

A Mighty Spirit: Praying Like Hannah By Wendy Amsellem

Hannah, mother of the prophet Samuel, is often cited as the ideal person that one should emulate in prayer.

R. Hamnuna said: How many important laws is it possible to learn from these verses about Hannah? “And Hannah, she spoke in her heart”. From this we learn that one who prays must direct his/her heart. “Only her lips moved”. From this we learn that one who prays must enunciate the words with his/her lips. “And her voice was not heard”: From this, that it is forbidden to make one’s voice loud in prayer. (Talmud Bavli *Berakhot* 31a)

R. Hamnuna is fascinated by Hannah’s prayer. He begins with an exclamation, “How many important laws is it possible to learn from these verses about Hannah!” He then proceeds with a meticulous analysis of Hannah’s prayer - her intentions, the movement of her lips, the sound of her voice. From every one of Hannah’s gestures and inflections, we can learn how it is that we must pray. The Talmudic passage continues with other Rabbis offering other important lessons to be gleaned from Hannah’s every word. Hannah seems to be the model for how to appeal to God. Yet, a close reading of the text of Hannah’s prayer can leave one confused about precisely what it is that Hannah is praying for.

As the book of Samuel I opens, it seems obvious that Hannah desperately

wants a child. The very first thing we are told about her is that she is childless, while her husband’s other wife, Peninah, has children. Each time the family travels to God’s tabernacle in Shiloh, Peninah so upsets Hannah about her barrenness that Hannah cries and cannot eat her portion of the sacrifice. Finally, one year, Hannah gets up from the family meal and goes to pour out her bitterness and pain to God.

At this point, Hannah, who has desperately wanted a child for years, makes a shocking petition:

“She vowed a vow saying, ‘God of hosts if you will see the bitterness of your maidservant and remember me and do not forget your maidservant and you will give your maidservant a male child, I will give him to God all of his days . . .’ (Samuel I 1:11)

At first glance, Hannah’s request makes no sense. If she had so longed for a child, why is she giving him up even before she has him? How much does she really want the child if she can so quickly relinquish him?

There are several ways to read Hannah’s request. One possibility is that she does not want a child for the child’s sake, but rather to prove her fertility to Peninah. The main motivation for Hannah’s prayer is Peninah’s mockery and so it is not essential that Hannah raise the child, only that the child exist.

This is certainly not a flattering view of Hannah and given that the Rabbis hold Hannah up as the model for prayer, it is unlikely that they would have viewed Hannah’s petition as a petty revenge attempt.

Another possibility, suggested by Channa Lockshin-Bob, is that perhaps Hannah’s request is indicative not of a selfish desire to one-up Peninah, but is instead proof of her entirely selfless motives in requesting a child. Hannah does not want a child for her own benefit but rather because she thinks that it is important for the world that her child exist. Thus she is willing to relinquish any personal hold on her son, promising him to God even before he has been conceived.

Rabbi David Silber claims that Hannah’s motivation, while selfless, had a very specific political and religious aim. Hannah and her family came to the tabernacle on a regular basis. They must surely have witnessed the gross abuses of Eli’s sons who were the acting priests. Rabbi Silber suggests that Hannah specifically wanted a son in order to give him to God, so that her son could strike out at the corrupt priestly practices and

restore honor to the house of God. Later, when Hannah prays a second time after her son’s birth, she describes the victory of the righteous over the wicked. According to Rabbi Silber, this prayer is not about Hannah’s triumph over Peninah but rather it expresses her hope that her son will be victorious over the immoral priests.

While all of these suggestions can work as possible readings of the text, it is still worth noting the powerful irony in Hannah’s prayer. She is a woman who longs for a child and yet with the same breath that she asks for him she renounces her claim to him. Talmud *Bavli Berakhot* 32a-b suggests that Hannah teaches us how to pray, and I think that perhaps this tension in her prayer between desire and renunciation is part of her lesson to us. When we approach God in prayer, we come simultaneously with our own private needs and desires but also with the fervent hope that God will allow us to act as part of a divine plan. We want that which we want with our whole hearts, but we want also to want that which is God’s will. We hope that our desires are part of God’s plan, but we are aware that this is not always the case. Hannah’s power lies not in her ability to subsume her wants to God’s will. Rather, it is her ability to desire something with the full desperation of her being and yet simultaneously be willing to renounce it in the face of a greater Divine plan.

After Hannah’s son Samuel is born, she prays a second time, recounting poetically her exultation in God’s deliverance. Even as she knows that she must soon give up the son that she had endlessly longed for, she recounts in sublime terms her rejoicing in the triumph of God’s plan:

The enemies of God will be terrified,
God will thunder on them in the Heavens
God will judge the ends of the earth
And give strength to His King and raise up
the horn of His anointed one.
(Samuel I 2:1-10)

Hannah sees beyond her own situation and casts her story in universal terms. Her private desires have become a part of God’s plan and thus she feels God’s salvation even as she is parting with her son. It is appropriate that it is Hannah with her transcendent ability to both desire and relinquish who serves as our model of prayer through the ages.

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