

Sanctification and Commemoration of Jewish Holy Days

Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot, commemorate great events in the history of the Jewish people.

1. Passover celebrates the liberation of the Jewish people from Egypt.

2. Shavuot commemorates the Jewish people receiving the Torah at Sinai.

3. Sukkot re-enacts the sheltering of the Jewish people in the desert. There are two great actors in these dramas, God and the Jewish people. No one person, man, or woman, is the focus of these events.

Rosh HaShanah—Hannah's Story

This is not the case for Rosh Hashanah, the Holy Day of the New Year, the Day of Judgement. Rosh Hashanah celebrates no event in the history of the Jewish people. There is, however, one person, a woman, at the center of Rosh Hashanah. The drama of her life and her remarkable thanksgiving song are read in all synagogues for the *Haftorah* (selections from the books of Prophets) on the first day of Rosh Hashanah. This epic song is the basis of the unique three-part Shofar sounding service of Rosh Hashanah found in the prayer books of the Conservative, Orthodox, and Reform. This song is the source of the stirring prayer, ***Unetane-Tokef -Who shall live and who shall die?*** She is the single greatest source for the Jewish understanding and practice of prayer. Here is her life story.

Hannah, a barren woman, is married to a good man, Elkana. They live in a time of civil chaos. Joshua has died. The Judges who ruled Israel have slipped away. There is no central authority. There is corruption at the Temple. She will soon give birth to the prophet Samuel. Samuel will designate and anoint King David, who will unite the Twelve Tribes, and centralize Jerusalem as the capitol.

In other words, her baby will lead the Jewish people out of anarchy, stabilize the Twelve Tribes, and establish Israel as an effective nation state.

How did this barren woman gain such a child?

The Song of Hannah is her thanksgiving to God for the gift of a child.

There are six barren women in *Tanakh* (canon of the Hebrew Bible). These women are barren because God, not nature, closed their wombs. These women are barren because their pregnancy, birth, and longed for child are **part of God's plan**. They will birth, but only at the appointed time. In barrenness lies the promise of birth.

In the Bible, barren women always give birth to central salvation figures:

1. Sarah to Isaac;
2. Rebecca to Jacob;
3. Rachel and Leah, at times barren, and later fertile, give birth to the Twelve Tribes;
4. The anonymous wife of Ma'Noakh gives birth to Samson.
5. Hannah to Samuel who is the last judge, first prophet and priest

Samuel: Prophet, Priest and Judge

<https://blog.cph.org/study/samuel-prophet-priest-and-judge>

Who Is Samuel?

<https://www.gotquestions.org/life-Samuel.html>

Was Samuel a Priest?

https://jbqnew.jewishbible.org/assets/Uploads/511/jbq_511_barsamuelpriest.pdf

Key points about Hannah:

Hannah is the most fully developed character and personality of the women included in the greater miraculous births connected to the salvation narrative. While Sarah and Hannah acknowledge that God has closed their wombs, it is only Hannah who enters into sustained dialogue and deep relationship with God in order to discern the meaning of her barrenness and the purpose of the child she might birth.

The Bible is not often rich in emotional language. We know that Jacob *loved* Rachel, but we know nothing, of their romantic life. We are told that Abraham loves Isaac. We don't see that love expressed. The Torah is focused on human behavior. Hannah is *emotionally the most complex figure in Tanakh*. The portrayal of her inner life is the richest of any person in *Tanakh*. Her feelings are vividly presented. In her barrenness she is bitter. She weeps. She is angry. She is in despair. She is hardened. She is unable to eat. Elkana loves her more than his other wife, P'nina, who torments her. P'nina seeks to provoke Hannah's anger so that she will rage against God rather than enter into a relationship with God.

Hannah enters the [Tabernacle in Shiloh](#) for a moment of personal seclusion and prayer with God. Hannah turns to God for a child. Hannah is immersed in asking for, and then demanding a child from God. Her prayer is so pure that she is the prayer itself. In this solitude she comes to know that there is purpose to her barrenness. God will not give her a child until she realizes that her child's destiny is to serve God in a greater story.

When she does, she turns to God and says, "If You give me a child I will dedicate the child back to You." Hannah knows that she lives in an era of chaos in which there is no leader. It is God's plan for her to birth the next leader, the Prophet Samuel, a man who will be equal in moral and spiritual stature to Moses and Aaron. Because of this Hannah doesn't pray to God for a child. She surely doesn't beg.

