativity, which it prohibited on public grounds, from the display of a Hanukkah menorah, which the Court allowed, in its two decisions pertaining to cases that originated in Pittsburgh, PA. His opinion suggested that religious scenes or symbols should be permitted for display on public property regardless of the nature of the religious message they convey, and notwithstanding whether members of a religious group have evangelizing designs for supporting the display.

The Court, however, clearly and correctly based its discriminating reasoning in the two separate decisions on much more sophisticated factors. Government sponsorship of a creche was wrong in Pittsburgh because its context was purely religious, "unadorned by more secular symbols of the Christmas season," said Justice Blackmun.

Novak surely understood that the nativity scene is a representation of the birth of Jesus, indisputably one of the central religious narratives of Christianity. That scene is unambiguous. With no alternative meaning, it conveys and imparts one religious message. The Court's decision to bar such displays on government land made sense on constitutional first amendment grounds. It took the judges only eight lines to explain this unequivocal display. Novak cynically referred in his criticism of the decision to the "four long pages full of footnotes" in the court's opinion describing the meaning of the menorah.

I have always been certain that the rationale to permit the display of an eighteen foot high menorah a few blocks away from the creche, and to differentiate so clearly and extensively between religious symbols, is absolutely justified for three reasons.

First, the menorah is not a central symbol of Judaism. If the city of Pittsburgh had allowed Jews to display a Torah scroll on public space that would have been more analogous to the creche exhibit. The Torah is central to the theology and practice of all forms of Judaism.

Hanukkah, however, is a minor holiday in the Jewish calendar that celebrates the victory of Hasmonean priests over Hellenizing Jews in the second century BCE. The menorah, traditionally an oil lamp,

reminds Jews of a miracle of the rededication of the Temple. When the ancient priests had defeated their enemies they found only enough untainted oil to light the candelabrum for one day. Yet it lasted for eight days, now symbolized in the lights of the menorah. Jewish theologians acknowledge the importance of this event, but have always emphasized the subordinate position in Judaism of Hanukkah to other festivals such as Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Sukkot and Passover.

Second, the Creche has one dominant Christian theological meaning. The menorah is a multivalent symbol. It has historic meaning for Jews and seasonal significance for all people. We light lights on menorahs, Christmas trees, and throughout our towns and cities to symbolize our hopes for redemption and restoration in the season of our shortest days and most enduring darkness, around the time of the Winter solstice.

Third, context is crucial in the determination of whether presentation of religious symbols comprises state sponsorship of religion. The city of Pittsburgh set up a menorah, together with a Christmas tree and a sign saluting liberty, as a clear demonstration of one of the great values of our society -- the acceptance of all religions, working together cooperatively for the public good.

As part of a symbolic embodiment of pluralism we all ought to applaud the public sponsorship and display of certain religious symbols. But objecting on valid grounds to the display of some images -- like the creche -- is by no means tantamount to what Novak calls taking "away our grounding in the Jewish and Christian belief that there is a creator, who made us in his image and gave us inalienable rights."

I have always been disappointed that conservative critics such as Novak allow their religious fervor to distort and blur their ability to see important, if subtle, distinctions in the delicate matter of government sponsorship of various types of religious displays.

Now the blurring of the debate about religious symbolism has worsened. Regarding a pronounced semantic trend this year, House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert said, "To rename a Christmas tree as a holiday tree is as offensive as renaming a Jewish menorah a candlestick".

Mr. Hastert does not understand much about the words we use for our symbols. Menorah means "lamp" usually an oil lamp. In Modern Hebrew it also means "flashlight". And calling a tree a "Holiday tree" does not officially "rename" it.

Clearly, we can't account for what offends people's sensitivities. We can however say that under the microscope of proper legal analysis, yes, because of their seasonal meanings, the Lamp and the Holiday Tree should be afforded a prominent place in the public square. And no, because of its theological essence, the crèche should not be allowed to occupy such a venue.

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