

National Board Meeting July 12, 2015

Hineni.

Standing before this board four years ago in Las Vegas, as Hadassah's newly elected president, I chose to begin my term with Abraham's one-word response when God asked for him - Hineni.

Beyond the literal meaning of "Here I am," our patriarch's declaration meant that he was ready to accept the responsibilities and challenges God would present to him.

He also understood that whatever energy and intelligence he could bring to the task, he was committed to something larger than himself. My first appearance as the leader of Hadassah - with my daughter and granddaughter at my side - was and remains a cherished moment for me. A moment is a drop in the ocean of years. Being president has taught me that there is the wisdom that comes from experience over time, and the indelible memories that come from moments of experience.

These have been the four most intense years of my life, four years that sometimes seem like one continuous day. But the easiest way to take stock of them, and convey what those years have meant to me, is to break out a handful of highlights.

I spent roughly an entire year flying over the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. I'll spare you the stories, but credit those hours with some of the most uninterrupted sleep I got.

As much as standing in front of you four years ago meant to me, the things that stand out most to me as I look back are the moments and experiences in which I felt the comfort and presence of other leaders and colleagues around me—many of whom are now in this room.

In much of the world today, and throughout history, we can think of many people who sought positions of leadership because they were interested in power, or who became intoxicated with power once they had achieved it.

The Jewish people are not immune to such temptations, but our standard of leadership is based on humility. It is based on the example of Abraham, and others after him, who chose to be part of a purpose higher than themselves.

When God asked Moses to lead the Israelites from slavery to freedom, his response was, "Why me?" Even after he embarked on his mission, Moses was lonely and—according to Rabbi Jonathan Sachs—at times depressed.

Only when God told him to gather a council of 70 elders around him did Moses become comfortable with his role, exuding a gentle and generous confidence. The modern proverb tells us, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”

That, I believe, is the Jewish way. Millennia after our forebears bequeathed this concept of leadership, it became a blueprint for the democratic way of a president or prime minister who is a servant rather than a ruler, who shares power because he or she accepts that wisdom is never the domain of a single person.

It’s one thing to describe this idea. It’s another thing to see it in practice. I’ll never forget the moment, during an Israel mission I went on with Marlene Post, whose presidential term was drawing to a close, and Bonnie Lipton, who had just been nominated to succeed her. As we got off our bus at Kibbutz Ketura, Bonnie was mobbed—literally grabbed—by people excited by the presence of Hadassah’s incoming leader.

Bonnie hadn’t even taken office yet, hadn’t made a single decision as president. But the mantle of leadership had passed, and that is what prompted the response. I realized then that, like Abraham or Moses, whatever talents a Hadassah president brings to the task, the position represents much more than the person who occupies it. A Hadassah president embodies the past, the present, the future and the mystique of Hadassah.

I’ve since experienced the magic of that presence myself as I have travelled around the country to Hadassah events and represented us in Israel and on the world stage. But I never forgot that moment—that preview—with Bonnie and Marlene, which demonstrated to me the need for humility, long before the moment when I even dreamed of my own presidency. It was the first step to understanding that I could never allow myself to take things personally—not the accolades I might receive or the criticism that might come my way.

A president has to lose the “I”. If it weren’t for the people around me, and the army of volunteers who invest their confidence and energy in Hadassah’s leadership, I wouldn’t be able to accomplish anything meaningful. For a Hadassah president, the mission flows through you who have entrusted me with leading you, and who have made me both your representative and your instrument. If there is a message I want to send—not only to my successor, but also to the other future Hadassah presidents who may be in this assembly—this is it.

I’ve also learned that while it is essential to have goals; no leader, no president, can bend events to her will or her timetable. More important than individual goals is a strategy for leadership and a readiness to adapt quickly as the world changes.

I knew when I became president that I would have the tremendous honor, the kavod, of presiding over Hadassah’s Centennial. But I also discovered that aside from the calendar and our values, nothing is immutable. When I took office, Hadassah had already weathered a serious financial crisis on this side of the ocean. We had a new director general at HMO, the Sarah Wetsman Davidson hospital tower was rising and I wanted to focus on our domestic agenda and revitalizing American Zionism.

It gives me great satisfaction to be able to say that we have begun that critical work. But I couldn’t have predicted in 2011 that my own focus would be so absorbed by a financial crisis at HMO and a grueling campaign to guarantee our medical center’s role as the flagship of Israeli medicine and a touchstone of Israeli life – a campaign that continues to challenge us, although we have signed an historic agreement with the government of Israel.