Hannah is successful because her relationship with God is composed of fairly equal parts of brazenness and humility. Only the humble person can make brazen demands of God. The Rabbis are moved by her brazenness. They declare that she hurls her prayer at God! They tell us that she challenges God and is prepared to force His hand if she is not given a child. The only one who can be brazen is the one who can be humble. Three times Hannah acknowledges that she is God's servant. It is only in humility that a Jew can rise to brazenness in the presence of God. The High Priest Eli watches her intently. He thinks her a drunk as she stands, fixed and stoic, her lips move, yet no sound is heard. Eli has never seen anything quite like this. Eli confronts her:

Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Sober up!" (1Sa 1:14 TNK)

A woman of her emotional intelligence and spiritual proportions knows how to respond:

And Hannah replied, "Oh no, my lord! I am a woman of hardened spirit. I have drunk no wine or other strong drink, but I have been pouring out my heart to the LORD. Do not take your maidservant for a worthless woman; I have only been speaking all this time out of my great anguish and distress." (1Sa 1:15-16 TNK)

Avoiding God in the Holy Days

The holidays of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot, which commemorate great events in the history of the Jewish people, make it possible for some to avoid God. This isn't advisable, but it is possible. One can always celebrate these holidays just for their historic experience. This is not the case for Rosh Hashanah.

Rosh Hashanah is all about God. The Rabbis present Hannah's encounter with God in order to teach us **how to stand in the presence of God** and **how to engage in conversation with God** in prayer. Standing before God summons us to be both humble and brazen; both dependent and independent; fearless and relaxed; it calls upon us to imitate Hannah and to pour forth our thoughts and feelings. This she is able to do because she knows that she stands in the Presence with the greatest of titles. She is a child of Abraham and Sarah, created in the image of God.

Themes

The stories of Hannah, Elizabeth, and Mary, we find many common themes:

1. Promises made and lived out
2. Faithful responses to God's will
3. Songs of praise, wonder, and awe
4. Desires revealed and realized
5. New life brought forth in unexpected ways.

These women model for us what can happen when we trust God's faithfulness and might as recorded in Scripture: "for nothing will be impossible for God" (Luke 1:37). What can happen when we believe these words of the angel Gabriel spoken to Mary?

Hannah: Giving and Receiving

Hannah, the wife of Elkanah, describes herself in 1 Samuel 16 as a woman of "deep sorrow and misery." While Elkanah's other wife, Peninnah, has many children, Hannah is barren. Despondent, she silently pleads with the Lord in the temple for a child and promises to dedicate that child to God if given to her. Eli witnesses Hannah's earnest prayer and assumes her to be drunk. Hannah's response to Eli is beautiful: "I was only pouring out my heart to the LORD" (1 Sam 1:15).

The Lord hears Hannah's prayer and graces her with a son, whom she names Samuel. Hannah makes good on her promise and dedicates Samuel to God after he is weaned. Overcome with emotion at the moment of dedication, Hannah proclaims her own psalm known as "Hannah's Song."

Echoes of Hannah's song are heard in the Magnificat are found throughout **Mary's song**: "My heart exults in the LORD, my horn is exalted by my God. I have swallowed up my enemies; I rejoice in your victory... The barren wife bears seven sons, while the mother of many languishes... The LORD makes poor and makes rich, humbles, and also exalts..." (1 Sam 2: 1, 5, 7)

In the **divine reversal**, God flips the usual script on its head. The poor are made rich, those at the bottom rung are raised to the top. Life is brought out of a barren womb. And Hannah rejoices! She fulfills her own promise to God and gives right back to Him what she received as gift. She takes what is **most precious to her** and offers it to the Lord in trust and gratitude.

Elizabeth: God Does the Impossible

The story of Elizabeth and Zechariah is similar to that of Hannah: God fills the empty, barren womb, but this time at a miraculously old age. The coming of their son John is announced by an angel to Zechariah rather than Elizabeth, but when she learns of it, she says, "So has the Lord done for me at a time when he has seen fit to take away my disgrace before others" (Luke 1:25). Once again we see **God promise the impossible** and make good on His promise.

When Elizabeth encounters her cousin Mary during this pregnancy, she instantly recognizes God's grace at work in her cousin. This be could be because of her increased faith in witnessing God's miraculous power in her own life.

Grace calls to grace, and Elizabeth, "filled with the Holy Spirit," cries out a prophetic prayer of praise to Mary:

"Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled." (Luke 1: 41-45)

In these words, we see Elizabeth's humility ("how does this happen to me?") and an affirmation of Mary's faith ("you believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled"). These two statements offer rich reflection opportunities.

Mary

Mary's story, so familiar and so near to us at Christmas, need not be recounted here. Her faith and surrender to God's will are unparalleled. But we would do well to consider the words of her Magnificat, spoken immediately after Elizabeth's proclamation to her at the Visitation.

