

2<sup>nd</sup> day Rosh Hashanah 5777

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Hineni—being present; responding to God and one another's call

In this morning's Torah portion, we read, as we do each Rosh Hashanah, Akedat Yitzhak, the Binding of Isaac. This is a challenging and complex text. Past years, we have explored other aspects of the narrative, but today I want to draw your attention to one single word.

The most powerful word in this Torah reading is Hineni, meaning, I am here (here I am). However, this is not an ordinary "I am here." For that, in Hebrew one would reply, "Ani Po." As we will uncover, Hineni conveys a more profound meaning than simply being physically present.

Abraham responds Hineni three times in this morning's portion. The **first** time Abraham says Hineni he is responding to God's call, as our narrative describes.

"Some time afterward, God tested Abraham. God said to him, "Abraham," and he answered, "**Here I am.**" And God said, "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you." So early next morning, Abraham saddled his donkey and took with him two servants and his son Isaac."

Upon hearing God's call, Abraham responded: Hineni---here I am. [Gen. 22:1] With this simple reply, Abraham says: I am fully present. I am in a covenantal relationship with you and honored to respond to you with an open heart.

Hineni...

Rabbinic commentators emphasize Abraham's eagerness to serve God for he arises early and saddles his own donkey. He does not procrastinate and is eager to fulfill the mitzvah. Moreover, Abraham, a wealthy man with servants, wants to complete it on his own.

It's interesting to note the Hebrew word for donkey is chamor. Rearranging the letters spells the word rachum, which means

compassion. One of God's names is El Rachum, God full of compassion. Today, when we respond Hineni to another, we have the ability to bring compassion, which God has endowed in each of us.

When we say Hineni, we mean that we are emotionally and spiritually available to another; we are present. We are accessible in a non-judgmental, fully open and intentional manner. Our hearts are open and there are no pre-conditions. How will we respond to God's call this year?

Will we, like Abraham, perform the task ourselves? When are we willing to respond to a call for help?

For friends, families, and strangers whose stories touch our hearts, we stand up to make a difference in someone's life through our presence. We have many opportunities as a TBA community . When we feed the hungry on a Bridges Run or help at the newly established Soup Kitchen, Café 5000, in East Orange; when we go on a Midnight Run with our teens; when we volunteer each week with the Zakkours, a Syrian refugee family in Elizabeth. So many have responded Hineni-I am here—I am present for you.

Hineni

The **second** time Abraham responds Hineni in the text he is speaking to his son, Isaac.

Despite the gravity of the task, Abraham is following God's call and takes his son Isaac on the way to Mt. Moriah. They walk together. Isaac carries the wood while Abraham carries the firestone and knife. Then Isaac calls out to his father and Abraham responds, Hineni, my son.

Isaac is perplexed, perhaps even troubled. Where is the sheep for offering? Abraham tells Isaac that God will see to it and the two of them walk together.

Before and after Isaac's question, the text tells us that they walk together. *Vayelchu shneyhem yachdav.*

Hineni. What does it mean to walk with someone when we fear where we are going? We accompany our loved ones on paths unknown. Our being there, our presence, provides support.

We respond Hineni out of love standing in support of a family member or friend. We are present even when we don't have an answer. We walk with someone through the trial; through the scary time. When we love someone, we want them to be content/safe/loved. However, we can not tell them what will be ---we are not omniscient-we can not fix everything-but we can be present.

How do we approach moments or expanded times of discomfort and fear? Our lives are filled with trials and sometimes tragedies. The excruciating pain of witnessing someone we love suffer, or worse, is beyond understanding. Yet, we have a choice to respond through our presence. We will walk with our loved ones through these dark days, praying for light to emerge.

How can we be more present for our loved ones this year?

The **third** time Abraham responds Hineni, Abraham's hand is in the air, holding a knife, about to slay his son. The angel of God called to him from heaven: Abraham, Abraham, and he responded, Hineni.

Setting aside the horrible imagery of Abraham nearly killing his son, note that Abraham was fully immersed in following God's test. He responded to God's call. He walked with his son. And now, Abraham was interrupted.

What does it mean to respond to a call from God or an individual, when we need to abandon an action we are about to complete?

Answering the call that interrupts another action requires the ability to listen. And in listening, to heed the call.

Abraham thought that sacrificing his son was God's true test, but in reality, it was listening to God.

What calls will interrupt us? How will we be redirected on life's path?

How will we hear God's call?

Hineni---being present is not only for challenging times. It is for life's happy occasions and even everyday events. A lost tooth. A conversation with a child who is suddenly very communicative, far past bedtime. Attending an event where a friend is honored. Traveling to see your college child compete in an event. When we make the decision to show up for a simcha---it's wonderful especially when we are there in body and spirit.

Our lives are full and calendars often overscheduled. Multitasking makes us feel more productive. How often are we simultaneously watching tv, checking our computers, using a phone and playing Candy Crush, Pokemon Go or another game? Technological devices that are supposed to support us achieve our goals can end up becoming a relationship of their own. It's difficult to truly hear another's call when we are distracted.

