

SAYING "HINEINI" TO THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

As I considered themes for my High Holy Day sermons for the twenty-fifth time since coming to Beth Hillel, I realized that I must have used the Torah portion for this Rosh Hashanah morning, the story of the Binding of Isaac, at least every other year. I considered avoiding it. And yet, the text is so compelling, so troubling and so rich that I came back to it once again.

Each time we encounter the story of the Akedah, we see it with new eyes. As the seasons and the years go by, our world and our lives change. Even though the text remains the same, something new jumps out from the page that speaks to us in a way it did not before. When I re-read the Akedah at the outset of this special anniversary year of our shared lives at Beth Hillel, one word jumped out at me, and that was the word Hineini.

This word Hineini, which is actually a contraction of two Hebrew words: Hineh, which means "behold" or "here" and ani or "I", is the only word Abraham utters in the entire dramatic episode of the near-slaughtering of his son. And he says it three times! Hineni translates best as "Here I am." But its connotation is something more like "at your service," or "I am here for you."

The Eitz Chayim Torah commentary describes Hineini as an "attitude of conscientious receptivity and response," indicating a "readiness to listen and serve." On this Rosh Hashanah morning, we have listened. We have listened to the call of the shofar, in a special Beth Hillel "surround sound" moment. Now it is time for us to indicate our readiness to serve. Some of us have been away from Jewish life for a year. Others have not been so estranged. In either case, each one of us needs to hear the tekiyah of the shofar as a call to say Hineini to Judaism and to our Jewish community.

Therefore, let us explore the three Hineinis that Abraham utters in this morning's Torah reading as three ways that we can show our readiness to serve the Jewish people. Each of Abraham's responses will serve as instruction about raising our level of commitment to Jewish life. The three Hinenis that Abraham utters will encourage us to be counted, to be present, and to become involved in our Beth Hillel community..

The first time Abraham says hineini in the story of the Akedah, he does not even know what God is asking of him. In the very first verse of the story we read: "And it came to pass after these things that God did prove Abraham, and said to him 'Abraham,' and he said 'Hineini.'" Even without knowing what God wants, Abraham responds. In hindsight, knowing the content God's request of Abraham, we may wish he had waited for more detail before saying "at your service." But Abraham has defined his relationship with God as a priority. As a result, he does not require any caveats or express any hesitation or doubt when God calls.

We are wise enough to know that one cannot say "yes" in advance to just anyone. In most cases, we must first know the content or have considered the consequences of that request. But when a relationship is built on shared experience and mutual trust and commitment, we can say hineini before we know what the request is.

In considering how we might serve the Jewish community, this first type of hineini response requires feeling committed to and connected enough to the Jewish enterprise that we are ready to say "Here I am. Count me." Like Abraham, the first step that each of us must take is to allow ourselves to acknowledge: "I am part of this people, and I want to be counted," even if we are not sure where that stepping forward might ultimately lead. When Abraham said "Hineini" to God, he had an underlying commitment to God that made his response automatic. It is this kind of commitment we must cultivate with Am Yisrael, the Jewish People, as this New Year dawns.

Being here as the New Year is inaugurated is a step in that direction. There are plenty of Jews who are not in the synagogue today. But we are. Just by being here, we are making a statement that we are part of the Jewish people. Is each of us really needed here today? Not particularly. There are so many people here that our absence might not be noticed. But, our absence today will be noted at our schools and exercise groups, by our teams and social groups, in our places of work and volunteering today. That we have chosen to be counted today on Rosh Hashanah is an act of hineini.

A higher step in this first level of saying "hineini" is to affiliate with the Jewish community. Supporting the Jewish community financially through membership is a hineini response that cannot be understated. It is only through the financial support of our own people that Jewish institutions exist at all. No one else in any other community will support it—only those who live here and benefit from it will. And that, of course, is why membership is part of the structure of Jewish life. A synagogue cannot rely on the variable good will of donors. It needs to have a cadre of people that can be continuously counted on for support.

Of course, this is a tough time to be talking about these things. Today, more than ever, there are many who feel the obligation but cannot come up with the funds. Fortunately, there are other ways to be counted besides dues, and those ways take us to another level of saying "Hineini," corresponding to the second response by Abraham in this morning's Torah portion.

The second time Abraham says Hineini is in response to his son. They are on their way up the mountain. Isaac is not stupid. He sees the fire. Wood has been bound on his back, and he sees that Abraham has a knife. But he does not see an animal for the sacrifice. This is very troubling. He's got to find out what this is all about. All Isaac says is "Avi," "my Father," and Abraham immediately responds "Hineini," implying "I am here for you; I am with you. What is it? Ask." Granted, given Abraham's intentions, his Hineini response here is rather perverse. Yes, he is "there" for Isaac, but he is about to slaughter him in the name of God! Still, in the moment, he does show "presence," unconditional love and support. And that is the point of this second Hineni.

