

Hineini- Rosh Hashana sermon 5780 Beth David Rabbi Walker

Shana Tova! It's so great to see you all here! I want to start with appreciation to all of you for being here today. Thank you for making a choice to be here today. If this is your first time here, welcome! If this is your first time back in a few months or maybe even in a year, welcome back! There can be so many barriers to walking in through the doors, both here and also of any synagogue- maybe work has been crazy lately and it was hard to take a day off, maybe we have class, maybe we had a negative experience in the past, maybe we feel like we don't "know enough" or really so many other things pulling us not to come, but despite all that you are here. So thank you.

(I know I haven't met many of you yet, so if you will allow me to take a brief moment to introduce myself. Hi, I'm Becca Walker, but around these parts I go by Rabbi Walker. I do respond to "Rabbi" but that gets confusing since there are multiple Rabbis here. I am the new engagement rabbi at Beth David, which means my primary mission is engaging and creating opportunities for people in their 20s30s and families with school-age and younger children. More on that later...)

We have quite a doozy of a Torah portion today, really both days of Rosh Hashanah the readings are very challenging, and show the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs in not the most positive light. Today, *Akedat yitzhak*-the binding of Isaac. Every year I have so many questions, and I have yet to find a satisfactory answer...and I do think that is part of the point. We can read this story for generations and still struggle over the implications, we can question and we can learn each and every year. Wow. But before all of that I want to take us to the very first line, to one word in particular which I am going to focus on. (Genesis 22:1)

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהָאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת־אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר
הִנְנִי:

(1) Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test. God said to him, "Abraham," and he answered, "Here I am."

Hineini- Here I am. I am here. What a word! 3 syllables and so much in it. God is calling for Abraham and Abraham responds- Hineini. Not “hi” or “whatsup” or “what do you want” or “Yes” but “I am here.”

To get a fuller understanding of this word, we can look at the other times it pops up in the Torah. Abraham is not the only one who says it. Moses says it in response to God’s call as well. At the burning bush when Moses notices the bush is burning but not being consumed God calls out: Moses Moses and Moses answers “hineini.” Jacob also answers Hineini, in a dream he is called to by an angel and answers back with this word.

Each of these times is before a big moment or a big ask from God. Abraham answers Hineini and God tells him to take Isaac as an offering. When Moses answers Hineini it is when God will tell Moses that he will be the messenger to bring the Israelite people out of Egypt. A big and scary task. When Jacob answers Hineini in his dream the messenger of God tells him it’s time to leave his father in-laws place and return back to the place of his birth...which will eventually lead to reuniting with his brother Esau. It is a big upheaval with him and his family.

When God calls out to Jacob, Abraham and Moses and they answer Hineini it is a symbol of their presence and readiness. Only after they answer hineini does God tell them their message. Hineini, as Rashi writes (Rashi on Gen 22:1)

כך היא עֲנִיְתָם שֶׁל חֲסִידִים, לְשׁוֹן עֲנָהּ הוּא וְלְשׁוֹן זְמַן:

HERE AM I — Such is the answer of the pious: it is an expression of humility and readiness.

Rashi is saying that Hineini is more than just a hi- it demonstrates an awareness and readiness. Hineini, I am here- isn’t just an update of where we are in physical space, but also mental and emotional as well. Hineini in my mind means- I am fully present.

When our patriarchs are fully present, that is when God knows God can speak to them and they are ready for the task. Hineini and that presence is what opens up the possibility for the message from God and for the relationship.

Even when God speaks to you it can be hard to be fully present. Imagine you are Abraham for a second and you hear the voice of God...that would be wild! I imagine I would feel a lot of emotions, there would be a part of me listening and a part of me thinking “whattttt is God talking to me right now?! This is crazy” and wondering why and how and a million other questions. There is great wisdom in the response “hineini”- it points us to the value of presence.