Ironically, while working on this sermon theme, my son who often prefers to spend time online with his friends, was eager to play a game with me. Unexpectedly, I was caught between the desire to focus on my work versus responding Hineni to my son. During this period of teshuva, reflecting on my life, I was presented with the opportunity to turn towards the best version of myself. The writing waited.

In fact, I remember when one of my sons was little, he would literally turn my head towards him when he was speaking to me if he didn't think I was paying attention.

My friend and rabbinical school classmate, Rabbi Rebecca Dubowe, is the first deaf rabbi ordained by HUC-JIR. She taught me sign language for Sh'ma. While some may place a hand over an ear to show the word "hear," Rebecca taught me that she prefers to translate Sh'ma as "pay attention" with hands placed on one's face next to the eyes.

How true it is that to be present for someone, we need to pay attention. In our daily conversation when we greet someone and say "Hi, how are you?" we expect the response to be "good, and you?" The same question in Hebrew can yield a similar response yet the question, "Mah shlomcha

or mah shlomech” means how is your well being----How is your Shalom—peace or wholeness?

As I contemplate Hineni in my life, I think about times when others were and are present for me and how I can be present for others. Rabbi Norman Cohen, my Midrash teacher, explains in his book, *Hineini in our lives*: “We can heal our broken world-promoting tikun olam-when we are willing to see the world through the eyes of other people and respond to them with an open heart. Thus we can shape the future for our descendants, transcending the confines of our own lives.” [p.11]

How will we respond Hineni?

Will we respond unconditionally? The deeper the relationship, the more likely we will respond no matter what the call. When a child asks a parent for help, do we say, “Hold on. I’m doing something important.” Or do we offer a true Hineni? When a parent is in need of long term care, is our first inclination to respond with an open heart? When a sibling or friend is aching, do we turn to help him or her, even if our own challenges are weighing us down?

Abraham received three calls in this parsha: His first response Hineni teaches us to respond immediately and take action. We do not wait for the right timing to engage with the needs in front of us.

The second Hineni, when Abraham responds to his son, Isaac, shows we can respond when we don’t know what we can possibly do to provide help or solve the problem. We recognize that our presence is enough.

The third Hineni, when Abraham listens to God’s call and does not complete his awful mission, teaches us to accept that sometimes the interruption is more important than the original task. We allow ourselves to change course.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, theologian, scholar and author, discusses the challenge of responding Hineni in his book, *God In Search of Man*

“When living true to the wonder of the steadily unfolding wisdom, we feel at times as if the echo of a voice were piercing the silence, trying in

vain to reach our attention. We feel at times called upon, not knowing by whom, against our will, terrified at the power invested in our words, in our deeds, in our thoughts. In our own lives, the voice of God speaks slowly, a syllable at a time.”

*(God in Search of Man, p. 174)*

When we listen closely, we are able to respond to the call. This Summer I received an invitation to my college roommate son’s Bar Mitzvah in Chicago. I missed her older daughter’s Bat Mitzvah and knew I wanted to be present this time. Falling in September, it was a few weeks before the holidays but early enough that it seemed possible to be away for the weekend.

While speaking with her before finalizing my plans, she told me that I did not need to feel obligated to attend just because she was at my son’s Bar Mitzvah a year and a half ago. She said she’ll be in NYC for work soon and we could spend time then. As I listened to my friend, I realized that my decision to be at her son’s Bar Mitzvah moved from any sense of obligation to a profound sense of love. Hineni--I am here—for you my friend. It’s not always possible to travel but when we are able to be present for joyous occasions, as well as sad times, we can feel God’s presence in our Hineni responses.

I was even more grateful to be present as she faced many family challenges over the Summer. Being supportive for a friend, answering Hineni in times of challenge, makes it especially sweet to respond Hineni and magnify their joy for celebrations.

Rabbi Harold Schulweis says: This is what Hineni is all about—the initial willingness to respond to the other, the readiness to act on the other’s behalf no matter what is being asked. When trust has been built up and we have lived in a committed relationship over time, then each of us has to be ready to respond and act when the other, to whom we are committed, calls. [Hineni in our Lives, Norman Cohen, p. 8]

As we engage in the work of Teshuva, Tefila and Tzedaka on these Yamim Noraim, may we grant ourselves the extra breaths to be present in the moment. This allows for deeper reflection of where we are and

where we are going. We can better understand how we will respond to the Hineni moments when we deepen our self-knowledge.

On this Rosh Hashanah 5777 I offer this prayer for all of us:

Elohai N'shama

God, who gives us breath

Help us to be mindful of your presence

And the impact we have when we respond to others

God of our ancestors, our God,

Open our hearts to You and to one another

We pray that the New Year brings blessing and healing to us and our

world and thank you for the ability to respond

Hineni---I am fully present

I am here for you

Hineni.