

It was a shock to all of Steve's family when he received the devastating diagnosis of prostate cancer. Steve had hired my mom to do grant writing and development for the Cincinnati Cancer Advisors, a non-profit that aims to improve the care of cancer patients seeking second opinions. They were so close. Even though she was retired, and this was a part-time opportunity, she always answered when he called, whether it was a Saturday, we were at the pool, or on vacation, and they'd brainstorm approaches for asks, and talk about work, which wasn't really work for him, or for her. Steve was their executive director, and when his prostate cancer worsened, he continued to lead the organization with a spiritual level of dedication, despite his health limitations. As his prognosis became bleaker and bleaker, I could hear it wearing on my mom.

I was on my way to work one morning when my mom called to tell me that she was going to visit Steve in the hospital because he was dying. She said: "I'm scared because I don't know what to do or say." I didn't want to "rabbi" her with a textbook-style question or phrase I learned from my rabbinic training, so I just listened. "What do you tell your congregants during times like this?" she asked me. Whoa... at that moment, I realized my mom was asking *me* for rabbinic advice.

I explained that hospitals are uneasy for many people; they aren't places with which people have positive associations. They're scary, they're sterile and they're cold. Simply showing up at the hospital to spend time with someone means a lot because many people stay away. It's also really hard to put yourself in a situation where there's nothing you can say to take away someone's pain, discomfort or sadness. Not knowing exactly what to say, because there's **nothing** one can say that will make things better, means having to figure out what else to talk about, or worse, it means simply sitting with them while the weight of a prognosis bears down upon everyone in the room. And that is hard. Simply being there and being present speaks louder than words ever could. Showing up in these moments is difficult, but **so** impactful.

My mom is wonderful at many things, but when it comes to ***not*** saying something... well, that's not so easy for her. So, when I advised her to simply **be** there and not offer platitudes or say things to try and make the sadness go away, she was nervous.

However, when I called her at the end of the day to ask how it went, she told me that Steve and his family were grateful that she and some of the others from the office **showed up**. Despite their discomfort with

hospitals and the pain they felt at the impending loss of their leader, they were present for him.

Our patriarch, Abraham, knew what it meant to show up, even when it meant great loss and pain.

Tomorrow we will read *Akeidat Yitzchak*, the binding of Isaac. This torah portion, from Genesis 22, describes Abraham being commanded to sacrifice his son, Isaac.

God calls to Abraham: "Abraham!"

Abraham responds: "*Hineini*."

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**, on one of the heights that I will point out to you."

And early the next morning, Abraham took 2 servants, his donkey, and his son Isaac, and set out for the place where God told him to go.

Our own sages ignore the moral implications of sacrificing one's own child and "instead focus on Abraham's enthusiasm that manifests through the diligence and the speed with which he rushes to complete the task

(Musal Torah Commentary, 25)," so today, I want to talk about how Abraham responds and not what is being asked of him.

Before God ever lays out the details of the request, Abraham responds with "*Hineini*," a unique Hebrew contraction bringing together the word "*hinei*", behold, and the suffix "I", or me. We understand this one word to mean not just "*here I am*," but "*I'm stepping up to the plate because I am ready to respond, and I am eager to fulfill this mitzvah.*"

Despite my mom's wariness and nervousness about what to say, and what not to say, she *hineini'd*- she showed up.

When we sign up to bring a meal to a grieving family whose grief is so great that we might be scared into staying away because there's nothing we can say to reconcile the pain, we *hineini*.

When we visit someone in assisted living, or memory care, who may or may not remember us, and that's painful *for us* because we are their children, grandchildren or best friends, and yet, we put that aside, so they don't have to be alone, we *hineini*.

When we show up for a funeral and risk the awkwardness that comes with running into people we haven't seen or talked to in years, but we want to support just one of the mourners, we *hineini*.

When we call our parents or grandparents, even when there's tension, or they can't hear well, or we have to repeat ourselves many times, and we catch up, check in and listen not to respond, but listen to listen- we *hineini*.

Rabbi Alexandria Shuval-Weiner, who many of you probably remember from her time as a rabbi of this congregation, believes that, in this *parashah*, Abraham demonstrates the *midah* of *zerizut*, or enthusiasm. He rises to God's call with alertness and readiness.

Musar, the Jewish practice of mindfulness that uses our texts and spiritual disciplines to cultivate inner virtues, lists enthusiasm as one of the 32 character strengths worthy of calibrating and strengthening. And when all 32 are fine-tuned like a well-strung guitar, our inner holy light reverberates and shines through us, unobscured.

