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Rosh Hashanah Day 2 Sermon

September 8, 2021 - Tishrei 2 5782

We. Are. Here.

We made it. We got to this point in time, this place. We are here, together. That's an achievement all by itself sometimes, especially now. Congratulations! And welcome!

I don't know what you've been through, you don't know what I've been through, but we all get through this life one day at a time, sometimes one hour at a time. Some days are easier than others, some challenges longer than we'd like, but in the end, hopefully, we get through them and keep going.

In my twenties, I was told that it might not be possible to have children—or at best very, very difficult. There were different methods and options, but with no guaranteed outcome. We know that there are many reasons for infertility, but what all of them have in common is that they challenge our faith. We cry out, “Why is God doing this to me? Why doesn't He hear my prayers?” To be fair, we could cry that often about a lot of challenges. And some do.

When I was single, I found I could not teach pre-school music without going into my office afterwards to cry. All around me were families blessed with multiple children, many of whom took them for granted—and why shouldn't they? There was nothing to it, right? Husband, wife, two kids, picket fence, no problem. But I wondered, would I ever have that? The husband, the children, the big beautiful house?

There is a corollary here—be careful what you wish for—but that’s another story...

In our Haftarah yesterday, chanted so beautifully by Julia Kollin, we read the story of Hannah. In all my years here, I don’t remember ever hearing a sermon about Hannah. Plenty about Abraham. Some about Isaac. Moses, of course. Men. Isn’t that always the way? Where was Hannah? Well, today is her day.

Please note. This is a story for all genders and all ages. We are not speaking strictly here about prayers for a child—her story is also a metaphor about overcoming spiritual barrenness, emotional barrenness, psychological barrenness. How do we get through the proverbial winter?

Hannah is the prophetic archetype who was able to stand in the face of abuse and discouragement and bring into the world a son who knew the transcendent power of God. Samuel, her son, brought into being the Kings of Israel. At the time of his birth there was no true prophet on earth. There would be no Kingdom of Israel or King David without Hannah.

Year after year, Hannah went to Shiloh with her beloved husband Elkanah and her co-wife, Peninah—more on her later, stay tuned. We get the sense from the text that over and over again, Hannah was brought on that painful family pilgrimage, and that each and every time, her prayers for a child went unanswered. Nevertheless, she persevered. She held onto her faith and the truth that God can provide. She didn’t give up on hope. We shouldn’t either.

Why? Because Hannah knew that God does not operate on our timetable. We are so used to having everything in an instant—Uber, Lyft, Grubhub, Doordash, remote control groceries,

instant coffee, every possible entertainment option in the palm of our hands—heck, the entire internet! Why, we can even choose people as products on Tindr, Grindr, Findr, Blindrs, Bantr, Wantr, what have you...instant is so five seconds ago...

But God does not operate with a click or a swipe. We cannot know why God “closed up” her womb, we cannot begin to explain that or anyone else’s loss or painful story. This is key: we cannot assume anyone else’s pain or trauma, nor should we. I can only tell you what I know from my own life—that this closure was not a punishment from God.

We all go through peaks and valleys, winters and springs, deserts and verdant pastures. These can be in our career, relationship, financial, creative, what have you. How do we face the desert? Can we turn closure to... “Closed for Renovations.”

No one can see the big picture of their life in the moment. I have learned this over and over. After my divorce, I had to scramble—I have children, so there was that prayer answered, but now I needed a place to shelter them. Would God hear me? As with any house hunting, there were false starts and leaps of faith—was this the best house? (Maybe not the best basement...) Could I afford this? Thing is, if I had waited, the world would’ve shut down, the market would’ve shifted, the rental I was in would have expired...but I chose that house just in time. There was no way I could have known that, but looking back? Hashem provides.

There is a wonderful line from the play, “The Real Thing” by Tom Stoppard, that I think about at times like this. “Happiness is equilibrium. Shift your weight.”

Hannah was in her winter season for a long, long time. But if you're a gardener, you know that winter is important—it's when roots grow, especially spring bulbs. The daffodils and tulips you see in the spring are planted in the fall. Then they wait—it is impossible for them to bloom without the bitter cold.

