Haftarah D'var. First Day of Rosh HaShanah.

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The Hebrew word *haftarah* means "ending" and in Jewish tradition it refers to the concluding component of the Torah service. These weekly and festival *haftarah* readings from the *Nevi'im*, the Prophets section of the *Tanach*, the Hebrew Bible, were assigned in the post-biblical rabbinic era and they are always related in some way to the themes of the Torah passage. Sometimes the connection is obvious; in other cases careful listeners have the challenge and the pleasure of speculating about the connections that prompted the juxtaposition of Torah and *haftarah* passages.

Our Torah reading for the first day of Rosh HaShanah comes from Genesis 21. It begins with the birth of Isaac, the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and to Abraham's wife, the apparently infertile Sarah. This passage reiterates the divine fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants but this disturbing Torah reading also demonstrates that Sarah's lack of faith in God's promise and her attempt to provide Abraham with an heir through her own actions will have lasting problematic consequences for the people of Israel. Her story has an inconclusiveness that finds closure in our biblical reading.

The *haftarah*, from the first two chapters of I Samuel, also deals with themes of infertility, faith in God, and the destiny of the people of Israel. It recounts events that took place in the tumultuous days of the judges, before the establishment of an Israelite monarchy or the building of the Temple in Jerusalem. At its center is another woman, Hannah, a wife in a polygynous household. As the passage tells us several times, Hannah is childless because God has closed her womb and she is constantly taunted by her fertile sister-wife. Nothing her loving husband says or does can assuage her grief. Hannah accompanies her household to the shrine at Shilo where she offers a heartfelt private prayer for fertility; she promises that should she conceive a son she will "dedicate him to the Eternal for a lifelong service and no shears shall touch his head of hair." Eli, the priest of the shrine, catches sight of Hannah's moving lips as she prays in silence. Thinking she is intoxicated, he rebukes her for her impiety. But the undaunted Hannah responds "No, my lord, I am a woman sore in spirit, and no wine or liquor have I drunk . For I was only pouring out my soul to God, speaking out of great preoccupation and distress." Eli, moved by her sincerity, answers: "Go in peace"; . . . ."May the God of Israel give you what you ask – whatever you request from God."

A year later Hannah gives birth and, as she promised, she and her husband pledge their son, Samuel, to serve God at Shiloh. Unlike Sarah, Hannah is revealed as

a person who has complete faith; she prays to God and awaits divine fulfillment of her prayers. The *haftarah* concludes with the actual words of Hannah's supplication, praising God "the faithful one," as a master of reversals who acts in human affairs in unseen and crafty ways. Among other unexpected turns of events orchestrated by divine power, "The barren woman has borne seven, the mother of many is forlorn. The Power of Upheaval slays and brings to live, brings down into the earth and raises up! The God of Change both disinherits and makes rich, both humbles and exalts" (1 Samuel 2:5).

Hannah's son Samuel is the last and greatest of the judges. He plays a crucial role in Israel's transition from a mixed multitude of disparate and quarreling tribes to a united people under a divinely chosen monarch. Through Samuel, God ultimately establishes the line of King David – an act that will lead to the building of the Jerusalem Temple and establish the foundations of Judaism's enduring messianic expectations. In fact, the final verses of the *haftarah*, in the standard Jewish Publication Society translation, allude to just those events in ways that connect Israel's past glories to future messianic redemption: "The Lord will judge the ends of the earth. He will give power to His king, /And triumph to His anointed one" (1 Samuel 2:10).

