

Bob Rovinsky's Talk at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, October 6, 2019

(Hold up Ram's horn)

This is a shofar, an ancient musical instrument made in the shape of a ram's horn. In chapter 22 of the book of Genesis, Abraham is tested by G-d and asked to sacrifice his son Issac. When G-d calls to Abraham, Abraham says Hineni, here I am. Then when Abraham has bound Isaac and raised his knife to kill him, G-d's angel calls "Abraham Abraham" and Abraham responds "Hineni" "Here I am", and the angel replaces his son with a ram.

I tell you this for two reasons. The first is because the Ram's horn, the Shofar, is blown this week for 10 days starting last Sunday evening by Jews all over the world to awaken us to repentance and prayer, as we believe on that day, on which G-d created us, is also the day that G-d opens the book of life and death and judges each person. So for these ten days – and for the month before this one, we examine our lives and seek to repent before G-d and to seek out every person we might have hurt. We apologize to them, seek their forgiveness, try to make up for the harm we caused by word or deed, and make sure we don't repeat what we did in the coming year. Then from this Tuesday evening till the end of the day Wednesday we fast and pray to G-d to forgive the sins of us and of all our people everywhere. We have five separate confessionals, five times we stand and prostrate ourselves, five times we chant our sins and repeat them silently in our hearts, until the sun goes down and the book of life and death is closed and we can feel the forgiveness of G-d, as we blow the shofar one final time.

The second reason I tell you this story about Abraham and the ram is that we have, since 1987, been having our services here in this sacred space. Our congregation is a Chavurah, which means "friend" and we don't have a traditional rabbi or other leaders but run our services ourselves. We set up our space in the Ethical Culture Society building each Saturday and holiday, we sit in a circle, and sing most of the service, then open the bible to the part Jews read that week and spend about 45 minutes reading and discussing it and how it relates to our lives. We have met for over 40 years, and we keep each other company during each important moment of our lives, and we take care of each other.

Back in 1987 we were the only Jewish congregation that did not charge for our High Holiday services, and that invited everyone to come, no "ticket" required. We still do not charge and we still welcome everyone to our services. We believe and participate actively in social justice actions and so feel it's important that our hosts also say "Hineni" – Here I am – when G-d calls. And no other congregation in this city has done more to answer the call to feed the hungry, support the poor, welcome the stranger, and witness to G-d's words that New York Presbyterian. Even though we can fit into a smaller space now that other congregations are opening their services up, we still choose to be here. Today I bring you our greetings, and our thanks for hosting us these past 32 years. And I bring you apples and honey, that we Jews eat to wish each other a sweet year. We will be serving them at the back, after services, please come and lets wish each other a year of health, a year of life, a year of blessing, a year of peace, a year of honorable prosperity. May each of you inscribed for a good and sweet year. Shana Tova