

Shanah tovah.ⁱ

Almost 50 years ago, over the course of a hot September like this one, my father taught me how to read. I was behind in school, and my teacher suggested that my parents find a book that I might like and sit with me to read out loud, together.

In order to coax me into it and to give me confidence, the first few nights my dad would read a paragraph, and then I would re-read the final sentence to him. With time, we began trading sentence for sentence, then paragraph for paragraph, and then finally page for page. And then one night, in a graduation ritual of sorts, he sat and just listened as I read to him the entire evening. I remember the pride that I felt when, in his amazing, understated way, my dad stood up, looked me in the eye, shook my hand, and said, “Congratulations, you can read.”

Looking back, as meaningful as that time with my father was for me, I am awed by the incredible irony, or perhaps Divine intervention, that the book he had chosen for me was The Big Book of Children’s Bible Stories. You see, my dad was, and still very much is, definitively not religious. Don’t get me wrong, he is a highly ethical person and values being part of the Jewish people, but he does not believe in God, will gladly eat a BLT, and thinks that when you die, you are dead, and that is it. He is very practical and very comfortable in his atheism.

So why did he choose the Bible to teach his oldest son how to read? Perhaps because it had large print, and bright, inviting pictures opposite each page. But most of all, I think that he chose it because he thought I might like it, and I did. I really did. Long after he stopped reading with me, each night I kept on going. And when I came to the end, I would just start reading again.

Of all the Torah stories, the one that I read most carefully was about a little boy, like me, whose name was Samuel. It begins with Samuel’s mom (Hannah), who desperately wanted a baby but was not able to have one. So she cried, and prayed, and was very sad. One day, she went to the temple and was praying so hard for a baby that when the rabbi (a Levitical priest named Eli) saw her, he gave her a special blessing and told her that God would help her have a baby. And she did. She named him Samuel. When Samuel got older, his mom brought him to the temple a lot, and he liked being there. So much so that he began to work at the temple and even had his own room to spend the night. The rabbi, Eli, was his teacher and his friend.

One night, as Samuel was trying to go to sleep, he heard a voice calling his name, “Samuel, Samuel.” It was God, but Samuel did not know that. He thought it was the rabbi. So he sat up and went to see what Eli needed from him. “It wasn’t me,” said the rabbi, “go back to

bed.” This happened three times, until finally the rabbi understood that Samuel was being called by God, and told him to say, next time he was called, **דַּבֵּר יְהוָה כִּי שָׁמַע עַבְדְּךָ** / “Speak, O’ God, for your servant is listening.”ⁱⁱ When God next called Samuel’s name, the boy did what his teacher had asked of him, and thus began Samuel’s lifelong connection to God, a life of profound meaning, and his leadership of the Jewish people.

I remember reading this story, and then lying in bed, the house quiet before sleep. “Please God,” I would say out loud into the dark of my bedroom, “speak to me. Even if it’s just one word...just let me know that you are here... that you are real...just let me know ...something...”

For the past 50 years, Samuel’s story, my questing for God in the dark, and even the pregnant silence that seems to answer have stayed with me. It has become a part of me. But I now understand this story differently.

When I was younger, I related to the child in the story, Samuel. Like all children, he approached the world with ‘wonder’: A sense that life was a series of doors to discover so that the possibilities of each one could be explored. Since I was loved, I felt loved, and thought that people were generally good. God was a natural extension of these things, an entity waiting for me. Finding God was like a Divine game of hide-and-seek: experienced but not seen; a presence felt mostly through fleeting, everyday interactions that, after the fact, seemed to leave a note as if to say, “I was here with you.”

Later, in my adult years, I began to relate more to Samuel’s mother, Hannah. Her barrenness encapsulated the yearnings of the human condition: our feelings of helplessness despite our desires and best intentions; the suffering that comes from unrealized personal potential; and the reality that justice is anything but guaranteed in a world that is oftentimes distinctly ‘not fair.’

The Jewish tradition sees Hannah, and the rabbis of old hold her up for us all to see and to emulate. This is why her story is the one that Jews everywhere around the world, this Rosh HaShanah day, read together for Haftarah. Hannah’s plight reflects for us that the human condition is hard.

But it is her prayer that the Jewish sages want us to remember. Hannah weeps out of sheer vulnerability. Her prayer in that moment expresses her deepest desire that there will be another generation to hold and nurture, to teach and experience joy. Hannah’s sincere longing to God is considered to be the purest form of prayer that there is...and thus, what each of us should aspire to on Rosh HaShannah, in this season of reflection.

