

VAYERA – AND THE LORD APPEARED

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My idea of the perfect parsha about which to write a drash is one which is interesting, but not too famous. Well, the binding of Isaac is about as famous and examined as there is. So my thought was, maybe I can find something that I haven't heard discussed that often. By luck and a coincidence I came across just such a topic.

The first sentence of chapter 22 plunges us immediately into the story of the akeidah: "Sometime afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, "Abraham," and he [Abraham] said, "**Hineni – Here I am.**"

The reason I noticed this one word was that when I was Bat Mitzvah it was in my haftorah, in chapter 6 of Isaiah. Isaiah, like Abraham, hears God's voice. In that case, God needed someone to take on a prophetic mission. God says "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" And Isaiah answers, "Hineni, shlacheni". Here I am - send me". I thought those words were incredibly dramatic and inspiring, and I never forgot them, or the concept of standing up and being ready to go.

So when I read that Abraham said **Hineni**, I decided to do a little research on that word. It turns out that the word Hineni occurs 8 times in the Torah, and the first 3 times are in this chapter. The story of the akeidah is bookmarked by the two times Abraham responds to God with "hineni" – the first time when God calls to Abraham to tell him of his mission; and the second time, when the angels call him to rescind the command.

The meaning of **Hineni, here I am**, is much more than "yes, I'm here, what do you want?" The speaker is saying, Here I am, fully present, ready for your message, and, furthermore, willing and eager to take action. In speaking of this verse, Rashi explains the term as being "...**the response of the righteous. It is the language of humility and readiness.**" So, after Abraham responds, here I am. God says, "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering." And the very next sentence: "So early next morning, Abraham saddled his ass..."

That's it. No shock, no discussion, no equivocation, no confusion. God says offer your son as a burnt offering and early the next morning Abraham saddled his ass. He acts.

Ten lines later, we are at the altar with Isaac bound on top of the wood (Genesis 22: 10) "Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son. Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven: "Abraham! Abraham!" And he answered "Here I am." And he said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy..."

The use of the word Hineni signals that something extremely important, critical is about to happen, something that will change the destiny of the person who said it, and because of who those persons are, the destiny of the Jewish people.

In this parasha, the issue of the human sacrifice is dealt with. God establishes that the Jewish nation, unlike other peoples, will not practice this custom. And Abraham is alert and ready to experience the extremely dramatic way in which God communicates this.

"**Hineni**" is in the Torah 8 times. Each time, the person who says it is asserting their willingness to take an action that will insert a sharp detour into the path they are on, to accept a destiny they were not before aware of. In accepting their own destinies they become agents of the destiny of the Jewish people.

The next critical acceptance of destiny occurs in *Genesis 37:11*. Joseph has already antagonized his brothers by telling them about dreams he has had in which he is ruler over them. The verse says, "One time, Israel said to Joseph, 'Your brothers are pasturing at Shechem. Come. I will send you to them' " Joseph answers "**Hineni**".

This meeting started the chain of events leading to his being sold into Pharaoh's household. Of the use of hineni here *Rashi again speaks of the connotation of humility and readiness. He said, "Joseph was eager to fulfill his father's command despite his awareness that his brothers hated him."*

Rabbi Michal Shekel (December 08, 2009) said, "Hineni signifies preparedness for a difficult and life-changing task. Often, the individual is unaware of the significance of what is about to occur. In fact, when the word hineni is uttered, it is in preparation for a holy task; *it is the word that changes the world*. Rabbi Hamilton of KI in Brookline said, Hineni signifies 1) moral alertness, 2) emotional readiness, and 3) and a strong sense of presence to the moment.

Here's an amazing example of that (**Exodus 3:4**). Moses comes to the burning bush and "God called to him out of the bush: "Moses, Moses! He answered. "*Hineni, Here I am*" -- the answer to the divine call. "So now come, and I will send you to Pharaoh, and take My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."

I personally would like to receive a divine call. As *Abraham Joshua Heschel* said in *God in Search of Man*, "We feel at times called upon, not knowing by whom, against our will, terrified at the power invested in our words, in our deeds, in our thoughts... Reaching the peak of years, and learning how to spell the meaning of life-experiences backwards, some of us discover how the scattered syllables form a single phrase."

