**Hannah, Thunder, and the Shofar of Rosh Hashanah**

# Midrash Pesikta Rabbati

The midrash presents different interpretations of Peninna, showing her as both helping Hannah to wake up and as tormenting her. The interpretations presented here center around I Sam 1:6.

וְכִעֲסַתָּה צָרָתָהּ גַּם כַּעַס בַּעֲבוּר הַרְעִמָהּ כִּי סָגַר יְהֹוָה בְּעַד רַחְמָה:

“Moreover, her rival, to make her miserable, would taunt her that the LORD had closed her womb.” (NJPS)

“And her rival-wife would provoke her with provocation, for the sake of making-her-complain, for YHWH had closed up her womb.” (Everett Fox)

Note that there are one Hebrew word and one Hebrew phrase, the translation/interpretations of which can give quite different meaning. According to both NJPS and Everett Fox translations of 1 Sam 1:6, Peninna is Hannah’s rival and taunts Hannah and makes her miserable or provoked.

* The word צָרָתָה which literally translates as her distress or her adversary is commonly understood to mean second or rival wife.
	+ *Rashi commentary:* **And her rival**: Her husband’s other wife, Peninnah.
	+ I suggest that it might also be Hannah’s own trouble which rouses her to action.
* The phrase בַּעֲבוּר הַרְעִמָה is translated by NJPS as “would taunt her,” and by Fox as “for the sake of making-her-complain.”
	+ *Rashi commentary*: **in order to make her complain**:: (Literally, to make her storm.) Our rabbis explain, “in order to make her storm” that she pray. And Peninnah had good intentions.

*Pesikta Rabbati* 43.8 relates one tradition that Peninna is a vexatious rival, flaunting her ability to bear children while Hannah is barren. This commentary is in line with the NJPS and Fox translations above.

*And her rival vexed her sore* (I Sam. 1:6.). Peninnah would vex Hannah with one provocation after another. What would Peninnah do? According to R. Nahman bar Abba, Peninnah would get up early and say to Hannah: “Why don’t you rouse yourself and wash your children’s faces, so they are fit to go to their schoolmaster?” And at twelve o’clock, she would say: “Why don’t you rouse yourself and welcome your children who are about to return from school? Such is the provocation referred to in the words *And her rival vexed her sore*.

R. Tanhuma bar Abba said: When they sat down to eat, Elkanah would give each of his children his proper portion. But what would Peninnah do? Intending to vex Hannah [by calling attention to the fact that Hannah was childless], she would say to Elkanah: “Give this son of mine his portion. To this son of mine you have not yet given his portion!” Why did Peninnah speak thus? *To make her fret (hr’mh) (ibid.).*

This midrash shows a rabbinic portrait of women that is most unflattering. Yet in the very next sentence, *Pesikta Rabbati* suggests that Peninna’s role was not to make Hannah miserable, but to cause Hannah to thunder against God in prayer on her own behalf, suggesting that Peninna helped Hannah to actively request God’s attention. The second interpretation is reflected in Rashi’s commentary written above.

In another comment, the word *hr’mh* is read not “to make her fret” but to *make her thunder* against God in prayer on her own behalf. Thereupon the Holy One, blessed be he, said to Peninnah: “Thou makest her ‘thunder’ against Me. As thou livest, there are no thunders that are not followed by rain. I shall remember her at once.” *So the Lord remembered Hannah, and she conceived, and bore three sons and two daughters* (I Sam. 2:21).

Peninna becomes a woman who wakes Hannah up so that she can act on her own behalf. The wake up is not comfortable, and sounds very much like the action of the shofar as described in the following passage from *Pesikta Rabbati* 40.5

In ordaining for you that you blow the shofar on New Year’s Day, I intended by the blowing of the shofar to make you tremble and prepare yourselves for penitence. The prophet said: *When the shofar is blown in a city, and the people do not tremble* (Amos 3:6), it will then follow that *when evil shall befall the city, the Lord will not have done it*. (ibid).

The job of the shofar is to make people tremble and prepare for repentance, to prepare for a change of mind. Hannah needs to turn away from grief and not eating and towards active prayer. Peninna her rival (or possibly Hannah’s own inner distress) helps Hannah in this process, whether Peninna thunders against Hannah or assists Hannah to thunder in prayer against God. In thundering against God, Hannah herself serves as God’s reminder, another function of the shofar. The rabbis do not specifically make a connection between the shofar of Rosh Hashanah and the “thundering” of either Peninna or Hannah, but I think it is a possible midrash. In this light, we can see Hannah responding to an internal or external shofar which assists her to struggle against her own “stubborn spirit” (I Sam 1:15. NJPS translates אִשָּׁה קְשַׁת-רוּחַ אָנֹכִי as “I am a very unhappy woman.” I feel that “I am a woman with a stubborn sprit” is closer to the original Hebrew and suggests that Hannah was in contention with her own stubborn spirit).

We may look at Hannah’s yearning for a child as a metaphor for yearning for the presence of God. Hannah moves from weeping and not eating - generally feeling the bitterness of her soul - to pouring out her heart to God in her yearning for a child. The physical yearning for a child to quicken her womb might be likened to a yearning to be filled with the presence of God. Hannah suffers viscerally from experiencing an empty womb, and spiritually, knowing that God has sealed up her womb and has the only key to open it. R Nahman might call this experiencing the presence of God’s absence. Something has to occur for Hannah to leave her state of weeping inactivity and to pour out her heartfelt prayer in a vow with God. Shaul Magid’s formulation of R. Nahman’s view is that:

...for R Nahman creating the void in one’s own heart allows one to experience the absence of God and thus to yearn for God’s presence. (Magid, pg 511).

