

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Insights into the Bible [18]

Poor, Misunderstood Hannah Numbers 16:1-18-7



Gerbrand van den Eeckhout: The Infant Samuel brought by Hannah to Eli, Early 1660s.

Background to Our Story

Ramathaim-Zophim

Ramathaim-Zophim, also called Ramah and Ramatha, is a city from the Hebrew Bible, the hometown and resting place of prophet Samuel. The name of the town means "the heights of the views."

Ramah is the home of Elkanah, Samuel's father (1 Samuel 1:19; 2:11), the birthplace of Samuel and the seat of his authority (1 Sam. 2:11; 7:17). The town is frequently mentioned in the history of that prophet and of David (1 Sam. 15:34; 16:13; 19:18-23). Here Samuel died and was buried (1 Sam. 25:1).

The historian Josephus distinguishes between Ramathaim, "a city of the tribe of Ephraim," and Ramah, the burial place of Samuel the prophet, but he does not explicitly say that these were two different places.

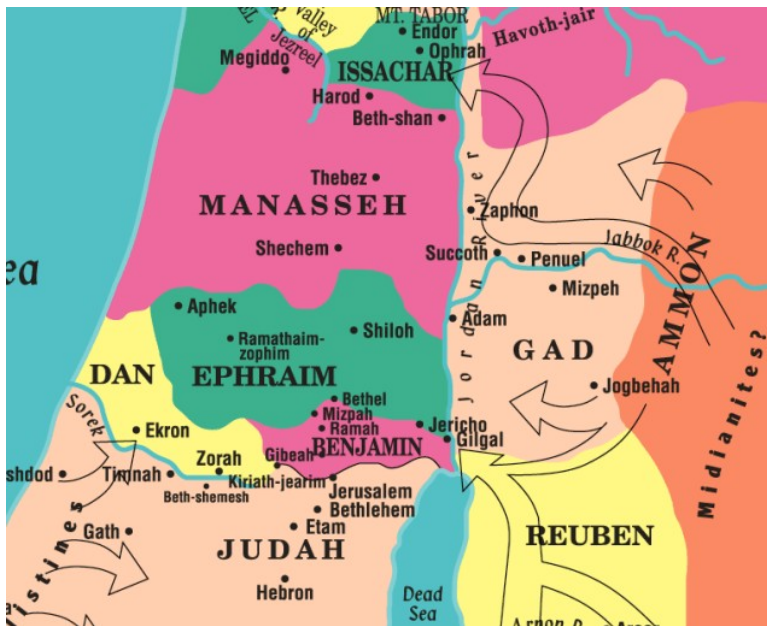
Nabi Samwil stands about 5 miles north-west of Jerusalem, and is held by an originally Christian tradition dating back to the Byzantine period to be the resting place of the prophet Samuel. The site comprises what is now the Israeli Nebi Samuel National Park, with its most prominent feature being a two-story Crusader fortress, now used as a mosque and a Jewish Orthodox synagogue.

The Sanctuary in Shiloh

◆ AI Overview

Shiloh was the central religious and political capital of ancient Israel where the portable Tabernacle (or Mishkan) housing the Ark of the Covenant rested for over 300 years (traditionally 369 years) from the time of Joshua until its destruction by the Philistines.

Map



Cast of Characters - Who is Who in the story? (Part 1)

- Elkanah, husband of Peninnah and Hannah
- Peninnah, fertile wife of Elkanah
- Hannah, barren wife of Elkanah
- Eli, the Priest at Shiloh
- Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, the Priest.
- Samuel, Elkanah and Hannah's son



א'

ויהי איש אחד מן־הקמתים צופים מהר אפרים ושמוֹ אֶלקָנָה בן־ירחם בן־אליהוא בן־תחו בן־צוּף אפרתי: ולוֹ שְׁתֵּי נָשִׁים שֵׁם אַחַת חַנָּה וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִית פִּנְנָה וַיְהִי לַפִּנְנָה יָלָדִים וְלַחַנָּה אֵין יָלָדִים: וְעַלָּה הָאִישׁ הָהוּא מְעִירוֹ מִמֵּימִים וּמִימָה לְהַשְׁתַּחֲוֹת וּלְזַבַּח לַיהוָה צִבְאוֹת בְּשִׁלֹּה וְשֵׁם שְׁנֵי בְנֵי־עַלִי חֲפְנִי וּפְנִחָס כְּהֹנִים לַיהוָה:

