

RH 5784 – Channah and Hagar’s Resilience – Three Traits to Embrace

What is Spirituality? I invite you to close your eyes for a moment, and think about when you have felt spiritual. Okay, open your eyes. Where were you? How many of you were on a mountain or in nature? I think that spiritually is something akin to the sense of deep experiential connectedness, wonder, and/or insight, and that experience is often fleeting and difficult to explain or reproduce. Sometimes it just shows up. It’s not easy how to tell someone how to find or experience spirituality. It’s an interesting word, spiritual. Within “spiritual” is the word “ritual”, which may give us some access. In the rituals we have, *when* we add a certain awareness, of paying attention, seeing with receptive eyes, we discover a world of ceaseless wonders. The rituals available to us are many, and may be prayer, hobbies, cooking, baking, walking, and many more. The special ingredient is intention and a willingness to learn, see, or discover something new.

There is a walking path on the Pentacheta trail not far from my home. Several years ago, I began taking a picture of a particularly beautiful and unique oak tree each spring, summer, fall and winter. I wanted an outdoor ritual, and I gave myself a sort of ‘assignment’ to capture what the oak tree looked like in the different seasons. One year, in the spring, I went out to take pictures again, and when I got to the tree it took my breath away. This majestic oak had changed dramatically. A massive limb had fallen, it had crashed down upon the trail and into the stream near it. I imagined the sound it must have made when it fell to the ground, and the wildlife it disturbed. As I looked, the remaining part of the oak tree still stood as proud as ever, but now smaller, scarred.

I wondered, what is this oak tree teaching me? I was not there when the oak’s massive limb came down. I humbly realized that change happens whether I notice it or not, whether I am there or not. Sometimes change is subtle, sometimes dramatic. And I realized, the oak tree, smaller and scarred, would live and thrive despite its injury and loss. It was a survivor. I suddenly felt that the years and months of witnessing this majestic oak, even to this moment, was not just a ritual, an assignment I had given myself, but now it was a privilege, a gift. It has become for me a source of inspiration, awareness and connection to nature and how delicate and precious it is. Nature calls me to be aware, inspires in me awe of God’s creation, slows time, and helps me to weather the stresses and challenges of life, and I become grateful and feel rejuvenated.

The stories of Channah and of Hagar show how they navigated the stresses and challenges of life. Striving, seeking to fulfill purpose, they dealt with rivals and troubled relationships, Channah - trying to bring life, Hagar - staving off death, crying, prayer, and

being alone and loneliness. Their stories can teach us how to become more resilient in the face of challenges and crises that life always brings.

The story of Channah you have just heard in our reading of the Haftarah. We heard her anguish and even anger, as she prayed to God to have a child.

And in the Torah, we have Hagar the Egyptian, and the meaning of the name Hagar is “the stranger.” Initially Sarah’s maidservant, she was forced to bear a child for the infertile Sarah and Abraham. Hagar and Sarah vied for motherhood and superiority for years. Once Sarah realized her son Isaac was second in inheritance, she insisted that Hagar and Ishmael be sent away, to ensure her own son’s status. Hagar’s status was never secure. As Hagar walked and wandered in the wilderness of Be’er Sheva, the wilderness of Seven Wells, the skin of water became empty, and in her fear and anguish, placed her son in the shade of a shrub and willed herself not to see him, fearing he would die of thirst. God came and told her to lift him, to strengthen him with her hand and promised to make a great nation of him. God opened her eyes, she saw the well of water, they drank, and God was with the boy as he grew.

Channah strives to fulfill her purpose in life – a purpose paramount in Biblical times – to have a child. Hagar’s son Ishmael became endangered, as Abraham exiled Ishmael and Hagar from their family and home.

Both stories found resolution by the opening of eyes. Channah prays and vows to dedicate her son to serve the Eternal, and says: “Eternal of Heaven’s Hosts, if you will **truly see** Your servant’s affliction and remember me...” Channah prays, asks, demands, that God **see her** affliction, remember her, and give her a child. Exiled, Hagar is so aggrieved and afraid that she sees none of the seven wells for which the area she wanders in was named. Her son’s cries are heard, and God opens her eyes so she can **see** the nearby well. Our Rabbis of the Talmud said: "All gates are closed except the gates of tears" (Talmud Bavli Bava Metzi’a 59a).

