SPEAKING VOLUMES

Global Day of Jewish Learning: Curriculum

NOV.17.19
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A Project of the Aleph Society
Introduction (5 minutes)

Facilitator's Notes: If your participants are unfamiliar with the story of Hannah and her role in the Book of Samuel, use the following paragraph as a quick introduction, or give your own summary. We use the spelling “Hannah”, although different sources use alternate spellings such as Hanna, or Chana.

In the Bible, the Book of Samuel begins with the story of the prophet Samuel’s mother, Hannah. When we first encounter her, she is unable to have children, which causes her immense grief. In her distress, she prays to God for a son. She eventually gives birth to Samuel, who becomes one of the greatest leaders and prophets of the Jewish people.

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

Today we will look at how Hannah uses words to pray and engage with the Divine. Before we explore how Hannah prays, and what we can learn from her prayers, let’s look briefly at our own experiences of prayer.

Ask:

1. What words or ideas come to mind when you hear the word “prayer”?
2. What are some words you would use to describe an ideal experience of prayer?

In the Talmud, the biblical figure of Hannah is held up as a model for how to pray. Though she appears in the Bible only briefly, her prayers in the Book of Samuel make a lasting impression. How do our expectations for prayer compare with some of the guiding halakhot (laws) the Talmud derives from Hannah’s prayer?

Read Text #1 aloud.


Rav Hammuna said: How many great halakhot are there to learn from these verses from Hannah’s prayer. For so it says: “And Hanna spoke in her heart, only her lips moved and her voice could not be heard, so Eli thought her to be drunk.” (Shmuel 1:11). The Gemara specifies: From this verse, “And Hanna spoke in her heart” we learn that one who prays must direct his heart in his prayer. And from this verse, “Only her lips moved,” we learn that one who prays must articulate his words with his lips, not only with his heart.” And from this verse, “And her voice could not be heard” we learn that it is forbidden to raise one’s voice in prayer for the Amidah prayer must be said silently. And from this verse, “So Eli thought her to be drunk,” we learn that a drunken person is prohibited from prayer, which is why he rebuked her.

The Sages of the Talmud identified elements of Hannah’s prayer that informed how they approached personal communication with God. What is so remarkable about Hannah’s prayer? Let’s look at the text to find out.
Part One: Hannah Prays (15 minutes)

The Book of Samuel opens with Elkana and his wives, Hannah and Penina, and his children from Penina, on a pilgrimage to the temple in Shiloh. At the Temple, they make sacrifices and feast together, but the festivities remind Hannah that she is childless. In her distress, Hannah enters the Temple to speak to God. There, she prays in an unconventional manner.

Read Text #2 aloud.


9 Hannah arose after eating in Shilo, and after drinking, when the tense family meal had ended. And Eli the priest was sitting on the chair near the doorstep of the Sanctuary of the Lord. 10 Hannah went inside [the Sanctuary] as she was embittered, hurt, and forlorn, Ho, and was weeping. 11 She vowed, saying: Lord of hosts, if You see the suffering of Your maidservant, and you remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and You give Your maidservant substantial offspring, a worthy, strong child, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and a razor will not come upon his head.

12 And it was as she was praying extensively before the Lord, Eli was watching her mouth. 13 Hannah, she was speaking quietly in her heart; only her lips were moving, but her voice was not heard; and Eli therefore thought her to be drunk. 14 Eli said to her: Until when will you become drunk and act in an intoxicated manner? And if you are already drunk, remove the influence of your wine from yourself. It is unfitting to be drunk anywhere, certainly not in the house of God. 15 Hannah answered and said: No, my lord, you mistake me. I am an embittered woman; I did not drink wine or intoxicating drink at all, but instead I poured out my soul before the Lord. 16 Do not deem your maidservant to be a wicked woman who came drunk to the Tabernacle, for it is due to the extent of my grievance, the bitterness of my soul, and my anger that I have spoken at great length until now.

17 When Eli heard her answer given in an entirely sober manner, he regretted his accusation. 18 She said: May your maidservant find favor in your eyes. May your words come to pass. The woman went on her way, and she ate as usual, and her face was no longer downcast as it was. Now she had renewed confidence and hope.

19 They, the whole family, arose early in the morning, and prostrated themselves before the Lord upon their departure from the Tabernacle, and they returned, and came to their house to Rama. Elkana was intimate with Hannah his wife and on this occasion the Lord remembered her. 20 It was with the passage of the seasons, when another year had passed, that Hannah conceived and bore a son; she called his name Samuel [Shemuel], for she explained: I requested him [she'iltiv] from the Lord.
Given Eli’s reaction to Hannah’s way of praying, we can see that her prayer is unconventional — both in the way she prays and the words she uses. Hannah’s words are forceful, and her emotions charge the conversation with God and the interaction with Eli. She is bringing her grievances and giving them directly to God in anger, and Eli is completely surprised by this method and attitude.

**Part Two: Hurling Words at God** (20 minutes)

Can emotions be transmitted in a prayer? Can a human even dare to be angry at God? How can Hannah’s manner of praying be one that the Talmud would want us to learn from? Let us see what other commentators have made of this remarkable situation.

In Text #3 we return to the Talmud. Texts #4 and #5 are from Rabbi Yehiel E. Poupko, Judaic Scholar at the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago.

**Ask participants to read and discuss Texts #3, #4 and #5 in chavruta, and discuss the questions that follow.**

Chavruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you read and discuss texts together.

**Text #3: Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 31b.** English translation [bold text] and commentary [plain text] by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the Koren Talmud Bavli.

