

Hineni: "I Am Fully Present"

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Shabbat Shalom and Shanah Tovah. I am honored to stand before you this Rosh Hashanah morning to offer this teaching, and I am especially grateful to Rabbi Talve and Rabbi Fleisher for making room for me to be here. That's a great thing about Central Reform Congregation -- We'll really make room for the things that you want to do. So I thank you.

Last Shabbat, I was sitting with my friend and Klezmer mate Bill Sitzer, and he knew I was going to be doing this today, and he asked me, "Ed, are you ready for Rosh Hashanah morning?" I said that I thought I could chant and translate the portion, but my *drash*, my commentary, is a little unfinished. In his wise, rabbinic way, he smiled, and said to me, "Ed, the drash is always unfinished.." How true it is. So, thank you Reb, William, for the permission to offer my unfinished commentary on this morning's Torah portion.

The portion we just read, the *Akeidah*, or binding of Isaac, is one of the most challenging in all of Torah. It is typically read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah and sometimes, as today, on the first day. It is also read every day as part of the traditional Orthodox morning service. The rabbis thought this portion was so significant that it is read daily and on Rosh Hashanah morning. Just think for a minute, if you were a rabbi deciding on what Torah portion to read to begin the New Year. Wouldn't it make sense to read *Bereishit*, "In the beginning", the story of creation- the birth of the world as we celebrate the birthday of the world? Or, how about one of the many stories of the beginnings of our people, Abraham leaving his father's house, our leaving Egypt, our wandering in the desert, even our receiving the 10 commandments at Mount Sinai. Or, how about the idea of *kol hatchalot kashot*, that all beginnings are difficult. Maybe even this beginning, of this year, as we approach the one-year anniversary of the tragic events of

September 11. How about any of these beginnings? **No.** Let's choose the story of Abraham about to sacrifice his son? How many of us would pick that story? How many of us would even consider that story on this Holy day? Probably not many. However, out of all the possible Torah portions that the rabbis could choose, they chose this portion.

So, we are to begin the New Year with the story of Abraham about to sacrifice his son. Then, of course, the question is, "What is so important about this portion that we read it daily and on Rosh Hashanah, one of the holiest days of the year?" And what could it possibly teach us as we begin a new year?

We go to the text. In the very first line of the portion we read "*v'ha elohim nissa et Avraham.*" God tested Abraham. The obvious question, what is the test? Many commentaries say the "test" is to see if Abraham would have so much faith in God that he would be willing to risk that which is most valuable to him, namely his son, Isaac, to prove it. Would Abraham actually sacrifice his own son to demonstrate his faith in God? And, Abraham actually does show that much faith.

Today, I'm not exactly sure that we'd use the word "faith" to describe Abraham's behavior. Faith is Rabbi Talve saying to me that she didn't need to see a copy of this sermon before I delivered it. Today, some of us would look at Abraham's behavior and wonder if he needed to see a psychiatrist. What about a mood stabilizer or an anti-depressant? What about Abraham seeing a therapist, or being in a men's group for those who are obsessed or overly involved in their own lives? We all know none of these happened. So, maybe the test **was** to see if Abraham would be willing to sacrifice his son to show his faith in God.

However, as we keep reading, something else emerges. *Vayomer elav, "Avraham";* God said to him, "*Abraham*"; Vayomer, "*Hineni.*" And Abraham said, "*Hineni.*"....."here I am." It's an interesting word, *hineni*. It's actually a contraction - like the words "do" and "not"

become “don’t”. *Hineni* is a combination of *hinei*, which means behold or here (h-e-r-e) and *ani* which means “I.” *Hinei ani*. There is no verb to be in present tense in Hebrew. It is understood. So, *hinei ani*, is “*hineni* “-- here (am) I or here I am. So, when God calls to Abraham, Abraham responds with *Hineni*, here I am..

Now, *Hineni* is not a casual “Hey, man, I’m here.” *Hineni* means, I’m fully present for you. I’m focused on you, ready and willing to hear you, to receive you, to be present with you and for you. It’s my being present with all of myself. So when God calls Abraham, and Abraham says, “*Hineni*”, Abraham is saying I am fully present ready and willing, and open to what you might ask or say. I truly hear your call.

We all know what it’s like to call someone’s name and get less than a “*hineni*” type response. It happens all the time. We’re responding to the other person, and, at the same time, we’re doing something else, like reading the newspaper, or watching TV, or talking on the phone. Because, we’re all so good at multi-tasking. *Hineni* is not about multi-tasking.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk offers an interpretation of Exodus, 24:12 to illuminate this idea of presence. God says to Moses, “*aley, ehlai, ha harah, ve hehyeh sham.*” “Ascend to me on the mountain and be there.” Why does it say, “Ascend to me on the mountain **and be there.**” If Moses went up on the mountain, where else would he be? The teaching suggests that one can be physically present but emotionally somewhere else. *Hineni* is being present with all of oneself.

Later in the portion we encounter “*hineni*” for the second time. We read, *Vayomer Yizchak el Avraham aviv, vayomer avi* - And Isaac said to Abraham his father, he said, “My father”. *Vayomer, hineni v’ni*; And Abraham said, “Here I am, my son.” The “here I am, my son” suggests that Abraham says I am open, fully present and ready to respond without knowing

what you're going to say or ask. It's often like this. We usually don't know what the other will say or ask when they call us.

