

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [327]

An Offspring Who Would Be Inconspicuous Among Men Insights into Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 31b



Background to Our Story

I Samuel, Chapter 1

¹ There was a man from Ramathaim of the Zuphites, in the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham son of Elihu son of Tohu son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. ² He had two wives, one named Hannah and the other Peninnah; Peninnah had children, but Hannah was childless. ³ This man used to go up from his town every year to worship and to offer sacrifice to the Lord of Hosts at Shiloh. — Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the Lord there.

⁴ One such day, Elkanah offered a sacrifice. He used to give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; ⁵ but to Hannah he would give one portion only — though Hannah was his favorite — for the Lord had closed her womb. ⁶ Moreover, her rival, to make her miserable, would taunt her that the Lord had closed her womb. ⁷ This happened year after year: Every time she went up to the House of the Lord, the other would taunt her, so that she wept and would not eat. ⁸ Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why are you crying and why aren't you eating? Why are you so sad? Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?"

⁹ After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose. — The priest Eli was sitting on the seat near the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. — ¹⁰ In her wretchedness, she prayed to the Lord, weeping all the while. ¹¹ And she made this vow: "O Lord of Hosts, if You will look upon the suffering of Your maidservant and will remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant **נָרַע אֲנִישִׁים**. I will dedicate him to the Lord for all the days of his life; and no razor shall ever touch his head."

¹² As she kept on praying before the Lord, Eli watched her mouth. ¹³ Now Hannah was praying in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard. So Eli thought she was drunk. ¹⁴ Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Sober up!" ¹⁵ And Hannah replied, "Oh no, my lord! I am a very unhappy woman. I have drunk no wine or other strong drink, but I have been pouring out my heart to the Lord. ¹⁶ Do not take your maidservant for a worthless woman; I have only been speaking all this time out of my great anguish and distress." ¹⁷ "Then go in peace," said Eli, "and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of Him." ¹⁸ She

answered, "You are most kind to your handmaid." So the woman left, and she ate, and was no longer downcast. ¹⁹ Early next morning they bowed low before the Lord, and they went back home to Ramah.

Elkanah knew his wife Hannah and the Lord remembered her. ²⁰ Hannah conceived, and at the turn of the year bore a son. She named him Samuel, meaning, "I asked the Lord for him." ²¹ And when the man Elkanah and all his household were going up to offer to the Lord the annual sacrifice and his votive sacrifice, ²² Hannah did not go up. She said to her husband, "When the child is weaned, I will bring him. For when he has appeared before the Lord, he must remain there for good." ²³ Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Do as you think best. Stay home until you have weaned him. May the Lord fulfill His word." So the woman stayed home and nursed her son until she weaned him.

²⁴ When she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with three bulls, one ephah of flour, and a jar of wine. And though the boy was still very young, she brought him to the House of the Lord at Shiloh. ²⁵ After slaughtering the bull, they brought the boy to Eli. ²⁶ She said, "Please, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you and prayed to the Lord. ²⁷ It was this boy I prayed for; and the Lord has granted me what I asked of Him. ²⁸ I, in turn, hereby lend him to the Lord. For as long as he lives he is lent to the Lord." And they bowed low there before the Lord.

Lost in Translation

ותדר נדר ותאמר יהוה צבאות אם־ראה תראה | בעני אמתך וזכרתני ולא־תשכח את־אמתך ונתתה לאמתך זרע אנשים ונתתיו ליהוה כלי־ימי חיי ומנרה לא־ינעלה על־ראשו:

Modern Translations: "...and not forget your servant but give her a son" (New International Version).

Classic Translations: "...and not forget Your maidservant but will give Your maidservant a male child" (New King James Version). See Also: "...and not forget Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a male child" (New Jewish Publication Society - 1985).

