

Hannah's voice: A challenge for each of us

A Sermon Delivered by
Rabbi Bennett F. Miller

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This morning I want to invite you to join me in looking at one of the texts in our liturgy. You and I read this text each and every year. Our past presidents share the reading with us and we just listened to it a few moments ago. It is the Haftarah for this Rosh Hashanah morning. You know it; the story of Hannah who goes to Eli the Kohen, the priest at Shilo. She goes to Shilo because she is barren and she hopes that through her visit to the sacred place, where sacrifice is performed, God will look upon her and provide her with a child. It is a strange text, for at Shilo, Eli the Kohen takes her for a drunkard, thinking that she has had too much wine. Hannah responds by saying, "No, all this time I have been speaking about my abundant sorrow and torment." At the end of the text we find that Hannah's seemingly quiet mutterings are really prayers which will be answered when she gives birth to a child who she names Samuel because, *Shmu-El*, God heard her prayer.

For some, this text is just a portion of the Bible that we gloss over. For others, this text has a power of its own. Here is what I mean. Some years ago, a woman approached me immediately after services. She literally came running up to me on Rosh Hashanah morning when the service concluded. "Rabbi," she declared, "Remember that 10 years ago you married me and my husband. Every year since then I have listened to this passage as it was read and I have wept for I was barren and could not conceive. I was Hannah and I was drunk with what had become tears of bitterness and sorrow. But this year, I am a different Hannah, and *Shmu-El*, God has heard my prayers. I will have a child born in the coming months."

That is a pretty powerful story. Over the course of my years as a rabbi I have had many who have shared with me how a few words in the text or a biblical episode that they read, or words from a sermon have resonated with this person or that. I think that speaks to the richness of our faith and tradition.

This morning I want to return to Hannah and her story and see what new lessons we can derive from this reading, for I believe that Hannah and her story are waiting to teach us, to challenge us, and even to inspire us.

I

What really was it about this woman named Hannah? What was it in the rabbinic imagination that this seemingly minor episode in the Book of Samuel (a book that few of us even look at) came to hold such a prominent place in the Jewish liturgical cycle?

Certainly, Hannah fits in with the theme of this day, the theme I mentioned last night. Just as God remembers Hannah, so too, God remembers the Jewish people and the covenant that was forged between us and the Divine. But I doubt that this alone would give Hannah such prominence and importance. No, I think there must be something far more compelling.

Permit me to suggest the following: Hannah is one of two wives of an abusive husband. One wife, Peninah, provides Elkanah with children. The other, Hannah, is “barren” and she lives a life of inner sadness and terrible tears. Hannah is bereft not only because of her inability to give birth to a child but also because where Elkanah her husband takes her to entreat God she cannot abide. The ritual of sacrifice, the rigidity of the priest at Shilo, all of this confounds Hannah in the midst of her sorrow. Through her sadness Hannah recognizes that the language of faith placed before her is corrupt and incapable of permitting her to speak her own voice. And when she does what emanates from her mouth are words of prayer. Rather than sacrifice, Hannah offers words; she entreats God through the language of prayer. When she enters the Temple at Shilo it leaves her numb until she approaches God directly, giving voice to her thoughts from the deepest depths of her heart. For us, Hannah represents the beginning of change for Judaism as hers is the first prayer offered to God, a remarkable and also radical action for her times that should teach us something about the time we live in today.

But before I continue I want to ask you to take a moment and close your eyes ... take a breath, and recall the last time you cried. If you can, consider what it was that led you to shed tears, how it felt to release them, and how you felt when you wiped them away or allowed them to simply wash down your face. I have always taught that God gives us tears to wipe away our sadness, to ease our pain. Tears are salvific; they release in us our inner spirits and emotions. We need tears, both for sadness and for joy. The Pietzetzner Rebbe, chief rabbi of Poland who perished in the Warsaw Ghetto taught that ‘the Tsadik, the righteous person is one who owns his or her heart, and a person who owns the heart can access his or her tears.’