And so should it be with our relationship to the Jewish community. A willingness to be truly "present" for our fellow Jews, for our synagogue, and for the greater Jewish world is a second and higher level of Hineini than merely being counted. This level involves making ourselves available to our Jewish community -- offering our presence, our skills and our passions, what ever they might be.

At a minimum, being "present" is expressed in the famous adage, set forth by that great Jewish philosopher Woody Allen: "Eighty percent of success is just showing up." When Woody Allen delivers the line with his famous deadpan, we chuckle. But in the Jewish community, this is no joke. To be part of a minyan, the minimum ten adults needed to hold services, all we have to do is show up. On a given Shabbat and at many other events and projects at Beth Hillel, our presence is noticed and needed.

In order to read from the Torah scroll; in order to say the kaddish, the community has to be present. In a community as small as ours, a minyan is often in doubt—both at Shabbat services and at the house of mourning. "Presence" is also important when a speaker is invited to the Temple, a teacher is needed in the classroom or a clean-up day is scheduled. Making that extra effort to "make a minyan" or support a Temple event or project is more than just a numbers game of being counted. It is about "being there" for your fellow Jew and for the perpetuation of Am Yisrael, the Jewish enterprise.

When we sit down in our favorite chair on Friday near sunset and feel the weight of the week settling in, it can be very hard to get up and go out again. But if we consider that the Jewish community is depending upon us, our "hineini" neurons ought to be activated. Or when we look at the other compelling options about how to spend a Saturday morning or a Sunday, a hineini posture would allow us to feel strongly the pull of the Jewish community. On this Rosh Hashanah morning, thinking of Abraham's response to Isaac on the way up the mountain, the shofar calls us to build an unconditional bond within our community that will compel us to choose to be "present" for our fellow Jews.

Something unstated but strongly felt about this second level of saying Hineini is the assumption (shall I say fear?) that once we show up, we may be asked to play a role. In the synagogue, this can happen by being called for an aliyah at services, but it can happen in many other ways as well, and we need to be prepared for it. When we join other organizations, we do so thinking that we will be expending some time and energy on the activities of that group. And we expect to be called upon over and over as long as we belong to that organization. And so it is with synagogue membership. Even if we have been called upon before in large or small ways, we need every member to reengage. In other words, to borrow a line from John F. Kennedy: "Ask not what your synagogue can do for you. Ask what you can do for your synagogue."

The last time that Abraham utters the word Hineini is at the climax of the tale when his arm holds the knife over his own son, who is bound on the altar as a sacrifice. Shocking as it is, it takes two calls from the angel of God before Abraham seems to realize that he is being addressed. Only after two insistent calls: "Avraham, Avraham," does he respond: "Hineini," which leads to release from the tragic deed at hand.

There are only two other times in the Torah when a character is called twice before responding. One is when Jacob is faced with the decision of whether to take his family to settle in Egypt. We can understand his hesitation when God calls out "Ya'akov, Ya'akov." After all, God had told Abraham that his people would be enslaved in Egypt. Jacob had to be asking himself if he wanted to be the one responsible for taking his family there. The other story with a double call before the response "Hineini" is when Moses stands at the burning bush, and God calls: "Moshe, Moshe." Here again, we see the hesitation and the worry about getting involved in such a venture. Moses feels inadequate to the task, and yet, upon God's insistence, he responds: "Hineini." (after Rabbi Shelton Donnell RH sermon, 5765)

In the Akedah, it is hard to imagine what possible fear or worry prevented Abraham from staying his hand and responding the first time God called. Perhaps his grief over what he was about to do temporarily deafened him. What ever the explanation, as in the other two cases, the belated response of "Hineini" after an insistent double call to attention represents overcoming some kind of obstacle that prevented a response at first.

As we open the book on this New Year, we need to consider: What are the obstacles that keep us from saying Hineini to the Jewish community? I suspect that none of us has heard God calling our name --even once--this day, but we have heard the shofar's insistent call to greater Jewish involvement.

What keeps us from answering that call? Are we afraid of the commitment? Are we worried we will not do a good job? Are we unsure of how much we want to associate with our fellow Jews? Do we feel inadequate, thinking we do not have enough Jewish background or knowledge to serve? Are we weakened by a health or emotional set-back and concerned about our stamina? Are we too committed to other things to make room for this in our lives? What ever the obstacle, our community needs us to find the courage and the commitment to overcome it.

When we compare what is asked of us to what Abraham and Jacob and Moses and others throughout our people's long story have been asked in order to sustain our heritage and our peoplehood, we have to admit we have it pretty easy. We are not being asked something outrageous like Abraham was. We are not being asked to take our people into danger like Jacob was. We are not being asked to risk our lives like Moses and many others throughout Jewish history were. But we are needed to be counted, to be present, and, ideally, to make a concrete contribution to the life of our community in a way that fits our passions and skills. Let us celebrate this twenty-fifth anniversary of our shared commitment to Beth Hillel by saying Hineini on a new and higher level.