

Rosh Hashanah Day 1 5779 - The Blessings That We Share
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Rosh Hashanah marks the time of our yearly pilgrimage of the soul. We enter a holy space, a holy time. We reach towards our highest selves and seek a new beginning. The stories we engage with today and tomorrow provide a prism that illuminates, that clarifies, the colors of the interior arc of our journey.

In today's parasha we read about Avraham and Sarah. A critical moment in the narrative is when a trio of visiting angels declare that in a year, Sarah will bear a son. This prediction seems ludicrous. Sarah laughs - almost scornfully – at the idea. How could it be possible? She has been in menopause for years – in one year, Avraham will be 100 and she will be 90.

Sarah long ago gave up hope of having a child of her own and had arranged for her handmaiden, Hagar, to bear a child with Avraham. While a common practice at the time, it had certainly not worked out as well as she had thought it would. Instead of joy, the birth of YishmaEl brings jealousy and anger. Above all, Sarah is hurt. There was no *shalom* – no peace - in their home.

And G-d “remembers” Sarah, and a son is born. Sarah's response is, “God has made me *L'tzahek*, laugh with joy - and everyone will *l'tzahek* - rejoice with me -- and the baby is named Yitzchak, for Sarah's joyous laughter. But, only three verses later, when Yitzchak is weaned – Sarah sees Ishmael *m'tzahek* – laughing, she cannot abide it. She demands that Avraham send Hagar and Ishmael away, back to her home in Egypt. In the harsh wilderness, they almost perish, but G-d saves them.

This is a difficult stuff – Hagar's cries are heart-wrenching. Every choice seems to have a dark or cruel shadow side– how quickly laughter turns to tears -- the refrain is that there is not enough, not enough children, not enough kindness – it feels as if there is not enough love to go around.

Yet, Rosh HaShanah is a time of joy. We gather to celebrate the birthday of creation, the renewal of life, and to affirm our hopes and dreams for the way our lives and the world can be. How can we reconcile these shadows and conflict with the light and joy of this new beginning?

Let's take a look at another story, the story of Hannah. It is in the haftara for today, that we will not be reading this morning, but perhaps it may illuminate some of the shadows in the story of Sarah and Hagar. It unfolds during the early years of Hebrew settlement in ancient Israel, when the Mishkan was located in Shiloh, before King David brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem.

From the Book of Samuel, chapter 1: “Elkanah had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah: and Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.” Sound familiar? Peninah keeps popping them out. But Elkanah loves Hannah more than Peninah. So Peninah gets back at Hannah by teasing her incessantly. Hannah is miserable.

One year, during their yearly pilgrimage to Shiloh, Hannah collapses in the shrine and weeps inconsolably as she prays to G-d as *Adonai Tz'va'ot*, the Creator of Multitudes, if G-d would only grant her a son, she will dedicate him to serve the Cohanim at Shiloh.

Eli, the Cohen, sees Hannah --but although he sees her lips moving, he cannot hear her. The text explains that Hannah was “*m'daberet al libah*”—literally, speaking upon her heart. Eli thinks she is drunk and says “how long are you going to make a drunken spectacle of yourself. Sober up!”

Hannah answers for all of us who have experienced the depths of grief and despair, “Oh no, I am not drunk, I am pouring out my heart to G-d, I have been speaking to G-d about my pain and sorrow.”

Eli is taken aback. He apologizes and gives Hannah a blessing that her request may be granted. And God “remembers” Hannah, and a year later – you guessed it! – a baby boy is born. Hannah names him Shmuel - for God hears. And when Shmuel is weaned, Hannah brings him to Eli, fulfilling her vow.

How does Hannah’s story help us to see the story of Sarah and Hagar in a new light?

Sarah’s jealousy and protectiveness seem understandable. Who wouldn’t feel as she does in the same situation, competitive and threatened? Hannah’s actions seem almost impossibly altruistic – could we personally give up our only - dearly longed for - child? On the other hand, despite the bounty she has received in her life, beauty, love, wealth, prestige, and finally, a son – Sarah is never wholly content; sadly, she is unable to envision or enable a way for both sons of Avraham to co-exist.

