



## ICJW Online Study Program

### “The Jewish Festivals”

## THE STORY OF HANNAH

### The Haftorah Reading for the First Day of Rosh HaShana

The Haftorah reading for the first day of Rosh HaShana is Samuel I and 2:1-11. What I attempt to offer here are guidelines for analytical reading of the text, which I would encourage you to read carefully (in Hebrew, if possible) prior to providing your own interpretations and comments. You may find it useful to consult the commentary published by ICJW last year, which dealt with the Torah readings for the Festival, and specifically with the story of Sarah and Hagar, which has certain resemblances to the Haftorah with which we are concerned.

#### 1. Haftorah

Haftorah readings are traditionally taken from the books of the Prophets and, in the majority of cases (about 2/3 of the grand total), relate in some way to the content of the Torah reading that precedes the Haftorah.

Considering the content of the Torah reading for the first day of Rosh HaShana, to which part of it would you choose to relate in the Haftorah? In other words, what seems to you the most important/impressive/memorable/significant part of the Torah reading?

As you read the Haftorah, consider how *it* relates to the Torah reading.

#### 2. The Story of Hannah.

The Book of Samuel opens with the description of a devout family – Elkanah and his two wives, Hannah (meaning “graciousness,” “favour”) and Peninnah (meaning “pearl”). While Peninnah had borne both sons and daughters (no number is specified), Hannah was barren. Nevertheless, Hannah (like Rachel before her) was her husband’s favourite and he displayed his preference by giving her a larger portion of the sacrificial offering. In contrast, her rival Peninnah taunts Hannah and makes her life miserable. This situation apparently continued for a lengthy period (cf. v. 7: “year after year”). Hannah is inconsolable, despite her husband’s evident love and concern. Note the pathos in v. 8: “Am I not more (devoted) to you ten sons?”

Finally, the grief-stricken Hannah takes action, turning in prayer directly to God, “weeping all the while.” Her prayer is in the form of a vow, entering into a quid pro quo bargain with the Almighty, all the while stressing her subservience to Him. (Note the threefold repetition of her self-description as His “handmaiden.” (verse 11)). If God remembers her and grants her a son, she will in time return him to God, dedicating him to a lifetime of priesthood.

Eli the priest, who has been watching Hannah, at first assumes that she is drunk and rebukes her, but when she explains her behaviour (v. 16), he blesses her, praying that God will grant her request.



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Hannah’s prayer is indeed answered and she appropriately names her son Samuel, “I asked God for him.” (We can also read this as a contraction for “God has heard.”) Now the time has come for Hannah to fulfill her part of the bargain, but she clearly finds it difficult to surrender the son she so longed and prayed for. The next time Elkanah and all his household go up to offer the annual sacrifice, she stays at home, explaining that she is waiting till the child is weaned, since once he appears before the Lord he must remain there for good. Elkanah accedes to her wishes, and she stays at home, nursing her son “until she weaned him.”

Note that the period of time is not specified, so that we may conjecture that it is a matter of several years, until the child could be independent of his mother. In any case, when Hannah feels she can no longer delay keeping her promise, she takes materials for a sacrifice (bullocks, flour and wine) and goes to the house of the Lord in Shilo.

Note verse 24, with its pithy *והנער נער* – and the boy was a boy, i.e. still young. Yet one more small delay – for the sacrifice of the bullock specifically intended as a thanksgiving – and then comes the inevitable moment of separation. She brings the boy to Eli, identifies herself as the woman who had prayed in that place, and presents the boy to him. Note the words and repetitions here (v. 26-28), especially in the Hebrew text), which dramatically convey how even at this late stage she is playing for time, indicating how much the child means to her (“For this child I prayed”) as well as the mingling of reluctance and readiness with which she keeps the bargain struck with God.

The Hebrew text has a wonderful (and, unfortunately, untranslatable) word play with the root *שאל*, which is the root both of the verb “to ask” and of the verbs “to borrow” and “to lend.” Since God has given her what she *asked* Him for, she is “*lending*” that gift to God for life. The verb “lending” implies that she considers herself as still retaining a hold on her son, though he will no longer be a part of her household. We feel how hard it is for Hannah to give up what she so longed for, and yet how indebted to God she feels for having granted her prayers.