וַיְהִי הַיּוֹם וַיִּזְבַּח אֶלקָנָה וַנִּתֵּן לַפִּנְנָה אִשְׁתּוֹ וּלְכָל־בָּנֶיהָ וּבְנוֹתֶיהָ מְנוֹת: וְלַחַנָּה יָתֵן מְנָה אַחַת אַפִּים כִּי אֶת־חַנָּה אָהָב וַיְהִי סָגֵר רַחֲמָהּ: וְכַעֲסָתָה צָרָתָהּ גַּם־פָּעַס בַּעֲבוּר הָרַעְמָה כִּי־סָגֵר יְהוָה בְּעַד רַחֲמָהּ: וְכֵן יַעֲשֶׂה שָׁנָה בְּשָׁנָה מִצֵּי עֹלָתָה בְּבֵית יְהוָה כִּן תַּכְעֲסֶנָּה וּתְבַכֶּה וְלֹא תֹאכֵל: וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ אֶלקָנָה אִשְׁתִּי חַנָּה תִּבְכִּי וְלָמָּה לֹא תֹאכְלִי וְלָמָּה יָרַע לְבָבְךָ הָלֹא אֲנֹכִי טוֹב לָךְ מַעֲשֶׂרָה בָּנִים: וְתָקֵם חֹזֶה אֲחֵרִי אֲכָלָה בְּשִׁלָּה וְאֲחֵרִי שָׁתָה וְעַלִי הִכְהִין יֹשֵׁב עַל־הַפֶּסֶא עַל־מִזְבֵּחַ הַיֵּבֶל יְהוָה: וְהִיא מָרַת גִּפְשׁ וְתַתְּפֹלֵל עַל־יְהוָה וּבִכָּה תִבְכֶּה: וּתְדַר וְתִדָּר וְתֹאמַר יְהוָה צִבְאוֹת אִם־רָאָה תִרְאֶה! בְּעֵנִי אֲמַתָּךְ וְזָכַרְתָּנִי וְלֹא־תִשְׁכַּח אֶת־אֲמַתָּךְ וְנִתְּנָה לְאֲמַתָּךְ זֶרַע אֲנָשִׁים וְנִתְּנִיו לַיהוָה כְּלִימֵי חֲלִיו וּמִנְחָה לֹא־יַעֲלֶה עַל־רֹאשׁוֹ: וְהָיָה כִּי תִרְבֶּתָה לְהַתְּפַלֵּל לִפְנֵי יְהוָה וְעַלִי שִׁמְרֵ אֶת־כִּיָּהּ: וְחַנָּה הִיא מְדַבֶּרֶת עַל־לִפָּה רַק שִׁפְתֶּיהָ נִעוֹת וְקוֹלָהּ לֹא יִשְׁמָע וַיַּחֲשֹׁבָה עָלֶי לִשְׁכָּרָה: וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ עַלִי עַד־מָתִי תִשְׁתַּכְּרִין הַסִּירִי אֶת־יִינֶיךָ מִעֲלֶיךָ: וְתַעַן חַנָּה וְתֹאמַר לֹא אֲדֹנִי אִשָּׁה קִשְׁת־רוּחַ אֲנֹכִי וַנִּינוּ וְשָׁכַר לֹא שָׁתִיתִי וְאֲשַׁפֹּף אֶת־נַפְשִׁי לִפְנֵי יְהוָה: אֶל־תִּתֵּן אֶת־אֲמַתָּךְ לִפְנֵי בַת־בִּלְעָל כִּי־מֵרֶב שִׁחִי וְכַעֲסִי דִּבַּרְתִּי עַד־הַנֶּהָ: וַיַּעַן עַלִי וַיֹּאמֶר לָכֵי לְשָׁלוֹם וְאַל־תִּי וְיִשְׂרָאֵל יִתֵּן אֶת־שִׁלָּתְךָ אֲשֶׁר שְׁאַלְתָּ מֵעַמּוֹ: וְתֹאמַר תִּמְצָא שִׁפְחָתְךָ חֵן בְּעֵינֶיהָ וְתִלָּךְ הָאִשָּׁה לְדָרְכָה וְתֹאכֵל וּפְנִיָה לֹא־הִיוּלָה עוֹד: וַיִּשְׁקָמוּ בַבֶּקֶר וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה וַיָּשָׁבוּ וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל־בֵּיתָם הָרְמָתָה וַיִּדַּע אֶלקָנָה אֶת־חַנָּה אִשְׁתּוֹ וַיִּזְכְּרָהּ יְהוָה: וַיְהִי לְתַקְפוֹת הַיָּמִים וְתִהְיֶה חַנָּה וְתִלָּד בֶּן וְתִקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ שְׁמוּאֵל כִּי מִיְהוָה שְׁאֵלְתִּיו: וַיַּעַל הָאִישׁ אֶלקָנָה וְכָל־בֵּיתוֹ לְזַבַּח

