

## Hineini – Embracing the Moment and One Another

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*Hayom harat ha-olam.* According to our tradition, Rosh Hashanah is the anniversary of creation. Today is a day for renewal and rebirth. You might, then, expect that the Rosh Hashanah Torah reading would be the Biblical account of creation. But it's not. Instead, on Rosh Hashanah we read a far more enigmatic story: the saga of Abraham and Sarah and their son Isaac. The apex comes on the second day of Rosh Hashanah when we chant the story of how Avraham – at God's request –nearly sacrificed his son Isaac on an altar. This episode is commonly known as *Akedat Yitzhak* – or the binding of Isaac.

The power of Torah is that it can serve as both a lens through which to view our world and a mirror we hold up to our own lives. For me, this year, the Akedah is a story of life's trials and tests and how we respond to them. And I want to focus on a particular word in the story. The word is *Hineini*. *Hineini* means "here I am" – but *hineini* does not denote a geographical location. *Hineini* is about presence and availability. In our story, Avraham utters this word at three key junctures in the drama.

The chapter begins by telling us that "Sometime after these events, God tested Avraham. God called to him, 'Avraham' and Avraham answered '*hineini*' – 'here I am.'"<sup>1</sup> What is the nature of this call and what is the character of Avraham's response? You'll remember that Isaac was the son that God had promised Avraham and his wife Sarah in their old age, to serve as their heir and the father of a great people. Now, it seems, God is asking for this precious gift in return. *What is to be of Isaac and the covenant God made with Avraham?!* At this moment, Avraham stands in between the past and the future, yet his response indicates his full attention to the present moment. Avraham's answer is simply "*hineini*" – "here I am."

The first lesson I take from the Akedah this year is about the preciousness of time and the gifts we are given each day. The present moment calls to us, and the best thing we can do is respond, "*hineini*" – "here I am! Because I've learned that the most precious thing we have is the present moment. I can't change the past, I don't know the future; but, here I am ready for whatever is presented to me - right now."

It's hard lesson to really internalize; but this past year I've been schooled in the preciousness of time. Last Rosh Hashanah I stood before you with a heavy heart because I knew something most of you had not yet learned: that my wife Melanie was diagnosed with breast cancer. Then, in late March, just one month after Melanie's last chemo treatment, our son Koby was diagnosed with a brain tumor.

When Koby was in the ICU at Children's Hospital, I learned a great lesson in the power of presence. Koby went into the hospital on a Thursday morning. Over that first Shabbat in the hospital, I really can't say that I had any awareness of time. But something remarkable happened on Shabbat afternoon. Through word of mouth, people in this community organized a *mincha* prayer service at the hospital. I was hardly in the mood to see people, but I reluctantly emerged from the ICU to find a large conference room filled with

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 22:1

several hundred of you. You sat with us and cried with us. When we couldn't utter the words ourselves, you prayed with us. When all we could do is fall apart, you held us with your songs. As we recited Havdalah at the conclusion of Shabbat, you formed a circle around us that personified the bonds of community. Since then, people all around Denver and, indeed, all around the world, pray for Koby and our family every day.

We are so grateful for the prayers; but, perhaps more important than the words is the presence you all share with us – your willingness to show up and say “*hineini* – here I am. ” “I don't know what to do or how to help, but I can show up.” That's no small thing – it's powerful. Simply being present can make all the difference.

Each one of us is like Avraham – caught between the past and the future – and our greatest challenge is to live right now and respond to what is in front of us, to live this day.

The great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, taught that our tradition attunes our minds to the endless value of time.

Judaism [Heschel writes] is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time. Unlike the space-minded [person] to whom time is unvaried, iterative, homogeneous, to whom all hours are alike, quality-less, empty shells, the Bible senses the diversified character of time. There are no two hours alike. Every hour is unique and the only one given at the moment, exclusive and endlessly precious.

Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time, to be attached to sacred events, to learn how to consecrate sanctuaries that emerge from the magnificent stream of a year.<sup>2</sup>

We live our lives in moments; some more rich with meaning than others – but each moment is brimming with enormous potential. Shabbat and Holidays, our daily prayers, and our life cycle rituals give cosmic meaning to moments that might otherwise seem unremarkable.

Of all the things I do as a rabbi, what I find most gratifying are the moments I get to share with people as they experience the depths of life's meaning. Whether it's under the huppah at your wedding or standing next to you at the graveside, or greeting your children at the door on their first day of preschool, I feel blessed to bear witness to the most vital moments in your lives. You've taught me that the primary goal of a synagogue should be to create a space where people elevate life's moments in the presence of others.

When we become attuned to the value of time, we become more aware that each moment presents a question to us. Every instance brings with it an opportunity and a demand. The moment calls out: “What are you going to do now?!”

