B”H

And Hannah Taught Us Prayer

Wish a Good Year to congregation

I would like to talk about Hannah whom we read about in our Haftorah. More than anything she teaches us how to pray from our hearts.

Hannah’s story is as follows. Hannah was married to her husband Elkanah. Elkanah in fact had two wives, Penninah and Hannah. A sure problem! Penninah had children but Hannah had none. Penninah we read, was cruel to Hannah using her own fertility to ridicule and humiliate Hannah. Penninah we are told would mock Hannah to rage. To make matters worse this went on for years and years. Even when Hannah journeyed to the temple to pray, Penninah provoked her . Hannah was reduced to tears and at times refused to eat. Her husband Elkanah assured her of his love for here but we ask, was he hearing her pain?!

Finally Hannah tries again. She travels to pray at the temple and encounters Eli, The High Priest. Eli we are told is seated in a throne- like chair. A Macher for sure!!!

Hannah nonetheless knows she does not need the approval or guidance of Eli. She is a woman who has access to her soul and her feelings (like most women I should add) and she brings all her pain, bitterness, depression, rage and yes desperation and… she prays. She prays for a child and not only that, one who will serve Hashem. She prays for a long time. Eli watches “She prayed quietly with only her lips moving”. Eli accuses her of being intoxicated and demands she sober up. Hannah denies being intoxicated and tells his she has poured “my Soul to G-d”. She tells him she has prayed from a deep place of despair beyond what words could hardly describe. Eli finally understands and blesses Hannah. Hannah’s prayers are answered. She has a son whom she names Samuel or ShmuEl (For I requested him from G-d). She later prays again this time in gratitude that her prayers have been answered.

 Why do read this story on R”H? On R”H we acknowledge G-d’s Kingship over Israel. But this is an ancient metaphor. Perhaps one of the names for G-d the ‘Ein Sof ’ can replace it?! It means ‘beyond limits or conception, yet everywhere and yet seemingly nowhere. Perhaps such a conception of G-d can bring us to the same awe and the same humility like Kings once did?

 Eli the High priest can not imagine someone losing herself in prayer ; Just as a King is to be feared so should Hannah have the same awe and fear as he did when praying. The G-d Hannah prays to though, is in the heart and soul of everyone. Hannah understood that G-d is infinitely close! So close I can pray for anything! We pray on R”H for our livelihood ,our health, our families and “who shall live and who shall die”. Hannah prayed for a child but she reached beyond that place beyond boundary or limits straight to the Ain Sof! Hannah prayed from the deepest depths of her heart. When her prayers are answered she expresses Gratitude. She teaches us prayer is gratitude. On Rosh Hashannah we realize all our hopes and dreams are dependent only on You our G-d and ultimately nothing else.

Hannah teaches even more about prayer. The Sephardic Commentary on the Torah, MeAm Loez teaches us that Hannah teaches us that “ Whoever prays patiently is answered”. She also teaches concentration and the need to pray quietly but to also articulate our words,

What is prayer though? We are not used to praying. We spend many hours in synagogue on the Yomin Norim praying. But how do we pray? Many of us learned that praying was synonymous with learning Hebrew so we could pray out of a siddur or prayer book. Maybe prayer was obligatory and prayer became a chore. Someone told me to “pray properly” one needed to learn the meaning of the prayers. I did just that but still I found prayer frustrating. Then one day a Rabbi taught me that praying in our own words is as valid as praying from a prayer book. This was from someone who is committed to praying from a siddur yet he was telling me to pray in my own words. But what do I say I asked him? That was for me to figure out. I finally realized that I had been doing just that every time I prayed when I was doing poorly in school or ran into troubles that at the time seemed to be “the end of the world”. These early fox hole prayers WERE prayers! Please G-d save me ! Help!! When I learned prayer is communication that opened a new world for me .

 Prayer is communication to G-d to Hashem - to our Higher Power- to a G-d who loves us. Prayer can be from a book or in our own words. We can pray in silence. I believe even the trees and grass pray. It was then I realized prayer is infinite and the people world over pray too. Prayer does not need to be complicated it is natural.

The Midrash asks: How do we serve G-d. The answer is Prayer! Another midrash: “The people of Israel say “We are poor. We have no sacrifices to bring to You. G-d replies “I need only words” ( words meaning Torah here) The people then respond they do not know words of Torah and G-d then replies “weep and pray and I will answer You. Our Matriarchs and Patriarchs prayed in desperate times as well as in good times. There are the many beautiful prayers in King David’s Psalms (Tehilim) which were really his own Prayers to Hashem:

Why have you forsaken me? Listen to my prayer. Out of the depths I call You

 listen to the sound of my plea!

 Even songs and music were prayers for David.

 It is Hannah’s desperation that spoke to me as well when I read this story. This has been a tough year for me and I asked myself if I had been asking the same questions Hannah may have asked. Questions like: What does it mean to stand in a place where there seems as if there is no hope. Why aren’t my prayers being answered? Doesn’t G-d hear my prayers? I came upon a book around the same time as I asked these questions. The book is titled ‘Healing Through Dark Emotions’ by Miriam Greenspam . I am ever grateful for the following words:” It is through surrender to the unwanted that we embrace our vulnerability. Our helplessness teaches us humility. When we are humbled by pain we see our smallness in the vastness of the cosmos. The ego gives up its attempt to control. There is an opening and a larger vision can emerge. This letting go which is a kind of death is also one of the great joys of life. When we unfurl the gnarled fist of control, letting the hand open to receive and to give, our smallness-once the source of our agony becomes a source of comfort” (pg 42).

Many years ago I worked as a pre- school teacher. One day I was on the playground when I noticed a one of the teachers was wearing a necklace with a pair of golden boxing gloves attached to it. I asked her what the boxing gloves meant. She told me that her Father had been a boxer. “He taught me that whenever you get knocked down you get back up”. I think of Hannah as such a boxer. No matter what, day after day, year after year despite her struggles she does not give up. She prays .

I think Hannah is teaching us many valuable lessons about prayer. Simplicity. Permission to pray in our own words. Permission to ask: help me to pray. The freedom to pray for anything. Prayer for others who need Our Prayers. Prayers come from our hearts. We Pray to fulfill our potential. Ultimately prayer is about surrender and forgetting ourselves and remembering the source of our blessings. Prayer is saying thank You. Prayer can elevate our world and fill it with light.