

Hineini

These aren't the HHDs we thought they would be back in June. As vaccinations soared and Covid cases plummeted, we had hope that our services this year would be, well, close to normal. Or as close as possible. And then Delta. We plan; Covid laughs. For these reasons, our usual measure of presence at the High Holidays proves inadequate for us this year.

We are used to looking out into the congregation, counting chairs, seeing how many are full. You have your tush in a seat, and you're present. Praying with us. This year as with last year, we can't count that way. Because for many reasons, we've chosen to show up in other ways. Some of us have kids who can't get vaccinated. Others have vulnerable family members. And still others, rightfully, are worried for their own safety. And yet, I'm willing to bet that no matter how you're present with us this year, you're as present as ever, if not more so.

There is one word in Judaism that is emphatically about presence. The word, "*hineini*". "This one simple Hebrew word, [*hineini*,] conveys millennia of Jewish transformation and acceptance of responsibility."¹ It signifies not just, "Yeah...I'm here," but rather, "I am fully present." Whenever this word appears in the Torah, it indicates a moment of profound change or crisis. And... "*Hineini*" appears three times in today's famous Torah reading, the *Akedah*. In just 11 verses, Abraham answers *hineini*, *hineini*, *hineini*. And these three *hineinis* teach us three ways to be present: connecting with The Divine, supporting each other, and connecting with our own deepest emotions.

¹ Cantor Matt Axelrod, Hineni A Prayer for The Ability to Pray. <myjewishlearning.com>

Our torah portion opens, “...*V’HaElohim Nisah et Avraham*--And God put Abraham to the test. *Vayomer eilav, Avraham!*--God calls, Abraham! and Abraham answers, *hineini*”. The medieval commentator Ibn Ezra notes that this test of Abraham was not given because God needed to know whether or not Abraham was truly faithful to God--the medieval commentators agree that God already knows Abraham is deeply faithful. Rather, God wanted to demonstrate, to Abraham himself and to all of humanity, all of us later reading this account, Abraham’s exemplary unwavering connection with The Divine.² The test is not God asking Abraham, “Are you faithful to me?” It is God asking Abraham, “Do you see in yourself how faithful you are?” Abraham’s reply here, “*hineini*,” according to Ibn Ezra, helps Abraham and us consider how we are *hineini* in our own relationships with The Divine.

This summer, we had a wonderful ice cream social event at the synagogue. As we enjoyed some mango Italian ices, I spoke with a parent who was very much looking forward to being here at The Community Synagogue for the high holidays. This parent shared, “I’m not really religious, for me Judaism is about family, traditions and heritage,” a sentiment that so many of us share, “but,” the parent continued, “the high holidays feel really spiritual, they are so meaningful to me. I feel like something is *really happening*. The words, the rituals, the services, it’s powerful.”

Hineini, each of us is here, outside, in a tent, in the sanctuary, wearing a mask, at home physically, here on livestream--However we are here, we are fully present. Whether we would call ourselves “religious”, “traditional”, “cultural”, there is something about being here, in whatever way we’re here, that is different, that is fully present, that is connected with The

² Ibn Ezra on Genesis 22:1

Divine, however we understand, question or struggle with The Divine. We know this because, like Abraham, we value the Jewish spark within that inspires us to connect with this day, this place, these words, these rituals. Like Abraham, we may not recognize it in ourselves immediately, but there is a little bit of us that, particularly these days, feels *hineini*--connected to the presence of something greater.

The story continues, God tells Abraham, "Take Isaac to a mountain in *Moriah* that I will show you. There, offer him as a sacrifice." The next morning, Abraham, Isaac, a donkey and a couple of servants arrive at the foot of the mountain with the necessary supplies. Abraham, leaving the servants with the donkey, stacks the wood in Isaac's arms, and takes the firestone and knife. With his eyes focused on the place God has indicated, Abraham and Isaac walk on together. As his father continues to focus into the distance, his eyes on the mountain, Isaac senses that something is missing. Isaac says, "A-vi!--My father," and Abraham, taking his eyes from the mountain, from this test, from God, turns to his son, "*Hineini be-ni*--here I am, my son." Isaac, now looking into his father's eyes asks, "We have all of the tools that we need to serve God, but where is the offering?" Abraham, still looking into his son's eyes, replies, "God will see to the offering." And again the text repeats, "The two of them walked on together." No longer was Abraham looking towards the mountain, but now, he was looking towards his son.

Abraham's second "*hineini*" teaches us how we can be present with each other. The medieval commentator Rashi explains that, as Abraham and Isaac walked together following Isaac's question, they connected in a new way, they were *hineini* with each other, fully present, "with the same ready heart³."

³ Rosenbaum, Rev. M. and Silberman, Dr. A. M. Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtarot and Rashi's Commentary; Genesis. The Silberman Family, Jerusalem, 5733. p. 95.

