A rabbi walked into the empty sanctuary of her synagogue before Kol Nidre services and was suddenly overcome by the magnificence of the occasion. She threw herself down on the ground before the Ark and proclaimed, “God, I am nothing!”

The president of the congregation, also felt moved by similar emotions. He too, threw himself on the ground before the Ark and exclaimed, "God, I'm Nothing!"

Then, way in the back of the synagogue, a volunteer setting up chairs for services threw herself to the ground, and she, too, shouted, "God, I'm Nothing."

The rabbi immediately turned to the president and whispered, "Look who thinks she's Nothing!"

We all have moments of thinking we are nothing. Sometimes, like the rabbi in the story, we claim we are Nothing just to show that we really are Something. More often, however, we genuinely believe that we are not good enough, that our contributions won’t make a difference, that we are not worthy. Even those of us in positions of power or authority -- public officials, teachers, parents, and yes, rabbis -- struggle with feelings of unworthiness. This struggle is reflected in “Hineni,” the traditional prayer recited by the cantor on Yom Kippur afternoon and translated here by Rabbi Rachel Barenblatt.

“Here I stand
painfully aware of my flaws
quaking in my canvas shoes
and in my heart.
I'm here on behalf of this kahal
even though the part of me
that's quick to knock myself
says I'm not worthy to lead them.”

This prayer raises an important question: who is worthy to lead? Who should speak with moral authority? Who is “Somebody” enough to speak out and act about the injustices we see in the world?

Often, we assume that that “Somebody” is really “somebody else.” We defer to the supposed leaders of the community -- politicians, religious leaders, school principals, activists -- and expect them to do the leading. Perhaps we think, who am I? Who am I to challenge someone who makes a derogatory comment? It’s not really worth the trouble. Perhaps we think our efforts will be futile. Will it really make a difference if I say something? Perhaps we feel overwhelmed and do not even know where to start. There is so much craziness in the world today; how do I pick what to work on?

No matter what the reason, the end result is that we often end up letting others fight our moral battles. Busy with our lives, we are content to let others lead and speak on our behalf. But we must resist the temptation to stay on the sidelines. At a time when our president equates white supremacists with the people who protest against them, when attacks on African Americans, Latinos, Muslims, LGBT people, and yes, Jews are increasing, when people throughout the Caribbean are suffering from the effects of several devastating hurricanes, the world needs voices of moral authority more than ever.

As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches morality goes back to the opening words of the Torah, where God saw that creation was “good.” The Torah is a moral book, from Abraham’s arguments with God to
Isaiah’s call to loose the chains of injustice. The ancient prophets taught that a “society that is not moral--not marked by justice, compassion, respect for human dignity and honesty and integrity in public life--will not long survive.” The Talmud teaches (Shabbat 54b), “If you see wrongdoing by a member of your household and you do not protest – you are held accountable. And so it is in relation to the members of your city. And so it is in relation to the world.”

I am proud to say that we belong to a movement that is speaking with moral authority--taking a deep look at ourselves, our cities, and our county. This High Holidays, hundreds of rabbis are delivering a similar message, some using the exact same text. I’m quoting just a small piece here: “We, like the prophets before us, draw from the deepest wisdom of our tradition to deliver a stern warning against complacency and an impassioned call for action. We call on you to...say in thousands of ways, every day, as proud Jews and proud Americans: “You cannot dehumanize, degrade and stigmatize whole categories of people in this nation. Every Jew, every Muslim, every gay, transgender, disabled, black, brown, white, woman, man and child is beloved of God and precious in the Holy One’s sight. We the people, all the people, are created b’tzelem elohim, in the image of the Divine. All the people are worthy of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

In Washington, D.C., the Religious Action Center of the Union for Reform Judaism has helped organize a national movement of Jews who are speaking out. We are adding a Jewish voice to a national conversation that for too long has assumed that ‘the religious voice’ has a single register -- that of white, evangelical Christians. Along with other egalitarian voices from a variety of religious traditions, we are speaking clearly and with moral authority about helping the most vulnerable in our society, from protesting the ban on travel from majority Muslim countries to protecting people with preexisting health conditions. From the big cities of California to small towns in Texas, from the metropolis of Chicago to rural Pennsylvania, we are joined with Jews whom we have never met in speaking out at rallies, in writing op-eds, and in lobbying in the halls of Washington and our state capitals. We, all the way up here in Augusta, Maine, are part of a movement to bring the wisdom and truth of our Jewish traditions into the public square, adding a necessary voice to the public dialogue.

