

Hineni Assembly

I'd like to start by sharing some music with you. I'm going to play you the first part of a wonderful Simon and Garfunkel song, The Only Living Boy in New York. Paul Simon, a musical genius and the guy in the picture with the guitar, wrote it. It is very immediate and personal, referencing Art Garfunkel heading off to act in a film – at the start you will hear him say 'Tom, get your plane right on time' (Garfunkel is called Tom, as the duo first performed as Tom and Jerry). Paul Simon is left alone in New York, free to do as he likes. Everyone else has obligations and responsibilities – only Paul Simon is able to express himself fully and be who he wants to be. That is why he thinks of himself as The Only Living Boy in New York: the others are not fully alive. He gets all the news he needs on the weather report and he has nothing to do today but smile.

Thinking about the lives of those around him, and his own life when he is not so free, Paul Simon reflects that 'Half of the time we're gone But we don't know where.' Surely, we can all recognise the truth of that feeling. At least half of the time we are unfocused, or tired, or frustrated, or hiding from the important things in our lives by concentrating on distractions. How much of your life is spent with you fully there, fully alert, fully engaged – *all in* and committed to this present moment? When we are so committed, we find that kind of floating joy that Paul Simon so elegantly captures in The Only Living Boy in New York.

All through the song we hear the phrase 'Here I am'. Paul Simon is offering himself to the moment – to fully experience it and savour it. He feels as though he is encountering himself and his city almost for the first time.

Let's hear it. The Only Living Boy in New York

[Simon & Garfunkel - The Only Living Boy in New York \(Audio\)](#)

Paul Simon is a Jew and draws upon the Jewish religious tradition. He will have gathered his understanding of the phrase 'Here I am' from that tradition – specifically the Old Testament. There, the phrase 'Here I am' occurs several times, usually as a translation of the Hebrew word 'hineni'.



'Hineni' or 'Here I am' is a phrase reserved for the most important encounters in the Old Testament. This is a picture of St Catherine's monastery in Sinai, dating back to the 5th century.



It is built on the site of one such encounter. The Bible tells us that one day, Moses was tending his flock in the wilderness when he came upon an unusual sight: a burning bush that was all aflame but not being consumed. Amazed by this vision, he chose to draw closer, to get a better look.

And perhaps it was that curiosity which led God to choose Moses. Moses saw something incredible, but he was not fearful. He did not run away but leaned in to get a better look. He could bear witness to something strange and uncanny and do so with full engagement.

He chose to be present to the moment of awe and mystery. The story goes that from the burning bush, God called his name. “Moses, Moses.” And Moses answered “Hineni, here I am.”

Take a moment to think about that response. That “Hineni” is an instant acceptance and commitment. All Moses has heard is his name, yet he is willing to open himself fully to the strangeness of the moment. It is unequivocal: “I am *here*”, where and as you found me, fully attentive, focused, all in. And even more, “*I am here*”- all of me, with all that I am and all that I can be.

Hineni appears many other times in the Old Testament. In Genesis, God speaks to Abraham before commanding him to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham responds with “Hineni.” In Isaiah, the prophet wrote ‘Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?” Then I said, ‘Here I am. Send me!’

Isaiah’s response to God’s call, ‘Here I am, send me!’ captures the essence of “hineni”, embodying the spirit of readiness and commitment that “hineni” conveys.

‘Hineni’ echoes God’s description of himself in Exodus. During the conversation with the burning bush, Moses said to God, “Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they say to me, ‘What is His name?’ What shall I say to them?” And God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And He said, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

Add the geographical locator ‘here’ to that ‘I AM’, and you have ‘hineni’

Leonard Cohen is another great songwriter from the Jewish tradition. Like his fellow Canadian, Joni Mitchell, he approaches songwriting through the lens of poetry. He is brilliant - you should get to know his work if you don’t already know him. In an album released just days before his death, Cohen picked up the idea of ‘hineni’ in the title song ‘You Want It Darker’. In old age, Leonard Cohen’s voice has deepened to the deepest bass. His exhaustion and age are evident. He knows he is dying. Recorded in his home, with family and close friends, this is his farewell to life, and to those he loves. It is an extra-ordinary sound – a truly weathered voice.

You Want It Darker

[Leonard Cohen - You Want It Darker \(Audio\) - YouTube](#)

There are two very different tones between Paul Simon and Leonard Cohen. One is joyful, the other resigned and thoughtful. Both use ‘hineni’ to mark a moment of profound importance to them.

“Hineni” is a response to something sacred – it is an undiluted presence in the moment, a response in which the self sheds all reservations, which expands the boundaries of self, indicating a readiness to receive and respond to whatever experience is about to unfold. It is brave and humble. It can be a response to God, or a response to life itself.



We won’t get to say ‘hineni’ very many times in our lives. Perhaps when you decide to give yourself in love to the person you want to spend the rest of your life with. Perhaps as a father or mother, with your newborn child. But also at a moment of your choosing. A moment when you can say ‘hineni’ to yourself – a promise to yourself to be, to become, to fulfil. The message of this assembly is to say ‘hineni’ to life and say ‘Here I am’ to embrace the present moment and the infinite possibilities contained within it.