

“HINENI REVISITED”
ROSH HASHANAH SERMON 5771-2010
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The very first time I stood before this entire congregation was on Rosh Hashanah in 1990. I delivered a sermon that focused on one word; a word that I suggested was the most important in the Rosh Hashanah Torah portion. That word was “Hineni.” While literally Hineni means “Here I am,” it is not actually a statement of location. It is much more a statement of emotional and spiritual presence and that was the message of my very first High Holy Day sermon.

There were 620 families in the Temple that day; most of them are still here amongst our now 1500 family community. Over the years many have spoken to me about or reminded me of this sermon. Sometimes I’ll call out to someone across the hall or in the parking lot and with a wise smile they will respond “Hineni” – Here I am”. Once in a while, in an effort to articulate our Temple’s goal to be available and present to all of our congregants, I will hear a board member invoke this sacred word: “We need to say Hineni to this person; we need to be fully attentive to this situation.” I am deeply gratified to know that Hineni has become part of the Rodef Shalom culture.

You may be surprised to learn that despite its unexpected impact, I have never looked at my Hineni sermon since that first Rosh Hashanah. Actually, I have never reread any of my past sermons. It’s as if once they are spoken, they are no longer mine. Their purpose is fulfilled. In truth, the thought of reviewing a sermon I delivered when I was a wet-behind-the-ears novice rabbi makes me a bit queasy.

But recently, during the celebration of our shared 20 years, so many people mentioned “Hineni” that I felt compelled to unearth this ancient text and look at it again. I tracked down my floppy disc, poured myself a glass of wine, took a very deep breath and reread it. And you know, it wasn’t actually too bad. I even felt a bit proud of my young rabbi self. I was pleased with the way I taught the meaning of “Hineni”. I realize now that I was also trying to tell you, my ‘then new’ congregation that I would strive to be present for you and do my best to help our Temple be more present in our greater community.

On that first Rosh Hashanah, I proposed that “Hineni” was the most important word in the Torah portion which is the binding of Isaac or the Akeydah. I’ve grown a great deal since then, and learned more than I ever imagined I would. Today I would propose a different message. Hineni is not the most important word in the Rosh Hashanah Torah portion; it is simply The Most Important Word.

While few of us may speak Hebrew, the expression “Hineni” accompanies all of us throughout our lives. It means being fully attentive to another person, listening and responding with a non-judgmental openness; it means being emotionally available and revealing one’s whole self in the moment. We hear this word when we are loved, and we say it when we love. When it is absent, we are miserable. When it is said insincerely, we feel betrayed. Can you imagine a time when you experienced the sincere attention and attentiveness of another person? When they put themselves aside to be entirely available to you? Surely, all of us have experienced a less than attentive, incomplete “Hineni”. It happens all the time. We’re speaking to someone and know that their attention is not entirely on us - we hear the clicking of the keys in the background; or see their eyes focused somewhere else. All of us can detect the nuances that accompany this word - echoes of falsehood and distraction as well as tones of truth and sincerity.

My experiences as a rabbi have deepened my appreciation of the concept of being present. Hineni moves me and challenges me in a much more serious and compelling way than it did 20 years ago. Sitting at a bedside in the hospital and witnessing a couple exchange vows under the huppah have taught me that “Hineni” is not only a word and it is more than an idea. It is a posture, an attitude and a response. Abraham captures the power of “Hineni” in our story today, Joseph chooses it as his response to his father, Moses proclaims it at the burning bush.

“Hineni” actually appears 178 times in our Bible. It is uttered most often in response to God but it is also spoken from one individual to another and it is the answer to our own inner voice. Today I want to say “Hineni” to you once again and I want to look with slightly older eyes at the meaning of this word for us.

“Hineni” is the contraction of the two words: “Hiney” (here) and “Ani” (I) – Here am I. It is the ultimate response to an eternal question that God and others are asking us. We first hear this question in the Garden of Eden. God asks Adam: “Ayekah” – Where

are you? The question is not a physical one. We can assume that the Biblical author believed God always knows where we are. Rather, the question is an existential one. Where are you? That is – Where are you on your life journey now? Where are you spiritually and emotionally and morally? This is an ongoing question, one which we can't afford to lose sight of. And according to our tradition this question has only one response: “Hineni”.

In today's Torah portion Abraham speaks this sacred word three times. He says it to God, to Isaac and finally to an angel. Each call and each response is so different. Each touches a unique aspect of Abraham's life and each responds to a different obligation he has in the world. One comes out of awe, another out of love and yet another from pain. All answer the question: “Where are you?”

