

## PURIM 2020

So, do you have a favorite piece of art? Or piece of music? How about a favorite movie or TV show? I suspect that for many of you, the answer is “yes” to some of those questions. But what about this one: do you have a favorite little piece of Scripture and an understanding as to why you love it so much?

For Jews, this tiny Scriptural portion could be a few connected verses from the Tanakh. Or perhaps a single verse, maybe even a mere phrase. It could be a precept – like “Justice, justice shall you pursue” (Deut. 16:20) or “Love your fellow as yourself.” (Lev. 19:18) Or it could be a few images from the Psalms, like: “Raise a shout for the LORD, all the earth; worship the LORD in gladness; come into His presence with shouts of joy. Acknowledge that the LORD is God; He made us, and we are His, His people, the flock He tends.” (Ps. 100: 1-3)

Those are all blessed snippets. But none of them would be my top choice. You see, the Tanakh is above all else a book of stories, and those verses by themselves don’t help us tell a tale. So my favorite verse, the one I will talk about tonight, is part of a story -- a human, all too human, story.

In 29 Hebrew words, this one verse offers many lessons about the essence of the Jewish civilization. Some of these lessons we can be proud of, others we might want to forget. Never does this verse *explicitly* invoke any of the values at the heart of contemporary Judaism, values like love or justice. But those values lie beneath the surface, waiting to be teased out by the reader and emerging only through study, contemplation and a willingness to wrestle painfully with truth.

The verse I have in mind is one we read every year as part of the Haftorah for Rosh Hashanah. It is in Samuel I, Chapter I. That chapter begins with a reference to a man named Elkanah who had two wives: Peninnah, who gave him children, and Hannah, who could not. When Peninnah cruelly taunted Hannah that God had closed her womb, Hannah would weep and refuse to eat. Though Elkinah favored Hannah over her rival, she still couldn’t stop suffering year after year from her inability to have children. And so, we get to verse 11 – Hannah’s prayer:

*O LORD of Hosts, if You will look upon the suffering of Your maidservant and will remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to the LORD for all the days of his life; and no razor shall ever touch his head.*

Tonight, we will explore many things that this verse has to teach us. The discussion will be organized around two sets of lessons. Both explain why the verse is a fertile tool for anyone who wishes to understand Judaism. Yet I will save for the end the lessons that explain why this verse is uniquely able to tug at my own heartstrings. My hope is that this exercise will inspire each of you to find your own verse that you can unpack and explore with equal depth. In fact, I am not so much looking for you to agree with the lessons I draw from this verse as I am trying to motivate you to go through the same unpacking exercise for yourself.

Let's start with the recognition that this verse begins with an activity, one that is perhaps the quintessential activity of our faith: a lone individual directly addressing the Jewish God. Let's also consider the name that Hannah uses to address the divine: "LORD of Hosts." That name refers to the heavenly hosts, or armies, of angels that God commands. It is a name frequently used in the prophetic books of the Tanakh, like Isaiah and Jeremiah, when the people of Israel suffered terrible earthly defeats. The use of this name highlights the infinite distance between the greatness of God and the impotence of the Jewish people. In other words, Hannah is praying to a God whose transcendence and power is beyond our wildest imagination – not only because of the infinitude of God but because of the weakness and frailty of the human condition.

Our first lesson, then, is that the Jewish God is an awesome, majestic deity whom we worship out of humility. Our Tanakh constantly reminds us of how terribly we Jews behave and what awful consequences this behavior brings. It also offers us little in the way of hope for a blissful eternity that awaits us when we ultimately depart this earth. But as humbling as Judaism can be, it does provide us sustenance in the form of a transcendent God whom we can address. It is precisely the radiance and awesome power of this God that gives us hope and allows us to dream even in the darkest of times.

We can, of course, continue to dwell on this point more – but remember, these are just the preliminaries, and we have to make time for the main event. So let's move on.