This may come as a shock—God is not an Uber. You can't click and summon him and tell him where you want to go and expect him to deliver you there. That's not how it works. All we can do is welcome the wait and stand firm in the cold. Maybe we sense His hand in the maps—maybe not Apple Maps, use Google Maps, trust me on that one—but He doesn't tell us where to go, we have to figure that out.

Now, the way is not always clear. How do you deal with the people who stand in the way?

This is where we get to the person I think may be the worst person in the Bible. There are murderers and idolators, sure, but you need to understand the small, petty, daily cruelty of Peninah. She taunts and bullies and snipes at childless Hannah as her own children play and grow around her. She makes every hour, day, season that much harder to endure. What kind of person would you have to be to throw salt in those wounds year after year?

I'm not here to tell you that people like Peninah are literary inventions and don't exist in real life. Fact is—and you all know this, you all have these people as well—they are all around us. Maybe not sharing your house or your spouse, but you know them, yes? They enjoy your failures, they know your weak spots, and they revel in your struggles, often while seeming to have everything going their way.

How does Hannah handle Peninah? Well, we never hear Hannah retort or reply. Not a word, not an incident. The bible recounts other women rivals, Leah and Rachel for instance, but what is striking is the silence of Hannah in the face of abuse. Hannah holds her head up high and does not stoop to Peninah's level. Nevertheless, she persevered.

She may take a swipe at her in her prayer in Chapter 2: "While the barren woman bears seven, the mother of many is forlorn." As my daughter Liz would say, "Stay mad, haters." The best way to handle this type is to carry on as if they don't exist. Don't feed the trolls. Or the exes. (There's that corollary again.) As I said the other night, "It's chaos out there, be kind."

That brings us to Elkanah, the clueless husband. He loves Hannah with all his heart but does not understand what she is going through. Isn't his love enough? Isn't he worth as much as ten sons? "Why are you so sad?" How many of us have heard that same question? "What's the matter with you?" Elkanah is the friend or family member who loves you and means well but does not see your pain, does not see the winter around you. He asks Hannah to eat and drink in Shiloh in verse 7, but she is so distraught she is unable. Yet in verse 9, we come to a critical moment, "*Va-takom Hannah*"—and Hannah rises. She rises and vows to dedicate her son to the Lord.

The best way to deal with an Elkanah is to continue on your path. How many people in your life tell you to settle? Settle for a career, a spouse, a dream. "Why can't you just be happy with X or Y? Why do you need Z? It's a nice house, a nice white picket fence, and the husband is okay, right?" They mean well—they do want you to be happy—but the answer is no. They want you to be happy-esque. That has nothing to do with what is right for you. Life is not about consolation prizes. It would be easy for Hannah to make him feel better and give up her dream. For these

people, it's about their peace of mind, not your well being. Hannah doesn't waver. She doesn't give up on her dream—in fact she rises and makes her vow of dedication overheard by Eli.

And yet Eli is the third person who tries to stop you—this person misinterprets your passion and misjudges your motives. Now, Eli was blind, his sons wicked and corrupt. Sanctity and the transcendent had left him—and here comes this barren woman crying and murmuring in the dark. Eli takes her for intoxicated! He has no idea she is spiritually miles above him.

Eli is the person who says you're doing too much, feeling too much, expressing too much—they cannot comprehend what you are doing or why, what you are saying, what your path may be. They're blind to your reality, content in their assumptions, happy to believe that everyone feels the same things they do, that their perspective is the only one anyone should—or does—have. They do not listen to what you need, what you want, what is possible. They stay rooted in their own mindset, stuck with their assumptions, apart from reality. Note, Eli died an ignominious death, falling over when he heard his sons were killed and the ark was taken.

I was blessed with two daughters, both following the difficult path—Annabel is sixteen now, and Elizabeth is fourteen. And then three years on came Emma without any medical intervention at all. We can never know God's timetable. As Father Andrew Greeley liked to say, "God draws straight with crooked lines." Of course, this is why I use Google Maps...

As we enter 5782, may we all be blessed to move through our barren seasons, to hold fast to our dreams, to stay open to other perspectives, and to rise up as did Hannah to something greater than ourselves. We are here, we are there. May we all persevere. Shift your weight. And be kind. Shana Tovah.