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Preface

Any number of times I have heard people quote Woody Allen as saying, "80 percent of life is simply showing up." Actually, Allen said: "80 percent of *success* is showing up," but the misquote does say a great deal about people's attitude. Most people feel that all we have to do is be physically present, whether in our professional roles or in our personal relationships, and that is sufficient. We can get by if we merely "show our face" to others.

The Bible seems to already anticipate this sense that "being there" is sufficient to ensure success when we read God's words beckoning Moses to ascend Mt. Sinai: "Come up to Me on the mountain and be there, and I will give you the stone tablets with the teaching and the commandments" (Exodus 24:12). The Divine's words seem to imply that by Moses being on the mountain, he would receive the commandments. However, a famous Hasidic master, the Kotzker Rebbe, asks why God had to further instruct Moses to "be there." Wasn't he already up on the mountain? The Kotzker suggests that God was telling Moses not to just be there physically, but rather to be fully present in the moment—mentally, spiritually, and emotionally. Moses' relationship with God will come to fruition in his receiving of the Ten Commandments if and when he is fully there, a covenantal partner with the Divine.[1]

We, too, must be fully present, responsive, and receptive to the other in our lives, whether it be God or the individuals whom we love—our parents, spouses, children, siblings, or friends—if we want to experience real happiness and fulfillment. And at a time when

many of us are finding it overwhelming to face the violence, terror, and seeming hopelessness that is so much a part of the fabric of our everyday lives, we need even more to experience the sense of security, wholeness, and meaning that comes from significant personal relationships. By truly hearing and responding to the call of the other, whether human or Divine, by giving of ourselves, we grow in stature. If we are so caught up in ourselves that we are unable to engage others in significant ways, then we are relegated to living life on our own. We become the sole sources of joy and meaning in our lives.

The Bible can provide us with opportunities to reflect on our own relationships and how we relate to those close to us. By confronting biblical characters and their struggles to respond both to other human beings as well as to the Divine, we can find out about ourselves as husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters, children, lovers and friends, and as people searching for meaning in a fractured world. The Bible can be an extraordinary means of self-reflection for us as modern readers, helping us to better understand who we are and who we can become.

Just as the biblical characters are called by God and by the others in their lives, so, too, are we. Beginning with Adam in the Garden of Eden, biblical characters are asked to respond within relationships.[2] Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Samuel, and the prophets—in every generation individuals are called, either by God or by other human beings,[3] and each responds with the word *hineini,* here I am. Every moment of calling and response is a model for each of us, who must learn how to discern the call of the other and react to it appropriately. We are the Abrahams, the Moses, and the Samuels of our time, and we are challenged to hear the call and the cry as they did.

There are many important terms and word-symbols in the Bible that represent essential themes or values. Some of these we all can call to mind, such as *mitzvah* (commandment), *chesed* (favor), and *b'rit* (covenant). However, no single word is more well known, important, or powerful than the simple word *hineini.* While other key words convey umbrella concepts that undergird the entire biblical worldview, only *hineini* is spoken. It flows from the essence of the individuals who say it and teaches us much about who they are. It represents the ability to respond to the other within relationships. At times the

Rabbis emphasize that we respond to God, to the highest call in the universe, when we are present for those whom we love and know and with whom we are acquainted. Our response to the Divine should lead us to recognizing our obligations to other people. This one word—*hineini*—has been used by the Rabbis in our traditional texts as well as by contemporary teachers and leaders to capture the essence of relationship from a Jewish perspective and to motivate modern Jews to act on behalf of others.