Mary begins the same way as Hannah, praising God for His greatness: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior" (Luke 1:46).

And then we hear an echo of Elizabeth's question, Why me?, in the next verses:

“For he has looked upon his handmaid’s lowliness... the Mighty One has done great things for me” (Luke 1:47-48).

Like Hannah, Mary recognizes that God has turned the worldly order of things upside down. A poor young woman, unimportant in the eyes of her society, will be remembered by every generation. God has “lifted up the lowly” and “the hungry he has filled with good things” (Luke 1: 52-53).

A Woman who Prays

Hannah is the only woman in the Bible so far who prays to God herself, without any mediators – directly and in the Holy Tabernacle no less. No woman before her and no woman after in the Hebrew scriptures did so.

Perhaps this is why Eli sees Hannah and cannot believe his eyes.

A woman is standing alone in the Tabernacle and whispering.

And according to his worldview only drunkenness could explain such puzzling behavior. Therefore, Eli demands of the eccentric woman who seems to mutter to herself, that she reform her drinking habits. But Hannah explains to Eli that she was simply praying.

The impact of this story is that the priest Eli is willing to listen, to hear her explanation. Eli responds to Hannah. Some may say that Eli behaves like a humane and compassionate person. He recognizes Hannah’s pain, maybe from the bottom of his heart or maybe Eli simply off-handedly makes a remark. Most importantly, God hears her and His response is embodied within Hannah. God’s heart responds in empathy. Instead of continuing to rebuke

her, or expel her from the Tabernacle, Hannah's prayer is answered.

And Eli answered, and said, Go in peace; and may the God of Israel grant the request you have asked of Him.” (1 Samuel 1:17)

Amazing women prayer warriors of the Bible:

1. Hannah – Prayed for a son in the temple (1 Samuel 1:10-11).
2. Sarah – Laughed in response to God's promise, suggesting a form of dialogue with God (Genesis 18:9-15).
3. Hagar—in distress cried out to the LORD—El Roi the God who sees me (Genesis 16 and 21)
4. Rebekah – Inquired of the Lord during her difficult pregnancy (Genesis 25:22-23).
5. Rachel – Cried out to God for a child (Genesis 30:22-24).
6. Leah – Named her sons in ways that reflect her petitions to God (Genesis 29:31-35).
7. Miriam – Led a song of praise after crossing the Red Sea, suggesting a prayerful attitude (Exodus 15:20-21).
8. Deborah – A judge and prophetess who likely prayed as part of her leadership role (Judges 4-5).
9. Jael – Blessed by Deborah, suggesting her actions were in line with God's will (Judges 5:24-27).
10. The Widow of Zarephath – Showed faith in God's provision through Elijah (1 Kings 17:8-24).
11. Huldah – Prophetess who spoke God's word, indicating a relationship with God (2 Kings 22:14-20).
12. Esther – Fast and prayed before approaching the king (Esther 4:16).
13. Job's Wife – Though her faith was challenged, she did communicate with God (Job 2:9-10).
14. Abigail – Her wise actions to prevent bloodshed indicate a godly wisdom, if not explicit prayer (1 Samuel 25).

15. The Shunammite Woman – Showed faith in Elisha and God when her son was revived (2 Kings 4:8-37).
16. Elizabeth – Praised God when she conceived John and when Mary visited her (Luke 1:25, 41-45).
17. Mary, Mother of Jesus – Offered the Magnificat, a prayerful song of praise (Luke 1:46-55).
18. Anna – A prophetess who prayed and fasted in the Temple (Luke 2:36-38).
19. The Canaanite/Syro-Phoenician Woman – Prayed to Jesus for her daughter's healing (Matthew 15:22-28; Mark 7:25-30).
20. The Woman with the Issue of Blood – Touched Jesus in faith, a form of unspoken prayer (Matthew 9:20-22).
21. Mary and Martha – Communicated with Jesus about their brother Lazarus, indicative of a prayerful relationship (John 11).
22. The Women at the Cross and Tomb – Though not explicitly said to be praying, they were in a posture of mourning and worship, which can be considered a form of prayer (Matthew 27:55-56; Luke 23:27-31).
23. The Women in the Upper Room – Were praying with the apostles between the Ascension and Pentecost (Acts 1:14).
24. Lydia – A worshiper of God whose heart the Lord opened to pay attention to Paul's words (Acts 16:14)
25. Phoebe, Priscilla, and other women in the early church – Likely engaged in prayer as part of their Christian service (Romans 16).