

HINENI V'NI -- BEING THERE

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Congregation Shirat HaYam, Nantucket

a sermon by Rabbi Gary M. Bretton-Granatoor

I will never forget the opening scenario to a sermon my friend, Rabbi Eric Gurvis, gave more than three decades ago, as his Rabbinical School "Senior Sermon". He described a scene in which he saw, in the distance, a father and child walking down a city street. There in the father's hand, were the lovely fingers of his young child. Together, walking hand and hand they approached Rabbi Gurvis. At first, he was awe-struck by the beauty and simplicity of the scene. As they got closer and closer, he could see that the child was talking to the father, but in the father's ears were the headphones of a Sony Walkman. Now, so many years later, the Walkman has morphed into an iPod and the scene is repeated everywhere we look.

How like our Torah portion this morning. Abraham and Isaac are walking towards destiny. Hand in hand, Abraham and Isaac, each carrying the tools needed for the impending sacrifice -- but one lost completely in his own thoughts. "Father," Isaac said plaintively. "Hineni V'ni -- Here I am, my son" "Father, I see here all the things we need for the sacrifice, but where is the lamb?" Abraham responded, absentmindedly, "Oh, God will take care of that." And off they walked together.

But was Abraham really present for his son -- was he really there? Couldn't Abraham hear the pain in the boy's question -- the doubt -- the confusion. Did he believe that his answer would truly allay his son's fears?

"Mother, why did grandma die?" "Where did my dog go?" "What makes the sea look blue?" "How many stars are in the sky?" "Where does God

live?" "Are you going to leave me?" "Do you still love me?" "Why is this happening to me?"

A myriad of questions, pleas, and yearnings. How many have fallen on deaf ears? How many times have we been deaf to those around us, to those who count on us? This is sin that all of us are guilty of -- even Avraham Aveinu.

Abraham marching towards destiny, willing to accept the challenge of God's test. Isaac -- his precious son, the son that he begged for, the son that he prayed for. Hand in hand they walked towards Moriah. Arriving at the place that God told Abraham to go, they set out to build an altar. When it was complete and to Abraham's liking, he gathered rope in his hand to bind up his beautiful son.

Listen to the words of the poet Danny Siegal:

Isaac should have knocked the knife away
slung it down the mountain,
broken it on a rock,
whatever --
as soon as he saw Abraham
unwind the rope from the ass's saddle.
He should have shouted in his father's
sad-eyed face,
"Your sadness is cheap!
too sophisticated,
too programmed,
weeping for Youth dying Young
according to God's will!
Stop crying! Defy this mystery-laden
Master, this Voice of yours,
and love me, your visible son!"

Would not the birds,
stunned by the near-atrocity of the act,
would they not have burst into a mighty Psalm-song
to drown the clank of the knife
rolling down the hillside
and the roaring joy of Abraham?

Had Abraham not been so absorbed in his own challenge, wouldn't he have heard the fear in his son's voice? Wouldn't he see that his own self-interest might have led him to misunderstand the command of the living God? What if he stopped along their path to gaze in the eyes of his boy -- to see his own humanity reflected in the loving gaze of his child? Had Abraham stopped, listened and felt, he would have known that the test was a ruse. He would have heard the pain in his son's voice and he would have responded. But he did not. His ears were closed to all but the words -- his mind occupied with the details of his mission, shutting out everything else.

But if he heard.... Wasn't this the same Abraham that challenged God on other occasions? Who was it that demanded of God to seek out the righteous in Sodom and Gomorrah? Was it not the same Abraham that ignored his own son? Here was Abraham's failure, for God would have called off the test at any point -- the God who shouted from the heavens -- Avraham, Avraham -- *Al tishlach yadechah el hana'ar, v'al ta'as lo m'uma* (Abraham Abraham -- Don't send forth your hand towards your son -- don't do a thing).

Abraham failed to listen -- and if he heard the words then he misunderstood the question. He may have heard his son speaking -- but did not get the meaning.

That, too, is a problem that plagues us all. We listen, but we miss the message. There is a story told of a woman who visits a lawyer and tells

him that she wants a divorce. The lawyer asks: "Do you have grounds?" She says: "About half an acre." He says: "No, that is not what I meant. Do you have a grudge?" She says: "No, we have a carport instead." By this time, the lawyer is getting frustrated. He says to her, speaking very carefully: "Tell me, does he beat you up?" She says: "No, I get up in the morning before he does." By now the lawyer has had it. He says to her: "Will you please tell me exactly why you want a divorce?" And she answers: "Because, Mr. Lawyer, he doesn't understand me!"

