

Sarah, Hannah, and the Prayerful Stance

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The story of our matriarch, Sarah, and the story of Hannah from the book of Samuel are an interesting pair of stories to have associated with the first day of Rosh Hashanah. Both of these texts recount the story of a woman who has longed for a child and finally gives birth. In the Biblical idiom, each woman is “remembered” by God after a long period of being unable to conceive.

Sarah’s story starts back in chapter 11 of the book of Genesis, where we are told two things about her: that she is Avraham’s wife, and that she is barren, and has no child. We then follow Sarah and her husband Avraham around for many years, as they travel from Haran, in what is now Iraq, to the land of Canaan. They have been promised that they will become the progenitors of a great people. Five chapters and 12 years later, Sarah has despaired of having her own child, so she tells Avraham to take her handmaid, Hagar, as his second wife. Using Hagar as a surrogate, Sarah will be able to count any child that her servant bears as her own. Avraham complies, and Hagar promptly gets pregnant. Feeling that Hagar is now somehow mocking her, Sarah flies into a rage and treats Hagar so badly that the handmaid runs away, into the wilderness.

But it is Hagar’s destiny to give birth to a son named Ishmael, and to become in her own right the progenitor of a great people. So she returns to Avraham’s and Sarah’s camp, and the story continues.

13 years pass, and still Sarah has not borne Abraham a child. But they receive a promise from divine messengers that now the time has come, and Sarah will finally become a mother. And this is where we pick up today. The great day arrives, and Yitzchak, Isaac, is born. Sarah expresses both her joy and her disbelief at the wondrous event—a child born to a woman of 90 and a man aged 100!

So far, so good. A long-awaited child, joyful parents, and a feast of celebration on the day he is weaned. But then the story turns in a disturbing direction. Once again Sarah becomes unsettled, this time not by Hagar, but by Hagar’s son, Ishmael. It is unclear what exactly is wrong—we are only told that Sarah saw Ishmael “*mitzachek*”—which can mean laughing, or mocking. The word *mitzachek* shares a root with the name of Sarah’s son, Yitzchak—leading some commentators to suggest that Ishmael was “Isaacing”—was somehow pretending to take Isaac’s place. Whatever it was that Ishmael was or was not doing, Sarah decides that their family no longer has room for both of Avraham’s sons. She tells her husband, “this servant-woman’s child shall not inherit with my child Yitzchak!” With a heavy heart, Avraham obeys Sarah’s command, and sends both Hagar and his first-born son into the wilderness, possibly to never see them again.

This is a difficult story. It initiates a theme that will echo throughout the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs—that of one son being chosen over another, of there never being enough—not enough inheritance, not enough blessing, not enough love—to divide up equally. On the level of

national myth, it sets up the great divide between the Ishmaelites and the Israelites, the ancestors of what become the Arab nations and the Jewish people. It is a hard story to hear on a day when we are supposed to be celebrating the birthday of the world and the creation of humanity.

This is why I find the choice of haftarah particularly intriguing. The rabbis of the Talmudic era decided, at some point a few millennia ago, to pair the story of the birth of Isaac with the story of the birth of the early Israelite prophet and judge Samuel. Hundreds of years past the time of Abraham and Sarah, we again encounter a woman, named Hannah, who longs for a child. As with Sarah, the first things we learn about Hannah is that she is married (to a man named Elkanah), and that she has no child. Again there is a second wife, although in this case the status of the two wives appears to be equal. But Peninah, the other wife, has already borne her husband sons and daughters. Even worse, there is active conflict between the two women—with Elkanah seemingly favoring Hannah, and with Peninah openly mocking her, and intentionally causing Hannah distress about her inability to conceive.

Elkanah, like the reader, commiserates with Hannah's pain, and tries—albeit not very successfully—to console her, telling her in effect that his love for her doesn't hinge on her ability to give him a son. But Hannah is not consoled, and she continues to long for the child that she feels God has refused her.

In one of the most detailed and extensive portrayals of a woman praying in the Bible, Hannah takes her heartache directly to God, during her family's yearly visit to the shrine at Shiloh. Her prayer comes from deep within her pain, and takes the form of a vow. Here are her words:

“*Adonai Tz'va'ot*, if truly you see your servant's state of need, if you remember me and don't forget your servant, if you give your servant-woman human seed (or, alternatively, “a male child”), then I shall dedicate my child to Adonai for lifelong service, and no shears shall touch his head of hair.”

In making this vow, Hannah dedicates her future child to holy service as a life-long Nazirite and a priest.

