

Hineini: Crossing the Line and Taking a Stand

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Do you know what a “stolperstein” is? Well, neither did I until this past summer’s congregational journey to eastern Europe. In many places we came across simple brass plaques, about 4 inches square, placed neatly in the pavement in front of a store or residence on which are inscribed, “Here lived” followed by the name, date, and place of death of a Jewish person or family during the Holocaust. This project, begun in 1993 by the German artist Gunter Demnig has placed over 25,000 such plaques in 569 cities and towns across Europe. These plaques, are called Stolpersteins which in an ironic twist on the biblical injunction to “not place a stumbling block before the blind,” is the German word for “stumbling block”. They are intended to do just that: make those who might be blind to stumble upon the reality of those that were taken from these places and murdered.

While we are instructed in Leviticus *not* to place a stumbling block before the blind, in reality, our tradition places many ‘stolpersteins’ in our way. The High Holy Days, for instance, are meant to be one gigantic stumbling block that we might open our eyes to lives we have been walking through blindly. Which is why we begin this morning with:

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהָאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי:

“And it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, calling out to him, “Avraham!” And he responded, “הִנְנִי” (Here I am)

Wow, talk about a stolperstein! With these words, the complex and challenging story of the Binding of Isaac ushers us into the New Year. What makes this story especially eye opening is not just God’s remarkable request but Abraham’s equally amazing response: הִנְנִי . הִנְנִי, There is no English equivalent that really captures the meaning of this word. It’s plain meaning is, “Here I am.” But it is so much more than an expression of physical

presence, it is also a confirmation of emotional and spiritual readiness. Abraham's willingness, his readiness, trips us up. We can do no other than open our eyes and mind wide in an attempt to understand what is going on here.

Rabbi Aryeh Cohen, Associate Professor of Rabbinic Literature at the American Jewish University, has written of **הַנְּגִי** that it, "is the moment of crossing the line, of making the decision, of claiming the path. **הַנְּגִי** is that moment of response to a situation in the world, to the cry of another person. There are many reasons to ignore the cry. There is only one reason not to: the clear knowledge that it is for this reason that you're here, that responding to that cry is part of what it means to be a person created in the image of God." Simply put, **הַנְּגִי** is the response of one fully awake, eyes, heart and soul wide open.

This morning I want to introduce you to five remarkable individuals we met on our European journey who have "crossed the line" and responded **הַנְּגִי**, stating that the reason they are here is to serve as witnesses to *our story* - a story that might, otherwise be forgotten. In doing so, these five became my "stolpersteins."

A story that might, otherwise be forgotten. Think about that for a moment. What a strange thing to say. "How is it possible," you might wonder, as did I, surrounded by memorials and standing literally on the graves of millions, "that one could possibly forget?" Suffice it to say that 40 years of memory manipulation inflicted as part of the communist rule that followed on the heels of the Nazi terror has not been without great consequence. In their expressed attempt to dictate uniformity among the masses and filled with plenty of anti-Semitism of their own, the atrocities against our 6 million was transformed into atrocities against ~~fallen comrades~~.

And so in both Warsaw and Krakow, for instance, while many memorials to the Holocaust have been erected since the fall of the Iron Curtain, there are also many people who still harbor deep seated anti-Jewish sentiment ingrained in the people by centuries of anti-Semitic indoctrination by the Polish Catholic Church which is, believe it

or not, just in recent times beginning to acknowledge their role in the horrors of the Holocaust. When I asked Waclaw, our guide, about this contradiction between the civic memorials and individual ignorance he said that the average Pole just doesn't know. Most Poles, he noted, give these monuments no more than a passing thought. "They are for others," he said. "They see no personal connection to them" After all, most Poles today have never met a Jew. Almost the entire Jewish population, about 3,200, lives in Warsaw, a city of 1.7 million. This is a far cry, to be sure, from the pre-War years where fully *one out of every three citizens* of Warsaw, 350,000+, was Jewish. Add to this few visit Auschwitz and neither the Holocaust nor anything of the magnificent history of Polish Jewry is taught in schools.