ליהוה את־זבח הַיָּמִים וְאֶת־נִדְרוֹ: וְחָנָה לֹא עָלְתָה כִּי־אָמְרָה לְאִישָׁה עַד יִגְמַל הַנָּעַר וְהַבָּאֲתִיו וְנִרְאָה אֶת־פָּנָי יְהוָה וְיָשָׁב שָׁם עַד־עוֹלָם: וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ אֱלֹקָנָה אִישָׁה עָשִׂי הַטּוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ שְׁבִי עַד־גְּמֻלָּךְ אֹתוֹ אֲךָ נָקָם יְהוָה אֶת־דִּבְרֹךְךָ וְתִשָּׁב הָאִשָּׁה וְתִינָק אֶת־בְּנָה עַד־גְּמֻלָּהּ אֹתוֹ:

וַתַּעֲלֶהּ עִמָּה פֶּאֶשֶׁר גְּמֻלָּתוֹ בְּפָרִים שְׁלֹשָׁה וְאִיפָּה אַחַת קָמַח וְנֹבֵל לֶיֶן וְתַבָּאָהּ בֵּית־יְהוָה שְׁלוֹ וְהַנָּעַר גָּעַר: וַיִּשְׁחָטוּ אֶת־הַפָּר וַיָּבֵאוּ אֶת־הַנָּעַר אֶל־עָלִי: וַתֹּאמֶר בִּי אֲדֹנָי חַי וּפְשָׁךְ אֲדֹנָי אֲנִי הָאִשָּׁה הַנֹּצֶבֶת עִמָּכָה בָּזָה לְהַתְּפַלֵּל אֶל־יְהוָה: אֶל־הַנָּעַר חָנָה הַתְּפִלָּתִי וַיִּתֵּן יְהוָה לִי אֶת־שְׂאֵלָתִי אֲשֶׁר שְׂאֵלָתִי מֵעַמּוֹ: וְגַם אֲנֹכִי הִשְׁאֵלְתִּהּ לַיהוָה כָּל־הַיָּמִים אֲשֶׁר הָיָה הוּא שְׂאוֹל לַיהוָה וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה שָׁם לַיהוָה:

ב'

וַתְּתַפַּלֵּל חָנָה וַתֹּאמֶר עָלַי לְבִי בִיהוָה רַחֵם קִרְנִי בִיהוָה רַחֵם פִּי עַל־אֹיְבָי כִּי שָׁמַחְתִּי בִישׁוּעָתְךָ: אִין־קִדּוּשׁ בִּיהוָה כִּי אִין בִּלְתֵּךְ וְאִין צוּר כְּאַלְהֵינוּ:

