

At this serious moment of crisis in our country, at the start of our new Jewish year, what does a middle aged, queer woman, who once had an abortion (thank you Planned Parenthood), and is a tante, an aunt, a tia, g-dmum, and stepmom, but who has no kids of her own, have to say about Hannah, and a haftarah from the books of the Prophets full of pleading with and praying to G-d to be granted a child? Hannah, who prays so sincerely and with her full heart that she becomes the paradigm for true prayer with kavannah. Hannah, who when her prayers are finally realized, and indeed she bears a child at the ripe old age of 130, then gives the child, her son Samuel, back to G-d, in gratitude and humbleness, or as some Torah interpreters tell us, with an appreciation that there is “enough for all” and perhaps she never really needed that son anyway.

My first response to this haftarah – which, I confess, has not really made a huge impression on me over all these years of Rosh Hashanah observance, so much so that if you had asked me, before I began to prepare for today, who Hannah was, I would not really have been able to recall – my first response was “yuck” and “why me?” Why this tale? Why this agonizing about fertility and childbearing and the worth of women? Why yet another story about a fellow who has two wives and one of them has kids but the other doesn't, and there are jealousies and mistreatments and resentments between them? Those stories never end well.

I read the portion over and again. And commentaries on it.

Commentaries about Hannah's devoutness – her pilgrimages to the Tabernacle, adherence to the halachic requirements for women [niddah (sexual purity), the taking of hallah from the dough, kindling of candles on Shabbat]. Commentaries about Hannah's boldness in speaking to G-d: reminding G-d of her merits, imploring G-d as to where she fits in the cosmos of things entreating G-d that if she, Hannah, who is not divine, is meant to be “fruitful and multiply,” and she is not multiplying, what then is she? Or in some midrashim, even threatening that she will commit adultery to ensure she can have a child,

and won't then that reflect poorly on G-d? Commentaries that teach that it was Hannah's persistence that both won out and finally swayed G-d, but also that same persistence that was responsible for the shortness (just 50 years) of her son Samuel's life – which G-d cut short because in fact she prayed too much. Sound familiar? Commentaries that note that, interestingly, Hannah is the only person in the Torah whose praying is mistaken for drunkenness. Commentaries¹ about the model of Hannah's direct, individual petition to G-d without intermediaries and how striking it is that a woman is the one doing this. And commentaries that raise questions about why a woman's prayer becomes a model for all Jewish prayer, and yet this doesn't emancipate women in the traditional rabbinic view, and exclusions and limitations on women's role in Jewish life persist for centuries – and, well, still do. It all reminds me of something about oranges on seder plates that Susannah Heschel wrote that we read at my Passover seder every year:

Somehow, though, the typical patriarchal maneuver occurred: My idea of an orange and my intention of affirming lesbians and gay men were transformed. Now the story circulates that a man said to me that a woman belongs on the bimah as an orange on the seder plate. A woman's words are attributed to a man, and the affirmation of lesbians and gay men is erased. Isn't that precisely what's happened over the centuries to women's ideas?

I remained unenthused about this haftarah.

But I tried and wrestled again.

What does it mean for us right in this minute, sitting here in Brooklyn, to have before us an ancient and praised example of true, heartfelt prayer and pleading? Hannah's prayer is answered. Is the lesson that hers are somehow more pure or correct than ours? What are we doing wrong? Surely our individual and collective prayers about so many things are no less true, heartfelt, intentional OR urgent. Our prayers for the health and safety of

¹ I particularly recommend Rabbi Toba Spitzer's drash "Sarah, Hannah, and the Prayerful Stance" and Dr. Leilah Leah Bronner's article "Hannah and Rabbinic Ambivalence."

loved ones, for the repair of broken bonds, to protect neighbors, to end violence and racism, for decisive action by Congress that might lead to impeachment, to ensure that our Constitutional protections are not eroded, to save our planet from certain destruction. Is the lesson we are supposed to take that we just aren't truly pleading enough? Or that where and how we are pleading is insufficient?

Hannah's is the only instance recorded in the Torah where a private individual – a woman no less! – prays in a sanctuary where sacrifices are offered. According to scholars “For rabbinic Judaism, this affirms continuity with tradition, between prayer and sacrifice, ritual word and ritual deed, synagogue liturgies and the ancient rites of Tabernacle and Temple.”² Are our prayers at home, in public, on the steps of City Hall or the Supreme Court or Capitol Building, in the voting booth and outside the White House any less correctly situated?

