

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

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D'var Torah for the First Morning of Rosh Hashanah

5771

"And there was a certain man of Ramathaim-Zophim, of Mount Ephraim, and his name was Elkanah. And he had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninna; and Peninna had children, but Hannah had no children." (I Samuel 1:1&2)

Some of you may be familiar with the book Jerusalem Chronicles: News of the Past, published originally in 1954 by the Reubeni Foundation in Jerusalem. It is a unique book that presents 4,000 years of Jewish history in a newspaper format. The book, which was originally published in three volumes, was reprinted in a one-volume edition in 1993 and I am sure it is still available out there. It is a great book which exposes the readers to the main biblical, Talmudic, medieval and modern Jewish heroes and the main events in their lives in a lively way, as if the reader was reading about them in a daily newspaper. Some of the main headlines are: "Prince Moses is a Hebrew," "Joshua Crushes Five Kings," "Saul Becomes Israel's First King", and "Jerusalem Falls; Temple in Flames." The Jerusalem Chronicles has letters to the editors, the Woman's Corner, and even adds; all in the style of the time a particular issue tries to portray.

As with regular newspapers, not every single event that transpired in the last 4,000 years of Jewish history is presented in the Jerusalem Chronicles, but only "news that's fit to print," and therefore, we shouldn't be surprised that the story of today's Haftarah didn't make it into the Jerusalem Chronicles.

The opening story in the First Book of Samuel is, like many biblical stories, an ordinary one. A certain man has two wives (today that alone might make the headlines in the newspaper, but not in biblical times); one wife has children and the other doesn't.

"And this man went out of his city yearly to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of hosts in Shiloh" (I Samuel 1:3).

Our story takes place during the yearly pilgrimage of Elkanah to Shiloh, where a man and his household pay homage to the God of Israel.

The two wives don't get along. The fertile one is not beloved and the beloved one is not fertile. The fertile wife is jealous and provokes the barren one, who, in turn, cries.

"And as he did so year by year, when she went up to the house of the Lord, so she provoked her; therefore she wept, and did not eat. Then said Elkanah her husband to her, Hannah, why do you weep? and why do you not eat? and why is your heart grieved? am I not better to you than ten sons?" (I Samuel 1:7-8)

Poor Hannah; not only is she barren but her husband doesn't get it. Elkanah, a narcissistic biblical "provider," has wealth and glamour to spare, but cannot reach his wife's heart.

A sad story, but certainly not fit to print.

How many of these stories do we have in the City of New York? How many misunderstood husbands and wives live in the Borough of Queens?

Sad stories, indeed, but they wouldn't make it in the "New York Times," or even in the "Queens Tribune."

However these are the stories that made it into the Jewish Bible; these are the stories at the core of our Jewish and human identity. Abraham and Sarah; Isaac and Rebecca; Jacob, Rachel, and Leah; and Hannah and her rival made it into the most holy of the books and I say, as I learned in Roanoke, Virginia, "Praised be the Lord for that."

Hannah's story is not news fit to print but made it into the Bible not because of

Hannah's suffering, but because of what Hannah did with her suffering.

Hannah became the prototype, according to the rabbis in the Talmud, of an average person who transforms her suffering into a spiritual journey.

How did it happen? How did it happen that Hannah prayed for the first time? How did it happen that she poured out her soul to Hashem? How did it occur to her to address God personally? How did it happen that she spoke *in her heart; and only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard?*"

I will tell you how it didn't happen: It didn't happen overnight.

Hannah had been going to Shiloh for many years.

Hannah watched Peninnah bear children one after the other, and had endured her taunting for many years.

Hannah was also misunderstood by her husband for many years.

Hannah suffered in silence for many, many years.

And one day, with no particular reason for it being that day, she transformed her suffering into a bitter lamentation, into a promise, into prayer, into a spiritual journey. Not a prayer from a prayer book (please rise and turn to page 510 for Aleinu), not a prayer in Hebrew, or a responsive prayer in English, but a prayer from the heart, a soundless prayer.

Eli the Priest is in charge in Shiloh (he by the way has his own tzures with his children) and, as it happens many times with the religious establishment, Eli doesn't "read" Hannah correctly.

"And Hannah spoke in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought that she was drunk. And Eli said to her, 'How long will you be drunk? Put away your wine from you'" (I Samuel 1:13-14).

Poor Hannah; her husband doesn't get it, and neither does Eli, the Priest. She came for comfort and was told about the bylaws; she was looking for God, and

was told about the building fund.

But Hannah is determined and understands that there is more to religion than obnoxious rabbis and fatty sacrifices. In her bitterness she is still polite and explains herself. No, she is not drunk, only sad and bitter. Eli the Priest blesses her (he didn't say "I am sorry," but close enough).

Hannah's spiritual journey doesn't end there. She is blessed with a child and shows her appreciation to God, not only by fulfilling her vow religiously, but also by translating her joy into words: "*My heart rejoices in the Lord*" (*I Samuel 2: 1*).

I don't know what would have happened if God had not granted Hannah's wish. I like to believe that once you open a small window to God's presence in your life, God stays there with you, either to grant your request or to comfort you in His denial.

The Torah – in the broader sense of the word - is not about milestones in Jewish history, and that is the reason why Hannah's personal story was included in our most sacred text but not in the Jerusalem Chronicles. The Torah is about average people, like you and me, with personal challenges and crises, like yours and mine, and their encounters with the Divine, mostly products of these challenges.

Spiritual encounters don't happen overnight. They take time and are usually catapulted by personal or family crisis: sickness, the death of a son, a bad divorce, the loss of a job, the death of a parent, anxiety or depression. Occasionally we find a spiritual reawakening after the birth of a child or grandchild, or after reading a particular book or being in the presence of a very special person.

Spiritual experiences are very personal, and so we see a husband who "gets God" but not his wife, a child but not her parents. Spiritual roads are not straightforward; on the contrary, they are paved with obstacles and misunderstandings, as we read this morning.

Meaningful religious experiences can happen, and did happen, in isolated places,

like desserts, mountains and caves. However, the ultimate test to the religious experience is within the community, within our families, with our friends and fellow congregants, in the way we do business, and in the way we treat others.

Finally, encounters with the Divine, are not the sole inheritance of Jews or observant people. Still, our rich Jewish tradition, with its texts and languages, with its laws and rituals, with its complexity and beauty, has the potential of making it happen; and when individuals are transformed; then the community as a whole is transformed. Although such transformations don't necessary take place in the synagogue, they can take place in the synagogue and, I believe, they are taking place, slowly, in our synagogue.

As a rabbi, as the religious leader of Hillcrest Jewish Center, I would like to see myself as a facilitator of such spiritual transformations, experiences and encounters. Through classes, prayers, and shared experiences, I strive to enable my congregants to find the presence of God within themselves and within others, while I do the same, while I keep searching, while I work on my own spiritual journey, within my community, within my people.

May this be a year of meaningful encounters! May we find God's presence in the soundless speech, in the richness of our tradition, and in the diversity of our community!

Leshanah tovah tikatavu! May all of us be inscribed for a good, sweet, healthy and meaningful year!