אֶל־תִּרְבּוּ תִדְבָּרוּ גְבוּהָה גְבוּהָה יֵצֵא עֵתָךְ מִפִּיכֶם כִּי אֵל דְּעוֹת יְהוָה (וּלֹא) [וְלֹא] נִתְּקֵנוּ עַלְלוֹת: קִשְׁת גְּבוּרִים חֲתִים וְנִכְשָׁלִים אָזְרוּ חֵיל:

שְׂבָעִים בָּלָחֶם נִשְׁכְּרוּ וְרַעֲבִים תִּדְלוּ עַד־עֲקָרָה יִלְדָּה שְׂבָעָה וְרַבַּת בָּנִים אֲמַלְלָה: יְהוָה מִמִּית וּמַחְיָה מוֹרִיד שְׂאוֹל וְיַעַל:

יְהוָה מוֹרִישׁ וּמַעֲשִׂיר מִשְׁפִּיל אֶת־מְרוֹמָם:

מְקִים מַעֲפָר דָּל מַאֲשַׁפֵּת יָרִים אֲבִיוֹן לְהוֹשִׁיב עַם־נִדְיָבִים וְכֹסֵא כְבוֹד יִנְחֹלֶם כִּי לַיהוָה מִצָּחִי אֶרֶץ וַיִּשֶׁת עֲלֵיהֶם תִּבְּל:

רָגְלֵי חֲסִידוֹ יִשְׁמְרוּ וְרַשָּׁעִים בְּחֻשָּׁךְ יִדְמוּ כִּי־לֹא בָכָה יִגְבַּר־אִישׁ:

יְהוָה יַחֲתוּ מִרִּיבֹו עָלוּ בַּשָּׁמַיִם יִרְעֹם יְהוָה יִדְרוּ אֶפְסֵי־אֶרֶץ וַיִּתְּנוּ־עֵז לְמַלְכּוֹ וַיִּרְם קֶרֶן מִשִּׁיחוֹ:

וַיִּלְךָ אֱלֹקָנָה הַרְמָתָה עַל־בֵּיתוֹ וְהַנָּעַר הָיָה מְשֻׁרֵת אֶת־יְהוָה אֶת־פָּנָי עָלִי הַכְּהֹן:

I Samuel, Chapter 1

¹ There was a certain man from Ramathaim, of the Zuphites from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. ² He had two wives; one was called Hannah and the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none.

OBSERVATION

“Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none.” This is a fact that doesn’t require explanation, neither according to the text nor according to its characters.

³ Year after year this man went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the Lord Almighty at Shiloh, where Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the Lord.

? Why did Elkanah go up to Shiloh year after year to worship and sacrifice to the Lord Almighty at Shiloh?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

The text tells us that Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the Lord. This information might not be relevant now, but it will be relevant later.

⁴ Whenever the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice, he would give portions of the meat to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters. ⁵ But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the Lord had closed her womb.

? Why did Elkanah give a double portion of meat to Hannah?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

⁶ Because the Lord had closed Hannah's womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her.

? Why did Peninnah provoke Hannah?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

⁷ This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the Lord, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat. ⁸ Her husband Elkanah would say to her, "Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?"

Bonus ? How do we know that Elkanah knows already the answer to his questions?

Extra Bonus ? Why doesn't Hannah answer Elkanah's last question?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Answer 4 _____

⁹ Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on his chair by the doorpost of the Lord's house. ¹⁰ In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the Lord, weeping bitterly. ¹¹ And she made a vow, saying, "Lord Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head."

Extra Bonus ? Hannah has been barren for many years, and this was not the first time Hannah ascended to Shiloh, nor the first time Peninnah provoked her. What prompted her to pray in deep anguish, weeping bitterly?

Answer 1 _____
Answer 2 _____
Answer 3 _____
Answer 4 _____

¹² As she kept on praying to the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. ¹³ Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk ¹⁴ and said to her, "How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine."

? Why does Eli, the Priest misjudge Hannah?

Answer 1 _____
Answer 2 _____

¹⁵ "Not so, my lord," Hannah replied, "I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord. ¹⁶ Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief."

¹⁷ Eli answered, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him."

¹⁸ She said, "May your servant find favor in your eyes." Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast.

? Why isn't Hannah's face no longer downcast?

