



## *Hineni*

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In the yoga class I don't have time to attend, the teacher is wont to ask two simple questions: Where are you? What time is it? These are good questions for us to ask ourselves, so I invite you to take a moment, close your eyes if you wish, and ask yourself: What time is it in your life? Where are you?

I've learned a lot from yoga, but I didn't have to go to class to learn the spiritual significance of these questions. The existential question, "Where are you?" is already heard in the fateful encounter between God and God's first creation, our ancestor Adam, in the Garden of Eden. Adam, *Ahdam*, made of the earth, *adamah*, whose blood, *dahm*, pulses through us--for the more we learn about the earliest days of the human species, the more do we realize that neither chromosomes nor character have changed that much since then.

It is evening time in the Garden of Eden and *ruach*, a fresh wind, is blowing through the trees of the Garden; remember how creation too starts with *ruach*—the wind-spirit of God flutters over the primordial waters. Here again the Holy One, the Inspiration who breathed wind into the lungs of this first creature not so long before, now arrives on the wind, swirling about the consciousness of Adam and asks: "*Aiyecha*—Where are you?"

Where are you? What time is it in your life right now?

So much of our story—our Rosh Hashanah and High Holiday story, this morning's narrative of Abraham and his relationships with those he loves and what he values, our own life stories...so much of our story is a narrative about being busy all the time. There are calls to answer, flocks to shepherd, deals to close, wells to dig, carpools to drop off, treadmills to walk, idols to smash and then, all of a sudden, when we are finally "doing fine, thank you very much, catch you later!"—we get interrupted by an urgent summons. *Where are you? What time is it?* How does Abraham answer and how do we answer?

Our Rosh Hashanah Torah portion begins when things are going well for Abraham. He's got goats, he's got sheep, he's got servants, he's got tents, he's got options vested (at least until the market collapsed last week!). Best of all he's got a son (actually, two, but he tends to ignore one of them most of the time). All of a sudden, out of the blue, Abraham gets a voice-mail page he wasn't expecting:

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהָאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת אַבְרָהָם  
*And it came to pass sometime afterward and God tested Abraham, saying to him: "Abraham !"*

ויאמר ה'נני *And Abraham said, "Hineni! Here I am."* It is in this moment that Abraham's true character becomes known: Abraham is revealed to be a hero. Abraham and the Holy One have been in dialogue for many years, they have a covenant, a spiritual partnership together. Today, at this precise moment, God turns to him and says, sharply, urgently, "Abraham!" And the faithful man replies, "Here I am." Not, "I'll get right back to you," not "I'm sorry, she can't take your call right now" not even "Yo, what's up?" But *Hineni, I am open, ready and listening.* Abraham demonstrates for us what commitment means: it is the stance of being fully present, in this particular moment. Sometimes our commitments are tested by the group or organization whose mission we value. Surely you have had the experience of your involvement with a cause or organization growing as your commitment deepened—such that, as your investment grew, when there were occasions that something had to be done, small or large, you took it on because ...because someone had to stand up and say "*Hineni.*" In our intimate relationships and as family members, too, we don't know when we begin how our intertwined lives will unfold; commitment involves preparing for what we reasonably expect and hope for, but, more importantly, it means being present and responsive to the unplanned and unexpected. Abraham deserves to be our hero because he 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. There is the call, "*Avraham!*" and the response; "*Hineni! Here I am!*"

Now I want to be clear—it is good to set limits and boundaries. Our family relationships, our friendships, our volunteer commitments, and especially our workplaces are all healthier when we are clear, firm and respectful around boundaries and limits; the spill-over of worklife into all hours of the day and every day of the week is one of the most insidious dimensions of the contemporary economic culture. Our personal relationships are healthier when we are able to firmly articulate both the depths of our caring and the boundaries of our own privacy and space and lives. We do not value Abraham as a spiritual model because he is God's co-dependent with no personal boundaries. Rather, Abraham does exhibit here openness of heart, readiness to listen without prejudice or prejudgment. In this moment of encounter, Abraham is fully present.

