

Words Can Hurt or Heal: Penina's Taunts vs. Avraham's "Hineni"

First Day of Rosh HaShanah: 5774/ 2013 by Rabbi Lisa Malik, Ph.D.

Years ago, when I was a camp counselor for a group of 4-year olds, one of the campers turned to me with tears streaming down her face. She pointed to another one of the little girls in the bunk, and said, "She called me a big baby." The little girl was sobbing so uncontrollably that she could barely catch her breath. Desperately wanting to take away her sadness, I gave her a big hug and responded, "Oh, he must have been talking about your little brother," referring to her newborn sibling. But that little girl was too smart to believe me. With eyes watering over, the 4-year old said, "She came this close to me, and looked right at me, and said, "You are a big baby"" She was definitely not talking about my little brother."

PAUSE

That little girl was right. That's exactly what happened. And neither the best intentions nor the biggest hug imaginable could have taken away her pain at that moment.

I have thought about that little girl later many times over the past few years. Maybe, as she got older, she might not have cared as much about what other people said to her, but as we all know, far too well, **words can hurt teenagers and adults too**. When we get older, we may not cry publicly in reaction to **harmful words** like we did when we were children, but that doesn't mean that we don't sometimes feel like crying when someone verbally attacks us in person or by phone, text message, or email.

Like the story of my 4-year old camper, there is another story about a child who **cried as a result of harmful words** that most of you probably don't remember, although it took place this past **January (2013)**.

Of course, we all remember some of the big news stories that were covered in the media between last Yom Kippur & this Yom Kippur, including: Hurricane Sandy, the Boston Marathon bombing, Ed Snowden's seeking asylum (after leaking top-secret government surveillance programs to the media), the escalating civil war in Syria, the rash of violent protests in Egypt, including the ousting & imprisonment of President Morsi, & *I'havdil*, the birth of the "little prince" (William & Kate's son, George).

In the midst of all of these events making headlines over the past year, you might have missed the story of the suicide of a **14-year old girl** from Novaro, Italy who was the **victim of cyber-bullying**. **Carolina Picchio** was a beautiful teenager with a bright future. Then, late on the night of January 4, she jumped out of her bedroom window from her family's fourth-floor apartment. She died instantly when she landed headfirst on the pavement below. Before she jumped, she updated her status on Facebook with a chilling suicide note: "Forgive me if I'm not strong. I cannot take it any longer." // Carolina's ex-boyfriend and some of his friends had been circulating a suggestive video of her that had been taken at a party, in which she appeared tipsy and disheveled. The teenage boys, ages 13-17, had also been sending her nasty text messages and bullying her on Facebook with insults and threats. On the day that Caroline took her life, she had received 2,600 vulgar messages through "Whatsapp." In a letter that police found in Carolina's bedroom after her suicide, Carolina wrote to her ex-boyfriend, "Haven't you done enough to me already?.....How many times do I have to pay?" The **harmful words** on the Internet that were directed against this 14-year old girl ultimately caused her to kill herself.

As we know, the **power of speech** doesn't stop with our teenagers. How many of you have ever been **slandered by others**? And how many of you have been on the **receiving end of a nasty comment (or a perceived nasty comment) in an email message**? How many of you have been hurt when you found out that people you trusted were **saying nasty things about you behind your back..... or to your face?**

Then there's another story that you might have missed in the news: the story of **Carol Anne Gotbaum, a 45-year old woman** who died in Sky Harbor International Airport in Phoenix, Arizona a few years ago (2007); she is a woman who **could have been saved by a simple or compassionate word**. Carol had flown from NY to Phoenix earlier that day and had been attempting to board a flight from Phoenix to Tucson, where she was supposed to be checking into an alcohol rehabilitation center. Carol was the mother of three young children, and she had picked this particular series of flights so that she could drop her daughters off at their Jewish Day School that morning, before she left. But when Carol arrived at the gate in Phoenix for her connecting flight, she found out that the flight had been overbooked. When Carol found out that there wouldn't be room for her on the next flight either, she became exasperated. Sensing her desperation, the other passengers willingly offered Carol their seats, but the counter personnel at the airport wouldn't allow them to make the switch. And when Carol began to cry and protest, US Airways employees called the police. Carol was then handcuffed, dragged to a holding cell, chained to a bench, and left crying inconsolably. When the police officers returned to the cell, Carol was dead, with the chain stretched across her throat.

I wonder: What if someone else had been behind the counter that morning? What if someone, that day, had responded to the devastation, pain and fear on this woman's face with compassion? Would Carol Gotbaum be sitting in Rosh Hashanah services today – just like we are – ready to begin anew?