Hannah became for me, as she is to so many, a reflection of my adult reality. Bad things do happen to good people. But through her cries and her prayer reaching out to God, her voice

reverberates across generations, calling out... that each of us matters, that our lives, our joys, and our deepest sorrows, they matter. The fact that in her story God “hears” and helps her is less about God granting wishes than it is about God being with us as a caring, compassionate presence, even when our very existence makes us ache.

This year, for the first time, I find myself relating to the temple priest, Eli, who was Samuel’s teacher. Not just because he is a rabbi and presents as being mature in his years...although I’m sure those two things are part of it. In Eli, I see something of myself, something that I think many of us can relate to. He is a parent whose children are grown, and he worries about them as they struggle to navigate life outside of his home. He is a leader of his community, one of many, but his people are constantly beset by war or the threat of war. He worries about the Jewish people as a whole, how they treat one another, and how they will fare amongst the other nations in the tumultuous decades to come.

But mostly I relate to Eli as a teacher, one who seeks to nourish and empower the spiritual lives of the people around him, most especially the children.

I don’t think that it is a superfluous detail that Eli, an elder in the community, is the one to recognize that Samuel is having a direct experience of the sacred. And perhaps, more importantly, it is an adult who has the wisdom to give the child language to reach back towards God- to foster a relationship, to respond, and to connect.

Even though a child’s instinct may be a sense of wonder, their spirituality must be nurtured ...or else it will atrophy and fade with time.

Judaism cultivates a spiritual life that weaves us into a community of fellow seekers. So beautifully, it enlists us in the grand project of bringing goodness into the world through rituals and holidays, prayers and gatherings. And... it holds us accountable by asking if we are teaching our children enough to transmit this sacred connection from one generation into the next.

In Eli, I see each of us, those who are in the older generations. We may not always have the language or the confidence to ‘know’, but we do have the years of experience to recognize the tender beginnings of a young spiritual life. What we want for our children, the youngest generation, is to create an atmosphere, through family and community, ‘that has sacred moments and a feeling of warmth. We want to encourage our children to search and to question. We want to make sure they learn how important it is both to be good and to feel that they matter. Religion can help. Belief in God affects self-esteem, and searching for God together can help draw a family, and a community, close.’ⁱⁱⁱ

But I also see in Eli, a person whose sense of ‘wonder’ has been dulled. He is busy, and working hard, and going through the necessary routines that make up daily life. It is not

that he does not believe in God, clearly he does. But the relationship is tired, and perhaps taken for granted.

Eli's part in connecting Samuel with God breathes new life into his own faith. Their engagement helps Eli recall a part of himself that he had lost. And, by helping a child connect to the Divine, Eli was reminded what it is to participate in the world *not just* to understand things, but to cherish them. Not just to walk through life, but to really see, and in turn, be seen as being part of something wonderful and cosmic. From the child, the grown-up once again 'caught' a sense of wonder, and renewed his curiosity for the Divine.

In Jewish history, there are some rabbis who are known for more than their scholarship, more than their leadership, and more than their mystical exploration...there are those who are called 'Maggid', which means that they are known for their telling of stories. And telling stories is something that we all can do.

The Maggid of Dubno once explained how important the spirituality of children was to adults with the following parable:

Once there was a father who journeyed with his son for miles. Each time they reached an obstacle such as a river or mountain, the father lifted his son on his shoulders and carried him through the difficult terrain.

Finally, they came to their destination- a walled castle.

But the gate of the castle was shut, and there were only narrow windows on the sides of the wall.

The father said to his son: "My son, up until now I have carried you. Now the only way we can reach our destination is if you will climb through the windows and open the gate from within.

So it is, said the Maggid, "with adults, and children, and God.

Parents take care of their children, feed and clothe them, and see them through all sorts of obstacles.

Yet grown-ups who have so many strengths, often find the gate to God closed.

But children have a special spiritual capacity.

They can climb to places that adults cannot reach.

Children can fling open the gates of heaven from within so that they, and their family, can reach God together.

Shanah tovah.

ⁱ My thanks to my wife, Marita Anderson, for being my partner with this RHS sermon, and, in life.

ⁱⁱ 1 Samuel 3:9

ⁱⁱⁱ David J. Wolpe, Teaching Your Children About God: A modern approach. Harper. 1993. Pg 2