

Hineini – Here I am

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5772

Hineini, here I am. Tonight I want to explore with you this rare – it only appears 8 times in Torah – and important word.

Hineini. The first hineini is uttered by Abraham as a response to God’s call at the beginning of the Akedah, the story of Abraham’s near sacrifice of his son Isaac that we read during Rosh Hashannah. Vayomer elav “Avraham,” vayomer, hineini.” God calls to Abraham – “Avraham” – and Abraham, always ready to do God’s will, responds, Hineini, here I am. A little later in this terrifying tale Isaac calls out to his father, perhaps in fearful anticipation of what is about to happen, “Avi” (My father), and Abraham again responds, “Hineini b’ni”, (here I am, my son). And finally right as Abraham is about to slit his son’s throat, an angel calls twice to Abraham, “Avraham(!), Avraham(!) and again Abraham says, “Hinei” (Here I am).

Each time Hineini appears in the Torah, it marks a pivotal moment in the narrative. When Jacob tricks his blind father Isaac into giving him and not Esau his blessing, he calls after him “Avi” (My father) and Isaac responds “Hineini.” When Jacob, now a father himself, calls his favorite son Joseph in order to set him off to look after his brothers, Joseph answers “Hineini” as well, not knowing that this errand will soon result in his being sold into slavery by those very same brothers. Twenty years pass, and Jacob sets out to meet Joseph, his long lost son. On the way, Jacob falls asleep for the night and God comes to him in a dream: “Yaakov, Yaakov–Jacob, Jacob,” God calls. How does Jacob respond? “Hineini,” here I am. And later, when God calls to Moses from the burning bush: “Moishe! Moishe!”–“Moses! Moses!”—he too answered “Hineini.”

Hineini! What are we to make of this potent and important word? I see hineini at work on two planes, the vertical – a response to God – and the horizontal – a response to another human being.

Let’s start with the vertical: hineini as response to God. The question that hineini answers is actually first posed to Adam in the Garden of Eden after he has eaten the forbidden fruit – Ayekah? Where are you? God asks. The question is not a physical one; we can assume that God knew where Adam was. Rather, the question poses an existential challenge: where are you in your life? Where are you spiritually, emotionally, morally? Adam is too ashamed to answer.

Ok. I know that for many, as soon as we talk about God, you go blank, as if the power was cut from a computer. That is ok. For those who struggle with the concept of divinity, let’s put that struggle aside for a moment and just allow the existential question – Ayeka? Where are you? – to wash over us.

Are you where you want to be in your life? Are you where you want to be with your family, friends, community, work? How is your spiritual life? Ayeka? Where are you? Are you where you want to be? No better time than now, on the cusp of the New Year to ask that question, and

honestly answer it, to show up for yourself, to say hineini to your own quest for meaning, for a life well lived.

And what role does God play in our showing up for ourselves? When and if God “calls” us, can we or do we respond?

16 years ago, my first Holy Days with you, I gave a very personal talk on Yom Kippur about what today I would call a hineini moment – God called and I responded. It’s a true story and it goes like this:

26 years ago I was living in San Francisco working as an outside salesman for “Payday The Payroll Company.” For me then, Yom Kippur was like any other day of the year, at least that was what I thought. That year, Yom Kippur happened to fall on a weekday so, like any other day, I got in my car, a yellow pop-top VW bus with black paisley curtains, early in the morning and started making the rounds, visiting customers, and making sales calls. I remember that it was a busy time of year for me, and I was working hard and doing well. But, that day, something felt out of place. I had this sickening feeling that I was missing something. Something just didn’t feel right, like when you have a fish bone lodged in your throat and you can’t get it out, but it wasn’t physical. I actually remember pulling over some where near the panhandle of Golden Gate Park. “What is going on?” I wondered. “Am I sick, should I pack it in for the day?” Then it dawned on me. “Today is Yom Kippur and I am working!” I didn’t know much about Jewish life then, but I knew enough to know that that was wrong. And I knew what I had to do – get myself to a synagogue. And, as it turned out, there was one practically across the street – Congregation Beth Shalom.