Literal Translations: "...and do not forget Your handmaid and have given to Your handmaid seed of men" (Literal Standard Version). See Also: "...and You will grant Your servant an offspring of men" (In: Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Berakhot. Koren publishers Jerusalem. Page 210)

The Text: Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 31b

“ונתת לאמתך זרע אנשים”

מאי “זרע אנשים”? אמר רב: גברא בגוברין; ושמואל אמר: זרע שמושת שני אנשים, ומאן אינון – שאול ודוד; ורבי יוחנן אמר: זרע ששקול פשני אנשים, ומאן אינון – משה ואהרן, שנאמר: “משה ואהרן בכהניו ושמואל בקוראי שמו”; ורבנן אמרי: זרע אנשים” – זרע שמובלע בין אנשים. כי אתא רב דימי, אמר: לא ארוך ולא גויז, ולא קטן ולא אלם, ולא צחור ולא גיחור, ולא חכם ולא טפש.

Later in her prayer, Hannah says: “And You will grant Your servant an offspring of men.”

The Gemara asks: What is the meaning of “an offspring of men”?

Rav said: Hannah prayed for a man among men, a son who would be outstanding and exceptional.

And Shmuel said: This expression means an offspring who will anoint two men to royalty. And who were they? Saul and David.

And Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Hannah prayed that she would bear an offspring who would be the equivalent of two of the world's greatest men. And who were they? Moses and Aaron. As it is stated (Psalms 99:6): "Moses and Aaron among His priests, and Samuel among those who call His name". In this verse, Hannah's son, Samuel, is equated to Moses and Aaron.

And the Rabbis say: "An offspring of men": Hannah prayed for an offspring who would be inconspicuous among men, that he would not stand out in any way.

The Gemara relates: When Rav Dimi came from Eretz Yisrael to Babylonia, he said in explanation: Hannah prayed that her son would not be conspicuous among men; neither too tall nor too short; neither too small nor too fat; neither too white nor too red; neither too smart nor too stupid.



Explaining the Story - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? Rav, Shmuel, Rabbi Yoḥanan, and the Rabbis have 4 different interpretations of זָרַע אֲנָשִׁים. Please summarize them in your own words.

? How are the opinions of Rav, Shmuel, and Rabbi Yoḥanan different from the one of the Rabbis?



Exceptional: deviating from the norm, not like most others of the same type.


Synonyms: extraordinary, notable, noteworthy, odd, phenomenal, rare, remarkable, singular, special, strange, uncommon, unheard-of, unique, unprecedented, unusual.

Antonyms: common, commonplace, familiar, inconsequential, insignificant, like, normal, ordinary, regular, similar, standard, typical, unexceptional, unimportant, unremarkable, usual

Inconspicuous: not easily or quickly noticed or seen. Not attracting attention.

Synonyms: hidden, indistinct, insignificant, low-key, low-profile, modest, ordinary, plain, unassuming, unostentatious

Antonyms: conspicuous, noticeable, visible, high-profile, salient, significant, striking, pronounced, prominent, distinct, remarkable, dramatic, outstanding, distinguishable, brilliant, commanding, eminent, famous, distinguished, illustrious, notorious, renowned, discernable, spectacular


Bonus  After exploring the definition of inconspicuous, why do you think, Hannah would pray for her son to be inconspicuous among man (according to Rav Dimi, *neither too tall nor too short; neither too small nor too fat; neither too white nor too red; neither too smart nor too stupid*)?

Answer 1 _____



Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____





 Can you think of people in your life who are exceptional? What about people who are inconspicuous? Can you think of a time in your life when you wanted to be exceptional? What about when you wanted to be inconspicuous? Can you think of some countries which are exceptional? What about countries which are inconspicuous?



 What are the advantages of being exceptional?  What are the advantages of being inconspicuous?

“The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from This Text.

 “I know, I know. We are Your chosen people. But, once in a while, can’t You choose someone else?” (Tevye from Fiddler on the Roof), or “The blessing and curse of being exceptional.”

 May you have an / year! (circle one)