

# Answering a Higher Call: Remembering Rabin

Sarah Beller '98 | BronfmanTorah | Parshat Vayera 2015

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*Sarah Beller '98 is the Director of Education and Programs at J Street, the political home for pro-Israel, pro-peace Americans. She holds a Masters degree in International Peace and Conflict Resolution from American University and is a trained dialogue facilitator. Sarah lives with her husband and 16-month-old son in Washington, DC, where she co-founded SongRise, an a cappella group that inspires audiences to take action for social justice.*

"A painting I made a few months ago, which reads "*Hineni*" in Hebrew and "*Huna Ana*" in Arabic."

In Parshat Vayera, one of the most chilling and effective literary devices is Abraham's repeated response of *hineni*, which translates literally as, "Here I am."

The first time Abraham says *hineni* is when God calls out to him and then explains Abraham's terrible test – to go sacrifice his son Isaac. (Genesis 22:1)

The second time is when Abraham is walking up Mount Moriah with Isaac:

Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he answered, "Yes, my son." (*"Hineni v'ni."*) And he said, "Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" (Genesis 22:7)

Finally – and with great relief to those of us squirming in our seats while reading this story – just as Abraham has picked up his knife and is about to follow through on sacrificing his son:

Then an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven: "Abraham! Abraham!" And he answered, "Here I am." (*"Hineni."*) And he said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me." (Genesis 22:11-12)

Considering that this expression is used three times here, and the Torah does not mince words, it must hold great significance. What is the deeper connotation of this loaded word?

For answers, it's helpful to look to other places in the *Tanach* (Bible) and liturgy where *hineni* appears. *Hineni* occurs 178 times in the *Tanach*, and often the meaning is mundane, "Here I am doing such and such." But other times it indicates "the openness and responsiveness of someone to an urgent call" (Rabbi George Barnard). A few of the most striking appearances are:

- When God calls out to Moses from the burning bush, Moses answers, "*Hineni.*"
- When Samuel is first called to service, he says *hineni*
- Isaiah both answers God's call with *hineni*, and then later flips the equation around:

You shall call, and the Lord will answer, / you shall cry for help, and He will say: *Hineni*, Here I am! (Isaiah 58:9)

But perhaps even more well-known than its appearances in the scripture is this word's place in the liturgy. *Hineni* is deeply associated with the High Holidays because it's the word that starts off the musaf (additional) service on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. In this meditation, the cantor or *shaliach tzibur* (service leader) expresses humility, recognizing his or her imperfections in the midst of the awesome responsibility of conveying the congregation's most heartfelt prayers to the heavens.

So *hineni* has a number of connotations: an expression of being fully present, humble, utterly authentic, and ready and willing to serve when called upon – whether by a higher power or from an important human relationship.

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This week, many of us have been thinking about Yitzhak Rabin. The former prime minister of Israel was assassinated 20 years ago on November 4, 1995, and the Hebrew date of his *yartzheit* (death anniversary) falls on October 29, 2015. Over the next few days, Israeli and American leaders and people all over the world will

commemorate Rabin, who has become a symbol of the elusive quest for peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

I remember visiting Rabin Square, filled with candles and poems, on my BYFI trip in 1998, less than three years after his death. I also remember our session with David Grossman, one of Israel's foremost authors, when a member of our group asked him, point-blank, if he thought there could ever be peace, and he surprised us by answering that he did believe that peace was possible, even in the following few years.

The sad truth is, that was half a lifetime ago for me and my fellow '98ers, and there still isn't peace. And in the midst of the recent wave of violence and terror, Israelis and those of us who feel connected to Israel are experiencing a great deal of fear and despair. In tough, scary times like this, it's hard to find a beacon – something to focus on,

something to give us hope, something to lead us forward out of this seemingly endless cycle.

What can we learn from Rabin's legacy at a moment like this?

Though as a profoundly secular Israeli, he wouldn't have described them as such, Rabin seems to have had his own *hineni* experiences – times that he answered a call to serve a higher purpose.