I parked my car, and walked in the shul. They were just finishing mincha, the afternoon service, when I arrived. I didn’t know that then. As a matter of fact, I had not a clue what was going on. I simply found a seat towards the back of the sanctuary and sat down. It was all in Hebrew and I didn’t even know how to read Hebrew, let alone participate in the service. But that didn’t matter. I just needed to be there. I cried a river that day. I cried the tears of a young man who had been away a long time and had finally come home; God had called and I had answered, hineini, here I am.

You may be thinking to yourself, “Nice story rabbi, but that has never happened to me.” I wonder... Really? You’ve never felt drawn to act, pulled up from the inside out by something bigger than yourself? I have a hunch that hineini moments are available to all of us all the time, if we are open to both “hearing” and responding.

One reason we tend to shut out “God’s voice,” or what some might call the voice of conscience or the yearnings of our soul, is that, more often than not, the message is uncomfortable, challenging or down right scary. When God called to Abraham, Abraham thought God asked him to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. Who would want to answer that call?! When God called to Moses, it was to lead a revolution against the mightiest country and the most powerful despot of the known world at that time. No wonder Moses baulked! I wonder if Moses didn’t occasionally think, “You know if I would have just kept walking and not stopped to look at that darn bush, life would have been so much easier.”

Thankfully, we are not Abraham or Moses. The kind of Divine communication I am talking about is less demanding and more subtle. As the prophet Elijah found out, God is often not in the fire, or earthquake but rather in the “still small voice” (after 1Kings:19:12). That’s the call we need to hear: the still small voice of conscience, the yearning of our souls, the sometimes desperate pleas of our hearts. But since the call is subtler, it is often harder to hear, especially given the blistering pace of most of our lives, not to mention the deafening background noise that surrounds us.

Oh, excuse me, my iPhone is ringing... God, I love my iPhone. I bet you didn’t know that I can actually text, and check e-mail during services...

Not really. You would be outraged if in fact I was on my phone, but somehow it is not outrageous if you are checking yours right now, no shame intended. And, in truth, I am no tzaddik. Like so many of you, I too can be seen, nervously reaching for my iPhone, talking, texting, or e-mailing when I should be paying attention to the person, the action or just the moment that is now. As Rabbi Maurice Salth noted, “Many of us who began using these tools for work now find them next to our plates at dinner or on our night stand in the bedroom. All too often our tools meant to make life better end up keeping us from experiencing our lives all together.” (Adapted from “Bucky Dent and Rosh HaShanah by Rabbi Maurice Salth, Central Synagogue, NYC, 9/8/2010)

Remember how when God calls to Moses at the Burning Bush, he responds, Hineini. What if, at that very moment, Moses had been updating his status on Facebook? According to the Midrash, many shepherds passed by that bush but only Moses notices that it was burning and not being consumed. He stares at it in amazement, and then, only after God has Moses’ full attention, that God calls: “Moses, Moses” and he responds, Hineini.

Ayeka, Ayeka, Ayeka!? Where are you! Where are you? Where are we? I do believe God calls even those who don’t believe in God! In fact, I often think our problems with divinity are mostly about language – I call it “God” you may call it “our higher selves” or “conscience”. Can we let go of that struggle and focus on the results of that struggle – what we want out of life, how we want to live. The question is, are we able to hear “the still small voice” –and no that is not a ringtone! – can we hear it, and respond, hineini, here I am.

Let’s move from the vertical plain, bein adam l’makom/between a person and The Place – a grand name for God, to the horizontal plain, bein adam l’havero/one person and another.

To do this, let’s return to the story of the Akeda that we’ll hear chanted tomorrow morning. When Abraham and Isaac are on their way up the mountain, Isaac, perhaps realizing that things are not adding up – we have everything for the sacrifice but the animal to slaughter! – he calls to his father: “Avi” and that is when Abraham responds “Hineini”, here I am my son.

Every time I read the Akedah I am struck by the silence between father and son– Abraham and Isaac hardly say a word to each other. Rabbi Rick Jacobs the incoming President of the URJ (Union for Reform Judaism) – we were fellows at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem together – comments: “I wonder if the father of the Jewish people (Abraham) has any idea who

his son is?...Abraham is too consumed with his holy work to notice the fragile, little boy (Isaac).”