Within a year's time, just as with Sarah, Hannah is “remembered” by God, and bears a son. And, just as with Isaac, there is a feast when the baby is weaned. Yet in Hannah's case, the meal is a sacrificial offering, back at the shrine at Shiloh, and the actions that come next take a powerfully different direction than those that we read about in the Torah portion.

As part of her offering at the shrine, Hannah fulfills the vow she made a year earlier: she hands over her son to the priest, Eli, forever, for good. In a play on words that the English doesn't entirely capture, Hannah tells Eli that God has given her what she requested—*asher sha'alti*—and now she will “lend him” to God—*hishiltihu La'Adonai*. These two words—to ask and to lend—come from the same root--*sha'al*. And so Hannah's asking and her “lending” are two sides of the same coin; a giving and a receiving, from God to human and back again.

What do we learn from the pairing of these two stories? Is it possible to read Hannah's story as a kind of *tikkun*, a repair, on Sarah's actions?

Both of these stories affirm the real-life pain of desiring a child yet being unable to conceive. Both describe the longing and alienation that so many people feel when they look around at those able to give birth while they are unable to do so. Both stories celebrate a long-awaited birth as a miraculous occasion—in the language of the Bible, a gift from God.

Yet I also see in the juxtaposition of these texts a lesson that goes beyond the specifics of child-bearing, that speaks to the fundamental experience of powerfully desiring something that we don't yet have, and how we deal with that experience of wanting. On this level of interpretation, Sarah and Hannah's responses appear to me as diametric opposites. The juxtaposition of their stories makes one into a cautionary tale, and the other a model for spiritual practice.

Of the two women, I would imagine that most readers would find Sarah a bit easier to identify with, even if her actions are problematic. What parent, after waiting years and years to have a child, would so readily hand that child over to someone else? Hannah's actions seem incredible and almost unbelievable.

I think that Sarah does in fact represent most of us—she is your ordinary, conflicted, fallible human being. When we want something badly, we will sometimes do things we never would have imagined in trying to fulfill our desire. In giving Hagar to Abraham as a kind of lower-status wife, Sarah must have swallowed her pride and her feelings of jealousy in order to achieve what she had wanted for so long. Yet when her plan was successful and Hagar became pregnant, the feelings of pride and jealousy rose up, and conflict ensued. Sarah's uglier side reared its head, and she ended up causing harm to Hagar. Many of the traditional commentators, despite their general adulation of our foremothers and forefathers, are quite critical of Sarah's actions. And it only gets worse after Isaac is born. Her desire fulfilled, her child now in her arms, Sarah still seems to be operating from a mindset of scarcity. The bounty that she has received does not lead to an expansive view of those around her. Rather, in clinging so desperately to what is hers, she sees only a threat in the child who shares a father with her son. And now her actions are even harder to justify—sending Ishmael along with his mother into the wilderness, and causing profound grief to her husband.

Yet, however disturbing we might find Sarah's actions, if we're honest with ourselves, perhaps we can admit that they're not so surprising. Who doesn't hold tight once something or someone that we've desired so profoundly comes into our life? Parents are fierce in their protection of their children, and that fierceness comes out in Sarah's actions. What is disturbing is not Sarah's protective instinct, but her insistence that there is simply not enough room in the family for both her son and Ishmael. She misinterprets God's promise of a covenant with Abraham through Isaac to mean that Ishmael must be forcibly removed from their midst.

Along with this mindset of scarcity, Sarah seems intent on controlling everything and everyone around her. Again, this is not unfamiliar—most of us wish we could control the events of our lives, and we tend to expend a lot of effort trying to do so. Sarah's first attempt at taking things into her own hands is when she sets up the entire situation with Hagar and Avraham. As we've seen, things don't play out quite as she expected, and she soon regrets that Hagar has become pregnant. The second is the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness. This attempt

at control also backfires, albeit in a less direct way. As we read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, soon after Hagar and Ishmael are sent away, Avraham takes his remaining son, Isaac, up to a mountaintop to sacrifice him.

While in the end Isaac is not sacrificed, the Torah never shows him interacting with Sarah after this episode. In fact, the next verses after the sacrifice of Isaac deal with Sarah's death. According to the midrashic tradition, Sarah dies upon hearing what has been done to her son, and she never sees Isaac again. After clinging so tightly to her beloved Yitzchak, she ends up losing him entirely.

The midrash about Sarah's death seems to me to capture a very profound spiritual truth in the midst of this sad family story: it comes to illustrate the ways in which our fantasies of control, our fears of losing that which we have, our anxious efforts to protect ourselves from the complexities and exigencies of life, lead only to our own suffering, as well as the suffering of others. In our desperate effort to hold on tight to what we perceive to be 'ours,' we end up experiencing the exact opposite of what we truly want.

