

Watch Your Tone

“Watch your tone, young lady.” I remember these words coming as a warning that I was on the fine line between being sassy and being in trouble for it. The tone of voice we use can tell others exactly how we’re feeling, what’s on our mind, what we think about them and so much more. When we get excited, our voice might get higher, and when we lie, our voice might go quiet. When we’re angry we might scream, and when we’re annoyed, our tone might have a certain bite to it. While the words we use are important, how we say them can tell others so much more about what we’re thinking.

Parshat Vayera, this week’s *Torah* portion, is chock-full of narrative. It opens with Abraham after he makes the covenant with God and goes through his circumcision. He is immediately greeted by *malachim*, messengers from God. Abraham has a choice: he can welcome them and make them feel at home, or he can send them away. Abraham chooses to welcome them. Next in the *parshah*, Abraham has to deal with the fall of *Sdom* and *Amora* and save his cousin Lot and his family as these two cities of weak morals come to their own demise. Later in the *parshah*, Abraham and Sarah are blessed with the birth of Isaac and have to sort out their complicated family dynamics with Ishmael and his mother. After Abraham makes a pact with a nearby king, he comes to a moment of testing, both of his faith and his trust.

This section of text is referred to as the *Akeidah*, the Binding of Isaac. This is the narrative of God asking Abraham to take his son, his only son, the son that he loves, Isaac, and sacrifice him as an offering for God. This whole incident is described by the rabbis as a test of Abraham’s faith, but it teaches more about his character. During this encounter, Abraham uses the same word, *Hineini*, (“here I am”) three times in response to three different people. While the text isn’t written in click-to-hear format, we can imagine the change in his voice.

The first time Abraham answers is to God in chapter 22, verses 1-2. God calls out to Abraham, and Abraham, not knowing what is about to come to him responds, *Hineini*, “Hey God, HERE I AM!” One can envision Abraham perhaps hesitantly, but enthusiastically awaiting his next task from God. Saying *Hineini* with this attitude lets others know you are there and ready to step in. You’re not judging what they might ask of you or placing conditions on what you’ll agree to, you’re simply ready to go.

A few verses later in chapter 22, verses 6-8, we find Abraham on his way to fulfill God’s wishes in offering up Isaac. He and Isaac are walking together with all the materials necessary for a sacrifice except for the animal to be used. Isaac, who is possibly every bit as nervous as his father, calls out to Abraham, perhaps with a bit of hesitancy and concern. Abraham again responds with *Hineini*. But this *Hineini* might lack some of the enthusiasm of the previous one. Abraham stands up this time, walking with his son, trying to be a calming presence.

The third instance occurs as Abraham has his arm lifted to make the sacrifice. A *malach*, an angel of God, calls out to him. Up to this point, Abraham has twice answered calls ready to act and has twice been burdened with their gravity. It should come as no surprise that this time the *malach* has to call his name twice before he answers. Perhaps this time he answers with a bit of a bite in his voice. “What?! I’m here!”

In our lives, we are constantly being asked to support this cause or that cause, to give money to this organization or that one. We have families, friends, and jobs that constantly place requests, demands, and constraints on our time. While we might have once jumped up and said *Hineini*, here I am, ready to

help, maybe we now find ourselves overburdened and annoyed at these requests. But, if Abraham had ignored that final request, our story would have gone quite differently. We too have the opportunity to turn ourselves off, or to continue to take responsibility for ourselves and our community, to keep answering the call because it's the right thing to do. Just watch your tone.

ללמוד **To Learn:** ללמד **To Teach:** לשמור **To Keep:** לעשות **To Do:**

Parshat Vayera is the source text for the *mitzvah* of *Bikur cholim*, visiting the sick. Saying *Hineini* means making sure that those in our community who cannot be physically with us because of treatments or other limitations are still included. When a classmate, friend, neighbor or family member is sick, make a little extra time to visit them, call them, send a meal or a card as a family. Include your children in the learning.