The Torah tells us that Avraham rose early and set out with Isaac. He didn't know exactly where he was going; God simply commands Avraham to go – “to a certain mountain I will show you.” Isn't that the truth

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<sup>2</sup> A. J. Heschel, *The Sabbath*.

of life? None of us really knows where we're going. Being present – saying *hineini* – is only the start of a journey. Like stepping into a rushing stream, the moment does not wait for us; the present confronts us with a new reality and beckons us to take the next step – to make a choice.

The Jewish philosopher, Emanuel Levinas, teaches that when we are in the presence of another human being – created, as we all are, in the image of God – a claim is made on us. When we confront another human being – with all of their concerns and all of their needs – something is immediately asked of us. Looking into the face of another person, we can see a trace of the Divine seeking a response. As Isaac and Avraham journey together, Isaac breaks the silence with a pressing question:

וַיֹּאמֶר יִצְחָק אֶל-אַבְרָהָם אָבִיו, וַיֹּאמֶר אָבִי, וַיֹּאמֶר, הֲנִי בְנִי...

Yitzhak spoke to his father Avraham saying, “My father.” And [Avraham] responded, “*Hineini, b’ni* – here I am, my son.” And Yitzhak said, “Here is the fire and the wood; but where is the sheep for the offering?” And [Avraham] responded, “God will see to the sheep for the offering, my son.” And the two of them walked together - יַחְדָּו - וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם, <sup>3</sup>

In this exchange, Avraham and Yitzhak use language that emphasizes their relationship – “father” and “son.” Now, Yitzhak carries the wood; his father carries the fire and the knife. The question creates relationships of responsibility. The two of them walked together, now sharing the burden of uncertainty. Yitzhak’s question is prescient and urgent – “where *is* the sheep for the offering?” *We all want to know with certainty what the future holds for us.* And, Avraham’s response is truthful: “God will see to the offering.” *Despite what we were told at the beginning of the narrative, the truth is: no one really knows what’s going to happen.* This is the essence of faith: to confront the absurd and terrifying uncertainty of being and to have the courage to respond; to take the next step; to say “*Hineini.*”

In our tradition we have a word for that call and the next step. We call it *mitzvah*. I’ve recently come to a new understanding of *mitzvah*. We were all taught that *mitzvah* means “commandment.” It does indeed mean that. But I’ve come to translate it differently. I no longer translate *Mitzvah* as commandment, but rather as *invitation*. A *mitzvah* is the still quiet call we detect in a particular moment that invites us to respond.

The moment calls a question. Eating a simple piece of bread evokes gratitude: so our tradition invites us to pause for a *bracha*, a blessing. Spending the week working our tushy’s off to eke out a living from this daunting world urges a spiritual response. So Shabbat whispers: “you are not a human *doing* – you’re a human *being*! Put down the iPhone and take up a glass of wine; turn to the people you love and bless them.” Another human being is suffering the pain of loss and grief: our tradition invites us to bring food and words of consolation to a house of shiva. A society is degraded by racism, poverty and violence; so our Torah cries out in righteous indignation: “*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*” – Justice! Justice shall you pursue!<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 22:7-8

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 16:20

As soon as news of Koby's illness spread, this community heard the call of mitzvah and responded with *hineini* – here I am. You brought us delicious food, every day for weeks. You took care of our other children – Hannah and Micah. You ran errands for us. You even brought a construction crew to our house to make our home accessible for Koby. You sent cards and gifts. You sent us food. You came to visit and sit with us. You lent us your car when our extended family was in town. You prepared an entire Passover Seder for us with everything we needed to celebrate in a conference room at the hospital. (Did I mention you fed us... you fed us a lot!). Within days, you set up a fund at the synagogue to help us care for Koby to which over 700 families made donations! You helped us in ways big and small... even in ways you don't realize.

This is an amazing community of people capable of hearing the inviting call of mitzvah and saying "*hineini*." And it isn't just with my family. Time and again, I've seen you care for one another and support one another in similar ways. I've seen you rally to those in need and rise to celebrate in times of joy.

You see, when we are present to the moment and willing to say "*hineini*", the call of mitzvah draws us into relationships. It creates bonds between people that elevate the human experience, allowing us to flourish, even in the most difficult circumstances.

When Avraham and Yitzhak reached the top of the mountain, Avraham built the altar and bound Yitzhak upon it. He then picked up the knife and extended his hand to slaughter his son. And at that fateful moment, he heard yet another call. God called out "Avraham! Avraham!" and Avraham responded "*hineini!* – here I am!" Just as before, Avraham is ready to heed the call. This *hineini* reveals his willingness to find an alternate path.

