

ROSH HASHANAH DAY 1 5780 - INTRO TO TORAH/HAFTARAH

Today's Torah reading and the Haftarah share a common theme. Two women: Sarah and Hannah – who desperately long for children, who struggle with infertility. Their anguish is at the center of their stories. Their longing is an elemental longing, made all the more potent because they live in a patriarchal society where the ability to produce offspring is a key measure of a woman's worth. Still, even if they are unable to bear children, the husbands of these two women still cherish them.

Hannah's husband tries to comfort her. He asks: "Hannah, why do you weep, and why do you not eat, and why is your heart so sad? Am I not better to you than ten sons?"

Her husband, for all his concern, cannot grasp her pain.

Neither can Abraham understand Sarah's pain. Nor can he understand her resentment of Hagar, Sarah's handmaiden, who has borne Abraham's child. Wasn't it, after all, *Sarah's* idea to have Hagar serve as a surrogate mother for her? Abraham does not notice how Hagar now looks down on her former mistress, how humiliated Sarah is, how painful it is each time Sarah sees Ishmael.

Our reading today opens with the words "*Vadonai pakad et Sarah...* The LORD took note of Sarah as promised." But the family dynamics grow more complicated, not less, when Sarah finally does give birth to Isaac. Hagar and

Ishmael are cast out for good. Abraham is deeply troubled, but in the end, God responds to the mothers of both of his sons.

And that is the central point of this Torah reading. *God responds*. To Sarah's anguish over her infertility. To Hagar's fear that she and her son will die in the wilderness. Sarah and Hagar will become mothers of great nations and Abraham will be father to both of them. God responds.

And that is echoed in the the *haftarah*, the story of Hannah. Likewise, a woman who struggles with having a child. Whose husband has offspring (in case, many children) with another woman in the household, though Hannah is the more beloved.

And one year, when they go up to the worship and feast at the Temple at Shiloh, Hannah can't take it anymore. She leaves the banquet table, enters the Temple, and prays, weeping bitterly and pouring her heart out to God. She vows that if God gives her a son, she will dedicate him to serve as a priest in the Temple.

And what do you know? A few verses later, the text tells us *vayiz-kireha Adonai*- And the LORD remembered her. And Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son."

The lesson is the same. God hears us. And God responds.

It's a comforting message. It's a reassuring message. I get it. I get why the rabbis chose these readings for Rosh Hashanah. But I have to tell you that

when I was struggling to have children, I didn't find these readings to be all that comforting.

The anguish. That I got. That I could relate to. And it wasn't just about having kids. I was a rabbi. I saw people experiencing pain and anguish all around me. And calling out to God.

But look, in life, we don't always get that great ending. The answer we desperately seek. The child we long for. The life-saving cure. The dream job. Sometimes marriages come to an end. Things spin out of control.

For a while, I thought the rabbis' choice of these readings was, I don't know, theologically simplistic. As if they were saying: Don't worry, if you pray hard enough and do what you're supposed to do, God will reward you in the end. Just like Sarah and Hannah.

Maybe. But the Sages weren't naïve. When they read the story of Hannah, they didn't focus on her fertility. They didn't honor her for being the mother of the prophet Samuel and others, but as the originator of silent prayer. Indeed, in the Talmud, Hannah is *the* role model for authentic, sincere prayer.

Imagine that today's haftarah ends with verse 18. Hannah's silent prayer and tears have initially been misunderstood by Eli the priest. Eli thought she was drunk, that she had overdone it at the banquet. But then he recognizes his error and apologizes. Hannah has been able to express herself.

Eli has recognized her pain, listened to her, and reassured her. Hannah now feels heard by God, and by the priest. She leaves, feeling comforted.

“Go in peace” Eli tells her “and may the God of Israel grant what you have asked.”

She answers, “You are most kind to your handmaid.” So, the text tells us. “the woman left, and she ate, and she was no longer downcast.”

We are no different than Hannah. We long deeply for things in our life to get better, to change, to remain the same, for so many things that are outside our control.

But it not only about the longing. It’s not only about the outcomes, so much as it is about our need to cry out, our need to be heard, and acknowledged. To be comforted and strengthened enough to move forward.

And the rabbis knew that when they chose these readings for Rosh Hashanah morning.