Hannah: Grace in the Face of Adversity

View PDF



Rabbi Uzi Weingarten teaches a weekly no-charge class, via Zoom, titled "To Walk with God: An exploration of the moral and spiritual teachings of Tanakh." The class is open to all, Jews and non-Jews. It meets Sun evenings at 730 PM Eastern, and repeats Tues evenings at the same time.
He can be reached at uziteaches@gmail.com

The opening verses of the book of Samuel are the Haftarah (reading from the Prophets) for Rosh Hashanah, the first day of the Jewish year. The story itself is simple: Hannah has difficulty conceiving; she prays to God for a son, and vows to dedicate him to God. Her prayer is answered, she gives birth to Samuel, and she brings him to the Sanctuary in fulfillment of her vow. Samuel goes on to become one of the great prophets of Israel.

Although the story is simple, the account in the book of Samuel is quite detailed. It includes the interaction between Hannah and her husband Elkanah, and between Hannah and Eli the priest. Why is there a need for all this elaboration?

Biblical accounts are teaching tools. They are meant to be studied, not simply read. They invite us to think about them--to seek out their moral and spiritual teachings and their life lessons, and how to apply them. With that in mind, let us study.

We recall that the scene around which the story revolves is the annual family pilgrimage to the Sanctuary at Shiloh. At the festive meal, Elkanah's wife Peninnah sits at the table with her sons and daughters. Hannah, Elkanah's other wife, does not have children. She does not partake of the feast. Instead, she weeps bitter tears.

Elkanah attempts to comfort her:

8. Hannah, why do you weep, and why do you not eat,

And why is your heart sad?

Am I not better for you than ten sons?

Hannah does not respond to Elkanah. The next sound we hear from her is sobbing:

9. Hannah rose, after the eating in Shiloh and after the drinking

--And Eli the priest is sitting on the chair by the doorpost of God's temple--

10. And she was bitter

and she prayed to God and cried and cried.

We were told earlier that Hannah is Elkanah's true love: "It is Hannah whom he loved" (v. 5). There is no doubt that saying that he is "better for you than ten sons" is an attempt to alleviate Hannah's pain. But despite his good intentions, he doesn't succeed. Why is that?

From the standpoint of communication skills, Elkanah makes a major mistake. In his attempt to comfort Hannah, he tells her not to feel what she feels. 'Don't cry and be upset,' he says. 'My love is better than children. Just look at it this way, and you can stop crying and start eating all this delicious food.'

However, Hannah is *not* looking at it that way at all. Yes, her husband's love is priceless. And in a society that often measured a woman's worth by her ability to bear children, Elkanah's unconditional love is even more precious. But no matter how strong Elkanah's love is, it is not a replacement for children. Hannah looks around and sees one table with Peninnah and her children, and her own table with no children, and it is devastating to her.

Elkanah cannot fill Hannah's need for children.[1] The reason he thinks that he is better for her than ten sons is because he is seeing the situation through his eyes, not hers. We recall Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife, who in a similar situation demanded of him, "Give me children; and if not, I will die!" (Genesis 30:1).

It therefore doesn't surprise us that Hannah does not respond to Elkanah, and that the next sound that we hear from Hannah is the sound of crying:

10. And she was bitter

And she prayed to God and cried and cried.

As part of her prayer, Hannah makes a vow:

11. She made a vow and said:

God, if you will see the affliction of your maidservant

And remember me, and not forget your maidservant

And give your maidservant a son

Then I will give him to God all the days of his life

And a razor shall not pass over his head.

Let us notice the threefold repetition of the phrase “your maidservant.” Repeating a phrase multiple times is one way that Scripture calls our attention to it. The phrase “your maidservant” speaks to the major theme of Rosh Hashanah, which is proclaiming God as king and voicing our hope for a world in which all recognize God as king.[2]

When Hannah speaks of herself as “your maidservant” three times, she expresses this concept: you are my God, I am your servant, and as such I appeal to you. This relationship is at the heart of Rosh Hashanah.

Beyond referring to herself as “your maidservant,” Hannah says something more: “If you will see the affliction of your maidservant.” Her husband does *not* see her distress. But she can go over his head and appeal directly to God, king of the world, praying that he both see her distress and give her a son.