All of this made even more remarkable our encounter of individuals willing to stand up and say *הִנְנִי* "Here I am, "making the decision" to serve as witness to that which must be remembered." There was first and foremost the aforementioned, Waclaw, our tour guide through Poland, a wonderful, knowledgeable Catholic man with a true love for the Jewish people and a passion for teaching about the Jewish community. He calls out *הִנְנִי* with great fervor. When others ask, "Why do you want to be with *those* people?" I assure you he is not shy about telling them *why* it is important to be with and learn about *those* people.

Then there was Wojciech ("Voychik") our guide through Auschwitz. His father, a local Catholic teen at the time of the German invasion, was immediately arrested as an insurgent and sent to Auschwitz where his German language skills and an extraordinary amount of luck kept him alive *for over five years* in a place where the average life span was no more than a few weeks. After the war, he bore witness as an Auschwitz guide. Voychik has followed in his father's footsteps, responding *הִנְנִי* as well as he witnesses to a new generation about the nightmare which must never be forgotten.

On our final night in Krakow we met Aga, a mid-twenties doctoral student in *Holocaust Studies*. "Why?" I asked this young, Catholic woman, "would she choose to devote her life to Holocaust Studies?" Aga related how she had first learned about the Holocaust in

a University class. She was shocked that she had reached this stage of her education before ever knowing anything about this part of Polish history. “How was that possible,” she asked? Aga is devoting her life to making sure that Jewish life and memory is revived in Poland. She is committed to making the Shoah a regular part of the school curriculum. She even expressed the hope that perhaps, someday; the Jewish people would be willing to return to Poland, not as visitors, but to rebuild a vibrant Jewish community. Not something, frankly, that I can imagine happening any time soon. But to be sure, our history has been filled with more surprising and unexpected twists and turns.

Three extraordinary individuals, three *Catholics* nonetheless, three small sparks each spreading sacred light in their willingness to call out **הַנִּי**.

In Budapest we met Anni, a Jewish bundle of amazing passion and energy. For two whirlwind days we tried to keep up with her as she revealed to us at every turn the hidden Jewish history of Budapest. But, she saved the best for last. On our final day we toured a lovely artist colony on the outskirts of Budapest called Szentendre. Here, we visited the smallest synagogue in the world. True to its reputation, the 16 of us barely fit inside. There Anni told us the story of this town where much of her family had lived before they were deported to Auschwitz.

With the fall of Communism, the family decided to sell an unoccupied residence they owned in town. An aging uncle, however, adamantly demanded that they not sell. So they decided to rent instead. Again the Uncle made a demand, “Only the first floor.” Assuming that he did not want the family to lose the opportunity to enjoy the scenic view of the Danube from the second story balcony, again the family agreed. As they were keeping it they decided to restore it for themselves, which is when they made the discovery: while pulling up some old floorboards they found, stuffed underneath a part of a Torah scroll, some silver Judaica and picture that revealed a vibrant Jewish community had existed in this little Budapest suburb.

Anni heard their voices and she answered, **הַנְּנִי**, building in their memory the littlest synagogue in the world, dedicated to her family and to this lost Jewish community. The names of the members of that community are inscribed on the courtyard wall, their Judaica sits in display cases along one wall of the tiny room and their memory is alive in this place. And Anni makes sure that they are not forgotten.

This little synagogue is no tiny matter. On our way to Szentendre, Anni sadly revealed to me her frustration that here, in the third largest Jewish community in Europe, few are willing to stand up and say **הַנְּנִי**. While some anonymously support the Jewish community, most are unwilling to put their name on any list associated with anything Jewish. "After all," Anni explained, "it's how they found us." But Anni has "claimed a different path and with **הַנְּנִי** she with pride, passion and more than a little defiance announces who she is ...

One of our greatest and most poignant moments came on our visit to Terezin, the Czech military garrison that was turned by the Nazi's into a "model" concentration camp. Our guide was Irene, a vibrant, feisty octogenarian born in Kolin. She was deported from Kolin along with the rest of the Jewish community in June, 1942 and sent to Terezin where she would spend the rest of the war. After her liberation Irene lived for the next several decades in Israel and England before returning to Prague in recent years where she now tells her story to visitors of the concentration camp.

As a group we were so touched by Irene. Her stories, her strength and her courage were a gift we will all treasure. Irene's willingness to "cross the line" and spend the final years of her life saying **הַנְּנִי**, by returning regularly to a place that is certainly for her the very definition of hell, is beyond my comprehension. I am sure that I would have the strength.