Imagine this Hannah, her heart a brackish pool in the bitter wilderness of her body, living in a world that does not encourage emotion, that certainly holds no place within its structure for women (for sure) and men, too, to speak the language of faith from the depth of their inner beings. And yet, Hannah is compelled to take risks, to defy the norm of her day, and speak directly to God with a power and force unheard before. It is as if she is saying to Eli the Kohen, ‘your religious imagination is so narrow that you can’t understand me. You saw my lips and thought of me a drunkard; what kind of man of God are you?’

II

There is much for us to learn both from Hannah’s tears as well as her prayer. As I look around today I too possess tears. I am saddened by the harshness with which we speak to one another, by the lack of common cause in our country, by the diminishing of Jewish communities in so many quarters of North America. My tears flow at the pain that we have chosen to inflict on “the other,” “the stranger” in our midst through our nation’s immigration policy or inability to reform it because such reform is being held hostage by politicians. I am saddened that a woman’s freedom to make choices about her body is becoming increasingly limited by parts of society that wish to return to the days of “coat hangers” and control over women’s lives. I am disappointed that New Jersey has not yet fully legalized same sex marriage when it is clear that we are witnessing a seismic generational shift on this issue. And my tears are wet with bitterness that we cannot even come up with meaningful gun control policies. Hannah would have understood. She would have said to the immigrant, the stranger and the women, to those who are gay, “Wipe your tears from your face and let your voice speak loudly. You have a right to confront both ‘the man of God, and God, too.’

I shed tears today because the leadership of our nation has responded to the mass murder of innocent Syrians by going on vacation. I don't know any of these Syrians and I have little regard for Syria but when the world's leaders say, 'it's not our fight,' or 'we'll come back after the Labor Day recess to discuss the matter – it gives me pause. As Jews, we understand what it means to come back after the summer vacation. When Jews were being massacred in Europe, the leadership of the Jewish community in America met to discuss how to respond. They, too, went on summer recess, and when they returned to meet in September, it was too late.

Where is the moral outrage? What voices are screaming to the heavens that the use of mass weapons of destruction may not stand? Why are the people in countries all over the world not marching in the streets demanding that leaders in every land must do better than what we are witnessing both by the perpetrators as well by those elected and selected to lead in every nation on the face of the earth. Where is the voice of the Pope? I understand that America is a nation weary from war. The whole world is war-weary. But where are boycotts, the freezing of assets, the marching in the streets, the closing of embassies – where are the voices of courage demanding accountability and Syrian isolation before the world?

In light of President Obama's decision to encourage Congress to debate the issue and then make a decision, and in light of Great Britain's act representing a colossal failure of courage in a world desperately seeking courageous leaders, I offer you these thoughts: for many years I was privileged to study with Edwin Friedman, scholar and therapist and rabbi. Ed understood conflict and systems like no one I have ever met. He worked with governmental leaders, corporate leaders, clergy and people of all faiths. Here is what Ed believed and taught. His words should teach us much and challenge us in light of what we are witnessing all around and what is making me and so many others shed our tears.

He wrote:

I believe there exists throughout America today a rampant sabotaging of leaders who try to stand tall amidst the raging anxiety – storms of our time. It is a highly reactive atmosphere pervading all the institutions of our society – a regressive mood that contaminates the decision making processes of government and corporations at the highest level, and, on the local level, seeps down into the deliberations of neighborhood church, synagogue, hospital, library, and school boards. It is “something in the air” that affects the most ordinary family no matter what its ethnic background. And, its frustrating effect on leadership is the same no matter what their gender, race, or age.

