

Rosh Hashanah Morning: Shut Those Women Up

2018 was to be the year of women. The #MeToo movement reminded us that women's stories and truths must have a vital role in our lives and daily discourse, must inform our professional and political realities. This was, after all, the year that Israeli actress, Gal Gadot, took the world by storm as Wonder Woman, filming her blockbuster heroine role while pregnant. This was the year that Christine Hallquist became the first transgender woman to win a gubernatorial primary. She may, in fact, become the first transgender woman to be elected Governor. And this was the year that co-founder of Miramax, Harvey Weinstein, was told that he does not have unfettered permission to terrorize women in his orbit in spite of his riches, power, and fame.

Each and every year on Rosh Hashanah, we read and re-read Hannah's story. But I haven't taken the time to really tease out the importance of her story or its relevance to Rosh Hashanah. At face value, we have a Rosh Hashanah story that simply inspires us with the power of prayer. Hannah is barren. She prays with heartfelt *kavanah*, and a son is born. As we begin to examine the nuances of the text, however, additional layers emerge.

Hannah is an independent, strong woman who takes personal charge of her life. There are very few individuals, no less women, of the Bible who speak directly to God. Hannah does exactly that, *panim el panim*, face to face, *libah el libo*, heart to heart.

Fully immersed in her prayer, Hannah's lips moved but she made no sound. At that moment, Eli the priest sees her and takes her for a drunkard. Confronting her with superiority and indignation he reprimands, "How long do you propose to carry on like this? Get rid of your wine!" I am struck by the arrogance with which Eli judges and condemns Hannah. Pouring her heart out in prayer, she is mocked and obstructed by the high priest who seemingly cannot understand the profound depth and purity of her prayer. Eli, suspect of her prayer, challenges her very worth. I have frequently asked myself, what had Hannah actually done to deserve such a strong reprimand from Eli? She spoke up; she was visible. She took charge of something about which she was passionate.

Like Hannah, Senator Elizabeth Warren is outspoken and passionate. Like Hannah, the men around her move to shut her down. In February 2017, Senator Warren was ordered to stop speaking on the floor of the Senate, relinquish the podium, and take her seat. Senate Republicans invoked Senate Rule 19, an obscure and seldom used rule written in 1801, to silence Senator Elizabeth Warren. What had Senator Warren actually done to deserve this harsh reprimand? Had she called her fellow Senator a liar, a lowlife, a dog? Had she claimed that he was stupid or crazy? None of the aforementioned. Rather, she spoke up; she was visible. She took charge of something about which she was passionate. Senator Warren spoke out against then Senator Jeff Sessions' nomination to become Attorney General, showcasing his abysmal record on civil rights by reading a letter written by the late Coretta Scott King, widow of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in 1986. Senator Warren maintained that an individual who exhibits racist sentiments and protects racist policies ought not be confirmed as Attorney General. Senate Republicans didn't like Warren's calling out Jeff Sessions' record. She was removed from the podium. Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, explained, "She was warned. She was given an explanation.

Nevertheless, she persisted.” She, Senator Elizabeth Warren, was warned. She, Senator of Massachusetts, was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she, member of the Senate, persisted. She was visible; she spoke up. She took charge of something for which she was passionate.

Mocked, misunderstood, discounted, Hannah persists. She stands up to the errant priest and says, “Not so my lord. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord.” Hannah’s prayer results in the birth of Samuel, under whose leadership the nation of Israel will be saved.

I am captivated by the idea that this is the year of women. But if we actually think this achievable, then we would need to confront the reality that no men in the present Senate have ever been censured with Rule 19 for their remarks directed toward colleagues notwithstanding the tenor, tone, or content of their message. We would need to own that in the highest legislative branch of the United States of America, women are fundamentally treated differently. Do people object to Nancy Pelosi because of her age? Because of her policies? Or is it because she is a strong, effective woman? What made Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign not viable? Was she out of step with the voters? Were her policies not clearly articulated? Or was it that she was a strong, effective woman?

Hillary Clinton was brash and dishonest? Donald Trump was elected despite his brashness and dishonesty. When Eli the priest challenges Hannah, she does not respond by saying “I am an Israelite,” “I am a Hebrew,” or “I am a Jew”. She simply says: “I am a woman.”

After dozens of women came forward with allegations against movie mogul Harvey Weinstein, Weinstein was forced out of Miramax and was arrested on rape and sexual misconduct charges. Matt Lauer, Roger Ailes, Bill O’Reilly, Roy Price, Kevin Spacey: the list goes on. The problems of sexual harassment and gross inequity are pervasive for women in all sectors of society. Since Donald Trump’s candidacy to become the 45th president of the United States, at least 19 women have come forward with viable allegations accusing President Donald Trump of having initiated varying inappropriate behaviors with them, including allegations of sexual harassment and of his having forced himself on them in non-consensual sexual interactions. President Donald Trump has responded by declaring them all liars.

Shut those women up.

Perhaps this past year was marked by the #MeToo movement, but so too was it marked by an escalation of attacks on women, including efforts to defund Planned Parenthood, undermine women’s legal and reproductive rights, and slash essential benefits that directly affect women and their health. Do we believe that a woman has the right to self-determination concerning her own body and life choices? These very rights are being threatened today in fundamental ways we haven’t experienced since the Women’s Suffrage Movement.

But it is not just Eli the priest who challenges Hannah. Like Eli, Hannah’s husband, Elkanah, also challenges and belittles Hannah’s choice for her own destiny, her desire to make determinations concerning her own reproductive choices. “Aren’t I better for you than ten sons?” he admonishes.

Again this year, we read the story of Hannah. And again this year, I am pained to remind you that while more women than men are college graduates, female workers earn about 80 cents for every dollar their male counterparts make. While more women are running for office than ever before, women are painfully underrepresented proportionately as elected officials. Perhaps you are wondering if your vote matters.

Did you know that in the United States of America we have yet to pass an Amendment that would guarantee women equal rights in our country? This year Illinois became the 37th state to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment. We still need another state to ratify the ERA before a vote can be taken to enter Equal Rights for women into our Constitution. Is it important to you that you, your daughters, and your granddaughters have a voice in our country? Is it important that your daughter's, and granddaughter's reproductive rights be protected? Is it important to you that you, your daughter, and your granddaughter earn equal wages for equal work? Those questions will be determined by the November elections.

We are told that women are rising. Perhaps that is why Roe v Wade is threatened once more. It is dangerous to become comfortable with the myth that women in our society have gained full equality.

In December 2015, the Army made a determination that combat roles must be open to women. In the two years since the Army lifted its ban on women serving in infantry and armor jobs, more than 150 women have joined these details. Now the Army is opening up three more posts for potential assignments to female recruits.

This past August in Israel, the first female pilot was appointed to command a spy plane squadron in the Israeli Air Force. On that same day in another unit in the IDF, 30 soldiers training to be paratroopers turned their backs on a female instructor and refused to obey her orders. They were not punished. They were not court-martialed. They were "given a talk" in which it was made clear to them that they could not discriminate between male and female instructors.

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Hannah does it all. She is a good wife, a good mother, a woman of faith. She is strong, proactive, and determined.

Perhaps this year we will vote and speak up for women and candidates that will represent all of us. It is about time that we protect a woman's voice, story, and status as equal in our tradition and equal in our lives.