Now this verse involves two characters, both of whom are named. We examined the name given for God. Now let's turn to the other character, Hannah. She refers to herself three times in precisely the same way: "Your maidservant." It's not exactly the way a contemporary American would expect a Jew to describe herself. Here, Jews are raised to be anything but maidservants. Recent gentile immigrants – *they* are the maidservants. We are the doctors, judges, bankers, professors, statesmen, or at least we aspire to be. We might teach of the dignity of the maidservant in sociology or political-economics treatises, but we fight tooth and nail to ensure that neither we nor our children live like one. "God forbid," we might say, to such an outcome.

As we have seen, Hannah embraces this term "maidservant" for herself. She wants God to see her as someone who is willing to do the work that is dirty, difficult and unglamorous, but ever-so-critical. Because she needs God to answer her prayer, Hannah's first order of business is to persuade God that she is a person who can be depended on. The role of the maidservant is the one she selects to fit the bill.

Our second lesson, then, is that the Jew's greatest job is not to bring status to oneself but simply to lend a hand. For every rabbi and doctor in your family tree, there were probably 50 peasants and 50 maidservants – and that's OK. Personally, I am descended from poor fishmongers; talk about doing the dirty work! Jews acknowledge being descended from a few generations of Egyptian slaves, but the deeper truth is that we come from scores of generations of working-class people who never tasted the kind of prosperity or choices we experience today. In referring to herself as a maidservant, Hannah addressed God from the standpoint of real Jewish nobility. Not a big bourgeois macha who is in love with the cut of his own jib and the flattery of his peers, but rather someone God can rely on -- a dutiful, humble, worker bee.

So now that we know the two characters, let's look at what Hannah has in mind for their relationship. She wants to engage in another quintessentially Jewish activity: entering into a covenant. We Jews live through our covenants like fish live through swimming. Perhaps that's why so many of us find it easy to be married or trade in the marketplace. We learn in our Holy Books that life is about making commitments, and a life well lived is a one that involves honoring our commitments and choosing partners who will honor theirs. Remember all those awful things that happened to our ancestors in the Tanakh that caused our prophets to address God as "LORD of Hosts"? They reflect what happens when Jews *don't* honor their commitments, and implicitly they glorify the Jew who does. In this case, Hannah is telling God that she is up to the task.

Lesson three is that we must be willing to enter into commitments, even to God. They're the foundation of our economies, our families, and our self-respect. When you read Hannah's prayer, you feel that she understood this point from the bottom of her heart. We often read in Scripture about Jews violating their covenant with God by committing idolatry or ignoring the poor, but when we read Hannah's prayer, we're convinced that she could never dishonor her promise. In addition to asking for a miracle, she was asking for God to trust her to be a mensch.

So now let's look at the miracle Hannah seeks. The miracle of a human life. My own family has been given such a blessing in the not so distant past, and it was a reminder of how much of the Jewish soul is directed to this blessing. But note that Hannah doesn't simply ask for any human life. She asks for a "*male* child." In that sense, her prayer is reminiscent of that of another literary figure, a moronic, homicidal thug named Luca Brasi: "Don Corleone," Brasi says in *The Godfather*, "I am honored and grateful that you have invited me to your home today on the day of your daughter's wedding... and I hope that their first child, be a masculine child."

Lesson four is that we can no longer afford to sugar coat the truth about sexism; it has forever been part of Judaism and it will continue to be part of Judaism unless we confront it. Just as with gentiles, Jewish men have had exalted opportunities women have not. That is never so vividly conveyed as when a heroic woman who prays for the gift of birth feels the need to specify the gender of the miracle she seeks. When I studied at a yeshiva, I remember the rabbis preaching that the Jewish faith doesn't hold that men are better than women or have a better lot in life, but only that each gender has its own respective roles. Sorry, but I don't buy it. The male roles are more powerful, more autonomous, more valued. And when you find no less a Scriptural figure than Hannah in the moment that immortalized her asking specifically for a boy, you can see all too well which of the two genders has been more privileged. It's our job in contemporary society to change that once and for all, not to gloss over it or pretend it's not the case.