When the word *hineini* is uttered by biblical characters or by God, it generally connotes three main sentiments. First is the ability to be present for and receptive to the other, as we find when Isaac responds to his son Jacob in Genesis 27:18 and when God is ever-present for Israel in Isaiah 65:1. Second, the word indicates the readiness to act on behalf of the other, as evident in Abraham's reply to God's call in the story of the *Akeidah* in Genesis 22:1, and in Esau's willingness to hunt game for Isaac in Genesis 27:1. Finally, *hineini* at times indicates the willingness to sacrifice for someone or something higher, as we read in Genesis 37:13 when Joseph is willing to visit his brothers, knowing how much they despise him, or when God is present for humanity when we are willing to give of the depth of ourselves to others in Isaiah 58. The nature of our relationships is measured by our willingness to act for others or even to make sacrifices for others.[4]

Each of us can learn about who we are as we function within our relationships, by confronting and immersing ourselves in the biblical vignettes in which the term *hineini* is used. There are many places in the Bible in which variations of this term appear, most often in the form of *hin'ni,* which is used together with a verbal form. For example, in Genesis 6:17, God says, "I am about to bring *(hin'ni mayvi)* the flood waters upon the Earth." However, there are only fourteen such passages in which the term stands alone, unconnected to a specific action, and they are found in a range of biblical contexts and stories. The majority are found in the book of Genesis, involving Abraham, Esau, Jacob, and Joseph; one in the beginning of Exodus, with Moses at the Burning Bush; two in the books of Samuel, the first involving Samuel and Eli the priest and the second, David and Saul; and, finally, three passages in the book of Isaiah, when God calls out to Israel.

This book involves the attempt to characterize what each of these *hineini* texts can teach modern readers. By utilizing a range of classic rabbinic interpretations of each of these fourteen passages, along with probing modern questions to uncover the meaning latent in each of them, we will apply the messages of these intriguing biblical passages to our own relationships, as well as to our relationship with God, no matter how each of us defines the Divine power in the universe.

To gain added perspective on the meaningfulness and power of the fourteen texts, we asked well-known religious and academic scholars and leaders to share a personal anecdote associated either with one of the *hineini* passages or with the concept of *hineini* in general. These engaging personal stories demonstrate how the Bible can touch every human being.

It is our hope that these personal stories and biblical interpretations, written from the perspective of modern life, will have a powerful impact on the lives of all those who will read this book. May you, the reader, make it a part of who you are as we share this journey of discovery of personal meaning.

Acknowledgments

> One time, when his brothers had gone to pasture their father's flocks in Shechem, Israel said to Joseph, "Your brothers are pasturing at Shechem. Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "*Hineini*" (Here I am)…. So he sent him from the valley of Hebron. When [Joseph] reached Shechem, a man came upon him wandering in the fields. The man asked him, "What are you looking for?" He answered, "I'm looking for my brothers. Could you tell me where they are pasturing?" The man said, "They have gone from here, for I heard them say, 'Let us go Dothan.'" So Joseph followed his brothers and found them at Dothan.
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> *(Genesis 37:12–17)*

When Joseph sets out from Jacob's tent, having answered his father's request with the classic word of response within relationships, *hineini,* little does he know what is going to unfold. He thinks that he will merely go out to check up on his brothers, who are pasturing the flocks near Shechem, and he will probably be back in less than a fortnight. After all, how long should the trip from Beer Sheba to Shechem and back take? Joseph cannot foresee that his journey to Shechem is to be the first part of the four-hundred-year odyssey of slavery and freedom of the Jewish people. How is he to know that he will be sold to an Ishmaelite caravan by his brothers, be taken down to Egypt, wind up in prison, interpret dreams, and, as a result, become

the viceroy of Egypt, and witness his family settling in Goshen? And, ironically, had he not encountered and responded to the man as he was wandering in the fields, the entire story might have turned out differently.

The individuals we encounter along the way—our loved ones, those with whom we work, even the stranger on the road—often determine in part what our life journey will be like. Yet, sometimes it is only in retrospect that we can appreciate the crucial impact that certain encounters have had on us and how they have shaped our lives.

