

Haftarah for The First Day of Rosh Hashanah (1 Samuel 1:1-2:10)

The story of Hannah, the prophet Samuel's mother, is linked to Rosh Hashanah in a number of ways. Hannah's story is one of a woman, bereft of children, whose sincere prayers to God are answered with the birth of a son. This story parallels the story in the Torah reading of our matriarch, Sarah, who is also childless, is consequently remembered by God and granted a child. In both of these stories, we are taught to recognize that God, indeed remembers those who are in need and does not leave them abandoned. Hannah's story however adds an additional element to the picture of Rosh Hashanah by providing us with a model of sincere prayer on a day when heartfelt prayer is the order of the day.

Hannah's struggle with prayer was not an easy one. To raise her plight before God, she had to contend not only with her own painful predicament but also with the unresponsive institutions which stood in the way of her pure sincere spirit: "In her wretchedness... As she kept on praying before the Lord, 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 any other strong drink, but I have been pouring out my heart to the Lord. Do not take your maidservant for a worthless woman (bat Bliat); I have only been speaking all of this time out of my great distress and anguish.' 'Then go in peace', said Eli, 'and may the Lord God of Israel grant you what you have asked of Him.' She answered: 'You are most kind to your handmaid.'" (1:10-18)

The Talmud attempts to examine the underlying psychology of this interaction: "And Eli said to her: 'How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself?'" – Rabbi Elazar said: 'From this we learn that one who sees something unseemly in his neighbor must reprove him. "And Hannah said: 'No, my lord.'" – Ulla, or some say it was Rabbi Yose ben Hanina: 'She said to him: You are no lord in this matter, nor does the holy spirit rest upon you, that you suspect me of this thing. Some say, she said to him: 'You are no lord, [namely], the Shechinah and the holy spirit is not with you that you should rule harshly and not leniently with regard to my behavior. "I have not drunk wine or hard drink" – Rabbi Elazar said: 'From here, [we learn] that one who suspected wrongfully must clear himself.' "Do not take your maidservant to be a worthless woman (bat Bliat)" – this indicates that one who prays while drunk is like one who worships idols, as it is written elsewhere with regard to idolatry: 'Certain sons of Bliat have gone forth from among you.' (Deut. 13:14) ... "Then Eli said: Go in peace." – Rabbi Elazar said: From this we learn that one who suspects his neighbor of a fault which he did not commit must be his forgiveness, moreover, he must bless him, as it says: And the God of Israel should grant your petition." (Berachot 31a-31b)

What is clear from the dialogue between Hannah and Eli, as it is found in the Talmudic elaboration, is that their interaction was anything but a conversation. Eli was concerned exclusively with institutional standards (which are quite important) but did not make sufficient effort to discover Hannah's concerns. Hannah was concerned with her own bitterness and expressing it to God. She could not imagine that Eli's response to her was anything but an expression of his own religious corruption and contempt. The Talmud, in its exaggeration of the confrontation between Hannah and Eli seems to express an awareness that a person's relationship with God depends on more than just institutional conformity. It requires a delicate balance between respect for institutional standards and self-expression. Hannah's prayers are the embodiment of this struggle. (See Y. Brendes, *Agadah L'maaseh*. Pp.42- 44)