Having explained the unusual expression, “in her heart,” the Gemara cites what Rabbi Elazar said regarding another uncommon usage that appears regarding Hanna: **Hanna hurled words toward Heaven,** which is to say, she spoke brazenly against God. As it is said: **“And she prayed unto the Lord,”** which connotes that she hurled words toward Heaven.


*Het’akh, “hurling!” Imagine that — a pious Jew hurling words at God! Rabbi Eleazar bases his statement on the use of the preposition **al,** “upon,” rather than **el,** “to.” His description of Chana in prayer is supported by the verb “to pray”, **le-hitpalel,** whose root is **pl.** This is a complex and difficult word. Its various uses and contexts have shaped its meanings and functions. While “prayer” may be the only available word for translating the Hebrew word **tefila,** it is tepid and weak, decidedly inadequate...Prayer implies speech that moves in only one direction, from the petitioner to the one in power...Tefila takes place in and for the relationship between God and person. **Tefila** is the relationship.
Hurling Words Towards Heaven: Hannah's Prayer


Chana confronts God. At first we can only imagine what she says. Initially, the text does not present the content of her tefila. Possibly it is just despair. We know that she is direct with God in her bitterness. Only after she pours forth her desolation to God does she turn to Him with something other than the appeal of the petitioner. She presents her prayer request in a manner not often seen in TaNaKh. She does not merely seek something from God. Rather, in surprise for the request granted, she offers God something in return: if you give me, I will give you. This kind of prayer expresses both judgment and intercession. As she seeks something from God, Chana judges her circumstance and concludes, like others in TaNaKh, that her situation is unjust.

Ask:

1. Do these commentaries change how you interpret Hannah’s emotional state? How or why?
2. We read that Hannah hurls words at God. What does it mean to speak to God in anger? What are the sages saying in this text about how we approach God with our words?
3. Do you believe it is presumptuous to “hurl words” or negotiate with God during prayer? Are you surprised that the Sages have not condemned Hannah for her chutzpah?
4. Does seeing tefila as “the relationship” change your understanding of prayer at all? If it is a relationship, can prayer be a “quid pro quo” exchange or a negotiation with God? Why or why not?

The Talmud does not shy away from the notion that prayer is something “in the heart”, and that it is full of emotion. The Talmud says that Hannah “hurls” her words at God, highlighting the emotional stress that she feels, connecting her urge to pray to the need to unburden her heart. According to Rabbi Poupko, that is the essence of prayer. To say that tefila is simply prayer is not enough. Tefila is the relationship, not only the words that are said in a prayer.

What, then, can Hannah’s prayer teach us about the way we pray today?

Conclusion (20 minutes)

Let’s read from two essays about prayer by contemporary commentators. The first is from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972), a Polish-born philosopher, author, teacher and civil rights activist in America. The next is from Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentaries on the Bible and Talmud, and for his work on Jewish mysticism.

Read text #6 and #7 aloud.


Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehood. The liturgical movement must become a revolutionary movement, seeking to overthrow the forces that continue to destroy the promise, the hope, and the vision.
Hurling Words Towards Heaven: Hannah’s Prayer


...No matter whether we acknowledge it or not, each of us has a personal relationship with God. My relationship is always personal and private; precisely because He is so infinite and unlimited, He relates personally and specifically to me. It always is a one-to-one relationship, when I am by myself as well as when I am in a crowd; somehow we are always alone together.

That is why prayer, no matter the form, is so important. Prayer is always a conversation with God. It is the way we relate feelings, fears or aspirations, or make requests. There is also prayer for one’s community, for one’s own nation or for the world as a whole. And prayer can also be a different sort of conversation: an urge to say thank you, to say: how good it is that You are there...

More than that — we can appeal. Human beings have the right (perhaps also the duty) to converse with God, to ask things from Him and also to complain to Him, to claim: “You’re not right.” It is the same right that a child has to cry and to say, “Why do other kids get more?” A human being is entitled to complain. God wants us to be honest with Him. But still and all, He cannot be judged.

Ask:

1. Rabbi Heschel says prayer is a subversive act. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
2. Rabbi Steinsaltz says that prayer is always a conversation. What do you think that means? How might that affect the way you pray?

Rabbi Heschel and Rabbi Steinsaltz, like the prayer of Hannah, challenge us to understand prayer as more than saying “Can I have this please?” Prayer is thoughtful; it is work of the heart, a relationship, a revolution, a conversation, and more. Hannah is not afraid to bring her full self to God. She is willing to hurl her words at God to show what is in her heart, and in those words show the active nature of her relationship with God. Hannah is a model of Jewish prayer precisely because she demanded what she needed and brought her whole self into the experience, not despite it.

Reflect with your chavruta partner:

1. What do you gain when you view prayer as “work of the heart”? How might this affect the way you experience private, spontaneous prayer? How might it change the way you approach prescribed or public prayers?
2. What does it mean to be “real” in prayer? What is difficult about bringing our whole selves into prayer? What is empowering about it?
3. Is there anything you’ve learned from Hannah about how the words we use in prayer affect how we engage the Divine? Is there anything from today’s learning that you might take into your next experience of prayer?
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17 When Eli heard her answer given in an entirely sober manner, he regretted his accusation. Eli answered and said: Go in peace. Eli immediately added words of encouragement for the future. And may the God of Israel grant your request that you requested of Him. I do not know what you requested, but I bless you that God should give you your wish. 18 She said: May your maidservant find favor in your eyes. May your words come to pass. The woman went on her way, and she ate as usual, and her face was no longer downcast as it was. Now she had renewed confidence and hope.

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**Text #7: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. “A Personal Relationship with God,” 2010.**

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