The **High Holidays** bring us another story, the **Haftarah** about **Channah and Penina** that was chanted in shul **today**. As was customary in biblical times, Channah and Penina were both married to the same man, Elkanah, and, as is often the case in the Tanach (otherwise known as “The Diary of Imperfect families”), their shared husband, Elkanah, had a favorite: He loved Channah more than he loved Penina. But while Channah had her husband’s heart, Penina was able to have his children, a whole gaggle of children. Channah was devastated by her infertility. Year after year after year, Channah would make a pilgrimage to Shiloh, a special place where she could pour her heart out to God in prayer. All the while, Penina would tease Channah about her inability to have children. Penina would torment Channah so much that Channah would become physically ill. Channah wasn’t **4**-years old. She wasn’t **13**-years old. She was a grown woman with a heart filled with longing who was in deep pain: in part, because of her infertility, and in part, because another person was causing her an incredible amount of anguish through her harsh words....such anguish that it made Channah’s stomach ache... such anguish that it made Channah cry to such an extent that it rendered her prayers incomprehensible to an outside observer.

Whoever said that “**sticks and stones** can break your bones, but (names)/**words** can never hurt you,” was living in a world other than the world I know. **Words (and sometimes, the absence of words)** may not be able break bones in a literal physical sense, but they **can break the human heart and spirit**. They can tear apart relationships, and a person’s sense of self. In some extreme cases, they can even end lives. In some ways, **words can be much more harmful than sticks and stones!** (PAUSE)

But words not only have the **power to harm**;
they also have the **power to heal**.

In fact, there is one small word, one beautiful word that has the power to change people's lives for the better. It is a word that appeared in this morning's Torah reading from *Parashat VaYera*, and it appears other times in the Tanach, as well. It is a **word** that could potentially change the world. That word is "**Hineni**."

Tomorrow morning, on the **2nd day of Rosh HaShanah**, we will read about our patriarch, **Avraham**, who shouted out the word, "**Hineni**," repeatedly.

Ta Shma. Come with me and listen to a modern retelling of the story of *Akedat Yitzchak*, the Binding & Near-Sacrifice of Isaac: Avraham is sitting in his kitchen with his wife Sara. They are sipping their coffee, she is reading her favorite section of the local paper, and he is reading various blogs on the internet. Their son, Yitzchak, is text-messaging his friends in the next room.

Suddenly, Avraham hears the voice of God calling out to him, "Avraham. Avraham!" Recognizing that there must be something urgent prompting this unusual call, Avraham puts down his coffee mug, shuts his computer, and responds, "**Hineni**." "Here I am, God. I am fully present to you, willing to do whatever you need me to do!"

Now that God has gotten Avraham's attention, God continues, "*Kach na et bincha, et y'chidcha, asher ahavta, et Yitzchak, v'lech lecha el Eretz HaMoriah v'haaleyhu sham l'olah.*"

"Bring your son, your only son, the son whom you love, whose name is Isaac, and go to the Land of Moriah & offer him up as a sacrifice to Me".

By saying, "**Hineni**," Avraham had already agreed to the sacrifice. With just one small word, "**Hineni**," Avraham was able to communicate to God the depths of his love, faith, and commitment.

It takes a lot to utter the word, "**Hineni**," to someone else, whether that 'someone' is God or another person. It takes a lot to say, "Here I am for you, really present for you: without judgment, without conditions, without guilt, no matter how big or small your needs may be!" (PAUSE)

One woman who inspires me with her "**Hineni's**" is a Yemenite woman in Jerusalem whom I met when I was a teenager on USY Israel Pilgrimage. Her name is **Rabbanit Bracha Kapach** and she is one of the Mitzvah Heroes highlighted by Danny Siegel in his book, "Gymshoes & Irises." Bracha began responding "**Hineni**" to the calls of others when she was just 6 years old and her mother sent her to deliver food to the doorstep of a poor neighbor. Her mother instructed her to leave the food and run away so that the neighbors wouldn't feel embarrassed.

Years later, that little girl, now an adult, had a "**Hineni moment.**" She was walking home when she heard a woman crying in a nearby apartment. She knocked on the door of that apartment and opened the door to find an old woman, lying in filth, in desperate need of food and water. She washed the woman, changed her clothes, fed her and returned back to care for her every week, for years, until the old woman died. The Rabbanit heard a cry and she responded, "**Hineni.**" For over 80 years, the Rabbanit Kapach responded to hundreds of cries, with a heartfelt, "**Hineini!**" As an adult, the Rabbanit provides wedding gowns for poor brides, as well as Shabbat meals for hundreds of people that line up each week outside of her tiny apartment to pick up their homemade meal. She also runs international trips for handicapped people, and, in her spare time, she teaches elderly women how to swim.

Can you imagine? People know that they have a caring partner in the woman whose actions and very essence embodies the spirit of the word, "**Hineni!**"

Rabbi Avi Weiss, a well known political activist and spiritual leader of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale and founder of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, once told a story about the time his parents were coming back from Israel to New York for their annual visit. It was always Rabbi Weiss' responsibility to pick them up from the airport when they came in. This time, his father called to let him know that their flight would be arriving 24 hours earlier than scheduled. "Professing my deep love for my parents," Rabbi Weiss said, "I insisted that I couldn't change my schedule on such short notice." To which his dad retorted, "You don't have time for your parents anymore?" To which Rabbi Weiss responded, "I love you deeply, Dad, but it's hard to change my plans at the last minute." Rabbi Weiss never forgot his father's response. It was, "**Don't love me so much, just pick me up at the airport!**"

We must never forget that sometimes, showing up and responding to the call means more than just saying, "I love you." "**Hineni**" is more than just a verbal utterance. It is a **word**, backed up by **actions**, assuring the other that your love isn't conditional, that you will be there for them through the ups & downs of life. We live in a world that is full of, "**I will love you ifs...**" Wouldn't it be wonderful if every person had someone in their life who would say, "**I will love you even if**" ?"