This *haftarah* is fascinating in many ways, not least in the picture it presents of everyday family life in ancient Israel and its depiction of the shame and humiliation endured by the childless wife. It is also one of several similar biblical narratives about the seemingly miraculous births of major male figures in the history of early Israel. This, of course, is the immediate link to our Torah portion and the birth of Isaac to the aged Sarah, who is long past her childbearing years. Later in Genesis, Isaac's wife Rebecca struggles with infertility before the birth of her twins, Esau and Jacob, and Jacob's beloved Rachel suffers many years without children before she gives birth to Joseph. The central message of these stories is that God plays an active role in human affairs; the biblical authors are quite explicit that without divine intervention none of these men, so crucial to Israel's survival, would have been born. Thus, the birth of Samuel to an apparently infertile mother following her prayers to God is another example of the role of the Eternal in shaping Israel's destiny. It also reinforces the biblical belief that there is a divine role in human conception. As Psalm 113:9 remarks, "God gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children." In fact, the post-biblical rabbis taught that there were seven infertile women in ancient Israel: the first six are Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Hannah, and Samson's unnamed mother. The last of these barren women, based on passages in the book of Isaiah, is Israel herself. And just as the God opened the wombs of the six women who prayed to him, so in the messianic end of days, Israel's faithfulness and devotion will also be rewarded with fecundity.

In this and similar homilies, the repeated fulfillments of the prayers of the childless are transformed to prophetic consolation, pointing to the ultimate restoration and flowering of the descendants of Jacob and the land of Israel.

Another enduring aspect of our Haftarah is the Talmud's characterization of Hannah's words as the ideal model of individual prayer for all Jews, female and male (B. Berakhot 31a). The fact that a woman became the exemplar of successful supplication to God is extremely important, since rabbinic law does not obligate women to perform the duty of prayer in the same way as men. According to the Talmud (B. Berakhot 20a-20b), women are exempt from participation in prayers that must be recited communally at specific times. However, that passage goes on to teach that women are not therefore released from the requirement to pray since "prayer is a supplication for mercy" which is essential to all. Rather women's prayers may be spontaneous and individual; they are not limited to particular times of the day, they need not follow a specific word order, nor are they limited to any particular language. And this is true for all personal supplications to God.

The infertile women of these biblical birth stories, and the accounts of God's responsiveness to their individual prayers and their faith in divine action, have certainly had an empowering and enduring resonance for women and men through the ages. As our *mahzor* notes on p. 561, "This is a message of comfort to those in need – the pauper, the oppressed, the childless – urging them not to give up hope that their downtrodden state can be quickly reversed."

But what is the connection of our Torah and *haftarah* readings to Rosh HaShanah? I turn once more to a post-biblical teachings According to the Talmud, "God has retained direct control of three keys and has not entrusted them to the hand of any messenger or intermediary. These are the key of rain, the key of childbirth, and the key of the revival of the dead" (B. Ta'anit 2a).

Here, I think, we may find our link. Unlike most Jewish holidays, Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur focus on the individual. These days are not communal commemorations of historical events in the past of the Jewish people that also point to future national redemption. Instead, even though we are all together in the synagogue, Jews pray during the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe, as individuals. Each person considers her or his actions of the past year, each person seeks personal forgiveness from other individuals and from God, and each person looks hopefully towards individual atonement and a spiritual rebirth in the year to come. We pray that we and our loved ones will be individually inscribed in the book of life.

It is no accident that the rabbis link together the rain that animates the seeds whose germination is essential to human survival; the male semen that fertilizes the ovum in the female womb; and the revival of the dead. These three are the bases of human life and of the ultimate messianic redemption and only God can bring them

about. They are all forms of birth and rebirth -- especially if we understand the "revival of the dead" metaphorically as a revival of spirit and body in our present lives and in a messianic era of human peace and fellowship.

On Rosh HaShanah we are poised at the end of a dry summer looking towards a new year that we pray will be blessed with both actual and spiritual rain, rain that will bring new life to fruition. The Days of Awe bring the end of an old dried husk of a year and we begin a new cycle of living in which each of us prays for personal fertility -- including the fertility of new ideas, creativity, and spirituality to propel our lives forward. We pray, as well, for new growth in our relationships with our loved ones and our friends and a new burgeoning of commitment to peace and positive values throughout our world. Hannah is the model of faith fulfilled who helps us look beyond our present dry spell to the rainy days of an Oregon autumn and winter. With trust in a living God who directs our destinies in unseen ways, we also pray for fecundity in the New Year ahead.

Lashanah Tovah and May all of us be inscribed in the book of life.