Now, before we move to the more exalted set of lessons, I have one more to address. To set the scene, we can assume that Hannah is nobody's fool. She realizes that with a "masculine" child, especially a Jewish one, comes hair in lots of places. The head, the face, the chest, the foot, maybe even the back. So her proposed covenant includes a statement about hair. If God grants her wish, not only will she dedicate her son to the Lord but "no razor shall ever touch his head."

Why, you may ask, did she include that promise? I've researched this issue and seen a variety of possible answers. That's another way of saying we don't really know why. But that mystery is part of the verse's power. You see, as a people of the Covenant, Jews frequently constrain their freedoms in ways that don't have any obvious justification to the secular mind. For example, why can't Jews eat dairy and meat in the same meal? Oh, I know the rabbis point to the verse in Exodus that says, "You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk." (Ex. 23:19) But that can't be the real reason, can it? If a Jew isn't offended by the idea of eating a piece of kosher meat, or of kosher cheese, then what is so offensive about eating a damned cheeseburger? Why do we still honor a bizarre interpretation of a seemingly antiquated Biblical prohibition on a topic that doesn't offend our modern-day sensibilities?

Lesson five is that Judaism survives based on restraints that don't have any obvious contemporary moral justification except for one: they remind of us of who we are, which is not simply children of Noah, but children of Jacob. We bury our dead. We don't eat cheeseburgers. And some of us don't let razors touch our heads – or at least not our faces. In other words, we cleave to rituals that go beyond refraining from behaving in secularly immoral ways. Some think of such rituals as silly. But it is precisely the rituals that are seemingly pointless from the standpoint of ethics and yet are performed by Jews day after day, often at great inconvenience, that perpetually mark us as having a special vocation in life -- one that beckons us to honor our community, our ancestors, our ethical principles and our God.

You see, when we refrain from killing, stealing, or committing adultery and when we engage in acts of charity and justice, we tend not to think of ourselves as acting Jewishly so much as acting morally. But when we go out of our way to follow the Jewish rituals that are *not* compelled by secular ethics, we make a statement to our ourselves and the world that we are committed to Judaism in particular. And there's the rub. As long as we are practicing our faith, and not simply tribalism, that commitment should in turn impel us to honor ethical principles and engage in acts of virtue. Those symbolic rituals, in other words, are reminders that we are religious Jews, and that reminder should cause us to behave the way religious Jews are *supposed* to behave – which means to model morality and spirituality as our religious teachers and heroes have done before us. That's how we get from "no cheeseburgers," to "justice, justice shall you pursue."

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Hopefully, you'll all agree that this verse, when fully unpacked, offers several important lessons to teach us about Judaism. But none of the ones we discussed explains its emotional power, or at least its power for me. Now, we'll endeavor to close that loop. And we'll begin by reminding each other of what it means in our own society to be a parent.

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance parents place on the lives of their children. Oh, we may care about our jobs or our bank accounts, but nothing takes on the significance of our children. As one of my wife's friends would say, only a bit jokingly, you're only as happy as your least happy child. So much of our pride is tied up in our children. Their successes are our successes, their failures are our failures. Most significantly, their joy or pain is magnified in our hearts.

Of course, many people choose not to have children and all the stress, servitude and demands that go with them. Others don't want to have children but get pregnant and can't bring themselves to have an abortion, so they choose to put their babies up for adoption. But Hannah is in neither of those categories. She wanted a child in the worst way. And yet she willingly prayed for the right to give up that child and deny herself the opportunity to watch him grow up.

Maimonides wrote about the eight levels of charity in his *Mishneh Torah*. But they are differentiated based on the *manner* of giving rather than the *extent* of what is being given up. I realize that some noble souls have given their very lives away – either in battle or to save a loved one from meeting a similar fate. Still, there is no act of giving that moves me more than Hannah's decision to give away to God the young child that her heart so desired. Here you have in the selfless decision of one woman a supreme act of charity, a supreme act of piety, and a supreme act of gratitude. Truly, I find it impossible to imagine a greater act of human grace.