My question for all of us is how can we say “Hineini” more in our own lives? How can we be more present? How can we show up more completely? The shofar gives us some good practice for this. Today (and yesterday) we will hear the shofar, and actually this is the most important mitzvah of the day. The halacha tells us that if there is an option of going somewhere with amazing services but no shofar or a place that definitely won't have services but even just might have a shofar...we should choose the second option because hearing the shofar is most important. Luckily here we have both so we don't have to choose, but you get the point. We have a shofar here- but that is only half the battle because in order to fulfill the mitzvah we must have the proper kavana, the proper intention. In the mishnah rosh hashana (3:7) we are told a scenario of two people who happen to hear the shofar because they were walking by the synagogue or because they lived across the street. If they heard it and had in their mind they were hearing it to fulfill the mitzvah then it counts, but if they did not have that awareness then it does not count. If they weren't present and paying attention it is as if they haven't heard it at all. It is not just about hearing the shofar, but LISTENING with intention- having in our mind that we are listening to the shofar. It is an active listening, not passive. We have to be present for it. Ready to let the shofar open up our hearts and wake us up.

What if we were able to bring that kavana to other parts of our lives? To show up as our full selves, to be present and ready in the moment like Abraham or Moses or Jacob. When they showed up fully, it opened up possibilities. Moses' presence lead to the Israelites freedom...presence

opens up worlds. When we show up somewhere and are fully present it can also open up a universe of possibility.

Not an easy task, presence takes a lot. It requires internal work and an openness that can be hard. Showing up in a community also takes work as a whole community. How can we make our community a place where everyone can be more present? This question applies to all communities we are a part of...and I also want to relate it specifically to our Beth David community. What do we need to do for each other to make this place one where more people can say Hineini?

I feel like this question is a big part of my charge here at Beth David as engagement rabbi, and really a big part of my rabbinate as a whole. To create opportunities for people to say Hineini, and to be present in our community in ways they haven't been in the past. While I do have specific demographics that I am focusing on in my role, I think that this work ripples out to the whole congregation. How can I help you say hineini? Maybe that means creating programming where there hasn't before, trying something new, it also means working together to make sure when we do show up, we all feel able to show up as our whole selves.

This is something I feel passionate about because I have felt it on both sides. I have felt how devastating it can be to feel like I have to leave parts of myself and my identity at the door of a shul and how amazing it can feel to be a part of a community that is open and be able to show up fully. I will say that overall I have felt very welcomed here at Beth David, and also we can always do more.

If you are someone who shows up a couple of times a year, how can I help you say Hineini more? Is there learning you'd like to do? Maybe services aren't your thing- what is? One thing I love about Judaism is that there are so many ways to connect to Jewish life and Jewish community-let's find your thing. I know I've already gotten coffee with many people to get to know them better and help figure out what we can do together, and I will continue doing so in the new year...it's one of my favorite things to do.

If you are someone who is here a lot, and feels like you are able to say Hineini- amazing, now my question for you is what can you do to help others feel that way as well? Your ability to come and be present already

adds so much, and what else can you do? Maybe it is reaching out to someone you haven't seen in shul in a while to check on them, or invite someone you don't know so well to a shabbat dinner or lunch or other meal. Sitting next to someone new. The possibilities are endless.

Saying hineini- being able to show up as our full selves in our own lives and in our communities enriches us all. Like Abraham and Jacob and Moses, their presence is what opened up the possibilities for relationship, that is the same for us. How can we say hineini more to ourselves, our families and our communities? The shofar today gives us some practice, and luckily we have many chances throughout the 100 blasts- because it is not easy.

I want to call our attention to one last element of these instances of hineini. Let's look back at Abraham, before Abraham says Hineini there is another piece. First God calls Abraham's name... vayomer avraham, vayomer hineini- and God say to Abraham and he said hineini. There is a call, same for Moses and Jacob. Let's consider this time in the Jewish calendar to be our call. We are being called by our families, our friends, our communities and even the world. So now our work is to figure out what we need so we can truly answer back hineini to our lives. Shana tova