Where are the relationships where you are able and ready to be fully open and fully present, where you can listen to all that is said with an open and embracing heart? The truth is we have been hurt, we do let each other down, we have been disappointed; the truth is, we are busy, we are overextended, we are working a lot of hours, and tired a lot of the time, and we do deserve just a little time and space for ourselves; the truth is that our parents and our partners, our friends and our family do press our buttons and every time they walk in the room or call on the phone, we take a little breath in, and roll our eyes just the tiniest bit, because the truth of the matter is, for many of us, if we didn't have some body and psychic armor, we'd never get through the day. Is that sometimes true for you?

But I also know that we are capable of saying, and we do say, "*Hineni.*" What is amazing in this story of Abraham is how he begins, the commitment and readiness and responsiveness to the beloved precedes the conversation about what he is being asked to do. What we witness here is the readiness itself. Have you had the experience of turning to another and being received and welcomed with "*Hineni*"?

To whom are you ready to answer with such fullness of heart and spirit? *Teshuvah*, the spiritual turning which is the heart of this season, is about renewing our covenants, returning to our commitments, restoring trust which has been broken or betrayed—*teshuvah* is the act of readiness for and saying “*Hineni*.” During these High Holidays, I invite you to reflect on your relationships with those around you and also to pay attention to the values which are at the core of your life. How are these values being expressed in your life right now? Where are you being called?

Our hero Abraham sets out on his vision-quest, impelled by the call he cannot refuse, and departs before dawn on his dangerous journey. But the dangers of this journey are not those of the wine-dark sea which imperil Homer’s hero, Odysseus. Our hero’s greatest challenges come not from the far-off and unknown but rather from very close by: When the voice of heaven calls to him, he is totally present; but is he able to respond to lesser voices with the same fullness of spirit? Did he leave the tent so early because of his enthusiasm to start out on his journey; or was he just trying to get out the door before Sarah, his wife, could waken and question the wisdom of his plans? Sarah’s voice and point of view are completely missing in the Torah’s telling of this story; she must not remain invisible in our retelling.

Isaac, walking at his father’s side, is silent for three days. It is only when Abraham and Isaac are climbing up the mountain that a new voice speaks:

הנני בני – *Then Isaac said to Abraham his father: “Father!”* ויאמר יצחק אל אברהם אביו אבי ואמר – *and Abraham said, “Hineni, my son.”* This is, for me, Abraham’s greatest moment, the heroic character at its best. Abraham wrenches himself away from his single-minded focus on the realization of his goal and, in this moment, turns—firmly, completely, with open heart—to his son, Isaac, and declares: “*Hineni, my son! Here I am!*” The Torah’s repetition of the *leitwort*, this theme-word, “*Hineni*,” comes to teach us that our personal commitments, the covenants we have with those closest to us, require the same attention and awareness as our bigger, public obligations do. Attention to these relationships does not result in raises nor promotions; we receive neither plaques nor awards; not even the approval of our colleagues and the excitement of starting a new project. The work of the private sphere is on-going and often repetitive—it is, by the world’s lights, decidedly unheroic.

Here then is Abraham the proto-feminist, the exemplar of responsiveness to the voice of our children, honoring the domestic and quotidian with the same commitment and soul-presence as rendered the transcendent revelatory voice of heaven. Abraham responds to God and his child in exactly the same way. Of course God doesn’t call us as often as Abraham, it seems, and not all of us are parents to young children—but we all are in relationships and daily encounter with those who are more powerful and more important to us and those who are less—Abraham asks us, by his example, to consider if our spiritual stance is different when we look down compared to when we look up.

Now, I must point out, Abraham’s temporizing resolution of the apparent conflict between the call he has heard from Above and the question he is asked from below is not particularly satisfying for us, but within the Torah’s narrative, it works, at least for now. We read: וילכו שניהם יחדו *the two of them went on together*. Isaac, it would appear, is satisfied, for the text makes clear, “*the two went on together.*” But this phrase refers not just to parent and

child but also to Abraham's double *Hineni*, his response to the two calls he hears, שניהם יחדו, וילכו, he was able to carry both with in his heart together.