I would call the Sarah approach to life, as exhibited in these stories, "command and control." The "command and control" approach lures us into believing that we can get what we want, and keep what we get, if we're in charge, if we're able to successfully manipulate the situation around us to fulfill our desires. If things go wrong, if the pieces don't fall into place as we initially imagined, then it must be because our control has faltered, we've let down our guard, we haven't held on tightly enough. The problem with this approach is, simply, that life will not allow us to control it. Life takes surprising twists and turns, sometimes pleasant, sometimes painful. And the more we try to deny that reality, the more we contend with what is actually happening in any given moment, the more we suffer.

Hannah comes to show us that there is another approach to life besides "command and control." As we've seen, Hannah deeply wants a child, and risks public humiliation to speak her profound longing to God. There is nothing tentative about Hannah's desire. And while we are not told of her reaction when her son is born, I think it's safe to assume that she feels the deep love for her child that most new parents feel. Yet Hannah is somehow able to place her desire and love for her son into a larger context. Just as she had been a vessel for bringing her child into the world, so her son will become a vessel himself—a servant to God, a servant to the people. To achieve this, she has to let go of him on a physical level—to give him over to the care of others, and to relinquish any further control over his life.

Believing that there is indeed something special about Hannah, the rabbis of the Talmud chose not only to lift up her story on Rosh Hashanah, but to also hold her up as the model for Jewish prayer. In the Talmudic tractate Brachot, Rabbi Hamnuna teaches that our style of prayer is modeled on Hannah's behavior at the shrine in Shiloh. Just as it says that Hannah "*m'daberet al libah*"— meaning literally, "speaking upon her heart"—so, teaches Rabbi Hamnuna, we must direct our hearts when we pray. And just as Eli the priest could see her lips moving, so must we articulate our words of prayers, with our mouths. And just as Hannah's voice could not be heard, so we learn that the Amidah, the central prayer of request and supplication, is said quietly. (Ber. 31a)

Hannah is not only credited with modeling proper prayer; she also creates a new name for God! In the vow that I quoted earlier, she refers to God as “*Adonai Tz’va’ot*,” which is the first time that this particular epithet is used in the Bible. And so the Talmud teaches, in the name of Rabbi Eleazar: “From the day that God created the world, there was no one who called the Blessed Holy One “*Tzva’ot*” until Hannah came and did so.” (Ber. 31b)

This name for God is an intriguing one. “*Tzva’ot*” means “hosts,” or “multitudes”—the image is often taken to refer to “hosts” of angels in the heavens. As translated in our machzor, *Adonai Tzva’ot* means “CREATOR of Multitudes.” It is a name that implies an overflowing sense of abundance. And so, in the Talmud, Rabbi Eleazar goes on to teach: “Hannah said to the Holy Blessed One: ‘Sovereign of the Universe, of all the hosts and hosts that You have created in your world, is it so hard for you to give me one child?’ A parable: what is this like? Like a king who made a feast for his servants, and a poor man came and stood by the door and said to them, ‘Give me a morsel of bread,’ and no one took any notice of him. So he forced his way into the presence of the king and said to him, ‘Your Majesty, out of all the feast which you have made, is it so hard for you to give me one bite?’” (*ibid*)

I love this parable, and what it implies about Hannah and her sense of how the Universe is constructed. The poor man—that is, Hannah—refuses to give in to a scarcity mentality. Looking at the “king’s table”—which is, of course, the entire world—Hannah sees more than enough. Enough for her, an average woman; enough for all who are wanting and in need.

I love the chutzpah that the rabbis see in Hannah, as conveyed through this parable—the poor man pushing his way into the presence of the king, and demanding his share. Not a demand for too much, and not a demand to take anything away from anyone else—just a request for a fair share of the abundance that is enough to nourish and sustain all beings.

If Hannah is our model for prayer, then this is an important teaching about what prayer can be: a modest yet adamant claim on the abundance that is all around us. Not out of a sense of selfishness or greed, but from the conviction that there is indeed “enough” for each of us, that we’re all entitled to our own particular slice of the cosmic pie.

The word for prayer used both about Hannah in the haftarah and by the rabbis in their Talmudic discussion is the word *hitpalel*—a reflexive form of a verb that means to intercede or to judge, in the sense of discerning what is true. It also has the sense of inquiry, directed both towards the self and also directed “out there,” towards God, towards the Universe. The early rabbis called the central intercessory prayer of each service “*HaTefillah*,” based on this same verb root.

