

D'var, First Day Rosh Hashanah
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Hannah: The Model and Power of Prayer
by Deborah Green

Every haftarah is supposed to connect in some way with the Parashah. In this case the connections are clear. Sarah has trouble conceiving, and Hannah has trouble conceiving. God eventually takes note of Sarah (ויהוה פקד את שרה) and she bears Isaac. Likewise, in the haftarah, we read that the Lord remembered Hannah (ויזכרה יהוה). In fact, the Talmud tells us that Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah are all “remembered” by God on Rosh Hashanah. And, as you may have noticed, the High Holy Day itself is referred to again and again in our Mahzor as the “Day of Remembrance.” It is the day when God remembers us, takes note of us, brings us to mind as it were. It begins a period of judgment, during which we reflect on our actions, ask forgiveness, and with contrite hearts make restitution for our sins. This period culminates in a full Day of Atonement when we recite our wrongdoings one last time and implore God to forgive us for our sins.

But what of our story? Aside from the obvious themes of birth and remembrance, are there any other profound insights to be teased out from the text? I think so.

A woman named Hannah is unable to have children. She knows that when her husband dies, the first son of her husband's other wife, Penina, will inherit half of the estate. Penina's other sons will split the other half. And Hannah? She will be left with nothing. In the Ancient Near East, a widow without children to care for her is utterly vulnerable. Hannah also has problems similar to those of Sarah. Hannah's relations with Penina are strained. Hannah feels taunted by the other woman, and this no doubt adds to her feelings of stress, anxiety, and

loneliness. So, while it may be very nice that her husband, Elkanah, loves her so much that he gives her a double-portion of the annual sacrifice at Shiloh, his attitude toward her is almost cavalier: “Why do you cry? Why don’t you eat? Why is your heart bitter? Aren’t I worth 10 sons to you?” he asks. The answer to Elkanah’s rhetorical question must be, “No, you are not. My future is not secure. My daily life is emotionally bitter and difficult. My self worth is low not only in my eyes, but in the eyes my family and community.”

But, to her credit, Hannah does not argue with Elkanah. Rather, after this comment, she gets up from the family festivities and walks over to the temple (not *The* Temple, for this is long before the first Temple was built) – she walks over to the temple building or altar at Shiloh. And, unlike Sarah, Rebecca, or Rachel, all of whom had trouble conceiving and all of whom laid this problem at the feet of their husbands, Hannah pours out her heart to God and makes a vow. If God will give her a son, she will dedicate him to the service of the Lord.

I can think of no other scene in the Bible as dramatic and heart wrenching as this one. Surely, Sarah would never have made such a promise to the God of Abraham. She laughs when she is told she will have a son, and her child, Isaac, comes all too perilously close to real dedication to the Lord. For as we all know from tomorrow’s Parashah, Abraham almost sacrifices Isaac. Perhaps that is why Hannah promises to dedicate her son to the service of the Lord in her vow, but when she presents Samuel to Eli, the High Priest, she says that she is “loaning” Samuel to the Lord for as long as Samuel may be requested.

But the image itself is what tantalizes me. Hannah, a lone woman, standing among the priests of the temple spontaneously erupts into prayer. She makes no sound with her voice, just her lips move as tears stream down her face. She is unaware of others who may be watching her, and does not seem to care how she appears. She is completely focused in her prayer. She asks

God to remember her, to turn his attention toward her, to give her a child. And then she vows: I will dedicate this child to the Lord's service and no scissors will ever cut his hair. In biblical parlance, this means he will be a Nazarite, in service to God for his lifetime. Does she know the ramifications of what she says? Has she considered that she will not be with him to feed him, to make sure he is warm, to hug him when he falls, to kiss him goodnight? Could any of us, whether we are parents or not, let go of a loved one so completely? Do we really trust that God can take better care of those around us than we can? What of the love, support, and nurturing that we draw from our friends and family? Kahlil Gibran asks his followers to remember that their children are not theirs, that children have their own pathways to pursue and are not a reflection of their parents. But how many of us could take these words to heart as Hannah does, and release a child, a husband, a wife, a lover, a friend to pursue his or her own path utterly even if it meant estrangement from us?

Then, as if the tension of the narrative were a string wound too tight, it snaps, and is replaced by the everyday realities of misunderstanding, confusion, and even humor. Eli, who has watched Hannah in her most intimate moments with God, assumes that her crying, whispering, and gesticulating are signs of drunkenness. And so, he admonishes her to stop drinking and put away her wine. It's a field day for feminists, as Hannah explains that she is not a drunk, but just a very troubled woman, pouring out her soul to God. Eli doesn't miss a beat. He accepts her explanation, tells her that she will receive that which she has requested, and sends her on her way.

In due course, Hannah bears a son and names him Samuel. Soon after, it is time to return to Shiloh for the annual sacrifice. Hannah refuses to go. At first, we breathe a sigh of relief. She has come to her senses and will not dedicate Samuel to temple service. But just as we begin to

relax, we realize that Hannah only intends to wean the boy. In the ancient world, weaning occurred at three years-old. So, when Samuel reaches three and he is weaned, Hannah brings him to Eli along with some bulls and other sacrificial items. She explains that she is loaning Samuel to God's service. And then, something remarkable happens. First, everyone bows down and prays to God together. Next, Hannah prays aloud, declaratively, in the form of a psalm. She speaks of vanquishing her enemies through the strength of the Lord. She speaks of God's absolute power: raising the dead, punishing the wicked, overthrowing the natural order of the world and reversing the fortunes of many. At the end, she declares that God will judge the ends of the earth, give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed one.

I submit to you that everything about this narrative and its psalm, placed quite remarkably I think, in the mouth of a humble, new mother, is about Rosh Hashanah. In fact, I might go so far as to argue that the Parashah about Sarah and the ordeal of Hagar has less to do with this High Holy Day than this Haftarah. The entire episode reminds us of God's power—not to aid the already strong but in support of the weak, the lowly, the vulnerable of our society. It reminds us that we are entering a period of time, these 10 days, when God judges us. But he does so not based on our actions this past year, but on how we will strive in the coming year to be better people. And like Hannah, we make a deal with God: Judge us positively and we will work hard to become the righteous people we are meant to be.

Hannah's actions also demonstrate for us the model and power of prayer. Not because she gets what she wants, but because she reminds us that our prayers need not be found in a prayer book. They may be spontaneous, declared quietly or aloud, whispered, cried, or screamed. We need not consider who watches us or what they may think of us. We need only focus on executing our prayer and meditation from the innermost depths of our hearts. If we reflect truly,

honestly, and from the deepest place inside us, we will be noted, considered, remembered by the Holy One.

In Pesikta d'Rav Kahana, Rabbi Tahalifa of Caesarea notes that we go out today as free people, newly created persons. And, as long as we focus on who we want to become and work towards that end, God supports us and judges us with his attribute of infinite mercy. Rabbi Levi said: "Throughout the days of the year, Israel go about their usual business. But on New Year's Day, Israel take shofars, and as they blow *teki'ah*, the Holy One, rising from the throne of justice, takes His seat on the throne of mercy. Whence filled with mercy for Israel, for their sake, He turns the measure of justice into the measure of mercy."

I wish you L'shanah tova u-metukha: May you have a good and sweet New Year.