Our history books are filled with stories of war, murder and greed. Our entertainment industry peddles in fictional stories that depict similar acts of human depravity. And then there is the so-called "news," where "if it bleeds, it leads." But every now and then, it is nice to imagine another domain of human existence, one that involves giving not taking, releasing not possessing, loving not hating, worshiping not scoffing. Hannah's story resides in that domain. She is a Jewish analogue to the Christian Madonna – a portrait of feminine virtue. We can even picture her as if she was painted by Raphael, with a glow on her face for making the only decision she felt able to justify given that her truest beloved was God. Yet unlike Raphael's Madonna, his Hannah wouldn't have a baby next to her; she'd be all alone. There would be no God incarnate to gaze at and adore – just faith in the power and the blessedness of the Holy Name.

Yes, we can also imagine all sorts of cynical interpretations of Hannah's conduct -- perhaps she didn't want the trouble of raising a child but only wanted to prove to her rival that she could get pregnant, or perhaps she gave up the child and then spent the rest of her life regretting it. But I choose to ignore those visions. My vision of Hannah is of a woman who never looked back. A woman whose dream came true with the ability to give a human sacrifice to God in the holiest sense of that term.

In case you can't yet tell, what I'm describing in this section of my talk is the supreme *beauty* in Hannah's decision and her commitment to honor it. Still, only now am I about to come to the greatest source of that beauty. For what makes Hannah's conduct so powerful isn't just what it says about herself as a Jewish Madonna, but what it reveals about the potential of all human beings. That's where other characters take the stage – figures like Samuel and, of course, God. But before welcoming them, let's provide a little background.

We all know the expression, "Converts are the worst kind." It's not without foundation. Religious converts can be hateful to the religion they left and fanatical about the one they join. They often speak dogmatically, as if they have somehow been granted access to the absolute truth. It is for this reason that a Muslim friend told me that converts are supposed to avoid preaching for ten years, lest their zealotry be seen as an exemplar of Islam, when in fact it is anything but.

Sometimes, though, I like to imagine the perspective of a convert, and especially a convert to Judaism. I imagine them reflecting on the spirituality of native-born Jews. Surely, the converts notice that most of the Jews in Reform, Reconstructionist or Renewal congregations rarely speak about their relationship to God. Many admit that they don't believe in God at all, and those who won't go that far likely will have trouble talking about the God they do believe in. You'd forgive the convert for thinking that among native-born Jews, the most common deity is what you might call the "Fox Hole God." The one you'd turn to only when you're in the proverbial fox hole; that is, when you need a favor. Otherwise, "God" has little relevance to the Jew's life, at least that's the way it comes across in the Washington, D.C. area in the year 2020 A.C.E.

It is easy for me to imagine the perspective of the convert because in some respects I am one. I grew up with a strong sense of Jewish identity and a love for Jewish ethics, but I found all the God-talk to be a bunch of nonsense. I had to wait until I was an adult before I could discover the value of such talk. But I haven't forgotten what it felt like to think of God as an object of superstition and to see the notion of "sacrificing" to God as imbibing a brain-sapping opiate. So when I encounter someone who clearly finds little relevance in her life for the name of God unless they are in need of something, I see a fellow traveler – someone who is little different than I was when I was an atheist. A Fox Hole God, you see, is no deity at all. It could never pass muster under Paul Tillich's definition of God as one's "Ultimate Concern."