At times, we fail to understand those around us -- those whom we most love and cherish. It happens that we have our own interests at stake, our own concerns that absorb our attention. But this New Year presents us with that refreshing opportunity to stop, listen and understand those around us. Isaac said so much with his simple and elegant question, "Dad, look, we are missing something -- I see here all the things we need to make this sacrifice. But, where is the animal for the sacrifice?" Is it not possible to hear Isaac's query in our own ears? Can you not hear the worry that something is gravely amiss?

We need to be present -- to be there -- wholly in the moment for those around us. Each person has something inside that needs to come out, that needs to be expressed. Ideas need to be born, concerns need to be noted and those around us need to feel as if they matter.

The Talmud tells us that when you see a crowd of Jews assembled together, you are supposed to say the blessing: Baruch Chacham Harazim. Praised be the Wise One who understands secrets. Each and every one of us has a secret deep inside -- a secret that must be shared with someone special and close. If we are not present, that secret becomes a Bracha l'vat'hala, a worthless blessing -- a blessing that fell on deaf ears. We begin each New Year with our own secrets. Secrets for those close to us. Or maybe even secrets for God. At this time we pray that God hears us, that God will listen. May God hear our secrets and may we each treat the other as

possessing great secrets -- important enough for those words to touch our souls, and respond appropriately.

In our service we read, "Shema Kolaynu -- Listen to our voices" O God, we pray that you listen to us, and not turn a deaf ear to our strivings. Is that not why we are here in shul? So that we might share our secrets with God? Rabbi Arnold Turetsky tells the story of a man whose wife was gravely ill and in the hospital. Since it was near the start of Rosh HaShannah he offered the man free tickets to High Holyday services. The man sadly responded that he had not been to synagogue in years and besides, he said, "Whatever I have to ask of God, I can ask of God from here." Turetsky responded, "That is true, but maybe God has something to ask of you." The man responded, "Rabbi, I never thought of prayer that way." That is why we come here -- not just to ask of God, God already knows what we need. We come here to listen to what God wants; to listen to God's dreams and hopes for us in the coming year. We come here to learn of God's vision of the way the world could and should be.

But it is not just with our loved ones that we have shut our ears – the world has also called and too often we have been deaf to its pleas. Think about the past year, from last Rosh HaShana to this – the conflagration with Gaza and Israel, the Ebola outbreak, the Ukraine civil war and Russia's annexation of Crimea, policing problems that led to protests in Ferguson and New York City, the need for people to declare that Black Lives Matter, the attack on three Israeli teens in the West Bank and the firebombing of a Palestinian home in the West Bank, the Greek debt crisis, the growth of ISIS, and the Syrian Refugee Crisis, which has now spilled over into Europe.... And all the while, the homeless still roam the streets of our cities in greater numbers and racist, sexist, biased epithets create a cacophony of noise in the streets – to be blotted out by our iPods, or the thoughts in our own minds. We have ceased to listen and we have stopped paying attention. The time has come for us to hear – to listen – to pay attention.

It is in this way that Abraham should have related to his precious son -- Hineni V'ni -- I am really here -- completely present for you, listening and loving. It is this way that we must relate to our friends, when they ask, "Do you care?" It is in this way that we must face our lover when that special person says, "What is wrong?" It is in this way that we must turn to our children when they say, "Tell me, I don't understand!" And it is in this way that we must heed the cries of the world around us -- broken, lost and needing to be heard.

George Bernard Shaw once said: "The only one who really understands me is my tailor. Every time I see him, he takes my measurements again -- He never assumes that I am the same size I was the time before." That is the true measure of being there. We must face those who call out our name with fresh eyes, willing to see what is happening at that moment.

Today, in this New Year, let us pledge to listen, not just with open ears, but open hearts and souls -- hearing not just the words spoken, but the dreams and hopes and doubts. Let us be present -- and be there for our parents, our life's-partners, our friends, our co-workers, our children, our community and our world.

Abraham should have said: Isaac, O Isaac, how I wish that I heard you sooner. Why did you have to suffer, why did you have to worry? When I responded, Hineni V'ni, where was I? Why didn't I listen?

Our prayer: listen and be there. And in this troubled world at the start of a New Year, let us listen and be there.

Isaac O Isaac, I am so sorry, I wish I could do it all over again. Next time, I promise. When you ask me a question, I will say, Hineni V'ni -- I am present my son, I will listen...