I'd like to think I do better knowing and communicating with my family, but they might tell a different story. How about yours? Research suggests that “fathers spend an average of seven minutes per day relating to each of their children.” In other words, “men spend more time showering, and shaving than they do talking to their kids” Ouch! (Hineini in our Lives, pg. 134). Let's face it, many if not all of us are like Abraham, involved in our own worlds – our careers, our interests, or our principles – so much so that we are blind to the fact that our children, our spouses, our parents are bound on the alter, sacrificed metaphorically like Isaac was nearly done physically.

What does it take for us to do teshuvah, to reorient in away that allows us to hear the call of those closest to us and to respond, hineini, here I am?

Our family and friends offer us hineini moments. The same is true for our community, and the organizations that sustain us like Shomrei Torah.

Over the years I have been awed by the myriad ways folks at Shomrei Torah respond with hineini to the many calls for personal help and communal service. Shomrei Torah has a big heart; people really care and give of themselves in every way to keep our community going and to respond to the needs of our members. We are not perfect – folks can fall through the cracks, we can let people down – but when we fail it is usually not for a lack of caring or effort.

And, it is also true that a relatively small group carries the majority of the weight both in volunteer hours and in financial support. The truth is, if Shomrei Torah is going to continue to prosper – be there for you at times like these and in more personal moments of joy or crisis – we need your help. If you are not a member, please join. We need you. We can't continue to carry the weight of the whole community without more communal support. If you are a member but not active or generous, think about making a bigger commitment; to be there for you, we need you to be there for us. You may only seek us out once or twice a year, but for us, Hineini, being able to respond to the needs of our community, is a 24/7 job.

Reb Zalman, Rabbi Zalman Shshchter-Shalomi, one of the spiritual giants of our time and the founder of the Renewal Movement, offers a reminder of why we need to answer our community's call for us with Hineini.

He tells how, during the Shoah, much of the Hassidic world was destroyed including most of the great rabbis and teachers of that time. This was a devastating blow to the Jewish world, one we are still reeling from. However, the few rabbis who did survive against all odds were able to in some ways, rebuild after the war. One of those was the Beltzner rebbe. This is what happened:

Early on in the War, before all the deportations, ghettos were being formed and the Jews of Eastern Europe found themselves in increasingly perilous situations. The Gestapo, seeking to further demoralize and oppress the Jews, burst into the house of the Beltzner rebbe and demanded to know where he was. The rebbe's gabai, his aid, a physically more imposing figure than the rebbe himself, stepped forward and said – you guessed it – hineini, “I am the one.” They shot him on the spot and left. Reb Zalman writes, “This sacrifice made possible a renewed

blossoming of a great heritage. Subsequently, the Beltzer rebbe and his brother were disguised in Nazi uniforms and spirited to safety.” (ibid, pg.162)

Reb Zalman finishes the story with some gematria, worth sharing this evening. In gematria, each Hebrew letter has a numeric value. When you add the numeric value of the letters in hineini, they total 115, which is also the value of the letters of the words, anachnu (we), aliya (ascent), and ha'am (the people). By being counted in hineini, we become part of the larger “we” – we transcend ourselves and experience an ascent, an aliya of awareness that frees us from our own limitations – the narrowness of I-ness—and thus we become part of ha-am, the people. (ibid, pg. 161)

Hineini. I am here. Responding to the call of the other, whether it be some one in our family, or in our community, often requires sacrifice; we have to give of our time, energy, money in ways we might not have originally planned, to reach beyond our self made boundaries, responding to the higher voice that is constantly asking Ayeka? Where are you? Because, ultimately, that question begins to sound like, Who are you?

What would happen if we all were able to answer the call, to declare, Hineini? This reminds me of a Hassidic teaching about the meaning of Birkat Hakohanim, the Priestly Blessing: “My God bless you and keep you, my God’s countenance shine upon you and be gracious to you, May good’s face shine upon you and bring you peace.”

This blessing is very popular in Judaism... and in Christianity: common but hard to understand.

What does it mean for “God’s face to shine upon you?” In truth, no one really knows, but here is one worthy interpretation – “may we live lives that are so true, so honest, so kind that we could, as it were, look God ‘in the eye’ with no shame, no embarrassment, no need to avert our gaze from The One that knows all and sees all.

Friends, the time is now. Our families and friends need us now. Your community needs you now. The New Year beckons – Ayeka? Ayeka! Where are you? Are you where you want to be? Are you the person you ought to be?

It is not too late. There is no better time than the present to say, Hineini, here I am.