

Spirituality and Religion: Hannah and Eli
Introduction to the Haftarah Reading
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5776
September 14, 2015

To anyone who has ever said, ever heard, ever even thought that there is a difference between being “religious,” and being “spiritual,” possibly, of course, favoring the second over the first, well, the Haftarah for Rosh Hashanah morning... this story’s for you! This selection, from the very beginning of the book of Samuel, and eventually describing the birth of the eponymous figure for whom the book is named... what we have here is the only story in the entire Bible describing the religious world of the Sanctuary at Shilo. And, according to my teacher, Micha Goodman, what we encounter in these verses is a deep, biting, critique of the religious world view that developed there.

First, of course, in this story, we have the woman Channah versus the priest, Eli. A female outsider, a male broker of power. He represents the religious hierarchy, but she has the religious moment. He is busy pouring out blood and wine and water on the inside of the Sanctuary; at the same time she “pour out her spirit,” her soul, on the outside. Inside is formal ritual; outside is spontaneous and sincere prayer.

The story goes on, beyond where we end, and offers additional criticism. It is clear that Eli and his sons believe, well, too much. They believe that ritual brings certainty. They believe in the almost magical power of the ark. They use it as a crutch in battle. Further, the establishment, the hierarchy itself... power corrupts. Eli’s sons, they sleep with the women who come to bring offerings... and they take from the offerings themselves – and it is also clear, in reaction, that Eli evaluates these sins, and sees the misuse of religious offerings as *worse* than the acts of immorality involving abuse of power and of people. The unit of chapters ends in a kind of parody, where the supposedly magical ark is captured, and Eli’s sons are killed.

These elements, then, begin with our tale: religion can blind us to real religiosity, ritual has triumphed over ethics, and a desperate quest for certainty can lead us to rely too much on the cult, the rite, the external forms. This is a world, then, in which religion makes us not more sensitive, but less.

And yet, this is a tradition that told this tale, preserved it, instructed us to read it on this occasion. A reminder, from long ago and far away, that all of what we do here today is but a tool, to help us get to a better place. It is not the words that are the point, or the Shofar, but the meaning behind them.. and the way the message lives in us.