

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Rosh Hashana I

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 10: First Day of Rosh haShanah, I Samuel 1:1—2:10

The Events Of Chapter 1 Of The Book Of Samuel-- A Brief Review

A man named Elkanah had two wives, Peninah and Hannah, the latter of whom was childless. Elkanah had a general custom of going once a year to Shiloh, to worship at the Tabernacle, the precursor of the Temple. Despite Elkanah's great love for Hannah and his attempts to comfort her, Peninah's taunts over her barrenness brought her to a crisis point. Bitter at heart, she went to the Tabernacle and prayed for a child, promising that the child would be given to God all his life.

Hannah used an unusual form of address in speaking to God, "*Hashem Tzeva'ot*, God, Lord of Hosts." Too, and, according to Rashi contrary to common practice, Hannah prayed silently. It was this aspect that led Eli, the High Priest, to assume she was drunk. Deciding her soundless mumbling was a sign of drunkenness, he rebuked her; she, insulted by his assumption, corrected him, earning a blessing by way of apology.

Soon after, Samuel is born; Hannah decides not to join Elkanah's annual pilgrimage until the baby is weaned; two years later, she brings him to Eli and informs Eli that this boy is "*shaul laHashem*, loaned to God," all the days of his life.

First Discussion-- The Elkanah Family

We might question the book's opening with the description of the family at all; the prophet seems to be implying that the pre-story of his birth is relevant to the book as a whole. I believe the answer lies in chapter 3's pointing out that "*devar Hashem*, the Word of God," was "*yakar*, rare" in those days. The nation was living through a time in which God's Word was not often a directly experienced reality.

Given that context, Elkanah and his family become more remarkable. Elkanah makes a yearly pilgrimage, a concern with God out of synch with the rest of society. One strand of Midrash thinks Peninah teased Hannah to spur her into asking God for help. Hannah, of course, makes God central when she prays for a child, when she promises that child to God, and when she thanks God after his birth. The backstory gives us an understanding of how it came to be that this family produced the prophet who would bring back the common closeness of people to God.

The Prayer And Conversation With Eli

In the Sages's opinion, Hannah is the first to use the title "Lord of Hosts." Hannah reminds us of the possibility of innovation within prayer, of discovering new ways to approach God. They need to be unsullied by improper motives, but proper innovations can fruitfully expand our understanding of how to relate to the Creator.

Note also that we do not know most of what Hannah said. We are told she poured out the

bitterness of her heart to God, but Scripture only records verbatim the part about Samuel being dedicated to God. The omission suggests that the preparation for prayer might not depend so much on the words said as on finding the frame of mind that will lead to telling God exactly what is deepest in our hearts.

Samuel a Nazir?

The Mishnah records a debate about what Hannah promised when she said, "*morah lo ya'aleh al rosho*, and *morah* will not rise on his head." The Hebrew "*morah*" can either mean a razor, in which case she is promising he will never cut his hair, as the phrase indicated in the case of Samson, or the word can mean afraid, in which case she is asserting that he will not cower before people. In the latter case, Hannah is reminding us of the importance of fearlessness for servants of God (and, perhaps, communal leaders generally).

Hannah's willingness to give up the baby she so greatly longs for might mislead a reader into thinking she cared about the physical experience of having a child, not raising or relating to one. Her actions after the boy's birth belie that. She keeps Samuel with her until he is weaned, during which she can set the foundations for his later life. In a section we do not read on Rosh HaShanah, Scripture goes out of its way to mention that she would also regularly bring him a new coat, a sign of their continuing connection.

Hannah's Prayer

After she brings Samuel to Eli, Hannah recites a poem that the prophet introduces with the verb "*vatitpalal*, and she prayed." There is no request in her words, suggesting that some prayers might only express joy, even though we usually think of prayer as needing some kind of request.

Some commentators see Hannah's words as a prophecy, a description of what will happen in the course of Samuel's life and leadership of the Jewish people. If so, we have another interesting component of her relationship with her son the prophet. Since the prophet tells us that God's word was rare in that time, knowing that his mother was a prophet suggests that his own service in that role was a continuation of a family tendency. His mother trailblazed for him in both prayer and prophecy.

Radak adds another dimension, claiming that Hannah's words were a warning to those who are too secure in their station in life. As Hannah notes in her oration, whether poem, prayer, or prophecy, the tides of Fortune can shift dramatically and suddenly. If so, the verb we commonly translate as "and she prayed" must mean something more along the lines of articulating understandings of the world, ones that can remind contemporaries of truths they have forgotten.

The multiplicity of meanings we see in the verb root "*pallol*" helps explain why we read this selection on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, in addition to the usual answers. As we envision God sitting on a throne of judgment, our haftarah reminds us that judgment, prayer, prophecy, and the proper understanding of how to live are intertwined with each other.

We can only hope that the judgment we are undergoing this day will turn out for all of us, individually and collectively, to take us to a future where we feel the need to sing the kind of song of thanksgiving Hannah so eloquently offered when her life turned from a nightmare into a

blessing she would never even have dared dream. *Ketiva v'chatima tovah*, may we all be written and sealed for a good year and life