Perhaps Hannah needed to empty herself out before she could be filled with the presence of God. Her yearning could not came not from within her confusion and grief, but required an act of emptying. How did Hannah awaken to this necessity? Once again we refer to the shofar of Rosh Hashanah, whose blasts, according to R. Nahman:

... revitalize the soul and intelligence of every Jew. Each one receives a new soul and a new level of understanding, each according to his level. This new soul and visions are drawn from the inner countenance of God. [35.6] (Noson, pg 141)

The purpose of sounding the Shofar is to arouse men from their sleep and prevent them from whiling away their days in slumber. When people are aroused from their sleep, the power of speech bursts forth with tremendous strength. This is turn leads to trust and those who were barren give birth. [60:9] (Noson, pg 141)

If the sounding of the shofar is necessary to awaken the soul on Rosh Hashanah, and if Hannah’s story is the haftarah for the first day of Rosh Hashanah, where might we find the shofar? One way to look at Peninnah is as shofar. If we take the reading that Peninnah thundered at Hannah, this looks very much like a shofar. According to Nahman, after the sounding of the Shofar the power of speech bursts forth and those who were barren give birth. After Peninnah goads Hannah, she burst forth into prayer (speech) and is able to conceive.

We could see Peninnah as helping to revitalize Hannah’s soul and to prevent her from whiling away her days in slumber. This is not to say that R. Nahman would have described Peninnah so, but his description of the shofar can help us to think of Peninnah having her own duty to fulfill, not unlike the Peninnah described in *Pesikta Rabbati* 46.1, who makes Hannah “thunder against God on her own behalf.”

The use of the word from the root for thunder in I Sam 1:6 (הַרְּעִמָהּ *hr’mh*) is difficult to parse. It might be interpreted as Peninnah thunders against Hannah, Peninnah causes Hannah to thunder against [God], or Hannah’s grief thunders against her self. R. Nahman associates thunder with both removing “crookedness” from the heart to allow for joy to enter, and with the actual voice of prayer.

The fundamental place of joy is in the heart, as it is written (Ps 4:8), *‘You put joy into my heart.’* It is impossible for the heart to be joyous until it removes the crookedness which is in the heart; that it should be a ‘straight heart’ (yishrei lev). At that point he will merit joy, as it is written (Ps 97:12), *‘O you righteous [straight hearted], rejoice in the Lord.’* The crookedness in the heart is removed by thunder as it says in Talmud Berachot (59b), ‘Thunder was not created except to remove crookedness from the heart.’ Thunder corresponds to the voice which comes forth strongly in prayer. From this [strong voice] thunder is created. (Magid, pg 508, quoting R Nahman).

What is the “crookedness” which needs to be removed from the heart? The proof text cited in *B. Berachot* 59b is *God hath so made it that men should fear before him.* (Eccl 3:14).**2** Crookedness in the heart prevents a person from having room for fear of (also awe and reverence for) God. The strong voice coming forth from prayer creates the thunder which empties out the crookedness of the heart and allows for fear of God which leads to joy. In our earlier discussion of the root *zkr* we saw that *Pesikta Rabbati* 43.2 also stressed the importance of fearing the Lord in order for prayers to be answered, specifically relating this to Hannah’s prayer.

Hannah needed to yearn and to pray in order to move from barrenness to bearing. Her heart was too full of sorrow and confusion to pray. Perhaps she was lacking in fear and awe of God. The thunder of Peninnah, or an internal thunder of her own, possibly catalyzed by Peninnah, or in reaction to her own suffering, emptied Hannah’s heart and she was able to open herself to strong prayer, and eventually to the joy of motherhood.

One way to interpret Hannah is as a woman whose heart was broken and for this reason she was able to pray. Only out of the bitterness of her soul and her weeping was she able to pray to the Lord and to be heard. She grieved for many years, but her heart had to be finally humbled and broken before she could make her prayers to God (again, her own trouble, or the trouble of Peninna). When R Nahman of Breslev writes of the necessity to weep and to be humble during the period from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur, he could be talking about Hannah.

During the Days of Awe it is a good thing when you can weep profusely like a child. Throw aside all your sophistication. Just cry before God; cry for the diseases of the heart, for the pains and sores you feel in your soul. Cry like a child before his father. (Noson, pg 142)

# SOURCES

# R Nahman of Breslev

R Nahman of Breslev lived 1772-1810. He was the great-great grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism. R Noson, a disciple of R Nahman, was instructed by R Nahman to collect from *Likutey Moharan* (R Nahman’s major work) some of his practical guidance. In R Noson’s work, *Likutey Eitzot (Advice),* there is a section on Rosh Hashanah. These texts provide rich commentary on the Hannah Narrative.

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(Magid, Shaul. “Through the Void: The Absence of God in R. Nahman of Bratzlav’s *Likkutei MoHaRan.”*  *Harvard Theological Review.* 88, no 4. (1995) pg 508, quoting R Nahman).

**1**The complete statement from*B. Berachot* 59b is: R. Alexandri said in the name of R. Joshua b. Levi: “Thunder was created only to straighten out the crookedness of the heart, as it says: *God hath so made it that men should fear before him*.  (Eccl 3:14)”

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# Sefat Emet

“The holy Zohar says that there is an outcry within the heart that the lips cannot speak. So, too, the shofar sound is hidden.” Green p 345.

“When we have gone beyond anything that words could possibly express, we come before the One with only the bleating, wailing, wordless cry that comes through the shofar. These sounds, we are told, come forth from the deepest places and rise higher than any words our mouths could utter.” Green p 346 (Green’s commentary).

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