But, as important as national work is, our local work is even more important. As the motto of Jews United for Justice based in Washington, DC says, “Think Jewishly. Act Locally.” Here in Central Maine our community experiences problems that cry out for our moral voices and actions. Addie’s Attic, where many Temple members work with our partners to give away clothing, will soon be homeless, along with the Basic Essentials pantry and the Warming Center. These services help our most vulnerable populations live in dignity. Finding a place for them is a moral issue. Please, ask your friends and neighbors if they know of a place. Ask the Chamber of Commerce and elected officials. Speak up about the importance of these programs in serving the vulnerable in our midst. Your actions will help build a community where people have the basic essentials they need.

We also want to build an inclusive community that welcomes people from all walks of life. The Temple has been very active with the immigrant community in the past year. Through our work with the Capital Area New Mainers Project, many of you have served on family mentor teams, becoming de facto case managers in the process. We have given rides, taught English, hosted classes on Islam, attended Ramadan celebrations, and most importantly built relationships with New Mainers. In recognition of our work, the Temple was awarded a Fain Award by the Union for Reform Judaism, one of just two congregations in New England to earn the URJ’s highest honor for social action.

This past year we also created Beth El in Action to strengthen and institutionalize our justice action work. A group of 15 congregants spent the summer researching how we can best take action in our local community. After many meetings with city officials, social service providers, and community members, we have decided to work on an issue that impacts not only our community but others as well, that of respecting the rights of religious minorities in public schools. Many of you know what it is like
to have a child miss picture day or a test because it falls on the Jewish holidays. To have a perfect attendance record ‘marred’ because of missing for religious holidays. To have coaches bench a student because she missed practice. This concern is not only felt but us, but also by the Muslim community, which faces additional language and cultural barriers. At its heart this is about creating schools that understand and respect religious diversity in a time of increasing polarization. It is about educating the next generation of leaders to see religious difference as a strength and not a threat. This gives us a chance to raise our voices not only for ourselves, but to model in our schools the respect we would like to see in our broader community. We will be doing more research, building relationships, and gathering allies in the next few months. Please let Emily Bessey or Miranda Phelps know if you would like to be more involved at this stage or later when we start talking with local school boards and asking them to implement new policies.

The work that we do in our local community must be based on the relationships we have formed. After Michael Brown was killed in St. Louis three years ago, a local rabbi in the suburbs called a black pastor in the city and asked what he could do to help. The pastor asked the rabbi, “Where have you been in the last year, in the last five years? Where were you before this? My community has needed partners for years.” The rabbi had no answer. Why did it take a crisis for him to pick up the phone? By then, it was too late. We are not waiting for a crisis before we act. We already have started building relationships across lines of race, class, and faith, and we must continue to do so.

Speaking and acting morally requires not only the energy of our national movement and of our local synagogue, but of each and every one of us as well. Almost 2,000 years ago, the sage Hillel said, “In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man (Pirkei Avot 2:6).” Some commentators take this to mean that one must be someone to issue decisions (Bartenura). But I think it has a much simpler meaning, one contained in the “I am a MAN” posters of the striking Memphis garbage workers in 1968. Recognize the humanity of all people. Act for what is right. Be a moral voice for justice.

The midrash says this is what Moses did. Moses grew up in Pharaoh’s palace. One day, he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. “He turned this way and that; seeing there was no man, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand (Exodus 2:12).” This is normally read to mean that Moses wanted to be sure he was not being watched. But the midrash explains, "He saw that there was no one who would be zealous for God and slay the Egyptian" (Exodus Rabbah 1:28-9). Moses looked around to see if anyone else would act. When he saw that they would not, he acted. We must be like Moses and act for justice, even if no one else will.

It will not be easy. The Hebrew word for strive, histadel, means to wrestle with oneself and to force oneself to acquire good qualities (Maimonides, commentary on Avot). This is hard and uncomfortable work. We might think we are not worthy of doing so. But, as the rabbis’ statement reads, “every community relies on passionate and engaged citizens; it relies on you to be insistent advocates for [respect] and enduring kindness between the diverse peoples of our nation. To pursue justice is to create a society that protects and enlivens every citizen. Let us be relentless, tireless builders of that society in our city and in our country -- in this New Year.”

Rabbi Rachel Barenblatt writes in her translation of the hineni prayer,

Accept my prayer
as though I were exactly the leader
this community needs in this moment,
as though my voice never faltered.

May we each be the leader we need in these times. If our moral voices falter, may we find a whole community of people willing to speak and stand with us.