"I will love you, even if you say something stupid, even if you fail miserably, even if you do the wrong thing, even if you make a mistake. **I will love you no matter what... unconditionally.**

Dr. Leo Buscaglia taught that if there is one person in this world with whom we can feel connected--totally, unabashedly, and unashamedly--we will never die of loneliness. **One person!** Not fifty, not a hundred, not a thousand. It really doesn't matter who that person is, just one person to whom you can go and lay it on the line, someone who will listen, someone from whom you don't have to hide, someone to whom you can say, "These are my feelings," and they would respond by saying, "Thanks for sharing your feelings with me. I am here for you and I will love you with all of your imperfections and your humanity! And if and when you hurt or disappoint me, and if and when I hurt or disappoint you, let's commit to working through it, because I want to have you in my life forever!"

In essence, Dr. Buscaglia was describing a **"Hineni" relationship.**

Yet, most people are scared to be in **Hineni relationships.** Most people are afraid to be truly present to another person, or to allow someone else to be that person to them.

But, let's face it, we all need someone who will say, **"Hineni"** to us and, to whom we can say, **"Hineni."** And you should know that there's a **hidden benefit** to the utterance of **"Hineni."** When you say **"Hineni"** to another person and commit to be present to them, you not only have the potential to change his/her life; in the process, you can also make your own life truly matter.

While **words** have the potential to break our hearts and our souls, they also have the potential to heal them. Let's choose our words wisely this year, and let's shout out to the people we know, the people we love, to God, and to life,

"Hineni!"

"Here I am, ready to begin a new year, and to become an even better me!"

Shanah Tovah!

Additional Hineni stories for future use:

1) The Russian writer **Turgenyev** once wrote about a time that he was walking down the street and a beggar stopped him, "He was a frail old man," wrote Turgenyev, "...with inflamed eyes, blue chapped lips, wearing filthy rags. Oh how poverty had disfigured him. He stretched out to me his swollen, filthy hand and whimpered for money. I reached into my pocket, but no money did I find. I had it at home. The beggar waited, and his outstretched hand trembled slightly. Embarrassed and confused, I seized his hand and pressed it and I said, "Brother, don't be angry with me! I am sorry but I have nothing to give you. I left my wallet at home, brother." The beggar raised his bloodshot eyes to mine. His blue lips smiled and he returned the pressure of my fingers. "Never mind," he stammered. "Thank you, thank you for this... this too was a gift. No one ever called me brother before.""

2) While there are many angels out there, doing great things in the world, the **Prophet Isaiah** reminds us that it is often easier to hear and respond to the faceless needy people whom we will never meet, rather than reaching out to our parents, children, spouses, siblings and partners, since these relationships can carry so much baggage. (Norman Lamm) Even with our family members, many relationships have become conditional these days.

3) In his book, **Why Doesn't Anyone Blush Anymore?**, **Rabbi Manis Friedman** tells the following story:

A husband and a wife went to the supermarket. The store was crowded, the lines were long, and the husband was feeling proud of himself for accompanying his wife to get their groceries. The couple got to the front of the line, unloaded their cart, and were about to pay, when the woman suddenly realized that she had forgotten her coupons as she went digging in her purse to find them.

The people in the line behind them at the supermarket began shifting their bodies restlessly. Lot of impatient sighs emerged when they watched the woman search for her coupons in vain. The husband, quite aware of what was going on, tried to ease the tension by rolling his eyes at the cashier and saying, "She's always doing things like this."

Not a particularly unusual scene. But what Rabbi Friedman said about the scene was truly insightful He said that in the moment that the husband rolled his eyes and whispered to the cashier, he divorced himself from his wife. He was embarrassed by her behavior so he separated himself from her and, instead, shared his intimacy with a total stranger, with whom he had no relationship with and whom he would probably never even see again .

Can you imagine a world where we stood by one another and recognized that we're all simply human, doing the best we can? Can you imagine a world in which people said "Hineini" to each other on a regular basis?

4) One man that showed us this type of living was **Tim Russert**; An accomplished journalist, news anchor and politico, Russert was the type of person who said, "**Hineini**" so often that he had beloved friends throughout the country and a father, wife and son whose calls he was never too busy to pick up, to hear or to respond to. On the day that Tim Russert died, do you know where he had been? I heard that he had gone to his son's Manhattan apartment to wait for the cable guy to

come. No matter how busy or renowned he was, he was always there to say, "Hineini" to those he loved. We sit here today, on the cusp of a new year and new opportunities. Our prayer book reminds us that while we don't know our fate, what we do know is that each and every one of us has the power to destroy lives through our words and the power to create fuller, richer, lives for ourselves and for others through our words.