

Hineini: Here I am
March 6, 2015

A joke. It is Fred's first day in prison. After spending the morning being processed, he is taken to the huge mess hall for lunch. He finds a seat at a table full of inmates who look like they have been behind bars for years. Suddenly, an inmate stands in the middle of the room and yells, "41!" As he sits down, the room erupts in laughter. Then another prisoner stands and yells, "123!" Again, there is laughter throughout the room.

Puzzled, Fred asks the inmate sitting next to him what's going on. "Well," the older inmate says, "Most of us have been here so long that we have heard all the jokes. So we just number them and use the number." Fred says, "I love to tell jokes! Give me one." "Okay," says the older inmate. "Everybody loves old 72. It always gets a big laugh."

So Fred stands up, waits for the laughter to die down from the last joke, and yells, "72!" There is nothing but silence as hundreds of inmates just turn and stare at him. Fred sits down and looks at the inmate who gave him the number. "What happened?" he asks. The older man shrugs and says, "Some people can tell a joke, some people can't."

The same is true of leadership. Some people have intelligence, insight, vision, charisma and just plain old good sense, what we Jews call "*sechel*" -- and they make good leaders -- some people don't. Some people know just what to do to bring others together for cooperation and consensus -- again, they make good leaders -- and some are just plain divisive by nature. Some people have their eye on the big picture, -- more good leaders -- and others are short sighted, not able to see the forest for the trees or to discern what is urgent from what is just important.

Some people are simply at the right place at the right time and are willing to step forward when they hear the call while others choose to ignore the needs around them -- as Jews, we are familiar with the term, "*hineini*. Here I am, choose me, I am ready to step up." These people may not be the smartest, or the wealthiest, or the strongest, but they hear a call and answer it; they are leaders in heart, soul, body and mind.

Of course, we don't all agree about who makes for a good leader and who makes for a poor one. That's why we have different political parties and elections, with God-awful campaigns; as well as different branches of government to balance the scales of justice; and a democratic society, which allows for differing ideas, and freedom of speech and expression of those beliefs; and, finally, the right to our convictions and to choose the path that best represents our values.

Yet, even with all of those freedoms and avenues for civil debate, it is still possible to behave shamefully. What determines whether we act honorably or disgracefully, even when we disagree, has everything to do with leadership, with those who lead us. I can give so many personal examples, I have witnessed, where leadership has stepped up to do the right thing and so many others where they have failed their communities. Tonight I want to share with you two examples that occurred over the past three weeks -- one in which leadership fell miserably short and the other where good leaders and their examples elevated a horrible situation

of discord and violence and brought communities together for the sake of unity and peace.

As the entire world knows, Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, addressed Congress this week to express his concern for what he believes is the "bad deal" that the P5+1 countries, including our own, are negotiating with Iran over its nuclear program. The Jewish community has been greatly divided over Mr. Nethanyahu's decision. Some feel it was necessary because Iran is an existential threat not only to Israel, but also to the United States, the Middle-East, and the world. Others believe that his action was politically motivated to undermine President Obama and win his re-election at home. The truth is probably somewhere in the middle. But I believe that had the leadership of the Jewish community behaved like real leaders, the rhetorical flames that were fanned by both sides and turned into a full-blown fire, could have been just a sputter.

Let me refresh your memories of what went on:

One day, there was a full-page ad in the *New York Times* by Elie Wiesel defending Netanyahu's right and his duty to come; the next day, there was a full page ad in the *Times* by Abe Foxman telling him to cancel his trip and stay home.

One day, there was a full-page ad by J Street saying the Prime Minister doesn't represent us. And the next day, there was a full-page ad by AIPAC saying: Yes he does.

One day, there was a television interview with Susan Rice, who is a high ranking member of the Obama administration, saying he should not come to speak to Congress and that his trip was divisive. And the next day, there was a full-page ad in the *New York Times* from the Zionist Organization of America that said that Susan Rice is a friend of dictators and an enemy of Israel.

One day, there was a full-page ad in the *Times* from *Tikkun* complaining, that by coming, Netanyahu was making support for Israel a partisan issue.

And the next day, there was a full-page ad in the *Times* from the Jewish Republican Organization that said: If you agree with Netanyahu, you should vote Republican from now on.

At a recent Lunch and Learn someone stated, in all seriousness, that President Obama is a secret Muslim and an anti-Semite. And I have heard others say that he is a Manchurian Candidate, trained by the enemies of Israel and planted by them in the White House to do Israel and the Jews harm. Still other congregants have said to me, seething with venom, that Netanyahu came to give his speech before Congress, not to speak out about the danger of Iran to America, but solely to gain votes in his campaign for re-election in Israel, adding, "they hope he loses . . . big."

And the list goes on. I can't remember a time when there has been so much discord and so much public controversy within the Jewish community as there was over this visit. I can't remember a time when so many Jewish leaders took to television and newspapers either to support Mr. Netanyahu or to condemn him as have in these last few weeks. And in Israel, the public fighting over Netanyahu's lifestyle choices has been even more ugly.