The rabbis also teach that is not just where she prays but how she prays that matters and makes it so powerful: Hannah moves her lips without even a whisper – meaning her prayer was heard by G-d without it even being uttered. It was her heartfelt-ness that mattered. When we are praying as we march in the streets or crying at a silent vigil or a loved one's bedside or making our prayer in solitude in the ballot box or whispering here as we say the Amidah – the very practice of which is modeled on Hannah's prayer – why do we fail at getting Divine response or action? Are we not whispering enough? Or are too many of us whispering at once? Or is it because Hannah really believed in G-d and enough of us don't? or that even those who do, don't believe in G-d quite enough, and no matter how we pray or where we pray, it will be fruitless? And is that supposed to scare us into believing? Or make us want to pray more?

And what does it mean for us to turn each year to a fable where the most urgent prayer uttered by the heroine is to give her a child: the only way her value and self worth could be affirmed, her place in the circle of kin be clarified, her anchor to home be dropped?

² (This quote is directly from “Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics.”)

What other fervent dreams or desires might she have had? If there had been a pathway to head of tribe or priestess for the women of her day, might Hannah have pleaded and prayed for that instead? What do we want our daughters and children to learn about women's dreams and desires – women's understanding of our value and what it takes to be affirmed and held high in our tribes? To be affirmed and held high in the very eyes of G-d?

I do not like this story. I don't like the polymagous family unit where there is one husband (Elkanah) with his two wives (Hannah and Peninnah) and they are set against each other – rivals, struggling, one demeaning the other, great pain and hurt in the mix – but his centrality is assured and he a bit also tips the scales. And, even though I can relate to it, I don't like the desperation in Hannah's pleas to become a parent only through conception – as if even in this ancient time there was no orphan or needy child among them who might not have been considered instead. I don't like that she prays specifically for a son – as if indicating that a girl or a child whose non-son gender she might not know or speak wouldn't be good enough or wanted as much. If she had given birth to a girl or a child whose gender would not align with “son,” would she have felt her prayer had been answered? Would the story have turned out differently? And I don't like the promises that the child – if granted – will serve G-d, and therefore somehow honor or repay the debt of the granting. As if there must be an exchange to have a dream or yearning or affirmation realized – some tit for tat. And I don't like that her passion – and only hers in our midrashim – is mistaken for intoxication and that she has to continually remind G-d that that she is but a “maidservant.”

What I can salvage from this story, is reading the turning over of her child as Hannah's acknowledgement that what was most urgent in her prayer was to be heard and acknowledged – to be truly seen. That the actual wish-fulfillment was not the issue at all, but instead, that she was crying out to be heard and seen in her own right, to have her voice and personhood honored and acknowledged. I can relate to that. I think a lot of us can. Right this moment, think of how many millions across our country and world are

crying out for the same. Women, girls, queer people, trans people, Black people, brown people, undocumented people, Indigenous people, refugees, immigrants, poor people, homeless people, people most vulnerable to climate catastrophe, and on and on.

How sad it is that so many of us – and because this is a story about Hannah, I am thinking particularly about women and girls – face this still every day. Regardless of what our prayer or desire is and regardless of whether it will ever come true and regardless of how we raise our voices or cry out – if we are even able. I pray for the day when that desperation and longing, that feeling and too often reality of being constantly overlooked or of less value, un-assured of home and safety and possibility, is ancient history. Maybe hearing this story over and again will remind us of how old this struggle for women's liberation – and for the liberation of all people, because, as all we intersectional feminists know, if any of us are un-free or second class than none of us truly are free – and how much work there is still to do to realize it.

I think of the words of another prophet, Patti Smith:

I was hoping in my hoping
to recall what I had found
I was dreaming in my dreaming
god knows / a purer view
as I surrender to my sleeping
I commit my dream to you

The people have the power
The people have the power
The people have the power
The people have the power

The power to dream / to rule
to wrestle the world from fools
it's decreed the people rule
it's decreed the people rule

LISTEN

I believe everything we dream
can come to pass through our union
we can turn the world around
we can turn the earth's revolution
we have the power
People have the power ...

The people have the power
The people have the power
The people have the power
The people have the power

I am not a fan of this story. But I am in awe of the many Hannah's in my life. Strong, creative, joyful, independent, loving, curious, courageous, resourceful, devoted, imaginative, all of them. I pray their dreams are realized, that their voices are heard, that they know how powerful and valuable and loved they are, that they are never unsure of their treasured place in our circles of kin, that they write new stories we will tell someday. That we all do.