Now, let us again welcome Hannah to the stage. Her act of supreme grace and selflessness arises for a reason. It obviously reflects a deep, heartfelt appreciation for the source of life – the one she refers to as the "LORD of Hosts." But it also reflects supreme confidence in the value of what it means to devote a human life to that Lord. She couldn't have known this at the time, but in the figure of the Prophet Samuel, her son, Hannah's confidence would be born out. Somehow, under the tutelage of Eli the Priest, Samuel grew up to be the moral exemplar of his age -- a man distinguished for his faith, wisdom, courage, and for serving as a reliable mouthpiece for God. Despite being a figure who spoke truth to power, it is written that when Samuel died, "all Israel gathered and made lament for him." In terms of Jewish heroes, Samuel was the bridge between Moses and his contemporaries, on the one hand, and David and Solomon, on the other. And it was the moral purity of his legacy that makes him unique, in contrast to some of our other heroes with their checkered pasts.

Famously, the Bard told us that "some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." Well, Samuel was clearly born great. But that wasn't because of his superior lineage or natural gifts; at least that's my interpretation. His greatness sprung from the faith of his mother, a self-proclaimed "maidservant," who had enough respect for the human condition that she believed that as long as she could devote her son's life from start to finish to the right goal, Samuel would indeed achieve greatness. There is a lesson for all of us in that interpretation. Regardless of where we are or where we come from, if from that moment forward we dedicate ourselves to a blessed goal, we too can become beautiful exemplars of the human species. Of course, that doesn't mean we can attain the levels reached by Samuel. You see, Samuel had the greatest of possible head starts. Plus, he had the greatest possible object of dedication. It is to that object that we must now turn to conclude this talk.

For me, the key phrase in this magnificent verse is “*I will dedicate him to the LORD for all the days of his life.*” We hear so much about God in Judaism generally and in the Jewish prayer service in particular. But it is this verse and that sentence that places the name of God before us with perhaps the highest and best use of the term.

In a fox hole, you see, we invoke the name of God as a would-be benefactor, a cosmic Santa Claus, an almost too-good-to-be-true agent of human happiness. This is the perspective on God that turned me off so much as a child. For if the so-called “Holy Name” is simply an amulet to invoke for our own selfish benefits, there would be nothing holy or extraordinary about it. By contrast, what Hannah is requesting is anything but selfish. Rather than asking for a favor, she seeks to make a deal with consideration flowing on both sides. If God will create a new human being through her, Hannah will see to it that this human being will treat God not as a benefactor but as a *beneficiary*. That human being will approach God from his first breath to his last as if the Divine were a star that could guide us onward and upward to the heights of moral excellence. That human being will seek to do right by God, act virtuously by God, and produce in God’s name the greatest good for the greatest number. Honestly, I don’t know if Hannah or Samuel would view themselves as deontologists, virtue ethicists, or utilitarians – but whatever the answer, they would look to the Holy Name to inspire the appropriate devotion to our planet, our species, ourselves, you name it. That is what it means to be dedicated to God. It has nothing to do with asking for favors. It has to do with the willingness to help.

Yes, Hannah gets something out of this deal too. She gets the baby she always wanted, she shuts the mouth of her nasty rival, and she surely has the satisfaction that anyone gets when they engage in an act of supreme virtue. But more importantly, she points out to Jews and Christians who read the Book of Samuel what it means to become a person of God.

Samuel is said to be a Prophet, a Judge and an anointer of kings. But if you read this verse carefully, you will see that above all else, Samuel is a *Servant*. For such is the lot of anyone whose life, from start to finish, is dedicated to God. To reiterate, this is a life of giving not taking, releasing not possessing, loving not hating, worshiping not scoffing. It is a life available to any of us once we decide to dedicate ourselves to the Holy Name. This is the legacy of Hannah. This is the example of Samuel. And this is among the greatest portraits of beauty in the Jewish religion, courtesy of Samuel I, Chapter I, Verse 11.

So there you have one verse, unpacked. The Tanakh has more than 20,000 others. Many of them will seem antiquated to us, but many others will summon us to analysis, maybe even to action. My request, asked for the last time, is to identify one of these verses yourself and do the work of unpacking. It will reward you immensely. And it’s the only way to treat Scripture as Scripture. So in the words of Hillel, now “go study.”