My point tonight is: I don't care if you are for Prime Minister Netanyahu or against Prime Minister Netanyahu. I don't care if you are for President Obama or

against President Obama. No matter what your political beliefs or personal convictions, we can fight with each other better than this. And I place the blame for all of this name-calling, mud slinging, and undermining of the solidarity of our people on the leadership of the Jewish community.

From Elie Wiesel to Abe Foxman, from J Street to AIPAC, from Zionist Organization of American to *Tikkun* to the Jewish Republican Organization, they all acted childishly and destructively. Putting their own interests above the unity of the Jewish people and the strength and security of the State of Israel.

There are other ways to express disapproval; they include letters and phone calls, but not the supposed leadership of the American Jewish Community fighting with the Prime Minister of Israel and the National Security Advisor of the United States of America on the pages of the *New York Times*.

Do I think that the relationship between the United States and Israel is damaged irreparably? No I don't. Do I think that Netanyahu's speech has caused Congress, if not the P5+1 countries, to look at the agreement with Iran more closely? Yes I do. Will it make a difference in the long run? I don't know. But I do know that now the world believes that the American Jewish Community is irreparably divided and weakened. And that is not good for our people today, tomorrow, or ever.

Example number two. In the past few months, there have been horrible acts of anti-Semitism and violence against Jews in Western Europe. We have spoken at length about the murders of the staff of Charlie Hebdo and several Jewish shoppers at a Kosher Market; Jewish graves have been desecrated; and just a few weeks ago, on February 19th, a synagogue in Copenhagen was attacked, leaving one dead and two guards wounded. In Paris, we know that a march of millions was organized to protest with leaders of forty-some nations coming together to show their solidarity for freedom of speech. Noting the high rate of emigration from France of its Jews, Prime Minister Manuel Valls has been extremely vocal about condemning these terrorist attacks of radical Muslims, as well as declaring emphatically that Anti-Zionism is just another form of Anti-Semitism, and that if its Jews leave France, the entire democratic enterprise of the Enlightenment will have been a failure. That is leadership.

And in response to what happened in Copenhagen, just a week later thousands of Muslims formed a human ring around Oslo's synagogue to show solidarity with Jews who were attacked in neighboring Denmark. Organizers sought to surround the synagogue with a 'peace ring', intended to show brotherhood with the Jewish community in times of increasing tension between the two religions. It was particularly poignant that this human ring of peace was planned for and took place on Shabbat. The message? That Islam seeks to "protect all people, regardless of faith or religion." That is leadership. We'll never even know who the organizers of the ring of peace were or remember the name of the Muslim young man, a clerk at the Kosher market in Paris, who saved a dozen Jews by hiding them in the walk-in freezer and then risking his own life to go get help. But we will always remember that they put the interests of their community and country, the humanity of others, and a desire for peaceful co-existence ahead of whatever their own self-interests might have been. They brought people together.

About a week ago, before Purim, the Jewish people held another holiday, a much more obscure one, which most of us have probably never heard of, called the Ninth of Adar.

The Talmud says that Hillel and Shammai, who were two of the greatest figures in rabbinic history, got along very well. They had differences - but they respected each other. They ate at each other's houses. They married each other's children. They disagreed with each other, but always with courtesy.

However, when they died and their disciples took over, things changed. The Talmud says that the disciples of Hillel and the disciples of Shammai fought with each other. And the Talmud says that on the 9th of Adar the Shammai-ites won control of the Academy and when they did, they barred the Hillelites from entering. And they passed eighteen laws, without the members of the House of Hillel being able to vote.

And so the Talmud says that that day, the Ninth of Adar, should be a fast day throughout the generations, because when Jews can't get along with one another, when they lock each other out of the academy so that they can win a dispute, when that happens, we are in big trouble. Perhaps we should revive this holiday and use it as an opportunity for the leaders and members of our community to come together and learn and talk about how to disagree with one another in a rational, constructive and effective way. It would have really helped the leadership of our American Jewish Community this year, since the Ninth of Adar fell on February 28th, right in the middle of their shameful display of self-serving hate.

Some people can tell a joke and some can't. Some can lead and some can't. I'm so proud to belong to a congregation that has an incredibly rich history of extraordinary leaders. It is one of the things that most attracted me to Ohef Sholom and the core value that I vowed to myself to nurture and nourish and support as your rabbi. You, y'all, can always do it better, when it comes to the running, brainstorming, planning, programming, supporting, and loving of this sacred community. And I am so grateful that so many of you step up in so many ways to make us the strong, vital, and vibrant Jewish community that we are. You do it with your time and talent, with your vision and commitment, with your un-selfish energy and enthusiasm, even with your strong convictions and passionate debates. And we appreciate every single one of you.

Tonight we honor those of you who have stepped up financially. We know that not all of you are able and certainly would if you could. But for those who were able and willing to raise your dues commitment to become a pillar of the Temple, we ask you now to please rise, that Cantor Wally and I may bless you for your generosity, for saying, "*Hineini* when we called: Here I am, choose me, I will do it."