



*Parshat Nitzavim/Vayeilech*  
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**Block Out to Dial In: A Strategy for Hineni in the Age of Covid**  
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100% of us share the same problem. 100% of us will be experiencing the same problem next week on Rosh Hashanah. 100% of us experience the same problem in different ways every day. Here is the problem. I'll use the language of the High Holidays. When God calls on Abraham, Abraham says: Hineni. I am here. Our problem is, how do we say I am here, when I am not here?

How does the Newton North or Newton South high school student say I am here for their new school year, when they are not here? The learning is remote.

How does your college sophomore or junior say I am here for my college experience, when they are not here? They are in their high school bedroom.

How do you say I am here for my office or workplace environment when there is no office or workplace environment?

How do we say I am here next Shabbat to celebrate Rosh Hashanah when we are not here? The energy of the High Holidays is physical. It is seeing people come home here, to Temple Emanuel. It is sitting next to people in the same pews you have shared, in the same seats, for years. But we are not here. We are at home, on our screens.

If Hineni means I am here, how do we reinterpret Hineni so that it can live in the age of Covid when we are not here? I had been meditating on this question for some time when I found a helpful insight in an unlikely place: the memoir written by Robert Iger, the CEO of Walt Disney Company, about his 15 years as CEO entitled *The Ride of a Lifetime*.

His book begins with a bang. He describes a seemingly impossible conundrum which, although very different from the lives we lead, has much to teach us one week before Rosh Hashanah.

It is June, 2016. Iger was on his 40<sup>th</sup> trip to China in 18 years, his 11<sup>th</sup> in the past 6 months, all done in the service of opening a Shanghai Disneyland. How could Disneyland bring the magic of Disney to a very different culture, but a very big market, in a way that was, in Iger's phrase, "authentically Disney and distinctly Chinese." This project began in 1998. Eighteen years later Disney's leadership, and Chinese and American government officials are about to dedicate the opening of the new park, the single biggest investment in the history of Walt Disney Company. Iger describes a whirlwind of events, meetings, speeches every day for two weeks prior to the opening. And now, June 16, 2016, at long last the opening is at hand.

Then something happened far from Shanghai that no one could have predicted. An alligator in a lagoon at the Grand Floridian Hotel in Orlando attacked a two-year old boy named Lane Graves who was visiting Orlando from his home in Nebraska. Such a tragedy had never happened before in the history of the company.

On the exact same day, June 16, 2016, Bob Iger has to do two very different things.

First, he has to speak with Matt and Melissa Graves, grief-stricken parents. This moment summons profound humility, listening and empathy.

Immediately after that wrenching conversation, he has to lead the festivities for opening Shanghai Disney. He has to celebrate with Chinese dignitaries, to shake a thousand hands, to smile in a thousand pictures, to radiate energy, energy, energy.

One moment is about listening humbly. The other about radiating charisma. How could he do both moments on the same day, within the same hour?

That is where Iger's book and the High Holidays intersected for me. I have always thought about Hineni as I am here *physically*. But Iger offers us a different interpretation of Hineni.

Namely, these two very different scenarios summoned the same value: could Iger be fully present *in the moment*, whatever that moment happened to demand? The only way he could do that is, to use his term, to "compartmentalize." That he block out everything else so he can dial into the moment he is living right now. When he is with Matt and Melissa Graves, he blocks out the opening festivities so that he can dial into the parents' pain. When he is with the dignitaries touring Shanghai Disney he blocks out the parents' pain so that he can dial into the joy of the opening.

Is this kind of compartmentalization, blocking out, to dial in, a good thing? There may be costs to it, but I would say yes, it is a good thing.

By compartmentalizing, Iger was able to meet the needs of both moments, and of the people in those moments. He was helpful to the parents, and he was helpful to the business and government leaders opening the new theme park. To bring the joy of the park to the parents, or the grief of the parents to the park, would have harmed both moments. So instead he compartmentalized.

That is what we need to do now as we face our first ever digital High Holidays. Block out. Dial in. Be fully present in the moment you are in. To that end I would like to offer three practical suggestions.

First, make sure you have a machzor, either the physical book, or an electronic version. You need your screen *and a prayerbook*, in paper or electronic form, to bump up against, to think about, to agree with, to disagree with.

Second, dress for the occasion. Don't do High Holiday services in your pajamas. Wearing your nice clothing is a visual cue that you are dialing into a serious spiritual experience.

Third, do not multitask on God. This one is really hard. By definition, our High Holiday experiences this year will be mediated through our screens. And our screens are rife with competing distractions, texts, emails, news alerts, all the things that prevent us from being dialed into our prayer life. Having a meaningful prayer experience from your home, on your screen, will require an act of intentionality on your part. I am not multitasking. I am not emailing. Not texting. Not reading news alerts. I am dialed in to God, to prayer, to thinking about how I can be a better version of me, and how we can be a better version of us.

I can tell you one thing on the basis of personal experience. It works. Blocking out to dial in works. Reinterpreting Hineni from I am here with you physically, to I am here in the moment with you, works.

September 7, 2020, this past Monday, had been a red-letter day on our family calendar. It was going to be tied for the very best day of my life because on that day our son Nat was marrying his beloved Davide in Italy. Davide is Italian, and a wedding in Italy would mean that his family could come. But of course with Covid our plans, like everybody's plans, changed, the wedding in Italy would have to wait.

Then a few weeks ago, Nat and Davide shared their evolving thinking. September 7, 2020 was going to be special in a different way. Davide had been studying for conversion for a year, and that morning, at 6:00 am, he would meet with his Beit Din, three rabbis from their shul, known as The Kitchen. He would immerse in the Pacific Ocean, recite the blessings, say the shema, and complete his conversion. That night, their rabbi would officiate at a simple civil ceremony in their backyard. They would zoom the wedding for immediate family: Shira and me,

Sam and Jordy, our father and Nat's grandfather in Jerusalem, and Davide's parents and sister in Italy.

How do you get ready for your son's zoom wedding? I got dressed in my suit and tie. We made sure all the other noise-making devices were shut off. And for one hour, all of us, in Newton, Brooklyn, Jerusalem, and Italy, were Hineni, we were all here, in Nat and Davide's backyard, at their simple civil ceremony, the two of them and their rabbi. The rabbi did the *erusin* ceremony, the betrothal, leaving the *nissuin* ceremony, the seven wedding blessings, the sharing of the ketubah, and the shattering of the glass, for the wedding in Italy when it is safe to travel again. I don't have words to capture how poignant the experience was for our family. There were lots of tears. When it was over, all of us came to a surprising realization: It could not have been more inspiring, engaging, life-affirming, if we had been physically in Italy, with a band, with flowers, with fancy dining. All that really mattered, love and commitment, was there, distilled to its essential core. My whole family has been on cloud 9 ever since.

Rosh Hashanah is coming, and it has the potential to be amazing. All it takes is you. Block out. Dial in. Find a new way to say Hineni this year. Shabbat shalom.