

Hannah / הַנָּח

There was a man from Ramat'aim 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. He had two wives, one named Hannah and the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah was childless. This man used to go up from his town every year to worship and to offer sacrifice to Adonai of Hosts at Shiloh.— Hofni and Pinchas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of Adonai there. One such day, Elkanah offered a sacrifice. He used to give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; but to Hannah he would give one only, though Hannah was his favorite—for Adonai had closed her womb. Moreover, her rival, to make her miserable, would taunt her that Adonai had closed her womb.

He did this year after year: Every time she went up to the House of Adonai, the other would taunt her, so that she wept and would not eat. 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?” 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 Adonai.— In her wretchedness, she prayed to Adonai, weeping all the while. And she made this vow: “Adonai 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 a male child, I will dedicate him to Adonai for all the days of his life; and no razor shall ever touch his head.” As she kept on praying before Adonai, Eli watched her mouth.

Now Hannah was praying in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard. So Eli thought she was drunk. Eli said to her, “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself - Sober up!” 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 Adonai. Do not take your maidservant for a worthless woman; I have only been speaking all this time out of my great anguish and distress.” “Then go in peace,” said Eli, “and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked for.” She answered, “You are most kind to your servant.” So the woman left, and she ate, and was no longer downcast. Early next morning they bowed low before Adonai, and they went back home to Ramah.

Elkanah knew his wife Hannah and Adonai remembered her. Hannah conceived, and at the turn of the year bore a son. She named him Samuel, meaning, “I asked Adonai for him.” And when the man Elkanah and all his household were going up to offer to Adonai the annual sacrifice and his votive sacrifice, 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 Adonai, he must remain there for good.” Her husband Elkanah said to her, “Do as you think best. Stay home until you have weaned him. May Adonai fulfill the utterance of your mouth.” So the woman stayed home and nursed her son until she weaned him. 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 Adonai at Shiloh. After slaughtering the bull, they brought the boy to Eli. She said, “Please, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you and prayed to Adonai. It was this boy I prayed for; and Adonai has granted me what I asked. I, in turn, hereby lend him to Adonai. For as long as he lives he is lent to Adonai.” And they bowed low there before Adonai.

And Hannah prayed:

My heart exults in Adonai;
My horn is held high.
My mouth is wide.
I rejoice in Your deliverance.
There is no holy one like Adonai,
Truly, there is none beside You;
There is no rock like our God.
Talk no more with lofty pride,
Let no arrogance cross your lips!
For Adonai is an all-knowing God;
By Adonai actions are measured.
The bows of the mighty are broken,
And the faltering are girded with strength.
Men once sated must hire out for bread;
Men once hungry hunger no more.
While the barren woman bears seven,
The mother of many is forlorn.
Adonai deals death and gives life,
Casts down into Sheol and raises up.

Adonai makes poor and makes rich;
God casts down, God also lifts high.
God raises the poor from the dust,
Lifts up the needy from the dunghill,
Setting them with nobles,
Granting them seats of honor.
For the pillars of the earth are Adonai's;
God has set the world upon them.
Adonai guards the steps of the faithful,
But the wicked perish in darkness—
For not by strength shall human beings
prevail.
The foes of Adonai shall be shattered;
God will thunder against them in the
heavens.
Adonai will judge the ends of the earth.
God will give power to the Divinely
appointed Ruler.
And will raise the horn of God's anointed
one.

Then Elkanah and Hannah went home to Ramah; and the boy entered the service of Adonai under the priest Eli.

Samuel was engaged in the service of Adonai as an attendant, girded with a linen ephod. His mother would also make a little robe for him and bring it up to him every year, when she made the pilgrimage with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice. Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, "May Adonai grant you offspring by this woman in place of the loan she made to Adonai." Then they would return home. And Adonai took note of Hannah; she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters. Young Samuel meanwhile grew up in the service of Adonai.

(I Samuel 1:20; 2:1-11, 2:18-21)

Questions:

1. What moments "shimmer" for you, or stand out?
2. Hannah is narrating this story in the first person to you as her friend. How do you respond?
3. What is the role of prayer in this story?

grace, favor, kindness – יח

Classical Midrash

Rav Hamnuna said: How many significant *halakhot* (Jewish laws) can be derived from the following verses of the prayer of Hannah? **“And Hannah spoke in her heart, only her lips moved and her voice could not be heard, so Eli thought her to be drunk.”** (I Samuel 1:13).” The Gemara elaborates:

“And Hannah spoke in her heart:” the halakha that one who prays must focus their heart on their prayer is derived.

“Only her lips moved,” the halakha that one who prays must enunciate the words with their lips, not only contemplate them in their heart, is derived.

