

Rabbi Leah Cohen

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Hineini

The story that we read every year on this day, The Binding of Isaac, is quite horrifying in many respects. What is the point of it and why do we read it on Rosh Hashanah? Each year as we try to find answers to these questions, one thing does ring true. The interpretation of this story says as much about us as it does about the events or the characters in the story itself. Perhaps that is its power and the reason why we read it at this time of introspection and new beginnings.

As we explore the theme of choices during these Days of Awe, I am struck by the choice of a particular word that is repeated throughout this story. We do not have this single word in English; at best, we can come up with a phrase. But even this does not capture the full sense of being present and willing that is expressed in the Hebrew word *hineini*. *Hineini* is often translated as “Here am I.” It usually comes as a response to a call. Something in the universe beckons and we choose to reply.

In this morning’s story, Abraham says *hineini* three times. For a tale that is written in such a terse style with almost no dialogue, this is significant. If we examine each of these instances we find that they are ripe with possibilities, not only for Abraham, but for us too. What will we say *hineini* to this year? Standing at the threshold of a New Year, there is so much that we cannot predict or control, but we can choose what we will pay attention to and in this way we have the power to make this year different.

The first *hineini* in this story comes right at the beginning. The text opens, “Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test, saying to him, “Abraham,” and he answered, “*Hineini*, Here I am.”

This *hineini* is spoken as Abraham’s response to the challenge of starting something that has an uncertain outcome. Abraham has uttered this word before. Back when God called to him the first time and told him to leave his home and venture to a land God will show him. In both cases Abraham summons the willingness to take on a new mission which changes his life.

In the year ahead, each of us will face our own tests. We too will be called and like Abraham we will have a choice. Do we answer or not? Not responding to the call for action, means denying, avoiding, or staying too preoccupied to even notice that we are being addressed. Responding could mean many things. It could mean starting a company or starting chemotherapy. We might say *hineini* to doing volunteer work, or learning a new skill. A willingness to take our lives in a new direction is the first step.

Once Abraham says *hineini*, he doesn’t waste a lot of time. Early the next morning he starts out with his donkey, his servants, his son Isaac and all the provisions he needs. We learn from his behavior that once we have made our choice, we take action. We focus on the goal, and then take the next step to reach it. Our action propels us forward, even when we are not 100% sure of the outcome.

As Abraham's journey continues, we come to the second time he says *hineini*. At this point in the story, he and his son are making their way up the mountain. Isaac notices that all the necessary elements for making a sacrifice are present, except for one. He calls out to his father to ask him what are they going to use for the burnt offering. This time Abraham answers *Hineini, beni*. "Here I am, my son."

This second *hineini* in many respects is the critical passage in this story for it represents an aspect of life that so many people struggle with these days. Consider for a moment the enormous gap between how Abraham acts in his external environment and how he acts in the intimate setting of his family. This is a man who is very open to taking on challenges in the larger world. Remember he was willing to go to war to rescue his nephew Lot when he was taken captive. He rushed to show the kindest hospitality to complete strangers who happened to pass by his tent. He vehemently argued with God to demand justice for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, who happened to be really corrupt.

When it comes to working hard and doing the right thing in the outside world Abraham is completely aware of what to do and always chooses to follow through. His character is expressed in his deeds. People like Abraham thrive on challenge and often answer *hineini* as he did when put to the test. These kind of people are usually blessed with status, possessions and success like Abraham was.

But let us not forget that Abraham is the same man who was willing to pass off his wife, Sara, not once, but twice as his sister in order not to be killed as they traveled through foreign lands. This is the same man who only one chapter earlier abandoned in the desert his handmaiden Hagar whom he fathered a child with and left their son Ishmael to die of thirst. This is the same man who is prepared to kill his most beloved son Isaac, without even telling his wife Sara anything.

How can Abraham answer Isaac when he asks about the sacrifice? What is he going to tell Sara when he gets home? What were his last words to Ishmael as he walked away in the desert? Could he even look Hagar in the eye? What could this man's *hineini* possibly mean to his family? *Hineini, beni*. "Here I am my son" he says to Isaac. We who know what is going on wonder, "how present is he really to those who are closest to him."

If we learn anything from this tale and its placement at this season it is that we have to say and mean the second *hineini* to those closest to us - to our children and our spouses, to our parents and our siblings, to the ones who love us the most and hurt us the most. It is relatively easy to say the first *hineini*; it takes a life time to accomplish the second one. But if we can honestly be present to the relationships that are closest to us, the rewards are the greatest. This is the soul wrenching work we do during these Days of Awe; this is the path to a new year we must walk as we accompany Abraham on his journey.

Finally we arrive at the last time Abraham says *hineini* and it comes almost at the end of the story. By this time he and Isaac have reached the top of the mountain. Abraham has bound his son to the altar and raised the knife about to slaughter him. An angel of God calls out to him, "Abraham!" But Abraham is busy, he is determined, he is on a mission and nothing is going to stop him. The final decent begins as the glint of the blade reflects in the sun light. Again the angel cries out, "Abraham!" and this time Abraham answers, "*Hineini*." "Here I am."

If the first *hineini* represents the moments in our lives when we respond yes to a big challenge, and if the second *hineni* captures the chance to say yes to our closest relations, then this third *hineini* is Abraham's and our chance too, to say yes, to stopping.

Much of our behaviors are driven by habit and old tapes that still play in our minds. We hold fast to our beliefs, committed to our opinions. We take pride in our convictions and glean satisfaction in our steadfastness. We say to ourselves, no matter what- we'll stay in this job, this feeling, this way of life. But the end of this story teaches us another lesson in awareness, in being fully present to our lives, moment to moment.

Something does get killed at the conclusion of this story, but it is not Isaac. Earlier, God promised to make Abraham great through his offspring and Isaac represents the fulfillment of this future. Ironically, Abraham's determination almost put an end to this possibility. Sometimes our best intentions can lead to our own ruin.

In responding *hineini* for the third time, Abraham becomes aware of an alternative; a much better option was right in front of his eyes. He just had to pause and look up for a moment. We too get so caught up in what we are doing that it is often hard for us to see alternatives and to be flexible in our thinking. We too, believe we are right, trapped in old behaviors that may no longer serve us well. It is this rigidity, this unwillingness to see other possibilities that we can choose to let go of in this new year.

What gets killed at the end of the story is not Abraham's son, his hope for the future, but a ram, a symbol of pride and arrogance, who is ensnared in a nearby bush by his own powerful horns. When we see that it is our own self righteousness that we must sacrifice, then we are able to protect, not destroy, the most precious things we have been given, the Isaacs of our lives. It took two calls of a screaming angel to get Abraham's attention, how many will it take to get ours?

At the beginning of the story, we read, "Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test." Some think that the test was of Abraham's faith, but maybe it was a test to see how many times he would say *hineini*. This story illustrates the ways that Abraham was called and responded on his personal journey. How will we answer *hineini* on ours? Will we face our challenges or deny they exist? Will we take meaningful steps to better our relationships or take a pass? Will we be driven by old patterns or dare to design something different for our lives? The choice is up to each of us. At this sacred time we are poised to be fully present and openly willing - what is calling for our attention? Listen and respond "*Hineini*," for this is how the new year and the new you will truly begin.

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