

# Hineini:

## The Sacred Duty of a Jewish Educator

*By Orna Siegel*

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**What does it mean to have a calling?** Merriam-Webster defines it as a strong inner impulse toward a particular course of action, especially when accompanied by conviction of divine influence. For me, the calling began when I was a teenager. I was filled with raw passion to learn and involve myself in the only place I felt I truly belonged - among my own people. Over the years, I made up for lack of training and formal education with tons of enthusiasm and through my continued presence at every single Jewish event. I was the Jew who wouldn't go home. Although it wasn't my plan, my avocation became my vocation.

The inner drive that compels me to work in the Jewish community may be rooted in my personal history or psychology, or per the definition, rooted in some divinely inspired pull on my neshama, my soul. Either way, I have spent my career serving the Jewish people, primarily through day school education. While recruiting families to day school may seem somewhat prosaic, my conviction stems in the belief that to survive as a people, our religion, culture, and language must be transmitted to the next generation through holistic, deep, and daily encounters. This is the approach I found at all three day schools where I have proudly enrolled new students, at Gann Academy, JCDS, Boston's Jewish Community Day School, and now at the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School. So while one could crassly categorize my job as the Director of Enrollment as a "sales" position, I view it as God's holy work, and this is the difference between "work" and a "sacred calling" – it elevates the mundane to the holy.

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Given the nature of Jewish education graduate studies, my work naturally lent itself to holiness. I've spent years immersed in different aspects of Judaism and Jewish learning. Beyond the day-to-day grind of getting through graduate studies – and often managing work and family besides - I experienced the exhilaration that comes with intellectual discovery. To be honest, when for a master's in Jewish education - an online program - I didn't know what to expect, and was surprised, but delighted to experience such moments.

Reb John Dewey asserted that education is a social process, so what kind of education could one expect from an online learning environment?

Online learning placed me in a new social context, one that was more democratic than a traditional classroom. On discussion boards, no one can use volume or charisma to make themselves heard above the crowd, you even have to dig through the discussion thread to find the professor's comments! This democratization of the voices in the classroom, and ability to speak when you are truly ready to do so, whether immediately after completing the readings, or once you've spent a few days pondering the material, created a learning environment that freed me to take intellectual risks, really for the first

time in my educational career. This experience was bolstered by a fellowship, where my cohort met annually at a conference and maintained our relationships throughout the year in our digital classrooms. Getting to know the wonderfully diverse and eclectic student body gave even greater dimension to the program.

Overall my graduate educational format was transformative for me as a learner and made me think about my sacred calling a new light. While I returned to school for professional reasons, as I internalized all that I was learning, I realized the results were profoundly personal. According to Reb Dewey, "The self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action." So by choosing to participate in an online program, through diligent study and reflection, my actions changed, and so did my self. The education transformed me.

But what happens after transformation?

When someone with a sacred calling undergoes a transformative educational experience – when the raw passion and untrained enthusiasm is given direction, deep knowledge, and the skills to lead and innovate, then it is almost as if a chemical reaction has occurred, that the very nature of the calling becomes something more – it becomes a sacred duty.

In the Torah, we see many examples of those who are called by God, have some sort of powerful experience, and become something new. Three times our forefathers are called – twice each – and they answer hineni – here I am.

When Avraham is asked to sacrifice Yitzhak, an angel of God calls out "Avraham, Avraham," and he answers hineni , Here I am. In this case, God blesses Avraham וְהִתְבָּרַכְנוּ בְּזֶרְעֲךָ, כָּל גּוֹי וְהָאֲדָמָה וְהָאָרֶץ "in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed."

Later, as Ya'akov dreams, God calls, "Ya'akov Ya'akov," and he answers hineni Here I am. This interaction redirects the path of Ya'akov's life saying אֶל-תִּירָא מִרְדֶּה מִצְרַיִם, כִּי-לֹא אֶגְדֹּל לְךָ-תִּירָא מִרְדֶּה מִצְרַיִם, כִּי-לֹא אֶגְדֹּל לְךָ "fear not to go down into Egypt; for I will there make of thee a great nation."

Finally, Moshe transforms from shepherd to liberator after an encounter with God, when God calls out to him "Moshe Moshe" and he too answers hineni. This time God sends his servant to confront Pharoah וְהוֹצֵא אֶת-עַמִּי בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, מִמִּצְרָיִם "to take out the people Israel from Egypt."

While each conversation begins the same – with God (or God's emissary) calling a name, that is where the similarities end, because while each of our forefathers responded with the word hineni, the transformation each time was entirely different. Avraham answered, Here I- Avraham -am with all that Avraham can bring to serve You and the Jewish people. And so, God responded with a mission and a promise unique to Avraham. Likewise, Ya'akov and Moshe responded with the same word, hineni, but with meanings that are distinctive to the work that each of them could offer.

Now I have a diploma – a symbol – it's not a burning bush, or a miraculous dream, but it transforms a sacred calling into a sacred duty. And according to Dewey, we can use this

transformation as an opportunity to respond with actions that will continue to form our true selves. We live in a time of incredible change and upheaval both in the Jewish community and the world at large. The challenges facing me as a leader of the Jewish people are myriad. I must be bold and innovative, humble and humane, passionate and creative in our response. While it is not simple to respond to these challenges, I have learned how to listen, reflect, and think without conventional boundaries because of the training I received in graduate school.

As Avraham was called upon to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth, Ya'akov to establish us as a people, and Moshe to work for liberty and freedom from tyranny, I must stand up and say, "hineni"- here I am. Here are my attributes, abilities, and my passions within the context of my personal history. I must try to be present every day, to answer hineni to students and the people in my community, to act with thought and intention, to respond to challenges with originality and compassion, and to assume my sacred duty with respect, humility, and faith.



**Orna Siegel** is a Director of Enrollment and Tuition Assistance at Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Washington, D.C. She received her Master of Jewish Education degree in 2016 from the Schoolman Graduate School of Jewish Education at Hebrew College, where her advisor was Dr. Deborah Skolnick-Einhorn, Assistant Dean of Academic Advising & Assistant Professor of Jewish Education at the Shoolman School.



**Deborah Skolnick-Einhorn** is the Associate Dean for Academic Development and an Assistant Professor of Jewish Education in the Shoolman Graduate School at Hebrew College. Dr. Skolnick-Einhorn specializes in Jewish history education and women's organizational leadership.