Before God ever gives Abraham his task, God calls to him and Abraham replies, "hineini." When God calls to Moses from the Burning

Bush in Exodus, Moses, despite being slow of speech and tongue, responds with "hineini."

In some instances, we respond after being asked, but in many situations, we are **called**... and we have to choose whether to stay put, or rise to the occasion.

How can we move from an apathetic, '*just get it over with*', to a '*let's do this!*' which captures the essence of our sage Rashi's understanding of hineini: 'eagerly running to complete the mitzvah. When applied to modern contexts, even the uncomfortable ones, it means not shying away from showing up.

When we say *hineini*, we aren't doing it for ourselves. We're prioritizing God, or that elusive "something greater" that a few of us might prefer to call God. And we're taking that and situating it above our own needs, to show up not because we have to, not because it's expected of us, not because we're just trying to get it over with and cross it off our to-do list, but because we've dug deep within our souls to our sacred reservoirs of strength, endurance, intuition and knowledge of what is right and wrong, and said "this is more important, and for this, I will be there." We say hineini!

In our Talmud, we read a story about Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba and his friend, Rabbi Yochanan.

Hiyya was ill, and Yochanan went to visit him. After some small talk, Yochanan tells his friend to "Give me your hand," and once he does, Yochanan revives Hiyya. Fast forward a bit, and the tables are turned- Yochanan is ill and his friend Hiyya visits him. They chat, and Hiyya says to his weak friend, "Give me your hand." He does, and Hiyya revives Yochanan.

What does this story have to do with hineini? Despite being able to revive another person, neither Hanina nor Yochanan could revive themselves in their weakened state- they had to rely on the aid of their friend. Our rabbis teach that "a captive cannot release themselves from prison; only with the help of someone from the outside, can they be raised up."

After God sees Abraham's readiness and puts Abraham through the motions of the task, and Abraham proves his willingness to step up to the plate no matter the circumstances, God rewards Abraham by sparing Isaac, the son that would have been sacrificed.

When we respond like Abraham, we are prioritizing others, and there is reward in valuing something greater than ourselves. The same reward that Abraham received, when he learned that his descendants, who wouldn't be possible had Isaac been sacrificed, would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand by the sea. Our reward for *hineini*-ing is continuation of that blessing, which to me is Jewish continuity and the opportunity to l'dor v'dor our values, to pass them on, to generations that will stick to them because of what we have modeled. Generations that will shine as bright as the stars in the sky.

However, I fear that we will not be as numerous as the stars if we can't learn to rise to the occasion and show up without being called. Before we can ever make our wishes for a sweet and healthy New Year come true, our Yom Kippur fasts worthwhile, before we can be written and sealed in the book of life, we must learn to find the balance between our own needs and others' needs.

Rabbi Simcha Bunim taught that every person should have two pockets. In one pocket, there should be a piece of paper saying: "I am only dust and ashes." And in the other pocket, there should be a piece of paper saying: "For my sake, the world was created." If we don't find a balance

between those two tendencies, our inner light will not shine forth, and the stars in our sky, and the gleams in our eyes of future generations to carry on our values, will become dull and will be sacrificed on the altars of our own complacency.

We each have the opportunity to *hineini*. Volunteer with Jewish Family Services' Jet Express program to drive clients, who lack their own transportation, to their errands and appointments. If you're not uncomfortable with hospital environments, become a JFS Spiritual Care Volunteer to provide pastoral care to members of our community recovering from surgery, illness or living in a care facility. When you hear a familiar name said during the *Mi Shebeirach* or Mourner's Kaddish, pick up the phone and call that person, or their family, who might be grieving, or feeling worn down because they might be the caretakers. Sign up for the meal train, go to the funeral, sit shiva, bring the meal, call weeks and months later to let them they have not been forgotten. And even though you will have nothing to say to clear away the pain of loss and grief, your presence speaks volumes.

Our late President, John F Kennedy, in his inauguration address, talked about this *parashah*, without even realizing it. He concluded by

reminding Americans, “with history the final judge of our deeds, we should go forth to lead the land we love. Though we will ask [God's] blessing and [God's] help, **we should know that, here on earth, God's work must truly be our own.**”

There are hineini moments to be had for everyone, in small ways and in large ways, and my prayer this new year is that each and every time we put that “something greater” above ourselves, we make God’s work our own.

Shanah tova!