My own personal journey, from being a chemistry major at Columbia College to my love for Torah study, Israel, and the Jewish people, and my desire to share my knowledge, passion, and commitment as a Jew with others, is the result of individuals along the way who have touched me deeply. I indeed have been blessed with insightful and wonderful teachers throughout my life—as a teenager in Young Judaea, a mainstream Zionist youth movement, at Columbia College, the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Hebrew University, and especially at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion in both New York and Cincinnati. As a rabbinical student and a Ph.D. candidate, I was privileged to study with many individuals who nurtured in me a profound love for Jewish texts. None, however, was more wonderful to me than Abraham Aaroni, my rabbinic thesis advisor. Abe Aaroni was the quintessential teacher of Hebrew language. In his own life, teaching at Herzeliah Teacher's Institute in New York City, in the New York City public school system, at Thomas Jefferson High School and Jamaica High School (where, coincidentally, he was close friends with my aunt, Jean, *z"l,* who taught music there, and my wife's French teacher), and later in his life at HUC–JIR, he nurtured generations of students who love Hebrew. To this day, long after his retirement, many alumni still stay in touch with him, crediting him as the best teacher they ever had. I am honored to count myself among them. I dedicated this book to him, not only because of what he taught me and how he conveyed it, but mainly because he showed me what it is to be a teacher. His caring, warmth, and dedication to his students served as a most important model for all of us who aspire to teach others. May he experience

continued good health so he can enjoy the rewards for the gifts he gave to so many.

I have also benefited greatly from the wonderful individuals associated with Jewish Lights Publishing. My friend Stuart M. Matlins, founder of Jewish Lights, has constantly encouraged me to share my own passion and teachings with as wide an audience of learners as possible. He has been a mentor who has helped me better understand how to engender a serious approach to Torah study through the written word. I have also been the beneficiary of the support and direction of Emily Wichland, the managing editor of Jewish Lights and a consummate professional. Emily's insights, vision, and prodding have made this book immeasurably better than it would have been without her help. The hand of Sally Freedman, who edited the book, may not be evident to the reader, but its presence its found on almost every page. Her structural suggestions helped create a manuscript that could best communicate the essential message that all of us can be serious students of Torah and find our own meaning in the text.

This book, *Hineini in Our Lives,* is more than an exercise in sharing textual insights and interpretations with the reader. It is an attempt to underscore how the biblical text calls to each of us, demanding that we respond out of our own life experiences. In so doing, not only will we learn about ourselves, but we will also be better able to hear the call of all those we encounter on our journeys—not only those whom we love, but also the nameless people whom we meet by chance. They may be able to give us more than directions on the road. Perhaps they will influence the direction of our lives.

Norman J. Cohen

Introduction

Reading through the Prism of Midrash—Making the Text Our Own

When we pray or when we recite liturgical texts, we remind ourselves of our relationship with God, and of God's nature, but we also experience the covenant anew. The process is both didactic and experiential.[1]

A primary example is the Passover Haggadah, in which we read: "Even if we were all wise, all persons of understanding, all knowledgeable of Torah, we would still be commanded to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt." No matter the breadth or depth of our knowledge, it is incumbent on us to retell, to relive, the story of our journey from slavery to freedom. In retelling the story, the goal is for each of us to feel as though we ourselves actually had gone forth from Egypt.

THE SEARCH FOR MORE THAN THE *PSHAT*

For most Jews, the challenge to personalize our life stories is not carried over to our study of the Bible. Many of us, even the most committed, view the reading of the Bible as a dispassionate exercise. Our sole intent is to use our analytical skills—be they linguistic, literary, source-critical, or historical—to understand the conventional meaning of the text (in Hebrew, the *pshat,* the simple, more obvious meaning). We focus on the question of what any particular biblical verse or narrative meant for the time in which it was written.

However, the literal reading is not the only possible way to interpret the text. The mystics of the Middle Ages understood the Torah to be an inexhaustible well that contained many levels of potential meaning. These different levels of meaning, or modes of interpretation, were conventionally divided into four categories, described by the word *PaRDeS,* an acronym for *pshat* (literal), *remez* (allegorical), *drash* (midrashic), and *sod* (mystical). The *PaRDeS* (literally, a citrus orchard) came to be understood as a symbol of the place of speculation about the Torah's meaning.[2]

The Rabbis of old recognized that there were "seventy faces to the Torah,"[3] only the first of which was the *pshat*. They intuited that the text, any text, is multivocalic, that there are a multiplicity of meanings implicit within the text, and that all readers can find a voice that will touch them. The Rabbis also taught that "every word of Torah can be divided into seventy languages," that is, the number of nations they thought existed in the world.[4] The message is clear: There are as many interpretations of any given biblical verse as there are people in the world.