Answer 1 _____
Answer 2 _____
Answer 3 _____

¹⁹ Early the next morning they arose and worshiped before the Lord and then went back to their home at Ramah. Elkanah made love to his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. ²⁰ So in the course of time Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, "Because I asked the Lord for him."

OBSERVATION The etymology of the name Samuel (Shmuel) is closer to God listened (Shama El). However, Hannah gives us her own etymology: "Because I asked the Lord for him." Hannah is the true heroine here. She overcame pain, embarrassment, and frustration; was misunderstood and misjudged and prevailed at the end.

²¹ When her husband Elkanah went up with all his family to offer the annual sacrifice to the Lord and to fulfill his vow, ²² Hannah did not go. She said to her husband, "After the boy is weaned, I will take him and present him before the Lord, and he will live there for good."

²³ "Do what seems best to you," her husband Elkanah told her. "Stay here until you have weaned him; only may the Lord fulfill His word." So the woman stayed at home and nursed her son until she had weaned him.

? Why doesn't Hannah go to Shiloh with her family?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

²⁴ After he was weaned, she took the boy with her, young as he was, along with three bulls, one ephah of flour and a skin of wine, and brought him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh. ²⁵ When the bull had been sacrificed, they brought the boy to Eli, ²⁶ and she said to him, "Pardon me, my lord. As surely as you live, I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the Lord. ²⁷ I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him. ²⁸ So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord." And he worshiped the Lord there.



Hannah knows how to ask, and knows how to say, "thank you."

I Samuel, Chapter 2

¹ Then Hannah prayed and said:

"My heart rejoices in the Lord;
I have triumphed through the Lord.
My mouth boasts over my enemies,
for I delight in your deliverance.

² "There is no one holy like the Lord;
there is no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.

³ "Do not keep talking so proudly
or let your mouth speak such arrogance,
for the Lord is a God who knows,
and by him deeds are weighed.

⁴ "The bows of the warriors are broken,
but those who stumbled are armed with strength.

⁵ Those who were full hire themselves out for food,

but those who were hungry are hungry no more.
She who was barren has borne seven children,
but she who has had many sons pines away.

⁶“The Lord brings death and makes alive;
he brings down to the grave and raises up.

⁷The Lord sends poverty and wealth;
he humbles and he exalts.

⁸He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
he seats them with princes
and has them inherit a throne of honor.

“For the foundations of the earth are the Lord’s;
on them he has set the world.

⁹He will guard the feet of his faithful servants,
but the wicked will be silenced in the place of darkness.

“It is not by strength that one prevails;
¹⁰ those who oppose the Lord will be broken.

The Most High will thunder from heaven;
the Lord will judge the ends of the earth.

“He will give strength to his king
and exalt the horn of his anointed.”

OBSERVATION Finally, Hannah can put her feelings into words. This is a cathartic song dedicated to God (“...there is no Rock like our God.”), but also to her rival, Peninnah (“I have triumphed through the Lord. My mouth boasts over my enemies”), and perhaps to her husband, who “didn’t get her,” and to Eli, the Priest, who rushed to judge her. Through the words of Hannah’s song of triumph, we can get a glimpse of her previous immense silent suffering.

¹¹ Then Elkanah went home to Ramah, but the boy ministered before the Lord under Eli the priest.

Cast of Characters - Who is Who in the story? (Part 2)

- Elkanah, husband of Peninnah and Hannah: he means well, but doesn’t “get” his wife. His question: “Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons?” is not even worthy of an answer.
- Peninnah, fertile wife of Elkanah: She provokes Hannah where it hurts more. We might be able to explain her behavior (she is not beloved as her rival), but we cannot justify it.

- Hannah, barren wife of Elkanah: She knows what she wants and transforms the greatest pain into the most powerful silent prayer.
- Eli, the Priest at Shiloh: He misreads and misjudges Hannah. To his credit, he accepts Hannah's rebuke and blesses her.
- Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, the Priest: The text doesn't tell us too much about them at this point, but we will learn about their wickedness in the verses immediately following Hannah's prayer.
- Samuel, Elkanah and Hannah's son: our dramatic story serves as a prelude to his prophetic calling.