Interestingly, this prayer is also called the “*Amidah*,” meaning “standing”—because we stand up when we recite this prayer. What I’d like to suggest is that it is possible—and perhaps even preferable—to think about prayer, about *tefillah*, as both literally and figuratively a stance, an orientation towards Reality, a willingness to stand in a certain way in relation to ourselves and the universe.

And it is possible to assume this stance whether or not we believe in God, whether or not we think we're the sort of person who actually "prays." It means looking into the truth about ourselves and about how the world out there operates, and orienting ourselves accordingly.

What can we learn from Hannah about what this 'standing' might look like? There are two aspects—two distinct postures within it, if you will: an opening up, and a letting go.

First, we allow ourselves, like Hannah praying at Shiloh, to be vulnerable and open—to be willing to ask for what we need. While this sounds straightforward, I know that for many of us, it's anything but. It means being willing to admit where our lives fall short, to admit our disappointments and our frustrations, our weaknesses and our vulnerabilities. It means sometimes admitting that we can't do everything ourselves. It means being open to our own heartbreak and to the suffering of others, just as Hannah cried out from a place of *marat nefesh*, a bitterness of soul.

It also means believing—like the poor man at the king's banquet—that we actually deserve our portion of the abundance that surrounds us, that we have every right to demand our share.

Yet we don't only open up in this way through heartache and a sense of lack. We need to equally open up our hearts to joy, to love, to compassion. Opening up means allowing ourselves to feel grateful for all that we have, for every moment of being here, being alive.

It is a very similar place in the heart, the place of yearning and the place of joy and gratitude. All of these things call on the heart to be open, and to keep opening wider. Sometimes our hearts are broken open, almost against our will, and sometimes we allow them to open. Either way, this positions us well for the stance of *tefillah*, of opening to the Universe.

So that is the first posture, the posture of opening. The second posture is letting go.

Letting go means, on a most basic level, being willing to ask for whatever it is that we need from the Universe, without depending on any particular response.

While a prayer isn't like a letter that is "sent" somewhere, it is something we are willing to let go of – in fact, that we want to let go of. It's not a thought that I wrestle with over and over in my mind, nor a problem to be figured out. A prayer is an intention that I release into the world.

It is a very interesting experience, to send out into the Universe a desire, a hope, a dream, and then to step back and create a space where whatever needs to unfold can unfold. I've found it takes a certain willingness to embrace the unknown, and to let go of any overly-determined expectations. This kind of "letting go" is not passivity, it doesn't mean just sitting around and waiting for the Universe to respond to my pleas. It is, rather, an understanding that what life holds in store for me often isn't exactly—or even anything all—like what I expected. If we're convinced that what we want and need looks exactly like this, then when something that looks a bit different arrives on our doorstep, we might miss it entirely.

This is where the aspect of the Hebrew word *hitpallel* that implies a kind of judgment or discernment becomes so important. It is the spiritual work of a lifetime to foster the kind of awareness that allows us to both be open to receiving whatever it is that the Universe sends our way, and to be able to discern when we've actually gotten the answer we've been seeking. That is why prayer isn't about sending off an email to God, but is a spiritual practice and discipline. It's not about God, it's about us. It's about fostering a mentality that we might call "embrace and let go," instead of "command and control."

"Embrace and let go" means that we can honor our dreams and our deepest yearnings, and at the same time accept the reality that life will take us to places we couldn't have imagined, that surprises and difficulties will continually arise.

"Embrace and let go" also means understanding that all that we seek and hope for is, ultimately, not for our own satisfaction—although hopefully we can have a bit of that along the way—but is in service to something Else. Hannah didn't give away her child because she didn't love him; she gave him over to a life of service because that is how she understood her own place in the world, and his. This is what it really means to "let go"—to understand that nothing that we think is ours—beginning with our own lives—is given to us for any purpose other than serving something beyond ourselves. Service to what? To Life, to God, to the greater good of all beings—however you may understand it. In the words of the prophet Bob Dylan, "You gotta serve somebody."

This kind of service is not self-abnegation, but self-fulfillment—what Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan called "salvation." It's what allows us to find meaning in our lives. It's the ground of real happiness.

So this, then, is the challenge that Hannah sets before us: to embrace our yearnings and hopes, as fully as possible, and to give of ourselves in service on the deepest level. To do that service, may we be willing to let go of our preconceived notions, our fears and inner obstacles, our skepticism and our doubt. May we be open to the full, difficult and wondrous panoply of experience that Life offers us, from joy to tears and back again. And may we experience the world as ruled by a reality called *Adonai Tzva'ot*, Creator of Multitudes, Source of Abundance, as we each seek our own share from the table.

May all of us be written for blessing in this new year—*l'shanah tovah tikkateivu*.