

“There was a man from Ramathaim of the Zuphites...He had two wives, one named Hannah and the other Peninnah; Peninnah had children, but Hannah was childless.” This man, Elkanah, loves his wife Hannah “more than 10 sons” despite her barren state. She is teased by her fellow wife and she herself feels worthless and cries and will not eat. Her husband’s love is not enough for her. Her husband’s devotion and declarations of satisfaction with her as she is go unanswered. She needs a son and cannot imagine life without this child. Interestingly it is not the raising of the child to maturity or having a child to care for her in her old age that Hannah longs for – she is willing to give the child up to God once she has it – but merely the having of it. She goes to Shiloh and prays fervently for this child whom she will “dedicate to the Lord all the days of his life” and her prayers are answered. The son is with her until he is weaned and then he is sent to Shiloh to serve. In the second chapter of our Haftarah Hannah’s prayer of thanks to the Lord shows just how grateful she is for having her prayer answered.

I am not here to talk about Hannah as a model of prayer or the prayers of a woman who longs for a child but rather I want to look at Hannah’s narrow focus and her inability to see the positives in her life. Her desire for a child is understandable, it is the fact that the depth of that desire doesn’t allow her to see the good that exists in her life that, to me, seems selfish. Elkanah is a devoted and loving husband – Peninnah’s teasing was, I am sure, a way to keep Hannah humble necessitated by Elkanah treating Hannah with favoritism despite her lack of offspring – a motif we also see with Jacob, Rachel and Leah. Hannah is mentioned first when we meet our this family, despite her lower rank in society due to her childlessness. Her husband wants her to be happy with their life as it is. He wants her to find her joy in him and in their love. Hannah is having none of this. Thankfully, for Hannah, her prayer is answered and so she is able to find joy in her son. But what do we do when our prayers aren’t answered and how much harder is it to face those times when we are also blind to the love and beauty around us?

I have had, as have we all, many disappointments in my life and if I had not been able to see the positives or find a new way of approaching things, I am not sure how I would have gone on at times. When I did not get into Rabbinical School, I was so supported by my community which gave me new ways to fill my need to be learning and growing as a Jew - all of which led me to my current life as a Jewish Educator – one I wouldn’t trade for the world. While I have not yet been able to have my own children, I have a husband who adores me and treats me much better than I deserve – most of the time – and am surrounded daily by children who give me love and fill most any need for interaction with children a person could possibly have. While the love one feels for their own child and that they receive from that child is unique and irreplaceable – the love of a community, a wonderful husband and a couple hundred kids goes a mighty long way. If only Hannah had been able to be open to experiencing the love her husband felt for her and had been able to find some comfort there. We are urged by the Rabbis to be “sameach b’helko” – happy with our lot or portion in life. Hannah is unable to find happiness with her portion in life and one has to wonder if she slips again into depression after sending Samuel off to Shiloh to serve God. I hope that as each of us reviews our past year and thinks about our disappointments or unanswered prayers, we are able to put these things in proper perspective alongside the answered prayers, unexpected miracles, love from our friends, family and community and the sheer wonder and glory all around us and find happiness in our portion. L’shana tova v’tikateivu.