

Rabbi Rebecca Shinder – Temple Beth Shalom

Lessons from Hannah - Rosh HaShanah I 2021 / 5782

Mah nistana ha-shana h'zot?? Why is this year different from all others? Of course there are more than merely 4 statements to answer that question - and those assertions will range from what kind of masks we wear, to exactly how many times we wash our *yadayim b'mayim*, to where we prayed our services in this New Year. Regardless of our location, many of us share the same head space with each other. So many of us are: anxious, battered, cautious, depressed, etc. These are very real, painful, and authentic feelings. In spite of them, or perhaps because of them, we have flocked to this destination - either at 13 Roosevelt Ave OR bit.ly/tbsservices, some come just to see familiar faces and others to hear haunting melodies- many of you come seeking sanctuary to approach some semblance of normalcy,/ and others still come to find inspiration from faithful prayerful moments with our God. I pray that each and every one of us finds what your soul needs during these Days of Awe, our High Holidays of 5782.

In any other “normal” year, at this point in our service Scott now would chant the Haftorah portion from the Book of Nehemiah. One may assert that Nehemia’s 5th c. BCE message of hope is just the kind of inspiration we need about now, especially with its instruction to the Israelites to rejoice and celebrate this holy day. Nehemia is the leader after the Destruction of the Temple and our people’s Exile to Babylon. He oversees our return to our Holy Land- and especially the rebuilding of Jerusalem. If this was less than 2 weeks ago, that would have been the message I would want to raise up to you right about now.

However, in recent days, I have been drawn to teach another traditional Haftorah reading chosen for Rosh Hashana-- the story of Hannah from the First Book of Samuel. At first glance, Hannah’s identity - like so many of the named women of the Hebrew Bible - is tied to her infertility. The text first tells us that her husband is named Elkanah and then it says that she has no children.

She cries, she trembles with grief and then she does something extraordinary for a woman, especially extraordinary for a woman in her precarious position - listen to the text in Hebrew: *Vateedor neder* - meaning she spoke and vowed [to God.] *Vateedor neder*- the plural of vow is *nidrei* - as in *kol nidrei* -- all vows. Here her singular *neder*, her vow is a prayer, a yearning, a wish for a son. According to Biblical scholar Dr. Nehama Aschenasy, “of all the petitions, prayers, and psalms in the Bible, mostly uttered by men, it is Hannah’s heartfelt plea to God that was singled out by our Sages as a model and prototype of all prayers to come.”

In its context, her prayers of the heart were the biblical equivalent of family planning. This parable of Hannah's supplications could and did inspire God to "Open her womb" and, according to the tale, enabled her to conceive. Yes this is a powerful proof text for the efficacy of personal prayer, and, yes in another year that could have been where my message would take us all. Yet the subject of another woman's womb is very much a part of our national discourse right now.

I thank God that I was able to give birth to three healthy children. Sadly, not all conceptions go according to plan, and as we all know, with the help of technology, parents now can make decisions to terminate a pregnancy if the potential child would be afflicted with life threatening ailments or not gestate to term at all. Some women conceive after a sexual assault, and some are just not yet ready to be mothers. In light of the recent Texas anti-abortion law that has gone into effect, I must provide an answer to the question: What does Judaism say about this?

I do know that, before I answer that question, some of you may think, Rabbi, this is not a very wholesome topic to preach from the pulpit - after all there are children here. Yes, there are children here who are exposed to issues of human sexuality on every kind of screen imaginable, and they need to hear that sexuality has consequences. They need to know that the short answer to this question is that Judaism says that a woman has the right to choose to plan a pregnancy, AND has the right to decide to end one, as well. Our children need to know that Judaism celebrates procreation. They should be taught that the injunction to, "be fruitful and multiply, pr'oo u'r'voo, is the first mitzvah in the Hebrew Bible.

However, the commandment does not continue - be fruitful and multiply -- no matter the risks, no matter the physical or emotional costs-- or if the fetus will not survive long after it is born. Though the Torah makes no specific reference to any process resembling a modern abortion, there is discussion both in Torah and later Jewish law about our tradition's earliest guidance on the termination of a pregnancy. Moreover, our sages interpret these texts to assert that human life begins at the child's first independent breath.

Guided by these assertions, On September 1, leaders of Reform Movement Institutions issued a statement to,

"..denounce, in the strongest terms, the law that went into effect in Texas, effectively making abortion care illegal in that state. In the most insidious state abortion restriction adopted to date, this Texas law makes abortion illegal as early as six weeks, before many are even aware that they are pregnant.

The law is manipulatively designed to thwart courts' ability to protect reproductive freedom, prohibiting state officials from enforcing the law but empowering any Texan to sue any person—an abortion provider, a counselor, a member of the clergy, a clinic worker, even a driver who delivers a person to a clinic, to name a few examples—who assists in accessing abortion care.

We are concerned about individuals who cannot afford to travel long distances to secure abortion care in neighboring states. We are also deeply concerned about Jews who will be unable to pursue an abortion in keeping with Jewish law, which mandates abortion when necessary to preserve the pregnant person's well-being.

With respect to Judaism's own limited approval of abortion: "as we would not impose the historic position of Jewish teaching upon individuals nor legislate it as normative for society at large, so we would not wish the position of any other group imposed upon the Jewish community or the general population." [i] We also ground ourselves in kavod habriyot—the sacred obligation to provide medical care."

There is much more to learn about this topic and we will not only study the Jewish position on this issue, but also discuss ways in which we can support people in Texas now and in the time ahead.

We've considered our movement's position on a woman having the right to determine her own physical and emotional destiny, but now as we end, I want to go back to the biblical Hannah's prayer. Hannah was weeping/ her heart was torn, her reality seemed bleak/ yet she was praying for help and for comfort. My heart goes out to all of you, as you -- in words or thought -- silently or loud -utter your own prayers on this Rosh Hashana as the delta variant is pressing down and preventing all of us from assembling.. Especially for those of you who are on Zoom, know that you are not alone, feel the connection of our community. Like Hannah, let your prayers reflect your own desire toward wholeness and normalcy and continuity. Let your individual prayer, like Hannah, rise up to bless you, to strengthen you, to grant a safe path in the year ahead.

Hannah was alone, perhaps bowed over in the Temple at Shiloh. We in our own shul and in the stained glass Zoom windows across our region, are linked with our fellow Jews throughout the country who, in their homes and in their hearts, offer their petition, praise and thanksgiving.

Y'hu litrayon imrie fee, May the words of our mouth and the meditations of heart be acceptable unto You, O God, our rock and our Redeemer.

Amen.