

**“Connecting to Our Heritage: No More Excuses”**  
**Rosh Hashanah 5771/September 9, 2010**  
**Rabbi Jay M. Stein**

It all started when I was 10 years old. When I was nine years old, we had moved to Connecticut from Queens. We were newly located in a truly foreign land. No kosher restaurants, no Jewish book stores and, honestly, no Jews like those to whom I had grown accustomed. Let’s be honest, the Jews of Connecticut are just not like the Jews of New York. My brothers and I had grown a little homesick for the old neighborhood so my parents decided they would take us back for pizza and we would make a day of it. So, one Sunday we got into the car and back we trekked. Just as we found a parking space in front of the pizza shop my father said, “You go on in, I want to *shmy* around the book store.” For my father, there is only one thing better than eating in a kosher restaurant. It is feeding his soul in a Jewish bookstore. Like him, I can spend hours looking over every title, evaluating the dustcover, reviewing the tables of contents, or checking the indexes. Then when the books are done, he goes over to the music section and then takes a quick glance at the Judaica.

As was the case with my childhood and the rest of my life, I always wanted to do what my father did. That day I was to discover something wonderful. So, when my mother and brothers went in to get a table and order, I followed my father. I followed him up and down the aisles, doing what he did. He would pick up a book, raise his glasses from his nose to his forehead and so I would pick up a book. He would flip through the pages, so I would turn a few. He would run his fingers over the cover, so I felt the smooth glossy cover of the one in my hand. Then strangely enough he would lift the book to his nose, so I did the same. For my father a Kindle would never do, he needed to hold the book.

Then we came upon the section reserved for prayer books. I discovered what I was sure were prayer books for kids, they were smaller. The writing was tiny. So I asked my father what was going on with these books. They were my size but they looked really serious, no pictures. To which he said, “They are pocket Siddurim. People should always have a Siddur with them, so they make them smaller for easy transportation. The Siddur is the best companion. Then the magical words, “Do you want one?” “Could I?” “Of course, I would be pleased to always buy you a Siddur – with it, you will never be alone.” I have never been alone since. Not because I had a Siddur of my very own, but because I learned something about myself.

The Siddur meant so much more than just a book, it was about a connection with my father, it was about the unconditional joy I saw in my father’s eyes as he gave me this gift. I saw my father’s commitment to my future, my happiness and growth. At the time I saw his eyes open a bit wider, a smile grew underneath his beard, his shoulders soften as he reached out and put a hand on my shoulder and then ran it along to the back of my neck as he caressed the hair where it met the back of my head. I still can feel the touch.

I don’t think I realized it, but he was connecting me to something bigger than the two of us.

Today we thank Len and Lynne Barrack for doing the same in the name of Lynne’s parents Irwin and Doris Axelrod. Like my father’s gift to me, the Barrack gift strikes a visceral chord. Lynn’s grandparents were founding members of this congregation. They knew the synagogue had to be and it had to be the center of their lives. They lived next door, they were leaders, they participated regularly and they were active. When the shul faced trouble they stepped up. Lynne’s Uncle was the first Bar Mitzvah and it is where family and friends came after school, it is where they came Saturday nights for dances. Lynne and Len learned it was the place to come, it was the community and it was and is important.

Lynne and Len, we know what this congregation means to you – but it is difficult for you to know what you mean to us. Five years ago Len and Lynne came to me and asked me if they could make this gift. At the time the Mahzor wasn't ready. Year after year they would ask, "Is it ready?" Finally, they stopped asking me. Then, this past year it was ready. I called them back and said, "It is ready. Are you still interested in making the gift?" They responded, "*Hineni*, here we are and we are ready, willing and able. It would be our honor, it would be our pleasure." Thank you for making this gift of 2500 High Holiday Mahzorim. Thank you for the example you set, and thank you for keeping the connection alive.

They said, "*Hineni*, we are here." You, too, have also said the same thing by returning this Rosh Hashanah morning. Like Abraham said in tomorrow morning's reading which can be seen in your prayer book on page 103, God put Abraham to the test simply by calling out his name, "Abraham." He answered, "Here I am." The commentary at the bottom of the page explains. *Hineni* "indicates readiness, attentiveness, receptivity and responsiveness." Today I ask you the same thing. What are you going to do? What is your talent? What is your contribution going to be?

Abraham, through his son Isaac, showed his commitment to God. Abraham in saying, "*Hineni*" to God showed his commitment to his son. What are you committed to and, to whom are you teaching those values?

In this season of the year, we are obsessed with books. We have The Prayer Book, The Book of Life and The Book of Death and The Book of Remembrance. So today I ask, "What books are you writing? What are the chapters?" I imagine there is a chapter about family, a chapter about friends and probably a chapter about your career, maybe even one about your hobbies.

What about your chapter on rising to the occasion? What about your chapter about the lives you have improved? What about the chapter on values and putting your actions where you have placed your words? What about the times you have heard the call and answered, "*Hineni*, Here I am? Who will be reading your book? Will your children, family and friends hear you respond, "*Hineni* – here I am in friendship, in support and in concern for the community?" There are so many books to write: books where you help victims of natural disasters or victims of violence, books where you assist people with special needs or people who are hungry, homeless or ill and books where you help the young or elderly.