On the phone, with caller ID, it's easy. First, you decide if you even **want** to hear the message. Then you decide **if** you'll respond and then you'll decide **how** you'll respond and **how present** you will be. There is no caller ID when we're face to face with someone. It's all in the moment. How will I respond right here, right now?

The third time "*hineni*" appears in the portion happens when Abraham and Isaac came to the place that God told them. Abraham builds the altar, arranges the wood, binds his son Isaac, and places him on the altar, on top of the wood. Abraham stretches out his hand and takes the knife to slaughter his son. "*Vayikra Elav malach adonai, min hashamayim.*" An angel of God called to Abraham from the heavens and said, "Abraham, **Abraham.**" And Abraham said, "*Hineni.*" "Here I am."

Let's go back to earlier in the story. When God calls Abraham, God calls once and Abraham responds. When Isaac calls Abraham, Isaac calls once and Abraham responds. However, when the angel calls to Abraham, the angel calls twice, "Avraham, Avraham." So, why does the angel call Abraham two times. Think about it. When have you called someone's name twice? And, why would you have to call someone's name twice? Rashi says that the repetition of Abraham's name expresses affection or love. Well, certainly, in an intimate moment calling the other a second time could be an expression of love. Let's try it out. So, the angel of God was expressing some love or affection for Abraham. Given the circumstances, I would doubt it.

A few weeks ago, I promised to take my daughter, Eliana, swimming. I was hard at work outlining a draft of these remarks. She called to me that it was time to go. "Dad", she called. I was oblivious. "**Dad**", she called a second time, a little louder and with more urgency. Why

would Eliana have to call my name twice and be louder the second time? Because I didn't hear her the first time, or because she wanted to get my attention and didn't feel that she got it after calling me once.

I remember teaching my sons Nick and Jacob to drive a car and saying on many occasions, "Nick, Nick, pay attention to the speed limit." "Jacob, Jacob, watch out for this car coming." While I love my children, the times I call them twice are not out of love, but out of urgency. Because of some danger, I needed to get their attention immediately.

Such was the case with the angel and Abraham. There was a sense of urgency because Abraham had taken the knife in his hand to slaughter Isaac. The angel said, "*Avraham, AVRAHAM,*" to get him to stop, and pay attention.

Maybe Abraham was so focused on what he was doing that, at first he didn't hear the angel call his name. I think it's true with us as well. How often is it that someone close to us calls our name and has to call a second, third, or even fourth time, maybe getting louder each time as well. And why would they have to call us so many times? Because, like Abraham, we also get overly focused on what we're doing, as if it's the most important thing in the world. Maybe sometimes it is. But, many times it isn't.

Maybe, as Rabbi Norman Cohen suggests, we're all Abraham. We're all so into what we're doing, or thinking, or even obsessing about, that we lose ourselves in it and get numb to others around us. The wife who is talking to her friend when her husband calls her, the husband who is watching or playing sports when his wife is calling him; the teenager who wants to be with her friends and doesn't hear the call of her sibling; the adult who is too busy to hear the call of his aging parent and the friend who is just too tired to respond to her friend in need. Sometimes we just don't hear those calls because we're so into ourselves.

What would it be like if in this New Year we all responded with a little more *hineni*? Think of the possibilities if we're all a little more present for each other. Maybe there would be more closeness in our families. Maybe there would be more collaboration in our communities. And maybe there would even be peace in the Middle East and other troubled parts of the world that are torn apart by the violence that comes from people not hearing each other.

We don't have to agree with each other. *Hineni* isn't about agreement. It just means we're fully present and ready to respond. And we don't always have to respond right away. *Hineni* doesn't always have to mean right then and there. Sometimes we have to be a little late in our being present. "I'll be there in a minute, or "after my phone call", or "when I get home from work." Sometimes it's unavoidable. We can't be there every time on demand, nor is it always necessarily good to respond on demand. On the other hand, in this New Year, we could all probably be more present and respond a little sooner, to those who call us.

Back to God testing Abraham -- So what was the test? Not that Abraham would sacrifice his son. As Rabbi Cohen suggests, the test was to see if Abraham would be able to awaken to hear the call of what is really important and respond with "*hineni*." Would Abraham be able to sacrifice his own needs..... his own needs, by hearing the call and responding with "*hineni*." And Abraham did awaken to hear the call and sacrificed his own needs so he didn't have to sacrifice his son.

Perhaps this is our ongoing test as well. Will **we** be able to awaken to hear the call and respond with "*hineni*." And, when we truly respond with, "*hineni*" we often have to sacrifice what we're focused on in that moment to be fully present to the one who calls us, be it our spouse, child, parent, friend, colleague, or even God.

And, I think this is the explanation for the daily reading of this portion, and the reason we read it as we begin the New Year. We are to begin each day, and each New Year, with a reminder to be fully present to those who call us, knowing that such full presence often involves some personal sacrifice.

We will all be called lots of times in this New Year. Hopefully, when someone calls our name, we can hear the call, stop what we're doing, and respond with "*hineni*", here I am for you, ready to respond. And then, we will all hear how good a year 5763 can be for ourselves, and for all those whose lives we touch. *Ken y'hi ratzon*. May this be God's will. Amen.