Heschel itemizes 3 ways of encountering God as through 1) sacred text or the *intellect*, 2) the physical world whose grandeur evokes deep *emotional* responses, and 3) by way of sacred deeds, *shaping the path* known as *Halacha*. God has built us with affinities *for encountering God with our mind, our heart, and deeds walking along our life's path*.

So maybe we don't have to hear a divine call. Suppose we feel that we can step forward, that we want to step forward and accept, or even grasp, a destiny that goes beyond the path our lives are on right now. Think about Golda Meir, on the path to becoming a schoolteacher in Milwaukee. The role of teacher itself would have an impact on the world. But she took a sharp detour, became a Zionist, moved to Palestine, and devoted herself to the future of Israel. To our knowledge she did not hear a voice coming out of a burning bush, yet some "call" or idea or drive within her led her to a destiny unimaginable by so many.

The righteous gentiles also heard a clear call, from their Jewish neighbors and from their consciences. They grasped dangerous, but truly holy destinies.

I am sure there are people in this minyan who have heard a voice within them and have either turned from the path they were on, or built into their destinies actions that affect the destinies of many others. But maybe not all of us.

Actually, It's not always that hard – or dangerous – to change one's destiny. People who give blood hear a call from inside and answer Hineni.

But many of us feel called up to do SOMETHING, more than we are doing right now but are not sure what that something is. Then we have to pay attention, be present, be ready, and listen to our own thoughts.

Here is one thing we can do. Israel is an opportunity for all of us to take action, and needs us to take action, to help insure she grows from strength to strength. The rabbi says, "go to Israel" – we can go to Israel. We hear the appeal on the high holidays: "buy Israel bonds", and we can buy an Israel bond. We can go to AIPAC, show our lawmakers that we stand with Israel.

In the book "The Abandonment of the Jews" David Wyman states that during the Holocaust, American Jews did little to save the Jews of Europe. (One reason was the considerable level of anti-Semitism in the US). The only efforts that were successful were those that were made in support of the development of the Jewish state in Palestine. Anything we do for Israel affects the destiny of the Jewish State and the Jewish people.

So take time to think about your destiny, your mission. We do not stop, look, and listen for our mission! We should think about what our mission is and what we will do to accomplish it, and then go into action.

Before I close I must say a few words about God and Abraham and the frightful thought of the sacrifice of Isaac. Lippman Bodoff in *The Binding of Isaac, Religious Murders & Kabbalah* and the commentary in Eitz Hayim give us two reasons to conclude that God did not expect Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, and Abraham did not expect that God would require him to do it. First, the Torah says that God intended to *test* Abraham – one could infer that **test** means that God will not expect Abraham to actually do what he asks and sacrifice Isaac. Also, Abraham said to his servants, "You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and *we will return* to you." By saying *we* will return (as opposed to I), he expected to return with his son. Thus, he didn't believe that Isaac would be sacrificed in the end. The story is about the binding of Isaac, which happened. It is about the not-sacrifice of Isaac.

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Footnote: the 8 occurrences of Hineni

1. God calls on Abraham to tell him to offer Isaac as a burnt offering.
2. Isaac says "Father" on the way to the place for building the altar, and Abraham says Hineni.
3. The **angel** calls Abraham to tell him not to kill Isaac.
4. Isaac calls Esau, and asks him to hunt some game and prepare a dish for him "so that I may give you my innermost blessing before I die". Esau accepts - Hineni
5. Jacob responds to **a divine call** with a "Hineni" (Genesis 31:11) and returns to his homeland and continues his mission.
6. Jacob speaks to Joseph, intending to tell him to bring food to his brothers and Joseph answers Hineni.
7. Jacob responds to **a divine call** again and begins his descent into Egypt (in Genesis 46:2)
8. Moses responds to the **voice from the Burning Bush** with a "Hineni" at the beginning of his mission of destiny (Exodus 3:4) *So now come, and I will send you to Pharaoh, and take My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."*