

Torah Thoughts Vayigash

5778:

The Torah displays an amazing literary facility in the way it tells our ancestors' stories. Through the use of skillfully deployed repetitions of scenes and words, the text makes connections between its sections for its audience, connections that repay careful reading.

In parshat Vayigash, for example, Jacob has a night vision from God urging him to go to Egypt, and promising a safe return. The phrase that catches our attention here is the call from God and Jacob's reply: "Jacob! Jacob" ... 'Here.' It is the same formula used when God called out to Abraham during the binding of Isaac; it will be the formula used later when God calls out to Moses from the burning bush. We are meant to notice these repetitions, and to understand that they connect the incidents in which they are used.

Each of the three uses of the doubled name of the protagonist and his response, 'Hineni,' comes at a moment of significant transition. Abraham does not sacrifice Isaac; Jacob and his family survive famine by fleeing to Egypt; and Moses will return from exile to free Jacob's descendants from slavery in Egypt. All three incidents precipitate a major new chapter in the story of the people, pushing their national story to its next phase, each time ensuring the continuity of the nation and the covenant with God.

When they hear God's call, and respond with 'Hineni,' no one of these characters is aware of those patterns, but as readers we are privy to these personal moments of revelation which take place generations apart. We hear the echoes of God's intervention in their lives and, through the repeated pattern, understand that God's loyalty and protection are ongoing in their time and in ours.

As we look ahead to a new year on the civil calendar, we too should prepare ourselves to respond to God's call. When we are asked to step up to help someone, be ready to say 'Hineni.' When there is a need at the synagogue, Jews should answer 'Hineni.' When the community at large cries out for our participation in the great social movements of our time, in the ongoing civic endeavor to lift up the country, let's all be ready to say 'here I am,' 'Hineni.'