The next scene is Hannah’s interaction with Eli the priest:

12. As she prayed more before God

Eli was watching her mouth

13. And Hannah, she was speaking in her heart

Only her lips were moving, but her voice was not heard

And Eli thought she was a drunkard.

One of a priest’s roles is to protect the Sanctuary from defilement. Eli sees a woman acting in a way that is strange to him. In antiquity people prayed out loud, and so Eli does not recognize what Hannah is doing as prayer. And Eli is unaware that Hannah did not eat or drink at the festive meal. Deciding that she must be drunk, Eli proceeds to chastise her:

14. Eli said to her:

Till when will you be drunk?

Remove your wine from yourself!

(In modern English, “Sober up!”)

Hannah opens her response to Eli by saying:

15. No, my lord, I am a woman whose spirit is troubled

And I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink

But I have poured myself out before God.

Hannah is very respectful, addressing Eli as “my lord”; the modern equivalent would be “Sir.” The rabbis, however, have a very different take on this. In a homily on Hannah’s words, “No, my lord,” the Talmud (Berakhot 31b) says:

You are not a lord (i.e., spiritual master) in this matter

nor is the Holy Spirit resting upon you

For you judged and condemned me

and did not give me the benefit of the doubt.

Eli is properly concerned with protecting the holiness of the Sanctuary. But he is *so* focused on this issue that he doesn’t see anything else. We recall that when Hannah prayed though her tears, “Eli was watching her mouth” (v. 12). Perhaps had Eli looked more carefully, he would have seen the whole person—her tears and her broken heart—and not rushed to judgment.

When circumstances allow one to give the benefit of the doubt, and instead one condemns, one is not a ‘spiritual master’ in that moment, and the Holy Spirit is not there.

It is remarkable how this plays out in the Jewish tradition. It is from Hannah, the supposed drunk, that Jews learned how to pray. In every Jewish service, the most important prayer is said silently, and the Talmud (ibid.) cites Hannah as the source for this practice. It is fascinating that what Eli saw as a desecration of God’s temple later becomes the proper way to worship.

As we look at the account as a whole, we find that there is one verse about the central theme of Rosh Hashanah, which is that ‘God is king.’ It is Hannah’s vow, in which she describes relationship to God as “your maidservant.”[3] The rest of the verses deal with Hannah interacting with the people around her, first her husband Elkanah and then Eli the priest. And both those interactions are painful.

Elkanah attempts to comfort her; as we saw, his intention is loving. Nevertheless, his words about him ‘being better than ten sons’ (v. 8) leave her in tears. Good intentions are not enough, not in communication and not in anything else. They need to be accompanied with skillfulness.

Eli the priest accuses Hannah of being drunk. This points to what happens when we get so focused on the holy and the sacred that we stop seeing people with compassion. The Haftarah reminds us that when doing ritual mitzvot, or anything else that we do *l'shem shamayim* (for the sake of Heaven), not to lose sight of people and their pain.

One of my teachers, the late Rabbi Yehudah Amital, of blessed memory, would quote a teaching in the name of Reb Shneur Zalman of Liadi (d. 1812), the founder of Chabad-Lubavitch. Reb Shneur Zalman was once in a house where an infant was wailing, and the father was so engrossed in Torah study that he did not hear it. The rabbi attended to the baby, and then told the father that Torah study should never lead to not hearing the cry of an infant. Rabbi Amital would add that he opened his yeshiva so that people will learn Torah in a way that will sensitize them to hear the cry of a baby.

On Rosh Hashanah, we proclaim God as king of the world, and we pray that all people recognize God as king. And the Haftarah reminds us that we need to translate this recognition into how we act, and specifically how we treat others.

Shanah Tovah, a happy, healthy and joyous year!

I am grateful to my study partner, Miryam Carr, for her contribution to this article.

[1] I recall when Covid began, my mother's friends stopped visiting her, concerned that they might infect her. After around two months, mom said that she felt lonely. I was surprised, since I had moved in with mom some years earlier. I understood mom's loneliness better when a social worker told me, "There are different rooms in the heart. You are filling the 'son' room, but you cannot fill the 'friends' room."

[2] All the blessings that express the essence of Rosh Hashanah include the phrase "King of the entire world": in each Amidah, in the Kiddush, and after the Haftarah.

[3] Hannah's song, which is also part of the Haftarah, expands on the theme of 'God is king' and on its corollary of God's Providence in the world.