This responsibility will occupy much of our time for the remaining months of my presidency, not to mention that of the next president. Despite the difficulties, the discarded timetables and lack of sleep, despite the sacrifices my family made and my own concern about the time away from them, nothing I have ever done in my life has given me the sense of purpose, allowed me to feel as fulfilled, or presented me with such a wonderful opportunity, as these past four years. As grateful as I was to be able to stand before you and say “hineni” four years ago, as honored as I am to serve as Hadassah’s twenty-fifth president, I could not have anticipated how great a gift it would be to be your leader, to accept the responsibilities, to have this once-in-a-lifetime chance to make a difference for the Jewish people and for Israel.

Some leaders in high pressure positions can be so overwhelmed by events and responsibilities that they feel the sense of honor only after their terms have ended. I have felt it every moment during the time I have served – in large part because I always knew I had your support.

It has become a cliché to talk about standing on the shoulders of previous Hadassah presidents and leaders. It’s true nonetheless. If I have been able to add a few stories to Hadassah’s history, it’s only because of the lofty platform I started on. But no matter how firm the platform, a leader who stands alone can get vertigo. As appreciative as I am of the leaders who went before me, I simply could not have functioned, and could not have so fully lived these intense years, without the constant counsel, assistance and stamina of the people who have stood beside me, Hadassah’s modern council of elders. From those who sat on the Exec to those who served on committees or in their home communities, I have never been alone.

First and foremost, my profound thanks to Shelley Sherman and Janice Weinman. Your support, your ideas, your wisdom and your energy, your leadership of the Synergy committee, and, Shelley your role as well in working with me and our lay leaders – two bodies that provided guidance and collaboration – have not only sustained me, they have sustained Hadassah.

To Marlene Post who first suggested I “talk to Shelley about working with me,” and who has consistently brought ideas to us to ignite a passion for new endeavors, thank you.

To National Treasurer Roni Schwartz, and past Treasurer Ellyn Lyons, and National Secretary Judy Shereck and past Secretary Ellen Hershkin, my sincere thanks for your guidance and patience. Judy, your understanding of our role as players within the world Zionist entities, has also been a vital component of your service.

So much that the Hadassah leadership team has accomplished in these past few years is because of the dedication and energy of our volunteers and professional leaders. We would not have achieved historic steps without the vote and confidence of the entire National Board, those who voted and those who advised even if they didn’t have a vote.

But I would be remiss if I didn’t mention a few by name. We would not have achieved our historic agreement between HWZOA, HMO, and the Israeli Government were it not for the wise, detailed and ongoing efforts of Audrey Shimron, Ilan Levanon, Barbara Goldstein, Barbara Sofer and Rick Annis, and attorneys Sheryl Zeligson and Lisa Tross.

My special thanks not only to them, but also to all who serve on the newly configured HMO board which now includes Nancy Falchuk, as well as those who served on the old board, and

our HMO chair, Joyce Rabin. Joyce, I am so grateful to have you again, sharing your quiet wisdom on a regular basis!

We would not have made so much progress toward completing the Davidson Tower—despite all the obstacles that faced us—without the tireless labor of the development division starting with Helaine Ohayon, and continuing with Roselle Ungar, Frieda Rosenberg, David Paster-nack, Miki Schulman and all the team.

To Bonnie Lipton for her extraordinary role as Tower Chair, I and all who benefit from the tower owe you our thanks.

Hadassah International is also an integral part of our fundraising efforts with gratitude to Sherry Altura, Belle Simon, Lonye Rasch, Pat Levinson and Melissa Kaplan.

The creation of PRAZE was a vision of mine that did come to fruition. We would not be able to look with pride and satisfaction at our revitalized domestic agenda had it not been for the hard work of Ellen Hershkin, Debby Mazon, Lauren Katz and Naomi Brunnlehrman who put advocacy back on the agenda, and Leah Reicin and her team who fought to ensure Zionism was more than a word in our name.

We would not have been able to establish the independence of Young Judaea without the guidance and efforts of Ellyn Lyons, Shelley Sherman, Roni Schwartz and Sheryl Zeligson.

Our membership and strength in the country and the nationalization of our staff in the country is in large part due to Roz Rosen, Melissa Karachalios, the Membership and Unit Services team, and each and every one of our region presidents. The Hadassah Leadership Fellows would not have been nurtured without the leadership of Janice Weinman, Debbie Minkoff and Courtney Hanauer.

Our revitalized efforts to support Missions are thanks to the efforts of Sherry Altura, Valerie Lowenstein and Dorothy Ganz, and, happily, now supported by Ayelet.