This summer I presided over the funeral of a veteran. It was the first funeral I've been to where an honor guard was present. The casket was draped in an American flag, and sat elevated next to the grave. One service member saluted the casket, while the other played "Taps." The small family of just four, the funeral director, cemetery employees and I watched silently, teary, with hands over our hearts, hats off in the blazing 90-plus degree heat. *Hineini*. I had only known this family for 48 hours, same with the funeral director, and the cemetery employees and service members, they only met us at the graveside. But for all of us present with these four mourners, everything else in the world had stopped.

The two service members, together, folded the flag, each crease meticulous and mesmerizing. Each salute slow, intentional, as one handed the flag to the other, and then, with a few steps and a bow, placed it in the hands of the child with words of honor, surely said many times before, but said with such direct intensity, this moment felt absolutely unique. "*Hineini, be-ni--here I am, my child.*" The service member turned, focused on the casket, and saluted his fallen brother with words of final farewell. The ritual of this moment, the precision, the slow decisive motions--like stacking firewood sturdily in your arms--with this family we were all at once hesitant, carrying a heavy weight, and yet lifted, as if all of us had grabbed hold of this burden together, with the same ready heart.

Like Abraham and Isaac, being *hineini* with other people, doesn't always mean seeing eye to eye, we may feel hesitant, even heavy, yet when we are *hineini*, we reach out to each other, look for connection, we share the burden, lift each other, and walk on together.

Finally, at the peak of the *Akedah*, Isaac is bound and lying on the altar, his father standing over him, eyes locked on each other. A rabbinic teaching describes what flashed before

Isaac's eyes in that moment: he saw his descendants enslaved, the destruction of the Temple, and their expulsion from their homeland. He saw that "...what was happening to him would happen to others, a tale without end, an experience endured by his children and theirs."⁴ At that moment, as he lifted the knife, Abraham saw his son's vision as well. He saw that his own fears and hopes were reflected in his son's eyes. "*Avraham, Avraham!*--Abraham, Abraham!" An angel called at that moment. And Abraham replies... "*Hineini.*"

This is a moment of turning inward and a moment of personal accounting. For Abraham, this is a "*hineini*" of personal struggle, of really recognizing the emotions he is balancing, caught, like a ram, by the horns in a thicket. Like Abraham in this moment, we've all been that ram. Stuck in a place where we must make a difficult choice. There is no one else who will be able to make this choice for us. It is us, hearing our name, that must now be *hineini*, present for ourselves.

In his recent book, *Chatter*, psychologist Ethan Kross explains that one way we can be present with ourselves is by addressing ourselves in the third person rather than the first. A couple of years ago, a snowstorm hit our area. It was one of those storms where the sky was completely white. The snow fell in tiny, sticky flakes that you couldn't make out, the air just looked foggy and dense. When I saw the snow begin from my window, I was one hour from home. I left immediately. By the time I made it to what would normally be the halfway point, I had been driving for two hours. I lined up the wheels of my little Mazda 3 in the two well-worn tire tracks, windshield wipers at full speed, snow building up on the hood and around the windshield. In utter silence, my eyes wide to make out the road ahead through the narrowing

⁴ Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God*, p. 72

patch of clear windshield, I thought, “Jade, this is really scary. You cannot stop to clear the windshield. Stay on track, keep going nice and slow and smooth. It doesn’t matter how long it takes.” Kross explains that when we address ourselves in the third person, we are more aware of our emotions, more self-reflective and can better manage our reactions, particularly in challenging moments. “Jade, it’s going to be OK.”

Like my drive in that snowstorm, perhaps we can understand Abraham in the *Akedah* similarly. In this peak moment, an angel from heaven calls his name twice: *Avraham, Avraham!* We typically read this doubling of Abraham’s name as a point of emphasis, meant to snap Abraham out of a violent trance. But I would like to suggest something different. The first “*Avraham!*” was spoken by the angel. And the second was spoken by Abraham himself. “*Avraham!*”, he repeats after the angel, addressing himself with his own name in the most dramatic moment of his life. What are you doing Abraham? “*Avraham, Hineini.--Abraham--it’s time to be present.*” To feel this faith, pain and love, Abraham is present with himself, seeing himself more clearly than he ever has before.

Like Abraham, we’ve all experienced suffering, despair and grief, and at the same time, love, grace and gratitude. We too are called to be *hineini* for ourselves, not just to wait for a call to come, but to call out to ourselves and be present.

Finally, at the end of the *Akedah*, the Torah teaches us, “And Abraham renamed that place, ‘*Adonai yireh*’--‘God will see.’” Previously, Abraham only saw this mountain from a distance, like hundreds of empty chairs set for the high holidays. But it was on his journey to the top of this mountain that he was truly *hineini* with God, with his son and with himself. The mountain was transformed. The sanctuary was filled. Today, we are all Abraham, we are *hineini*.

When we become aware of our connection with God or something greater, when we reach out to each other, and when we call out to ourselves, we too have made it to this place, “*Adonai Yireh*”, this place where God sees and where we see. Being present isn’t about sitting in a chair in one place or another, being *hineini* is about answering *hineini* wherever we are.

Shanah tovah.