We all know a bit of Abraham's story. It's quite a soap opera really, but at this point in his life, he is in a good place. He has a wife who has given him a son, and a handmaid who has given a son, he has flocks and tents and servants – not a bad gig. He's probably pretty busy – as most of us are. There are sheep to herd, goats to slaughter, deals to close, kids to drop off, idols to smash, workouts to get to, contracts to write, and events to organize. So many of us know this story...lots to do, too few hours in the day, I'll get back to you as soon as I can, can I put you on hold...?

And then, unexpectedly, there is the call or the voice (mail) “*Va'hi achar ha divarim ha eleh...*” And it came to pass that God tested Abraham, saying to him: “Abraham!” “*Vayomer Avraham, hinen.*”ⁱ and Abraham responded: “Hineni, Here I am”.

Over the years I have given many sermons about Abraham and honestly, I've been quite critical. But here we see a side of Abraham to be admired. The relationship between Abraham and God goes back many years; it is based on a covenant, a spiritual partnership that was established back in Haran. And so when God calls out urgently to Abraham, he stops and turns away from his work and replies “Here I am” I am ready, I am focused and listening. “Hineni.” Abraham demonstrates for us what commitment means: it is the stance of being fully present, open, alert, and responsive in the moment when we are called.

Perhaps there were times in Abraham's life when he was expecting God's call. While commitment involves being prepared for what we anticipate and hope for, even more importantly, real commitment means being present and responsive to the unplanned and unexpected. Abraham models a relationship in which risk is possible and trust is even deeper – there is no hesitation up front, no prior conditions, no review of the earlier disappointments or unfinished business. Abraham has no idea why God has called him or what God will ask, but he is ready and responsive.

In this day and age, the type of attentiveness Abraham displays is hard to come by. Many of us fall into the generation of multi-taskers. With a mixture of pride and shame I count myself in this group. "I can be on a conference call while eating lunch while checking my e-mail and following the news headlines on my i-phone. And, by the way, I have dinner cooking in the crock pot at home and the dvr is recording a show on Biblical Archeology." While many people think multi-tasking makes us more productive, the deluge of data which fill our days is not entirely a blessing. Researchers have shown that heavy multi-taskers actually have more trouble focusing and shutting our irrelevant information. One of the results of this is that we experience more stress. Another is that it's very hard for us to slow down and be fully present in the moment.

That first sermon, from a less chaotic time in my life, was a sincere attempt to express my readiness to say "Hineni", not only to the members of this congregation, but to my Judaism and to my God. The word was alive on my lips and I felt one with Abraham, prepared to respond to the Divine call. I had an answer to God's question – Ayekah – where are you?

Today, I must admit, that I don't feel as confident about such a response. I know God is calling me even now. But the world is a troubled place, life is so complex and my understanding of the Divine role is less clear. Like many of us, I come here today with the hope that I will rediscover Abraham's conviction and awe inspired readiness. In truth, my goal would be to embrace the 'Hineni Attitude' even before I sense God's voice; to live life in anticipation of the call. After all, God didn't call Abraham because God wondered if he would answer. God called Abraham because God knew he would respond. Because Abraham lived a Hineni life even before God called. And that is what God and Judaism expect of us.

Three days after his first affirming response, Abraham speaks the famous word again. He and Isaac have been walking together – silently. Abraham’s silence leads me to wonder what he is feeling – whether he has doubts or qualms or a clear commitment. I imagine that Isaac is worried, perplexed, scared perhaps. He can no longer stand the silence. “*Vayomer Yitzhak el Avraham, Avi!*” Then Isaac said to Abraham: “Father!” “*Vayomer, Hineni bini.*” and Abraham responded: “Hineni, I am here...” with an added touch of reassurance, “I am here, my son.” Through these words one senses Abraham’s message ... “I am here my son, but I can’t always make everything all right. I am not always the one in control. Only God has all the answers, or at least let’s hope so.”

There is no doubt that this “Hineni” emerges from deep within Abraham’s loving heart. But within this response I hear the sound of human uncertainty. Perhaps this “Hineni” is the most familiar to us. We so very much want to be there for our partners as they face challenges at work, our children when they have been hurt, our friends as they struggle with an illness. We are here but we know our answers are not entirely sufficient or complete.

