

When God call out to Abraham, as we read in our Torah reading, Abraham's response is Hineni. From his gut, he proclaims his presence and his willingness to listen. *Hineini*. Here I am. One word - *Hineini*.

The Bible uses this word when one calls out to another to indicate their attention.

- Esau and Jacob to Isaac
- Jacob to an angel
- Joseph to Jacob
- Jacob and Moses to God
- Samuel to Eli
- Samuel and Isaiah to God

Isaac responded to Abraham's call with the same word. The word *Hineini* means:

- I'm willing to listen to you.
- I care about you.
- I trust you.
- I'm here for you.
- You can depend on me.

Even God says *Hineini*, Isaiah says:

Then, when you call, Adonai will answer; When you cry, God will say: *Hineini*, Here I am. (Isaiah 58:9)

And God responds:

I responded, [even] to those who did not ask, I was present [even] to those who did not seek Me; I said, "*Hineini, Hineini*, Here I am, here I am," (Isaiah 65:1)

In our prayers, we ask God to listen. We ask God to be present. And our tradition assures us that this is the case. The covenant between God and Israel depends on Hineni. Our prayers depend on God's Hineni.

There is that moment of fear when the person you love says, "Will you do something for me?" I want to say, "what is it," and then decide whether I will do it or not. Sometimes I do, but afterwards I feel a little guilty about it. Because the right response is to jump past the fear into the trust, and say YES. *Hineini*. I trust that you won't ask me to do something that I am not capable of doing. And because I love you and trust you, I am willing to fulfill your request, sight unseen. It is a massive exercise in trust.

No matter how difficult the message, no matter how hard the task, the lesson from Abraham and others is to responds *hineini* before knowing what is being asked. When we are in relationship, when we are being caring people, that's what we should do. We respond Hineni, and then listens to what is being asked.

Part of that which binds us together as a community is a shared sense of *hineini*, that we are here for each other. We are together in this community because we choose to be. And the existence of the community depends on its members being there for each other.

Turn to a person near you, on your right. Look them in the eye, and say Hineni. Turn to a person near you, on your left. Look them in the eye, and say Hineni.

You have just affirmed your part in holy community. We are a web, connecting us together in a network of trust and support. That's what it means to be a part of Ahavas Israel. More than being a community devoted to traditional Jewish practice, we need to be a community devoted to each other. You need to be willing to look each other in the eye and say, Hineni. No matter what

disagreements you might have had in the past, if one part of the body of Ahavas Israel is hurting, the entire congregation needs to say, we're here for you. We'll support you in your mourning, we'll support you in your recovery. But there is a mutual pact here -- you need to be present to say Hineni. You need to support the community, its weekday minyanim, its Shabbat services, its shiva homes and funerals. And as you are present for others, others will be present for you.

We all have wounds, we all have scars, we've all be hurt. But having been hurt in the past need not turn you into a victim. A victim withdraws from community and lashes out at anyone who approaches. A victim is afraid of being hurt, of wounds reopening. A victim uses past trauma to justify ongoing anger.

Hineni is a statement that I am present, scars and all. That I am not going to allow my past trauma to keep me from being fully available to help others recover from their trauma.

*Hineini* is a statement that I am not a victim, that I take responsibility for my choices, and that I can choose not to let my past hurts define my future.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks tells the story of Mikhaila Peterson, a young woman who grew up in acute, incessant, pain from juvenile idiopathic arthritis. Her father, psychologist Jordan Peterson, raised her not to think of herself as a victim.

Rabbi Sacks wrote [<http://rabbisacks.org/not-being-a-victim-reeh-5778/>]:

People have every reason to construe themselves as victims. Their lives are characterised by suffering and betrayal. Those are ineradicable experiences. [The question is] what's the right attitude to take to that – anger or rejection, resentment, hostility, murderousness? That's the story of Cain and Abel, [and] that's not good. That leads to Hell.

It's the same with Holocaust survivors. They really were victims of one of the worst crimes against humanity in all of history. Yet they did not see themselves as victims. The survivors I knew, with almost superhuman courage, looked forward, built a new life for themselves, supported one another emotionally, and then, many years later, told their story, not for the sake of revisiting the past but for the sake of educating today's young people on the importance of taking responsibility for a more human and humane future.

The answer is that ... in any given situation we can look back or we can look forward. We can ask: "Why did this happen?" That involves looking back for some cause in the past. Or we can ask, "What then shall I do?" This involves looking forward, trying to work out some future destination given that this is our starting point.

There is a massive difference between the two. I can't change the past. But I can change the future. Looking back, I see myself as an object acted on by forces largely beyond my control. Looking forward, I see myself as a subject, a choosing moral agent, deciding which path to take from here to where I want eventually to be.

Thank you for being part of this holy community. Thank you for being present today. I want to conclude with a story about the power of a *Hineini* moment.

A colleague was saying *Kaddish* for his mother and was hoping to find a *Ma'ariv minyan* upon his trip home to Jerusalem from the airport. He asked his taxi driver if he knew of a synagogue that would have a late *Ma'ariv* service. Sensing that his driver was secular because he wasn't wearing a kippah, he knew the odds of the driver knowing of a *minyan* were slim, but he figured he would ask, anyhow.

"You need a *minyan*?" the driver asked.

"כן, yes," he answered.

“Don’t worry,” his driver assured him. Asher wasn’t sure what the driver had in mind, but they continued on the climb up the steep highway to Jerusalem. Shortly after entering the city, the driver pulled his taxi to the side of the road, took a well-worn kippah out of his glove compartment, got out of the cab, and told my friend, “תחכה רגע, wait a minute.” The driver then proceeded to flag down eight cars, got the drivers to come out of their cars, brought them together, to make a late-night *minyan* on a Jerusalem sidewalk.

A group of strangers transformed into Jews on a mission to do a mitzvah for a fellow Jew in need. So ask yourself, where is it that my holy community needs my help? Being an usher, being a Gabbai, helping make a weekday minyan, coming to a Shabbat or Festival service, setting up or serving Kiddush, cleaning up afterwards. Helping to plan a social activity, working in the garden, cleaning up our grounds, hosting a home study session, or joining a book group. This is your *Hineini* moment. I’m calling out to you, Ahavas Israel is calling out to you, Torah is calling you, God is calling you. How will you respond? *Hineini*?