Hannah comes to show us another way. Hannah “puts herself out there,” She “lets go and lets God.” She pours out her heart, not caring who might see her weeping. Hannah is able to see both her own needs and a larger view. She sees herself as a servant of Adonai, a holy vessel to bring her child into the world. And she views her child in the same way – that her son shall be a holy vessel, a servant of God.

Further, when she brings Samuel to Eli, Hannah says that G-d has given her what she requested—*asher sha’alti*—and now she will “lend him” to G-d—*hishiltihu La’Adonai*. The root of to borrow and to lend—is the same --sha’al. We can understand this lesson at its deepest level – that **giving and receiving become alternating and interchangeable possibilities – from G-d to us and from us to G-d.**

Hannah shows us another way to be, another way we can see things.

Her story and her prayers demonstrate how we can approach our relationship with G-d, and how this relationship affects how we behave in the world. Hannah’s prayers, in fact, become the model that the ancient sages of the Talmud adopted in creating the *tefilah*, the Amidah, which is when we say our private prayers to God. Talmud tells us that *tefilah* should be “*m'daberet al libah*”—“speaking from the heart” -- like Hannah’s.

The rabbis of the Talmud also tell us that Hannah's prayers are the inspiration for our *tefila* on Rosh Hashanah. Three special blessings are added today, the blessings of Malchuyot, Zichronot, and Shofarot. Perhaps we can understand these blessings as Hannah's prayers... that become our prayers, as we discover the prayers that are written upon our hearts – our desire to be able to freely give and receive, our desire to be able to pour out our deepest longings, and our immense gratitude at the continuing miracle of creation.

Hannah calls to, “*Adonai Tz'va'ot* – CREATOR of Multitudes – *Adonai Tz'va'ot* opens us to **Malchuyot** – to contemplating Adonai as the ultimate Source - Creator of the stars, the angels, the astounding array of all life in the universe.

Rather than laugh at the possibility that what seems barren can bear fruit, we can exclaim, “Wow!” to this infinite, endless abundance -- In wonder and gratitude we thank the Creator – that we have been given such bounteous blessings, including our own capacity to create and regenerate – and to bless in return. Hannah teaches us that we are ourselves a blessing – borrowed from God – and lent back – a revolving spiral of blessing turning and returning, through all time and space.

We can understand **Zichronot** – Rememberings – through the actions of Sarah, Hagar, and Hannah. The refrain is “God remembered”, which is “Torah speak” for the idea that a promise made, is a promise kept. It is easy to see where Sarah and Hagar think only of what they can get from God, Hannah is mindful of what she can give back. But again, we are asked to go deeper – for as you may have noted, Yishmael and Shmuel share almost the same name – God hears. When Sarah is upset, she literally throws this idea out of the house. How easily what we have asked for, all that we have been given, no longer brings us joy? Hagar places Yishmael at a distance and calls out in her desperation, but does not actually ask to save him. Torah tells us that God heard the **silent** cry of the child. Hannah, in contrast, despite the anguish that we know she must have felt at turning Shmuel over to Eli, gives him as her blessing back to God, tears wholly transformed into gratitude and love.

G-d remembers us – with infinite compassion, with infinite kindness, with mercy and with infinite love... These stories call out to us – **do not turn away** – remember - keep God close, God hears us even when we cannot speak – remember the blessings that God has given us in love, and that we can remember – out of our own infinite love to reciprocate.

Shofarot - We hear the call of the Shofar echoing through millennia, it calls to us through the month of Elul, even though we may not know that we hear it. The sound is fused in our DNA, like the Monarch butterfly, the wild geese – our souls hear, we feel the faint stirrings of new life, new possibilities – and we know the way home. God sounded the first Shofar and now of the call of the shofar is our call, our blessing back to God - wordless, coming from deep within- the prayer of our heart. And God is listening. When we raise the shofar, we are offering our blessing back to God – sounding the clarion call of Torah, of truth, of deliverance, of eternity.

May this year be wondrous for us all, may the sweetest, and deepest songs of your heart rise up and be heard, and may we all be written in the Book of Life.

Shana Tova Tikatevu