“And her voice could not be heard,” the halakha that one is forbidden to raise their voice in their *Amidah* prayer as it must be recited silently. F

“So Eli thought her to be drunk,” the halakha that a drunk person is forbidden to pray.
Talmud, B’rachot 31a

Hannah said before the Holy Blessed One: “Master of the Universe, are You not the Lord of Hosts, and of all of the hosts and hosts of creations that You created in Your world, is it difficult in Your eyes to grant me one son? The Gemara suggests a parable: To what is this similar? It is similar to a flesh and blood king who made a feast for his servants. A poor person came and stood at the door. He said to them: Give me one slice of bread! And they paid him no attention. He pushed and entered before the king. He said to him: My lord, the King, from this entire feast that you have prepared, is it so difficult in your eyes to give me a single slice of bread?
Talmud, B’rachot 31b

In her prayer, Hannah said: **“if You will indeed look upon the affliction of Your servant and remember me, and not forget Your servant and will give Your servant a male child, I will give him to God all the days of his life, and there shall be no razor upon his head”** (I Samuel 1:11). Rabbi Elazar said: From the day that the Blessed Holy One created the world, there was no person who called “*Adonai Tz’vaot*” until Hannah came and called God this. This is the first time in the Bible that God is referred to by this name.
Talmud, B’rachot 31a

Hannah said, “Master of the Universe! what must I do? I will recite song and melody to You: ‘Halleluya!’” Of her the Psalmist writes, (Psalm 113:9) “God sets the childless woman among her household as a happy mother of children, Halleluya!

What is the meaning of *Adonai Tz’vaot*? Hannah said before the Holy One, “Master of the Universe, there is a heavenly host above and an earthly host below. The host above do not eat, do not drink, do not reproduce, and do not die, but live forever. And the hosts below eat, drink, reproduce and die. And I do not know which host I belong to – above or below. If I belong to the host above, let me not eat, drink, give birth, or die; rather, let me live forever just as they live forever. And if I belong to the host below, let me eat, drink, give birth, and die, just as they do. This is the meaning of God of Hosts / *Adonai Tz’vaot*.
Pesikta Rabbati 43

Modern Midrash

As the poet and liturgist Marcia Falk [in an article for Tikkun Magazine] explains, at first, this little narrative may not seem terribly remarkable: a woman mutters under her breath, a priest accuses her of drinking, the woman explains herself to him. But what is remarkable is that Hannah is the first ordinary person to stand and pray at the entrance to the holy sanctuary where high priests officiated as men offered up their sacrifices. There Hannah stood with no sacrificial offering and no priest to act as her intermediary, and prayed, in her own voice, using her own words. Hundreds of years later, when the rabbis were replacing the sacrificial offerings of Temple days with verbal communal prayer, they chose Hannah's example as the very model because she prayed from the heart. By opening up her heart, Hannah connects to God, redirecting her perspective, achieving a certain level of serenity.

– Rabbi Suzanne Singer

Elkanah could have said: 'Do not worry, Hannah, you are as good to me as ten sons.' In other words, starting with the premise of the woman's role as the provider of sons to the male, he could have juxtaposed the ten sons, the contribution that Hannah has failed to make... Instead, Elkanah's attitude is surprisingly modern; he views himself not as a patriarch who has magnanimously forgiven his wife for not having done her duty to his family, but as the loving partner whose duty it is to make his wife happy... He does not define his relationship with his wife in terms of her familial or sexual duties, in terms of what she has or has not given him, but in terms of his contribution to her contentment: 'am I not better to you than ten sons?'

Hannah's negotiating tactics are cleverly made up of several clearly defined steps. First, her address to God is couched in the language of an oath, thus endowing it with the sanctity of a promise made to God. Instead of asking, Hannah frames her request within a sacred vow. She displays humble deference to God that is nevertheless combined with great tenacity. Although prefacing her entreaty to God with the conditional, tentative 'if,' and modestly referring to herself as God's 'handmaid,' Hannah seems to be resolved not to leave God empty-handed.

– Nehama Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window* (1998) pp. 136-138

Was it unusual for women to come to offer their own prayers? The story doesn't hint that there was any irregularity invoked. Eli doesn't try to chase her away or tell her that women belong in the home. It is the intensity of her prayers and their long duration that attract his attention, and the fact that he cannot make out what she is saying. Eli may have become accustomed to the sight of drunkenness associated with these pilgrimage feasts. Moreover, he may have expected women in distress to make a loud noise, to cry out or to ululate like mourners. Instead, she is praying silently. The story does not tell us why, nor does it tell us what she said. Her prayer was private, and the text leaves it that way. Only one part of the prayer has public importance: the promise of the child to God. And this vow is spelled out: the child would be given right back to God in service, and marked for that service by the long hair that distinguished a Nazirite.

Later readers were keenly interested in Hannah's prayer: what could she have said to make God give her a child? Rabbinic authors suggest what her arguments might have

been. She argued that her womb should not be created for nothing; she argued that God commanded procreation; she argued that Israel was supposed to teach its children the Torah, so there had to be children. Hannah to them is a master petitioner, a model of persuasive argumentation. They also considered her the very model of the importance of the silent prayers they introduced at the center of the worship service.

Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*

Marble Floor -- a song in Hannah's Voice by Alicia Jo Rabins

I opened my mouth but no words came
I lay down to sleep but I did not dream
I looked up at the stars but the sky was dark
like a mirror held up to my heart

A B C, D E F
Take away this alphabet
it's heavy on my tongue

You can want a thing so bad it seems
That you lose yourself and everybody else
So I got down on my knees on the marble floor
And I cried until my throat was sore

A B C D, E F G
Tell me what you want from me
I'll do it all I swear

I was not drunk, I was awake
I could not open so I had to break
to let the light come in

A B C D, E F G
Take this alphabet from me
It's heavy on my tongue



Debra Band, *Hannah, Illumination 2*, 2011, American, illuminated manuscript on calfskin vellum with ink, gouache and 23 KT gold