WEEKLY DVAR TORAH • VAYERA

Here I *Am*



4G SENIOR MECHANECH

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הִנֵּנִי בְנִי

"Here I am, my son."

BEREISHIS 22:7

In January 1945, nineteen-year-old Naphtali Lau arrived at Buchenwald with his seven-year-old brother, Lulek, who would eventually become *Rav Yisrael Meir Lau, the Chief Rabbi of Israel.*

Their father had been murdered, and their mother had been separated from them. Naphtali had taken responsibility for keeping his little brother alive.

Knowing that children were not supposed to be among the adult male prisoners, Naphtali wrapped Lulek in a feather quilt their mother had given them and hid him inside a sack that he carried into the camp. Imagine being seven years old, curled up inside a sack, hearing the screaming of the guards and the barking of the dogs, with no idea what was going to happen to you.

When they entered the camp, Naphtali discovered that the Germans were burning everything the prisoners had brought with them. He would have to give up the sack. Rav Lau remembers hearing his brother call out, "Lulek, come here!"

He climbed out of the sack, and one of the guards noticed him. The guard wanted to know what a little boy was doing in a camp for adult men.

Naphtali explained that the child had no father and no mother. Then he asked, "What was I to do? Leave him outside in the snow, by himself?"

When Somebody Calls

Let us for a moment imagine what it was like to witness Avraham and Yitzchak as they journeyed to the Akeidah. Avraham and Yitzchak are walking up the mountain. The wood is on Yitzchak's back, the fire and the knife are in Avraham's hand. And then Yitzchak turns to his father.

> וַיֹּאמֶר יִצְחָק אֶל־אַבְרָהָם אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר אָבִי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֶּנִּי בְנִי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה הָאֵשׁ וְהָעֵצִים וְאַיֵּה הַשֶּׂה לְעֹלָה
>
> *"And Yitzchak spoke to Avraham his father and said, 'My father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' And he said, 'Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?'"*
>
> **BEREISHIS 22:7**

Avraham knows exactly why they're going up the mountain. Yitzchak does not. Avraham is carrying the weight of a mitzvah that no father could possibly imagine receiving. He is tasked with sacrificing his beloved son. Yitzchak calls out to him, *Avi.* My father.

As a father, I cannot imagine what hearing that word must have felt like for Avraham. He knows what awaits them at the top of the mountain, and he cannot give his son the reassurance that a father would ordinarily want to give.

Somehow Avraham answers, הִנֶּנִּי בְנִי. Here I am, my son. Only then does Yitzchak ask his question. We have the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the korban?

Rashi explains that *hineni* is the way chassidim answer. It's a *lashon anavah*, an expression of humility, and a *lashon zimun*, an expression of readiness. I think the two translations are deeply connected.

Humility means recognizing that the moment is not about me. Even with everything Avraham is carrying, he is able to make room for what his son is experiencing. And in that humble space, he is ready to respond to whatever his son needs from him. He doesn't yet know what Yitzchak is going to ask, but he is making himself available.

Think about how difficult that can be. When somebody we love comes to us with something painful, we often feel an immediate need to make things better. We want to say the right thing, offer a solution, or somehow take away their suffering. And when we realize that we can't, we sometimes withdraw emotionally because we don't know what else to do.

> *One of the loneliest experiences a person can have is to be going through something painful and discovering that the people closest to him cannot bear to hear about it.*

It's not necessarily that they don't care. Sometimes they care so deeply that our pain makes them anxious. After a while, we stop telling them what we're going through. We can feel how uncomfortable our pain makes them, and we don't want to put them in that position.

But often, what a person needs most is to know that their pain doesn't make us disappear. Avraham cannot make the moment any less frightening, but when his son calls, he is there, and he is ready to give him whatever he can of himself.

This helps us appreciate the very next pasuk.

> וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יַחְדָּו
>
> *"And the two of them walked together."*
> **BEREISHIS 22:8**

Rashi explains that Yitzchak now understood that he was going to be the korban, and yet they continued walking together, *b'lev shaveh*, with an equal heart.

There's a concept in attachment theory called a *secure base*. When a child grows up knowing that the people he depends upon will be emotionally available when he needs them, he gradually develops an inner sense of security. Even when life becomes frightening, he knows that he has somebody to turn to.

Of course, not everybody grows up with that experience. Some people learn very early that sharing their pain only makes things more difficult. They become extraordinarily independent because they have learned that depending on somebody else can be dangerous. From the outside, that independence may look like strength, but underneath it can be a painful conviction that when things become overwhelming, they're on their own.

Naphtali Lau was a nineteen-year-old prisoner in Buchenwald with absolutely no guarantee that he could keep his brother alive. But he couldn't leave his little brother alone in the snow. In that unimaginable darkness, Rav Yisrael "Lulek" Lau had a brother who was determined not to abandon him. **That's what it means not just to say *hineni* but to live it.**

The Navi Yeshayahu says:

> אָז תִּקְרָא וַה' יַעֲנֶה תְּשַׁוַּע וְיֹאמַר הִנֵּנִי
>
> *"Then you will call, and Hashem will answer; you will cry out, and He will say, 'Here I am.'"*
> **YESHAYAHU 58:9**

Yeshayahu is speaking about our responsibility toward other people. He tells us to share our bread with the hungry, to bring the poor into our homes, and not to turn away from our own flesh and blood. And in that context, the Navi tells us that when we call out to Hashem, He will answer, *hineni.*

When we live *hineni* with others, we can be confident that Hashem will say *hineni* in return.

TAKE IT WITH YOU

Be somebody's *hineni* this week.

When somebody you love tells you they're struggling, try to listen without giving any advice. Humble yourself and hold space for them. They don't need you to solve their problem. They just need you to be present and available for them. As my wife often says, "Don't just do something. Sit there."

And if you're the one carrying something painful, especially if you've learned to handle everything yourself, consider reaching out to somebody you trust. Allow another person the opportunity to be there for you.

Avraham Avinu was walking toward the most difficult moment of his life. Yitzchak called out to him, and before he even knew what his son was going to ask, he answered. *Hineni bni.* I'm here, my son.

And ever since that moment we are called upon to do the same. To show up in difficult moments and say *Hineni.*

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SOURCES

Bereishis 22:7–8 (sefaria.org/Genesis.22.7-8) · Rashi on Bereishis 22:7 (sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Genesis.22.7) · Rashi on Bereishis 22:8 (sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Genesis.22.8) · Yeshayahu 58:9 (sefaria.org/Isaiah.58.9)