This Mahzor does so much – it teaches, it inspires, but mostly it asks, "What are you going to do?" Remember, it is only a tool! It drags three thousand years of input into the modern world. It asks you to bring your own personal intention to words that have been said for 700 years. It is constructed for the person who comes once a year, every Shabbat, or every day. It is for people who read Hebrew and those who don't, for those who understand and for those who don't, and those in between. It has contributions from Bratslav, Schneerson, and Amichai. It has a Yizkor for an abusive parent and a home ritual for those who cannot fast. It is extremely personal and it is for the community. It has directions and explanations. Through it we are inspired, energized, uplifted. So I ask, "What are you inspired to do? What are you energized to do? What are you uplifted to do?"

This Mahzor does so much – it teaches, it inspires, but mostly it asks what are you going to do? However, it is only a tool! It is a tool for connecting to our past, to our heritage and it boldly says, "There are no more excuses."

One of the most amazing findings in the Jewish Population study this past year was that 49% of us did no volunteering this year. For at least the last 50 years, our congregation has assembled in a variety of locations – whether it was 54th Street and Wynnefield or Radnor, or here on Hagys Ford Road, we have come together to share life cycle events and personal moments of triumph or tragedy. No matter. Each of us has these experiences every year, so on the High Holidays we return together as a community to place our year in perspective. Whether or not the location has changed or we sat in the pews, we pick up the Mahzor and engage with essentially the same words from the same book. No matter what happened in the previous year we knew when we returned to the Sanctuary we could pick up the same book. When our lives seemed so chaotic there was the constant of that book.

However, what has this book asked us to do?

There is a wonderful story about a young man, who got his first High Holiday job leading the congregation in davening. As the time to Rosh Hashanah got closer, he grew more and more anxious. Finally just days before the holiday, he approached his Rebbe and asked if he could be excused from class. He needed to go home to review his Mahzor. He said, “I have to go over the Mahzor and make sure I have learned everything I was supposed to.” To which the Rebbe responded, “The Mahzor hasn’t changed over the course of your life. You have prayed the same words your entire life. You are an excellent and conscientious student. No, you do not need to review the Mahzor, it has not changed but do go home and review yourself.”

The Mahzor is only a tool! It is a tool for connecting to our past, to our heritage and it boldly says that there are no more excuses.

Today we have all changed from last year. Today we are all different. Today is the first day of the rest of your life. Today the Mahzor which sits in your hands is a little different, but the themes are the same, the poems are essentially the same, the layout is different but the words are basically the same. There is more material for when your mind wanders and I hope it does. However, the claims are the same. Today you are different and if you are not, you better make a change. Today you have in your hands a better tool for doing just that. For asking yourself the big questions of what are you doing here? What are your values? What do you believe about your abilities and about God’s role in your life? Where do you fit in in your family and in your community? This Mahzor asks us never to be blinded by an ancient, seemingly inaccessible text in a foreign language.

Of the 130,000 copies of this Mahzor that were printed this year, we were the first to purchase. It is indeed an incredible statement, but meaningless if it does nothing for our inner life and its explicit expression. So now I ask you a slightly different question than my first, now I ask, “How is the book before you influencing you?”

If this Mahzor is a tool in your hands, what are you building, what kind of life are you crafting?

The book before you doesn’t care if you are a rabbi, an attorney, a doctor or an entrepreneur. This book, like our God, seeks the greatest person we are within. Our God seeks the holiness within. God is looking for the curious, the intelligent, the kind, the creative, the compassionate, the sincere, the funny, the sensitive, the brave, the insightful, the solitary, the social, the whole and the broken. Abraham Joshua Heschel, in what is quickly becoming my most favorite essay called “Analysis of Piety,” says holiness points to something beyond itself.

“As it works on the inner life, it is ever referring us to something that transcends man, something that goes beyond the present instant. Something that surmounts what is visible and available. Steadily preventing man from immersing himself in sensation or ambition, it stands staunchly as the champion of something more important than interest and desires, than passion or career.”

So does our new Mahzor, it works on the inner life and it refers to something that transcends each and every one of us.

When Abraham answers God with *Hineni*, he is saying, “Here I am.” Here I am in friendship, in support and in concern for the community.

My love of the prayer book grew out of admiration for my father and very quickly it had a life of its own. This prayer book is also the result of love. It is the result of children who admire and respect their parents, modeled by parents who loved and respected each other. Lynne shared the following description of her parents: “Doris and Irv Axelrod had truly a ‘Love Affair to Remember.’ It was clear and visible to everyone who knew them. It was filled with respect, admiration and adoration and it was unbreakable.” Respect for my mother was first and then commitment to family and to heritage. As we use these Mahzors, may they be instruments for commitment to our families, to our people, to our heritage and to our world.

Like a Stradivarius in a master violinist’s hands, I pray this Mahzor brings music to our lives and melody to our world.

*Shana Tova!*