

## **Hannah, Teach Us Faith**

Kol Nidre, Yom Kippur 2019 / 5780

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*Vayikra Rabbah*, colorful rabbinic readings on the Book of Leviticus teaches,

ק' פעיות שהאשה פועה בשעה שיושבת על המשבר: תשעים ותשעה למיתה ואחת לחיים

A woman cries one hundred cries at the time when she gives birth: ninety-nine of death and one of life.<sup>1</sup>

In his 20th-century biblical commentary, *Meshekh Hochmah*, Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk brings this midrash to draw a powerful connection below to link the 100 blasts of the shofar over Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, to the cries of a woman in labor.

The shofar is both the sound of birth and the sound of death. Similar to how tradition understands that matzah is both the bread of affliction and the bread of liberation, the shofar is both the sound of pain and the cry for life and thanksgiving. The call to war and the call to love. The call to wake us up and the call to break open our hearts to tell the truth. Its blast is so loud that we want to run and yet, it speaks directly to the still small voice within us.

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<sup>1</sup> Vayikra Rabbah 27:7

Tonight on this Kol Nidre evening we will reflect back on the Haftorah of Rosh Hashana and bring Hannah to bear. Hannah is a shofar. Her prayerful devotion and determination are, I believe, who and what we need on this Kol Nidre night.

As we might remember, Hannah, like many of our matriarchs, ironically is longing for a child. She prays to Gd, to be visited, to be seen by Gd.

Right here I want to pause and say about this idea of longing for a child. In the same way that so many folks check out or write off Gd because of the word Gd, I'd like to ask us to all look and hear again.

To give birth, while biologically has many potentially gendered and binary associations, and yet, this season is about new beginnings. I'd like us to consider the spectrum of what it can mean to "give birth." I invite us to listen for this metaphor of giving birth from "the grey." To be hungry for what we can learn from the grey rather than the black or the white, the "for me" or "against me."

To have a new beginning we must create! We must give birth to a new hope. A new possibility. A new version of reality and ourselves as authors of it.

So I ask us to consider how we might be courageous, like Hannah. All of Elul we asked ourselves and each other, verse 4 of psalm 27 -

אַחַת שְׂאֲלֹתַי מֵאֵת-יְהוָה אוֹתָהּ אֲבַקֵּשׁ:

*Achat sha'alti me'eit Hashem, otah avakesh:*

One thing I ask from the Lord, one thing I desire.

So what is this one thing that you want. What do you really want out of this year? Out of this circle around and the sun. What do you want to *birth* this year into reality? What is something that would be worthy of your next 365 days on this planet?

שְׁבֹתִי בְּבַיִת-יְהוָה, כָּל-יְמֵי חַיַּי

*Shivti b'veit Hashem, kol y'mei chayai*

Our psalmist asks, we ask, that we may dwell in Your house, safe and protected, all the days of our lives.

Yet, as my teacher Dr. Judith Kates notes, “Hannah suffers wounding mockery and torments ..., she endures these provocations in silent dignity.

We have all experienced feeling wounded and mocked. And we have all been the wounders, the mockers. No one has a monopoly of suffering. No community. No person. No people.

Hannah reveals her inner suffering and longing for a child. Her longing for a new beginning, for rebirth, through her tears and

what Biblical scholar Nehama Aschkenasy has called her “quiet desperation.” She seems to have turned completely inward.”<sup>2</sup>

We all have experienced this sense of quiet desperation. Of not being heard. Or not being seen. Of being put within a box as “other,” “not one of us,” “clueless” “too gay” “too straight” “too complicated” “too sick” “too old” “too young” “too far gone.”

And we isolate ourselves and we isolate each other.

But then, as Dr. Judith Kates points out, in an extraordinary narrative turn, Hannah finds her voice, as she summons the courage to address herself directly to Gd, alone on the threshold of “the Lord’s temple,” without permission or help of husband or priest.

Hannah, in this story, is simply herself – no family genealogy, no social role other than as a man’s wife, no history of actions or accomplishments. Yet she feels herself “adequate,” to use a term from the philosopher Rabbi Dovid Hartman, to speak to Gd of her needs and pain. In fact, according to the rabbis of the Talmud, she teaches us how to pray.

Dr. Kates notes that it is Hannah’s humanity that makes her the master of prayer. Hannah *“begins with weeping, a form of prayer in itself according to our tradition. But she moves from that wordless expression of her inner reality to giving eloquent and*

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Judith Kates on Learning the Language of the Heart: Hannah & Prayer in Hebrew College High Holiday Companion, p. 27-8, 2017.

*even daring voice to her needs, desires and hopes for the future. In the process of verbally re-making her own life, she creates a previously unknown pathway to Gd, re-shaping ritual in public sacred space into a vessel that can hold each person's self-expression and longing to reach beyond ourselves.*

*Her presence in our machzor (and tradition) inspires us to find a way to speak our community's language of prayer in our own voices."*

I believe we first have to honor our own torah, our own experience, wisdom and torah, deeply and sincerely. Then we can honor others'. We first have to greet ourselves with kindness before we can greet others with kindness. I invite you to think for a moment of how and what you call yourself.

When you're attempting to get out of the house for an appointment what tone do you hear in your head? When you mess up a task or fail to do something you said you would, what do you say to yourself? When you look in the mirror, what are the words and the tone of voice you hear?

Our only hope for not continuing to speak poorly of each other is if we start speaking kindly to ourselves.

There will never be a course, a book, or a rabbi who can teach us torah until we teach it to ourselves. Each of us must teach ourselves the torah we most need to learn.