Appendix 1

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

Rabbi Manes Kogan

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 ads; 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 deserts, 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 necessarily 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!

לשנה טובה תכתבו!

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

Appendix 2

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

Rabbi Manes Kogan

D'var Torah for the First Morning of Rosh Hashanah

5771

-Did you feel it?

-No, I didn't. What are you talking about?

-The earthquake. You didn't feel it?

-No, I didn't. Which earthquake?

-An earthquake in Virginia. It's all over the news! Check Facebook or turn on the TV and you will see.

-I am in the car. Let me ask Silvia to check.

...

Everybody is talking about it. It's all over Facebook. Apparently it happened a few minutes ago outside Washington DC. They evacuated buildings in New York City. I didn't feel a thing.

...

Yes mom, I am telling you I am OK. No mom, Virginia is in the middle of the East Coast and we are in the Northeast. We are fine, mom, the children are fine, nothing to worry. No, I don't know how many deaths. I just found out myself. It is all over the news in Israel? I believe you mom. I'll call you later; daddy is calling, probably to check if we are OK.

.....

-You are welcome to come to us!

-What are you talking about?

-Irene, what else?

-Who is Irene?

-The hurricane, it is going to go straight through the middle of Queens. You should leave your home.

-And go where?

-To our home, safety is primary. If you want to stay, that's your prerogative, but send Silvia and the children to our place in New Jersey.

-And who told you that New Jersey won't be hit?

-New Jersey? No. They show the lines going through the middle of Queens.

.....

Yes mom, I am telling you we are OK. No mom, just lots of rain. Yes mom, we lost power. No, mom, no flooding, thank God. Yes mom, we have drinkable water. No mom, I didn't have time to think about the food in the refrigerator. Yes mom, I will. No, mom. Yes, mom. No, mom. I don't have too much battery. Daddy is calling, let me speak to him. Love you. Yes, I will be careful.

.....

At the end of the summer New Yorkers experienced two unusual nature-related phenomena. First, an earthquake whose epicenter was in Virginia, 300 miles away, but was felt all over the Tri-Borough area (with the exception of Silvia and me). Second, Irene, a powerful hurricane, later on degraded to a tropical storm, which hit the northeast, leaving 44 dead, many more homeless, and hundreds of thousands without power.

By the way, I find it amusing and quite unfair that hurricanes are being named with human names. I am sure a few among us are named Irene, and we have at least one Katrina. Then poor you, you need to hear people say: "Irene was terrible!" Or: "I hope Irene doesn't pass near us!" Or: "Katrina was devastating, the worse in years!" And maybe other things which I am not allowed to repeat in the synagogue. Silvia assures me that I don't have to worry. That nobody is going to name a hurricane "Manes" even if they run eventually out of names. But still, you get the point.

.....

Earthquakes and hurricanes are not the same. However, they have a lot in common. One of their common characteristics is that they are arbitrary and, therefore, you are near the epicenter or you are not; you are in the path of the hurricane or you miss it. Paraphrasing the words of "Unetane Tokef": *How many will be hit and how many will be spared? Who will tremble and who won't? Who will lose power for four days and who only for one day? Who will feel it at home and who at work? Whose basement will be flooded and whose will remain dry? Whose nearby tree will be uprooted, and whose house will be hit by it?*

Personal suffering is very much like the path of a hurricane although the simile of an earthquake might be more accurate. When one human being suffers, others might be affected to different degrees, depending how far they are from the epicenter.

-I heard he has cancer.

-Yes, I heard it, too. It is terrible, poor wife and children. What are we doing Saturday night?

...

-They fired 150 people in my company"

-What about you?"

-Thank God, I was spared."

...

-I heard her daughter is being bullied in school, but my child has a nice group of friends!"

...

I am so sorry to hear about your loss. Please, call me if you need anything! I've got to go now."

How many will be hit and how many will be spared? Who will tremble and who won't? Who will lose his job and who won't? Who will be sick and who will be healthy? Who will be able to save for retirement and who will need to depend on his children? Who will be touched by the lucky star and who by the bad one?