I want to suggest that the Akedah was not a test of Abraham's obedience, but rather a trial of his character and the nature of his faith. Could Avraham face an impossible and painful conundrum and find a moral way out? Avraham was truthful and demonstrated faith when he told Yitzhak, "God will see to the offering" – *because he had not closed the door on hope*. Now Avraham is able to see a new possibility. He looked up and saw the ram with its horns caught in the thicket. Midrash teaches that this ram was standing there all along. Indeed, it was there from the beginning of time, waiting patiently to show Avraham the way forward. But the ram only became visible to Avraham when he was ready – when he said, "*hineini*."

When we are attuned to the present and when we make ourselves of service to others, we create new possibilities, and we have an opportunity to surpass ourselves.

Melanie and I can't express enough our gratitude for what you have done to help us. It's humbling – but I would like to think that your outpouring is a reflection of how much we love and care for your families. This is truly a carrying and compassionate community. And, yet, we can still do better.

So I invite us to consider another possibility. Imagine for a moment: what if every family and individual in this congregation had even a tiny fraction of the attention and care my family has experienced in the last year? Imagine what kind of community we would be. What would it look like to be part of a shul where

people take responsibility for one another and are there for each other, both in times of distress, and in times of joy and celebration? What could a community like that accomplish? What if such a caring community were to turn the compassion they had fostered for one another outward? What a difference such a community could make in healing our broken world!

In many ways, we are already well on our way to being this kind of caring community. I bet most of you don't know that in addition to the clergy, we have among us individuals trained in the skills to visit people in nursing homes and hospices. I bet most of you don't know that we have a cadre of volunteers who make weekly phone calls to elderly folks. You might not know that we have a devoted group of people who help build houses with Habitat for Humanity. We have a group that makes sandwiches for the homeless. We have people here who we call upon to help make a minyan for a family in mourning.

We don't do a great job of calling attention to these and so many other wonderful acts of kindness by this community, and we don't do enough to recognize the people who are willing to step up and say *Hineini*. But that is changing.

Inspired by the remarkable response to my family's situation and seeing what you all do for one another on a regular basis, Rabbi Dollin and I, along with our program director Naomi Kirshner and a group of thoughtful volunteers are launching a new initiative this year – not so much a program as a call, *an invitation*. It is an invitation to this community to bring all of that compassionate energy up to the next level. It is an invitation to come together as a community in the service of others. We are calling this new initiative Project Hineini.

Project Hineini is not simply a program – it is a vision for cultural transformation in the years ahead. Project Hineini is a sacred call – the question is, will you say hineini?

Can you call someone on the phone and wish them a Shabbat Shalom? If you can, say Hineini! Can you cook a dish for a family caring for a loved one? (Say Hineini!) Can you deliver a welcome basket to a family that just had a baby? (say Hineini!) Can you drive an elderly person to shul on a Shabbat morning? (say Hineini!) Can you help make a minyan so a family can say Kaddish? (say Hineini!) Can you stand in the lobby and greet newcomers on Shabbat; can you write get well cards; can you host another family for a holiday; volunteer to sort food for the homeless; tutor a kid struggling to learn Hebrew? The call is out there; the needs are infinite; the question is, will you say "hineini"?

In the coming months you will hear more about Project Hineini and learn about ways that you can get involved.

People ask me all the time: What can I do for your family? My response is: Thank you, but my family has all the support we could ask for. Take that compassionate spirit and go find another family in need and ask them the same question.

What I've learned this year is that life presents you with startling blessings in abundance; and life also brings unforeseen challenges. When things are good and life brings you blessings – celebrate with those you love;

soak it up, laugh, dance, and give thanks. When life puts challenges up in front of you – make the best choices you can with what you have, and hold on for dear life to those around you. I’ve also learned that community doesn’t just happen by magic. It happens when we show up and make ourselves visible – when we give and when we open ourselves to receive; when we say *Hineini*.

The lessons I’ve learned this year have also brought into sharp focus my vision for what kind of rabbi I aspire to be, and what sort of congregation I want to help lead. My mission is to help people flourish with the wisdom of Judaism; and the congregation I want to lead is one that invites people to experience life’s meaningful moments in the presence of a caring and compassionate community. That’s the kind of rabbi I want to be and that is the sort of community I do serve.

So I want to leave you with a blessing: May the year to come bring good health and wellbeing for all of our families. May we celebrate many happy occasions together, and may we face life’s challenges held in one another’s embrace. May we learn to embrace the moment, whatever it brings; and may we come to hear the call of our fellow human beings and have the courage to respond: “*Hineini* – here I am!”

*L’Shannah Tovah Tikateivu* – May we be inscribed in the book of life for a good year.