These my stolpersteins, five individuals we stumbled upon in our journey who have opened my eyes, touched my heart and have forever changed the meaning of **הַנְּנִי** for me. Three Catholics and two Jews each understanding in a deep and perhaps

inexpressible way that their own humanity, and that of the rest of us depends upon hearing the human cry and responding **הִנְנִי**.

And what of Kolin? I realize that I have barely mentioned the town that was the focal point of our pilgrimage. It's beautifully restored synagogue, like many beautifully restored synagogues throughout eastern and central Europe, stands empty. It is used for community events and exhibitions but rarely for *davening*. There is no *ner tamid* (eternal light). The ark stands empty. Its *sifrei Torah* like our own precious scroll, have been spread to the four corners of the world. Sadly, not unlike the ashes of the 2000 members of this community who lost their lives in those terrible days. The empty synagogues, the ritual objects, often tagged with the names of families that will never come to reclaim them stand testimony to the fact that, in some way, they won. Barely a remnant remains of the grandeur and greatness that was.

But the synagogue *is* there and *is* restored. This could not have been said just a decade ago. That, in itself, is testimony to the fact that communities across the United States, Canada and Great Britain, guardians of the scrolls and now keepers of the memories, have answered *hineinu*, we are here, we will not let you be forgotten. It is visits of communities like our own that have compelled the town of Kolin and others like it to respond and restore.

All of this begs the question that now hangs before us today. Like Abraham we are challenged to consider, as we enter a new year, "To what we will say **הִנְנִי**?" Have no doubt that we *all* say **הִנְנִי** to something. Consciously or not, like Abraham we all offer up our future to something. To what will we make our offering? That is not just a question that rises from the Torah, but also from Waclaw, Wojciech, Aga, whose commitment to tell *our* story is truly eye opening; from Anni who passionately and proudly let's all see who she is and challenges us to do the same, and dear Irene who continues shed light on the darkness by telling the story of her own personal hell.

God's voice calls out to us through them, "*Ahavat Shalom!*" Will we open our eyes and our hearts and answer "*hineinu*" ("here we are")?

You know, each of the travelers to Kolin carried with them the name of a Jewish resident of the town lost in the Shoah. I carried with me the name of Baruch Feder. He was the rabbi of Kolin, a man I am told of great compassion and care, greatly respected and revered. Rabbi Feder survived. He returned briefly to Kolin, there to see to the building of a memorial to his lost community. As I stood where he had stood, on the *bima*, and gazed out at the sanctuary I was overcome with emotion. What must it have been like for Rabbi Feder to return to his *shul* and gaze out at the empty seats? To know that there sat Dr. Pavel Fantl and his wife Marie, up there in the women's section. What must it have been like for him to open the ark and find it empty? The pain and emptiness must have been indescribable.

I think about him as I gaze out with incredible gratitude at this overflowing sanctuary.

And I pray from the deepest recesses of my heart and soul that **הַנְּנִי** will be our personal a communal response, that out of our commitment to this precious Torah and the Jews of Kolin we will not, of our own accord, empty our places of worship, turn them into museums to the great Jewish community that once was. I try to imagine what would I say to our three Catholic friends about our disinterest in continuing the story that they are struggling to bring back to life? How would I explain to Anni that someday we might be able to fit into her tiniest synagogue? And what of Irene, what else can we possibly say to Irene but **הַנְּנִי**?

And so, this morning I invite you to hear the call to Abraham as your own, with faith and commitment to both our past and our future, I hope that you will join me in saying **הַנְּנִי**, **הַנְּנִי** to this precious little scroll and to *this* most precious community that now safeguards it and the legacy of Kolin. **הַנְּנִי**, I am prepared"cross the line, make the decision, claim the path," to do whatever I can to help support and sustain the vision and purpose of this sacred community.

In the words of the meditation I often share as part of our Torah service:

We owe it to our ancestors to keep Torah alive:

They struggled and suffered to preserve our way of life;

They knew this to be their most precious gift to us.

We owe it to *our children* to keep Torah alive;

for why should they be spiritual paupers

when the riches of this heritage can be theirs?

We owe it to the world to keep Torah alive;

This is a message which the world needs to hear.

We owe it to ourselves to continue as a people

To share God's dream, to bear witness to God's sovereignty

and to *live* the words of *this* Torah.