He continues,

It is my perception, that this leadership-toxic climate runs the danger of squandering a natural resource far more vital to the continued evolution of our civilization than any part of the environment. We are polluting our own species. The more immediate threat to the regeneration, and perhaps even the survival, of American Civilization is internal, not external. It is our tendency to adapt to its immaturity. To come full circle, this kind of emotional climate can only be dissipated by clear, decisive, well-defined leadership. For whenever a “family” is driven by demand-feeding, what will also always be present is a failure of nerve among its leaders.¹

A “failure of nerve;” that is exactly what we are witnessing as we watch our “leaders” fail to lead, and as we observe the leaders of the world’s nations exemplify not the finest in leadership but the most base in political expediency and folly. I am not a military strategist and I cannot speak for the efficacy of sending forth bombs upon Syrian soil today or tomorrow or ten days from now. But I do know this; to do nothing will serve as a failure of leadership, not only President Obama’s, but our Congress, and the collective leadership of the world.

III

It was this simple woman, named Hannah, who wanted to dedicate a child to serve God, but could not do so to a God who only demanded sacrifice. And here is where the religious voice needs to be articulated and heard loud and strong. Hannah spoke a different language and used her voice. You and I and all people of faith needed to follow the paradigm set by her before the Kohen. You and I should be making the following demand on our leaders; we should be declaring: Enough! I say to President Obama, use your position, your pulpit as a world pulpit. Call not just the leaders but the people of the world to stand tall and strong finally against terrorism, against totalitarianism, and against those who violate the stated rules of engagement throughout the world. Call upon the world’s leader to isolate and declare a “pariah” any nation that violates such accepted rules of warfare. Refuse to buy their oil; prevent their merchandise from leaving port; close off their access to banks and to the world economy; refuse landing rights to their airplanes and keep their people from entering nations of good will; exclude them from participating in any organization that brings nations together. Either we all stand for something or we stand for nothing at all. As my friend and colleague, Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin has written, “When it comes to the use of gas, the world is suffering from global amnesia ... let us at least, as Jews, be the shock troops in the war against such amnesia.

You and I who are people of faith, it is time for us to declare that “eye for and eye,” powerful retaliation does not change the way people and nations learn to engage with each other, does not provide safety and security for innocent men, women, and children. It is time for people of good faith to stand up and declare, ‘we will no longer tolerate nations that starve their people when there is enough food in the world for everyone. We will not sit idly by and let nations who violate human dignity operate on the world’s stage. We will isolate and contain like we have learned to do with virulent diseases. My friends, you and I cannot eradicate evil from the world but we certainly can rise up and contain it or else it will spread like a cancer and destroy everything good that exists in this precious world given to us. And like Hannah, I believe that God is shedding tears, deep and painful tears, crying out, ‘I gave my creations hearts and minds and souls to care for my world, protect it and make it whole. Why do they spend so much of their energy on weapons of destruction when they could be expending their resources on the discovery of cures for afflictions and pain?’

Remember, it is Hannah whose prayer is uttered among her tears and her prayers are answered: *Shmu-El*, God heard her prayer. And why can’t you and take the same kind of risk as Hannah, why can’t we join together as friends and community, and then seek common cause with others, shaping and fashioning and dreaming a world where peace and dignity and human decency and compassion and mercy and gentleness can reign; where friendship and fellowship among peoples of faith and color, nations from every corner of the globe, can join in harmony and put an end to terror and war, bloodshed and destruction.

IV

It is Rosh Hashanah, the birthday of the world, not as it is but as we would wish it be. The question put before us on this day is this: What kind of world do we wish for us, for our children, and for our children's children? Let us begin to make our wishes come true. Let's reach out hand to hand and heart to heart to change the language of discourse and to fashion a better world. Let's isolate those who preach hate and perform acts of terror and keep them from destroying this earth that we hold so dear. The power for us to do so is in our hands.

It is time for us, like Hannah, to wipe away the tears and let our voice speak loud and strong. It is time for us to access the depths of hearts and join them together with others of faith and good will. May our hands be strong enough to embrace one another in kindness and love. *Shmu-El*, May God hear our prayers, and then bring them to fruition for our children and grandchildren and all who follow, and may God do so speedily in our day.

¹ Edwin H. Friedman, 1992. An expanded version of an essay delivered before the Governor, members of her staff, and government officials of the State of Texas, and a keynote address to the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy. This article was later incorporated into a book by Friedman, entitled *A Failure of Nerve*.