Born in 1922, Rabin joined the Palmach, the elite fighting force of the Haganah, shortly after high school and fought in some of the most critical battles of the war for Israel's independence in 1948. In his memoirs, Rabin reflects on why he chose to stay in the army:

Standing now at a crossroads in my personal life, I felt a profound sense of moral responsibility, a kind of debt of honor towards the men whose courage and whose very bodies had blocked the Arabs' advance. It was to these soldiers that I swore an oath of loyalty.... I stayed in the army, and together with my comrades fulfilled my pledge to the heroes of the War of Independence. We built a mighty army.  
(The Rabin Memoirs, 45)

Clearly, Rabin's military career was not, in his eyes, just a job. It was a calling, as if he was saying *hineni* to his fellow soldiers, some of whom had perished in the war, and some of whom continued on.

Looking at Rabin's career up until, say, the late 1970s, one might not peg him for a peacemaker. By age 42, Rabin was the commander of the entire Israeli army. And as Dan Ephron points out in his recent book *Killing a King: The Assassination of Yitzhak Rabin and the Remaking of Israel*, "It was Rabin who led Israel's astonishing six-day assault against a coalition of Arab armies in 1967—the very war that brought the West Bank and Gaza under Israel's control."

Over the coming decades, Rabin underwent a striking transformation. You can hear it in his own words when he addressed the US Congress in 1994:

I, serial number 30743, Lieutenant General in reserves Yitzhak Rabin, a soldier in the Israeli Defense Forces and in the army of peace, I, who have sent armies into

fire and soldiers to their death, say today: We sail onto a war which has no casualties, no wounded, no blood nor suffering. It is the only war which is a pleasure to participate in — the war for peace.

So what was it, exactly, that turned Rabin from a man of war to a man of peace? Did he stand at a burning bush, like Moses, or repeatedly hear a divine voice, like Abraham?

I wish I could ask Rabin this question, but of course, I can't. As far as I can tell, it seems that the changes got rolling during the time between his first term as prime minister (1974-1977) and his second (1992-1995). During this era, he served in the opposition in the Knesset and witnessed the unexpected peace with Egypt, Israel's first major peace treaty with a previously hostile neighbor and mortal enemy.

Of the time after his first term as Prime Minister, he writes:

Being on the "outside," as it were, allows a political leader to view events from a different and sometimes broader perspective.... As many dramatic political developments have occurred in the Middle East since I left office, I believe it would be constructive, and perhaps enlightening, to take a look at the forces and processes that have brought Israel to the threshold of a new age and, as a direct result, to a time of renewed introspection about who we are and what we aspire to become. (The Rabin Memoirs, 315)

Israel's peace with Egypt looms large in Rabin's shift in worldview and priorities. In his memoirs, Rabin describes in detail his thoughts and feelings as Egyptian President Anwar Sadat touched down on Israeli soil and to extend a historic olive branch to the Israelis:

I confess that as I stood on the receiving line waiting for President Sadat's plane to land, I was possessed by a strange feeling. Even though I had participated in negotiations with Egypt in 1949, subsequent events had reinforced an idea that had been with me since my youth — that Egypt was the enemy.... As the plane taxied up to the reception area and the door opened, the tension of the crowd waiting at the airport began to soar. But when President Sadat appeared in the doorway and moved out to the top of the steps, our emotion peaked in a way I

hadn't thought possible. It was a uniquely electric moment for us all; one of those moments that remain etched in your memory forever. (The Rabin Memoirs, 322)

Perhaps this was another *hineni* experience for Rabin. Following Sadat's overture and Israel's peace treaty with Egypt, Rabin felt compelled to continue this effort to seek a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace – and the next step would be addressing the conflict with the Palestinians.

Who knew, at the time, what price Rabin would pay for answering this call? Though Sadat's tragic end at the hand of domestic extremists foreshadowed Rabin's own demise, it's safe to say that no one knew how much courage it would take, how much resistance he would meet, and how he would pay the highest price for his decision to put peace and compromise with the Palestinians at the forefront of his agenda.

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Though this may not be a *shuir* or a real-time discussion, I'd like to leave you with a few questions as food for thought.

First, a political question: As Ephron describes in his book, following the assassination, Rabin's agenda fell by the wayside and a real chance for peace was squandered. 20 years later, his work is unfinished. Who can pick up that torch and rekindle it, even in the midst of a very difficult time? And what can a pluralistic group of North American and Israeli Jews do to continue this work?

Then, a personal question: what is your "*hineni*" right now? For what or for whom are you being called to be fully present? Is it a clear, loud call or a still, small voice that's almost impossible to hear behind the static? And is it a call worth heeding?

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