We would not have gotten through the sale of our building on West 58th Street and our move to the beautiful new Hadassah House on Wall Street without the tenacity, perseverance and patience of Rick Annis, Jodi Wechter Levy, Ricardo Ramos, and Lynn Blackwell.

We would not have been able to roll out Hadassah's new branding and marketing campaign without the direction and creativity of the Marketing and Communications department, led by Barbara Spack and Sheryl Hoffman.

To Benita Ross who chairs Youth Aliyah, and to Miriam Aron who took the flame of support for the Jewish National Fund from her mother, Debbie Kaplan, and kept it burning, our gratitude. To Sue Beller, who ensures we maintain a meaningful relationship with Young Judaea, and to Carol Goodman Kaufman who served admirably as our last Hadassah College Jerusalem Chair, thank you.

Together we will celebrate the Centennial of Hadassah Magazine, but here I need to express my thanks to Nancy Falchuk, Chair, and Alan Tigay, Editor, for so effectively documenting history through our magazine.

And certainly, and not least, we would not have been able to maintain our influence and clout in Israel, in America and in the world, without our army of members and donors, and the talent and brilliance of our many professionals—doctors, educators, lawyers, financial experts,

tech supporters, administrators, fundraisers, artists, editors and others who work under the Hadassah banner.

How blessed Shelley, Janice, Judy, the project chairs, and I have been to have the support of those who work with us: Katey McCarthy, Liz Farrell, Aliyah Azarzar, Jessica Guardao and Alex Corona. To Angie Lamont who completes our group, serving the Past Presidents, get ready—I'm coming in a few months! And here I pause to mention Carmie Kalmanson who keeps in regular communication with me to offer support.

I also want to take this moment to thank my own family for allowing me to make this journey. I could not have made it without your love and support. No one could be blessed with a better life partner than I been with my Eli!

To all in the Hadassah family, you have done me the great honor of making me, as your representative, a link in the chain of Hadassah, Jewish and Zionist continuity.

During the centennial year, I had two moments that stand out in my memory. The first came at Temple Emanu-El, during a Shabbat service in February in honor of Hadassah. Speaking to a packed congregation in the very sanctuary where Henrietta Szold called our first meeting to order in 1912, and with members of Henrietta's family present, I felt that larger mission to which we all submit flowing through me.

In November, as we celebrated our centennial in Jerusalem and also dedicated the Davidson Tower, I stood on stage in the Jerusalem conference center with our beloved Bernice Tannenbaum, and before the leaders of the nation we have done so much to help found, build and nurture. And just as any Hadassah president faces unexpected crises, there are also joys that arrive unexpected and unannounced.

Perhaps the moment that inspired the most awe, that gave me the greatest sense of honor and, at the same time, humility, came in front of a much smaller audience. Again, it was at Kibbutz Ketura, on Thanksgiving Day in 2011, at a ceremony dubbed "a date with time."

During the excavations at Masada in the 1960's, archaeologists discovered a jar of dry seeds from a Judaeian date palm. Because of Masada's hot, dry climate, some of the seeds were still alive—even though the species of tree they came from had by then been extinct for 1800 years. The seeds were put in storage at Bar Ilan University, where they remained for forty years. Ultimately, scientists treated them with fertilizer. One seed sprouted and was placed in a planter at Ketura. The tree from that seed flowered in early 2011, and at the ceremony I transferred what by then had been named the Methuselah date palm from the planter into the soil of Israel. The original seed, the tree and that moment, were so rich in connections and metaphors that some of them were still occurring to me long after I had done the replanting.

Planting trees as a way to re-establish the fertility of our land. A seed that even after it was discovered—liberated—spent forty years in storage. The fertile soil in the desert where Young Judaeians founded a kibbutz. A living remnant of ancient Israel now alive in modern Israel, and mated with a more modern tree, now producing dates.

After 60 years of national independence, trying to bridge the gap between the ancient and modern state, a single seed becomes the thread that ties the ages together. The role of Hadassah, which has planted so many institutions in the same soil. And you put me in the middle of the story.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you for allowing me the experience those soul-stirring, spine-tingling thoughts and sensations, for all of us. I could not have dreamed it, but I lived it. And I can say the same not only about that moment, but also about the last four years.

As we leave Philadelphia, after the business meeting ably chaired by Bobbi Kraft and Lynne Savran, I'll be going back to work. I'll be your president until the last moment of my term, continuing to address the issues we face, and preparing my successor for the challenges ahead.

Whatever happens, for every moment remaining in office, and even beyond, you'll know where I am and my response:

Hineni.