Our Torah portion this morning is, though, an adventure story, and according to the conventions of the genre, our hero must overcome three challenges, each one more difficult than the one before it. Some people suggest that the climax of Abraham's adventure—and his faith—is the moment in the story when he picks up the knife, ready to sacrifice his son, Isaac. But I am here to tell you that the true challenge for Abraham is not the picking up but the putting it down. When he picks up the knife, he has forgotten the reconciliation of the prior two encounters; he has opted to do what he believes he must. So it is as he stands ready, hand outstretched, knife in the air, that yet a third time, he is called. The first time, Abraham enjoyed the overwhelming awareness of the Divine Presence. The second time, Isaac, his son, spoke, saying, "Father." And now he is called by name, "אברהם, אברהם, Abraham, Abraham!" Who is calling him now?

ויקרא אליו מלאך—A messenger, a delivery person, an angel of God from heaven interrupts him. "Abraham! Abraham!" "ויאומר: הנני" Through his tears, Abraham looks over to this stranger and says: "*Hineni!* Here I am!" Here indeed, as raw and vulnerable and absorbed in the urgency of his moment as one could ever be—and all the same, his reply to this third encounter is the same as in the first two, *Hineni!* And it is because of his openness and spiritual strength that Abraham is able to hear the message that the *malach*, the messenger brings—turn in *teshuvah*, reorient yourself, for you have erred. The heroic gesture is not that he had picked up the knife, preparing to sacrifice his son—such a heroism we need? No, Abraham is our spiritual hero because of his openheartedness and responsiveness; in this moment, he can listen and see where he has turned aside from the path he needs to be on. Now we can fully understand the opening words of the text, נסה את אברהם *And God tested Abraham...* The challenge that Abraham had to overcome was not whether he would be willing to pick up the knife but rather would he have the inner courage, the spiritual fortitude, to risk putting it down.

This is our challenge too, isn't it? Can we say *Hineni*, can we be present and open to an encounter coming from an unfamiliar source? Are we open to the many guises in which God's messengers appear? And having once set a course, and gotten our pride and our commitment invested, can we be open and strong enough to turn in *teshuvah*, to change our direction without loss of integrity or self?

I must admit that Abraham is a problematic hero. His family, like every other one in the book of Genesis, is overwhelmingly dysfunctional. I have praised Abraham this morning for his responsiveness to God, the Isaac, to the angel...but he never does communicate with his wife, Sarah, through this entire story. If early on Abraham and Isaac, "walked on together," by the end of the story it appears that Isaac has been irreparably hurt, for Abraham returns down the mountain alone and, in the Torah's narrative, Isaac never speaks to him again.

Abraham is far from a perfect hero; but Judaism doesn't ask us for perfection, it summons the best we are capable of, at every moment. It was at these moments of great challenge that Abraham three times was asked, "Where are you?" and each time replied, "*Hineni*, here I am."

We began with that question: "Where are you?" God's first question to Adam, to humanity, to us is "*Aiyecha?* Where are you?" The story is told of how Rabbi Shneur Zalman was arrested and put in the czar's prison. His jailer came to taunt him, asking, "What worth is this God of yours? In the first story of the Bible, Adam hears God coming and runs and hides. And your God has to ask 'Where are you?' Is this God so bumbling that even with just one person on the whole earth, God can't find him?"

The Rav answered the jailer, "Do you believe that the Scriptures are eternal and that every era, every generation, and every person is included in them?" "I believe this," answered the jailer. "Well then," said Rav Shneur Zalman, "in every era, God asks every person, 'Where are you in your world? So many years and days of those allotted to you have passed, and where are you? The Holy One, Blessed Be, knows where every creature is at every moment. And at every moment, the Holy One is speaking to you, and asking: 'Where are you?'"

On this Rosh HaShanah, God asks each of us: *Aiyecha?* Where are you?

May we be as courageous as Abraham, answering: *Hineni*.

*Ken yehi ratzon.* Amen.