Despite this reality, so many of you here at Rodef Shalom step up to say Hineni each week. In the course of any month dozens of meals are made by you for others who are facing challenges. Perhaps you bring a challah to the home of a friend just back from the hospital. You realize that when you leave this person’s problem will still remain. But you go to the door and you step inside and offer the best “Hineni” you can: “I know you are in pain and even though I can’t take that away I am here with something that is a symbol of the fact that I care.”

While over these 20 years I have felt less secure in the “Hineni” I offer to God, in these 20 years I have come to feel more attuned to that human “Hineni” I offer to the people in my life and members of our community. Whenever I visit with a congregant, either at home or in the hospital, that’s really all that is said. Sometimes we talk about serious issues or simply chat about mundane matters. Sometimes I’ll offer a prayer or we sit in silence. But in the end, what matters most, I think, is the “Hineni” – my effort to say that I am here and that you are not alone. And when I fail, as I inevitably do at times, it is rarely because I said the wrong thing or offered bad advice, but rather it is because I wasn’t there, I wasn’t available, I wasn’t present. There have been many missed

“Hinenis” for which I am sorry. And some “Hinenis”, like Abraham’s to Isaac, where even the most sincere response is just not quite enough; and yet in our flawed humanity we continue to say this sacred word and to mean it.

Abraham’s third “Hineni” reminds us of a different kind of flawed moment. Abraham is so distracted, so absorbed in what he is doing, that he has blocked everything else out. Now, Abraham is holding the knife over Isaac. Right or wrong, he has opted to do what he believes God asked of him. So it is as he stands ready, hand outstretched, knife in the air, when, for a third time, he is called: “Avraham, Avraham!” Who is calling him now? *Malach min ha-shamayim*. A messenger, a delivery person, an angel of God from heaven interrupts him: “Abraham, Abraham!” I imagine him shaking and crying when he finally pulls himself out of his daze and looks over to this stranger, to this unknown being to say once again: “Hineni” Here I am. I am amazed that yet again he is able to redirect his attention and listen to the message that the malach brings: “Stop, turn from this deed, reorient yourself, despite your deep commitment, this isn’t the right path”.

Do we think we could be open to an encounter like this? Are we open to many guises in which God’s messengers appear? A stranger, an unfamiliar person or source, telling us to redirect ourselves? Having once set a course, and gotten our pride and our commitment invested can we be strong enough to turn and change our direction without loss of integrity or self? Can we welcome a new perspective? If an angel calls to us this year, will we pull ourselves away from our i-phones, our computers, our mundane routines to hear the voice and respond?

There have been times in these 20 years when some of you have brought a Divine message to me. You have helped me to find my way onto a new path, to redirect my focus and my efforts. I know, however, that it’s easy after so many years to become comfortable in a routine, to feel so much at home that you don’t want to disturb the healthy balance of the family. And yet, like Abraham, at times we need to be pulled away and shown a new course. Or perhaps we need to find that angel and throw ourselves into her path? I hope I am open to those encounters. I look forward to new passions in which to invest and I hope we’ll invest in those together. I believe that God’s messengers are

calling us, even now – asking us to re-examine our deeds, to enrich our relationships, to deepen our own spirituality, to change the world in real and meaningful ways - to say that most significant, challenging and sacred word – “Hineni”.

Of course, it’s not always easy. Some of us have had a difficult year. Some of us have lost jobs, or resources, a partner of many years, a parent or beloved friend. Even or perhaps especially in the face of struggle and loss, we have to find the will to be present for those who have been present for us. And even now, God calls out to us. Some of us have had a fantastic year with new love and new hope and joy punctuating the days and months. We bring it all here to day. The good and the bad and we try to find the “Hineni” within it all. To say “here I am” This is me. I want to be there for you, please take me just as I am.

There is a story of a boy who starting sobbing after hearing today’s Torah portion, the Akedah. “Why are you crying?” asked his teacher. “Suppose the angel had come a second too late?” he wept. The teacher comforted the boy by telling him that “an angel cannot come late”.

It may be that an angel can’t be late, but we know that people, made of flesh and blood, often are. Let us not delay in speaking a sacred “Hineni” to those who need to hear it from us. Let us not hesitate to say it to our God. Let us open our ears to the world outside and respond to the needs that have no voice but call out to us nonetheless.

God is asking us: Ayekah? Where are you? Many people we know, and those we don’t, are asking us that very same question. According to our tradition there is only one answer – “Hineni – Here I am!”

Amen, Ken Y’hi Ratzon

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