Although the biblical text may be finite, its re-creation, mediated by the process of interpretation, is infinite. Many meanings may resonate within each word, each letter of Torah, when engaged readers open themselves up to it in a significant way. The text truly comes alive when readers immerse themselves in the text. The process of finding new meaning in the text through the process of interpretation has been compared to the birthing of a child. Once the umbilical cord—the tie of the biblical text to a particular time, place, and set of authors—is severed, the text takes on a life of its own. It can grow, expand, and change as readers of every age interact with it.[5] Postmodern scholars describe this process as the "recontextualizing of the text." We find meaning in the text by reliving it, by filtering it through the prism of our own lives.

THE THREE LAYERS OF THE MIDRASHIC PROCESS

If it is to have any authenticity, the attempt to find contemporary meaning in the Bible must be grounded in the Bible itself. The term midrash comes from the Hebrew root *darash,* which means "to seek,

search, or demand," meaning from the biblical text.[6] The starting point in our search for personal meaning is a close study of the Bible. It is incumbent on us to use all the knowledge we possess of the Bible—philological, literary, archeological, and theological—and the knowledge of the world of the Ancient Near East in which it was written to approximate what the biblical writer(s) intended in any given passage. Our task at the outset is to attend to the meaning of the biblical text in its context. We must first ask: What was the intent, the message of any particular biblical passage when it was written?

However, since we are the heirs not only to the Bible, which is called the Written Torah or the *Torah she-Bihtav,* but also to the Oral Torah of rabbinic teachings, the *Torah she-Ba'al Peh,* our second task as active students of Torah is to view the sacred stories of our past through the eyes of two millennia of interpreters and to benefit from their readings. The sages of the past viewed the biblical text against the backdrop of the issues of their day. As they interpreted the Bible, they were responding to the political, religious, and sociocultural conditions under which they lived—that is, the exigencies of their own life situations. Their midrashic interpretations incorporated their responses to the challenges that they faced living in *Eretz Yisrael* and the Diaspora under the Greeks, Romans, Parthians, Babylonians, Christians, and Muslims.

Since each generation of rabbinic interpreters came to Torah anew, finding the answers to the questions and challenges to Jewish survival that were particular to their time and place, multiple interpretations of any given passage were possible. The Midrash (the entire body of rabbinic midrashim) has been described as a cacophony of readings of the Bible that cannot and should not be harmonized.[7] There can always be "another interpretation," a *davar aher* (literally, "another word"), and many of these interpretations of the same biblical verse are contradictory. Yet, the Midrash typically does not attempt to smooth over the contradictions. Multiple interpretations merely provide the student of Torah with many voices from which to learn—voices that seem to argue with one another even across generations. New readers are beckoned to join in a dynamic conversation that has been conducted over two millennia, a conversation in which all strive to find their own meaning.

Therefore, it is not sufficient for us to read the interpretations attributed to the great teachers of past generations, though we can surely gain invaluable insights from them. Midrash, by definition, is the process of finding contemporary meaning in the biblical text. Therefore, the study of our sacred texts forces self-involvement. As contemporary readers, we are called on to immerse ourselves in the dialogue with Torah across the generations, a dialogue that is embedded in the religious consciousness of the community of Israel. When we ourselves become engaged with the text, new meanings are created that give voice to our very beings. In creating our own midrashim, which respond to our particular questions and dilemmas, we bring to the fore elements of ourselves that may not always be conscious.

This is the final stage in the process of creating contemporary midrash. After reading and studying the biblical text, and then seeing how the cumulative tradition interprets any given text, it is left to us to wrestle with the sacred stories of Torah. If we are grounded in the traditions of the past, then our modern readings will be built on a firm foundation, enabling them to become a new link in the chain of interpretation extending back to Sinai.

READING FOR MEANING

We as readers are not passive agents. Rather, we are active participants in the dynamic process of creating meaning through our encounter with the text. A text that is not pondered has no meaning.[8] We create the meaning as we experience the text from the vantage point of our lives.