Audre Lorde has long been one of my heros. I learned of her from the first woman rabbi I ever knew, Rabbi Noa Kushner at Brandeis Bardin Institute in the Simi Valley. Those of you here who are ages 18-26 check out BCI and have your Jewish trajectory catapulted forward.

Audre Lorde was born in 1934 in New York City to Caribbean immigrants. She is an American writer, feminist, womanist, librarian, rights activist and poet. Audre Lorde's famous essay, *Sister Outsider*, which remains critical to my own understanding of my rabbinate and my voice. In it Lorde says:

*"Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference – those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older – know that **survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support.**"<sup>3</sup>*

This for me has been an essential teaching. I cannot please everyone. None of us can. And yet, our torah is valuable,

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<sup>3</sup> Lorde, Audre (1984). *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing Press. ISBN 978-0895941411.

[https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Lorde\\_The\\_Masters\\_Tools.pdf](https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Lorde_The_Masters_Tools.pdf)

precious. The master's house - what others think of us - is not the only source of support. As Hannah teaches us and models, she believes in her own truth. She expresses that truth straight to Source, straight to her Maker, her Master, her High / Lower / Inner Most Heart Beat, Gd.

Hannah and Lorde model for us this deep listening and brave sharing. In her essay entitled, "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action, in *Sister Outsider*, p. 41 she reminds us that our silence will not save us.

*Lorde writes: In becoming forcibly and essentially aware of my mortality, and of what I wished and wanted for my life, however short it might be, priorities and omissions became strongly etched in a merciless light, and what I most regretted were my silences.*

*Of what had I ever been afraid? To question or to speak as I believed could have meant pain, or death.*

*But we all hurt in so many different ways, all the time, and pain will either charge or end. Death, on the other hand, is the final silence.*

*And that might be coming quickly, now, without regard for whether I had ever spoken what needed to be said, or had only betrayed myself into small silences, while I planned someday to speak, or waited for someone else's word.*

*And I began to recognize a source of power within myself that comes from the knowledge that while it is most desirable not to be afraid, learning to put fear into a perspective gave me great strength.*

*I was going to die, if not sooner than later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you....<sup>4</sup>*

This room, this very special BCC community is full of powerful history, brave creativity and passionate devotion. And there is journey ahead and it will take all of us, with concern and care for each other. As Lorde teaches, *“The need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power I rediscovered... Interdependency (between women) is the way to a freedom which allows the I to be, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative...<sup>5</sup>.”*

Our support of one another creates a way to freedom, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative.

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<sup>4</sup> Continuation of the quote: But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I’m still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believe, bridging our differences. And it was the concern and caring of all the women which gave me strength and enabled me to scrutinize the essentials of my living.

<sup>5</sup> Continuation of the quote: It is this real connection which is so feared by a patriarchal world. Only within a patriarchal structure is maternity the only social power open to women. Interdependency between women is the way to a freedom which allows the I to be, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative.

My teacher, Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld points out that

“The ram’s horn is silent at first  
As is the ram.  
Caught in the thicket,  
Waiting for Abraham to lift his head and see, It appears at the  
last minute,  
Out of nowhere,  
When it’s almost too late.  
Of course, it was there all along.”

Often a different path is there, we just don’t look for it. We are not hungry for it so, we only see what we *know* rather than get curious.

Rabbi Cohen Anisfeld points out that, “It’s not just our stubbornness that blinds us. Sometimes it’s the commanding voice of faith. Sometimes it’s the commanding voice of despair. And sometimes it’s the thicket itself.  
The thorny, *tangled overgrowth of our lives*.  
It’s not that we’re blind,  
We’re just busy.  
Schlepping the wood, Tending the fire,  
Building the altar,  
Trying to quiet the children—  
Trying to answer their questions—  
Even though God knows We can’t answer our own.”

She challenges us to *“think about the thicket of your own life. What possibilities have you not seen? Think about a story you are telling yourself – whose outcome you think you already know. What alternatives have you not noticed? And think about the path we are all on together. The altars at the end of the road....”*

Think about the path we are all on together. The altars at the end of the road. Think about the thicket of your own life. What possibilities have we not seen?

We gather this Kol Nidre night to look, with courage and *collective will*. It is this shofar that becomes the voice of all of us. Blasted through the night, blasted through our guts and our minds. Blasted through our doubts and our fears. The last thing we hear at the end of our service tomorrow.

We learn from Lorde, “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”

So instead we “reach down into that deep place of knowledge” within us, the terror and the loathing, the person and the political, on this night of Awe and Dread. We see ourselves in our most angelic and nearly dead.

The ram’s horn is our wake up call. As if a bucket of cold water is dumped on our heads, our feet are held to the fire, the diagnosis is in, the time is up. We hear the blast and we are brought back,

sober, cold, to listen again to the bent horn of the ram through which the human breath becomes a blast.

Dov Bear of Mezrich teaches that we are in fact Gd's shofarot. Hannah, Audrey, the Ram, come to us now and show us how to blast. To let our voices become our shouts, our cries, our calls, our prayers.

May we have the courage to come before the ark, as Hannah did, and truly pour out our hearts. May these rites and rituals, ceremonies and sacrifices bring us closer to the Source of all Life *Makor HaChayim*. The Source of Blessing *Makor HaBracha*.

Afterall, in the twilight of the sixth night of creation, before humanity was conceived, *T'Shuvah*, the path to return was created. The road home, the round trip ticket, the hand reaching out to steady our step. Before we left, return was possible.

Let us return. *Chadesh yamenu, k'kedem*. Renew our days. Renew our nights. Renew our hearts to love and be loved by the Unending Source, the echoing voice of the shofar still ringing, still bringing our prayers from breath to sound to Source and back again.