

Rosh Hashanah 2016 Haftarah Commentary

Written by Kathryn Fleisher

There are countless explanations as to why Hanna's story is the one that congregations around the world listen to, dissect, and learn from during each Rosh Hashanah. From themes like the importance of family building to the effects of barren women during biblical times to the recognition of creative prayer, this portion clearly has a lot to offer and a lot to teach us.

But why is this the portion that we read? After I read the story through a few times over, I decided to take a step back and look at the bigger picture. Considering that Rosh Hashanah is a celebration of the new year, I wanted to choose a lens by which to view the portion that would correlate with the theme of the holiday itself. Eventually, it dawned on me that my initial question of why we read Hanna's story on Rosh Hashanah had a lot of validity. It is for that reason that I want to take a few moments to talk to you today about choices and choice making.

As we leave 5776 behind us and enter together into 5777, we have a lot of choices to make. Who will we be this year? How will we spend our time? What will we accomplish? These questions, and likely their answers, may seem daunting. But the beauty of it all is that we have the power to make choices about our lives and make choices about what goes on in the world around us in order to ensure that we are living our lives the way we want to in a world that reflects our values and desires. The ability to make

choices, to make good choices, defines who we are as individuals, as Jews, and as a society.

So let's translate this mindset of choice making from the context of our personal lives to the context of this haftarah portion. I believe that there is one main, significant choice made in this context; Hanna's choice to pray independently and take ownership over her independent actions.

Interestingly enough, this choice making situation is directly intertwined with the perception and treatment of women in biblical times. It was expected that women did not pray for themselves, and if they did it would certainly not be without an intermediary. Hanna broke this mold. Her husband made it clear to her that he had not seen her misery and certainly not prayed for her. So she took matters into her own hands. She went to the temple to pray from heart, despite the expectations that her husband would do it for her or that she should pray in a certain way. She made the choice to deviate from the norm and be for herself.

This isn't where Hanna's shattering of the perception of biblical women stops though. As the story continues and she is reprimanded by the priest at the temple for being drunk, she stands up for herself, talks back to him, and bravely explains who she is and what she is doing. Hanna is not scared or intimidated by Eli and his close mindedness; she shows him that he has misunderstood and misjudged her. He accepts her earnest explanation, even sending her away with a remarkable blessing. The lesson here is unmistakable; women must make the choice to raise their

voices, because we have the ability to re-educate others and create change. By speaking up and speaking out, we can crush misconceptions, defy stereotypes, and demand better. We must all make the choice to challenge the norm and not accept the status quo of how women are treated. And if Hanna could do it in biblical times, we can certainly do it today.

As we enter into this new year, we all have a very specific set of choices to make. The choices that will impact us as women or impact the women in your life. As woman, you have an obligation to be for other women. And if you are not a woman, well your daughters, your mothers, your wives, your granddaughters, and your grandmothers are still counting on you. Each and every one of us, both individually and collectively, have the power to sway what formal decisions are made about women and the informal way that society treats women. But the decision to harness this power is a choice. A choice to be an advocate for women.

We make these choices regarding the way we treat others each and every day, but human nature pushes us to crave a start date for new habits or new mindsets. So today, I am giving you the charge to use this day as your starting line, and encouraging you to launch into this year as an advocate for women. You may be surprised at how many seemingly little things about the way that women are treated, are actually in your control. And the way that you conduct yourself and encourage those around you to do the same, can have a considerable impact on our society's treatment of

women. I, as a young woman and a part of the next generation of women to inherit our society, am urging you to genuinely take on my charge. This is not a want, but a need.

So now, I want to pose to you the same questions as I did at the beginning of my commentary. Except this time, I want you to consider the power of your choices and the charge to stand up for women that I am leaving you with. So, who will you be this year? How will you spend your time? What will you accomplish? I, and the rest of the women in your life, are counting on you to follow through with the thoughts that just came to your mind. In fact, we no longer have the choice. To take a page out of Hanna's book, the time is now to stand up, to shatter expectations, and to demand better of our society.

Your choices have power, they have weight, they have potential, and they have influence. Make them wisely.

Shanah Tova.