In order for us to draw our own meanings from the biblical text, it is necessary for each of us as devoted and passionate readers first to read the text slowly, imbibing the power and potential meaning of every syntactical element—every word, phrase, and symbol. And since the biblical text is so terse, with few details provided to the reader, the inclusion or even absence of any element may be of great significance.[9] We must spend time with the biblical text, live with it, and allow the stories of our past to resonate within our very beings. If we run precipitously through the text, as if the object were to cover

the entire text in a minimum amount of time, then we are destined to see only the *pshat,* the text's surface meaning. To be active readers is to become engaged with the text in its breadth and depth.

As we wrestle with every element of the text, we must be willing to ask every meaningful question about it that we can think of. The art of interpretation rests in a significant way on our ability to elicit and address all the problems, conflicts, and ambiguities inherent in each passage. By highlighting the philological, literary, theological, sociocultural, and historical concerns inherent in the texts we are reading, we automatically locate hooks on which new meanings can hang. Every question, every problem presents an opportunity to create new interpretations of this ancient text.

As we ask our questions, it behooves us to ask the most difficult questions about the text, which for us as modern readers are either questions of belief or humanistic questions about the characters and their lives. We must be able to see the text from within, placing ourselves inside the characters and the fabric of their lives and relationships. In so doing, we will come to realize that the biblical characters, who are portrayed in very human terms, are faced with situations and issues very much like our own. And in engaging with them through our immersion in the text, we can begin to struggle with our own life situations.

Every question about the biblical text gives us entrée into its meaning. The search for meaning often demands that we focus on one question, one textual problem, one narrative moment that enables us to discern the potential impact of the text on our lives. Rather than taking a scattershot approach to the words and images that make up an extended story, we may more easily see the relevance of the biblical characters' interaction by zeroing in on one moment with which we can identify. Of course, we should not lose sight of the larger picture. We can learn a great deal from the larger, extended narrative involving any particular character. For example, who Joseph is and how he changes over the extended story of his interaction with his brothers can speak to each one of us who has siblings (Genesis 37–50). Yet, in seeing the personalities in the Bible at crucial moments in their lives that are similar to our own, not only can we learn about them, but in the process we can gain insights into

ourselves. Filling in the details of such narrative moments by probing the interaction of the characters, their feelings, and their concerns enables us as modern readers to see the relevance of these ancient stories to our own lives.

Sometimes, the challenge is to see the narrative through the eyes of characters whose voices we rarely hear. If, for instance, Sarah could tell us how she felt when Abraham took Isaac on the road to Mt. Moriah (Genesis 22), or Moses could share with us his anger at the people when they complained to him about the lack of water at the very moment of the death of his sister Miriam (Numbers 12), we might be better able to tap into similar feelings we have had in our own lives. Such biblical voices can remind us of who we are and how we can become better people—better siblings, parents, spouses, children, lovers, and friends. This is especially important when it comes to the female characters whose voices are often lost to us. They can teach us—all of us, both men and women—about our essential natures.

In the end we discover that when we study the biblical text, what we are doing is not simply reading and analyzing the narrative, learning about the characters and their lives. Rather, we find ourselves confronting our own baffling life dramas. Torah is a mirror: When we gaze deeply into it, it reflects back to us our own personas, ambivalences, struggles, and potential for growth. The challenge for us as readers, therefore, is to experience the text, relive the story—in essence, to become one with it. At that moment, when the sacred story of our people's past melds with out own life stories, we will not only be touched by Torah, but transformed by it.[10]

RESPONDING TO THE CALL: OUR OWN PERSONAL *HINEINI*

Reading a sacred text demands self-reflection. No matter who we are and or how much knowledge we bring to the moment of engagement with Torah, meaning is created if we open ourselves up to it. Though we all may be at different stages on the journey of Torah study, each of us has the potential to find personal meaning in the text. And since the text addresses each of us according to our individual capacities

and where we are in our lives, the biblical text may be read differently by us at different times in our lives and in different circumstances. As we change, so might the meaning of any given text for us.[11] It makes no difference whether we are rabbis, teachers, scholars, authors, theologians, students, or interested laypersons. The text beckons to each of us, calls to us to respond to it out of the depth of our beings. If we are open and ready, we can hear the call.