The opening verses of Chapter II (1-10) give us Hannah’s second prayer, this time not one of weeping and beseeching but rather a lofty expression of religious faith in God’s rule and providence. Though it begins with the personal, expressing Hannah’s joy and exultation (also over her enemies, i.e. those, like Peninnah, who previously mocked her), the hymn soon switches to a more general affirmation of God’s unique greatness (v. 6ff.). Yet within this general statement, what is stressed is the way in which God brings about reversal of fortunes, bringing down the might while strengthening the weak, making the barren fruitful, raising up the poor, rewarding and punishing according to human deeds. In both content and tone, Hannah’s prayer is reminiscent of other great songs of praise – that of Moses (and Miriam) after the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus, XV), and that of Deborah after the defeat of Sisera’s army (Judges, V). What effect does this similarity have in the presentation of Hannah? How does it impact on her status in our eyes?



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The prayer over, Elkanah returns home while Samuel stays with Eli. And where is Hannah? Perhaps in body she returns with Elkanah, while in spirit she stays with her son?

This interpretation can be supported by the later (and last) reference to her (2:18-21). The child Samuel ministers before Eli, “being a child girded with a linen ephod.” His mother makes him a little coat (note the tenderness implied in the adjective) and brings a new one with her each year when she comes with Elkanah to offer the yearly sacrifice. The verb used for her bringing of this garment (והעלתה) is the same as that used for the bringing of the sacrifice, indicating that for Hannah both the “offerings” are equally important expressions of her dedication – to her son and to God, of whom she had “asked” him. Though Hannah bears five more children, her first son, Samuel, clearly remains the apple of her eye.

### 3. Parallels and Echoes.

#### a) Barrenness and fruitfulness.

The Torah reading begins with the birth of Isaac to Sarah, like Hannah for many years a barren woman and, like her, mocked by the more fertile second, or other, wife (Hagar/Peninnah). Unlike Sarah, Hannah makes no attempt to avenge herself on her rival. The theme of barrenness is a common one in Genesis: three of the four matriarchs are initially barren, the exception being the less beloved Leah.

While in the case of Abraham and Sarah it is *he* who prays for a son, here it is the woman who prays, establishing (like Hagar and Rebecca) a direct relationship with God. Here too the importance of bearing a *male* child is stressed. A woman, however beloved (cf. Rachel and Jacob), feels unfulfilled and inadequate until she has borne a *son*.

Why are *male* children so important? Consider laws and traditions of inheritance, *inter alia*.

#### b) Sacrificing the Son.

In the Torah reading, Abraham is called upon to sacrifice the son for whom he had prayed and whom he perceived, in accordance with God’s word, to be his heir. Abraham unquestioningly and unhesitatingly responds to God’s extraordinary demand. We never learn of Sarah’s response, nor is there even an indication that she was aware of the entire incident of the “binding” of Isaac. (Though there is a good deal of Midrash on this, the Biblical text itself offers not a single hint).



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Hannah, too, “sacrifices” her son, even initiates the offer. She does this not by taking his life but by surrendering him forever to the service of God, far away from home, in a place where she will see him only once a year. Nor is her response as unhesitating as Abraham’s. As the text shows (see above), she waits as long as possible before fulfilling her vow, and even then the syntax of her speech indicates reluctance and delay (1:26-28). Perhaps Hannah’s response offers us a clue to how Sarah might have responded had God made his demand of *her*, rather than of Abraham? (For another mother’s refusal to accept the death of a longed-for child, see II Kings IV, 1, the Haftorah we read on the Shabbat on which the Torah reading, Parshat Vayyera, tells of the sacrifice of Isaac. The Shunamite heroine of this episode insists on having her promised son brought back to life after his sudden death!)

#### **c) Hannah’s First Prayer.**

Judaism derives the form and manner of prayer from Hannah. In the description of her behavior (I: 10-14) we may note three characteristics:

i) She speaks from her heart, “pouring out her soul before the Lord.” This is what we call כוונה, *kavanah*, full purpose.

ii) Her lips move, indicating that one needs to articulate prayer.

iii) Her voice cannot be heard, i.e. though one articulates the words, and does not pray only in thought or feeling, one should not raise one’s voice loudly.

The story of Hannah implies that, if we pray with all our hearts, with true intent, our prayers will be answered. On Yom Kippur we assert that penitence, prayer, and charity (*teshuva*, *tefilla* and *zedaka*) can avert God’s negative response of punishment for our sins. Hannah is a perfect example of the power of devout prayer. Let us try to emulate her in this respect and pray that, like her, we shall find favour in God’s eyes.

May we be inscribed in the Book of Life and may the coming year bring peace to Israel and to the world.