The haftarah reading this morning introduces us to four characters: Hannah, the childless woman, Peninnah, the rival, Elkanah, the husband, and Eli, the Priest.

Hannah, the childless woman, is at the epicenter of our story. She is the one suffering. The path of the hurricane passes right over her.

Elkanah, the husband, is one circle removed from the epicenter. He loves Hannah, no doubt, and he hears her moan and sees her tears. Her suffering, however, is not his. He has many children already, so he doesn't quite get it. Elkanah is successful, he is very busy, and when he gets overwhelmed by Hannah's suffering, there is always Peninnah, waiting for him.

Peninnah is the rival. She and Hannah share the love of Elkanah, although it is more 30% - 70%, than 50% - 50%. Although Peninnah has many children, when it comes to Elkanah's love, Hannah is the favorite one. Peninnah knows it and taunts Hannah, hitting her where it hurts the most.

Eli the Priest is the establishment. He is the rabbi, the leader, the one who represents society with its norms and rules. He knows how to read the holy books but he doesn't know how to read the human heart. Eli's menu of spiritual

possibilities is extremely limited: sacrifices and words. No tears, no silences, no shaking of the body and the soul. Eli the Priest is also the judge and therefore he is always ready to judge others. Eli the Priest volunteers his opinion whether it is wanted or not.

Elkanah lost power for a few hours. Peninnah lives in a different state and doesn't care. Eli the Priest believes that people should upgrade their insurance policies and, from the comfort of his office in the city, tells others what to do.

Hannah, however, is right at the epicenter, right in the path of the storm. She lost power, and her basement is flooded, and the food in the refrigerator is gone, and her insurance doesn't cover floods, and a huge tree fell right on her roof and she is bitter and lonely.

"And her adversary also provoked her bitterly, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb" (I Samuel 1:6).

Hannah suffers and Peninnah adds salt to the wound. She shows off her success in front of Hannah, and Hannah doesn't say anything. What could she say?

"Then Elkanah her husband said 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 1:8).

Elkanah doesn't get it. He is oblivious. Why do you weep, Hannah? I love you!

Hannah thinks: How can you say you love me if you cannot even feel my pain?

"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)

Eli the Priest doesn't understand pain. He is a man of the spirit, but the spirit eludes him. Eli cannot relate to Hannah's suffering, only to the letter of the law. When confronted with his misperception, he mutters a blessing, in lieu of an apology.

Peninnah is arrogant, Elkanah is oblivious, Eli is judgmental, and poor Hannah stands alone, at the epicenter of her suffering, at the mercy of the merciless storm.

....

Did you feel it?

No, I didn't. What are you talking about?

....

Elkanah the husband, Peninnah the rival, and Eli the priest are not only biblical characters, but prototypes of different ways not to relate to the pain and suffering of the others.

On the other hand, our society, our community, our congregation and our families, have many Hannahs, suffering in loneliness at the epicenter of their personal storms; Hannahs who are, more often than not, judged, misunderstood, and ignored.

Feeling an earthquake or being in the path of a hurricane is not a matter of choice (you feel it or you don't; you are there or you aren't).

The ability to feel the pain of the other, however, is a matter of a special sensitivity, one that can be trained, a sensitivity we all can work on it, we all should work on it. The High Holy Days can be seen, should be seen, as a spiritual journey, one that has the potential to transform us, to make us more attuned, more sensitive, to the cry and suffering of our neighbors, our co-workers, our classmates, our fellow congregants, our spouses. We might never be able to feel the exact pain they feel at the epicenter of their storms, but we can certainly learn how to move one or two circles closer.

...

So, did you feel it?

No, I didn't, but I am working on it.

...

As we begin these new High Holy Days, as we embark together on this joint spiritual journey, may we have the honesty to see our deep spiritual need to become more attuned to the suffering and struggling of our fellow human beings; may we recognize our potential to become more sensitive human beings, and may we find the strength and the courage to change.

May Hashem bless all of us and our loved ones with a good, sweet, healthy, joyous and meaningful year! Amen!