Life is a sacred adventure. In life, we can become blind and not see. We face situations in which we cannot seem to find a solution, we don’t see a way, we’re just coping and surviving each moment, each day, because of all that goes on in the world and in life, with weather crises, political crises, war, famine, flood, fire, earthquake, need I say more? And the media we turn to help us understand and is often there to tell us why we should be aggrieved and who to blame for it! And, sometimes it is our own fears, emotions, thoughts, and habitual ways of being that get in the way of seeing, cast a shadow in the place of experiencing life as a sacred adventure.

Each of these women, Channah and Hagar, had a spiritual experience. Channah poured her heart out in prayer, made a vow to God, and God heard her prayers.

Hagar was in exile, alone, separate from all that she had known, but God was there. She was not alone. God opened her eyes to the water, nourishment, and all around her.

Why am I talking today about spirituality, about God opening Hagar's eyes, and about God seeing and hearing Channah? About an oak tree on the Pentacheta trail? Because awareness enables us to be present, nurture deep connections, know ourselves, others, and the world, including nature, and the Source of Being, the Energy of the Universe, that which sustains and connects all of us into this mysterious web of life and being.

Why is it important to "see"? Because "in-sight" and deep connection gives us a way to heal and to grow, to connect deeply, to enjoy life, nurture life, and give of it to others. Why? Because life isn't always fair. There are huge concerns and problems out there, in governance, divisions, wars, and even the health of our planet. We worry, we make mistakes, others make mistakes. We hurt and are hurt. We realize as the years pass that our lives are short. With awareness as a baseline, we can begin to grow beyond our natural instincts to react, run, hide, and even attack.

I invite us to consider and embrace three character traits that Hagar and Channah embody: Awareness, Gratitude, and Generosity.

Hagar's eyes were opened, she saw the well, and she and the boy lived. Ishmael became the progenitor of the Ishmaelite tribes. Two chapters after Sarah died, Abraham married Keturah. The Sages discuss this and make the case that the name of Hagar the Egyptian was Keturah (Hagar just means the stranger). Though he sent Hagar away years earlier, she bore Abraham no ill will, they married, and Keturah bore Abraham six more sons. Her eyes were opened, she became aware, she was grateful, generous, and knew love and fulfillment.

Channah became a mother, and she prayed, "Through the Eternal, my heart knows joy." In her gratitude and joy, she praised God, kept her vow and gave, dedicated her son Samuel to serve God. Samuel became the prophet who anointed both King Saul and King David. Her prayer, gratitude and resilience brought forth greatness.

Seeing, aware, we pay attention to the ordinary and the wondrous. This sparks gratitude. Being grateful, we are happier, appreciate what we have, complain less, become generous and thoughtful, giving love, time, and attention. In each of these ways, we transform. Life expands. We become resilient.

When we open our awareness, we open ourselves to the ordinary and the wondrous, and we can see the wondrous in the ordinary. Turn off our screens, get a good night's sleep, go for a walk, visit with a friend, breathe fresh air, look up at the sky, go see the ocean. Read a book, write a poem, sing in the shower. Do new things. Be curious, embrace our challenges and challenging situations, be willing to learn from everything and everyone. Ben Zoma, in Pirke Avot¹ teaches, "who is wise? One who learns from everyone." Even trees can be our teachers.

May we be grateful for life itself, with all its worries, concerns, problems, and blessings. It's okay to let the news of the day go by without attending to it, take a rest from its bombardment. Allow beauty and dignity to arise in place of complaint and criticism. May we see people anew, letting go of opinions, first impressions, and what we think we know. Allow curiosity to infuse life.

May we be generous. With our hearts, with our listening, with our compassion, with our time and attention. Compassion with ourselves as we recognize our shortcomings and failures, as well as in others. Let us do what we can, act where we are able, and not just think about it. When done, our hearts are lighter for it.

I invite you to take these three words to heart: Awareness, Gratitude, and Generosity.²

Awareness: Where is my attention today, is this where I want it to be? Is there something new that I have not seen, really seen?

Gratitude: What am I grateful for? We have so much to be grateful for.

Generosity: In what ways great or small, may I be generous today? A smile, call a friend, donate to the food bank, volunteering?

Awareness, Gratitude, and Generosity. With awareness, we realize our lives and our world are interconnected and wondrous. Gratitude brings joy and fulfillment. Generosity nurtures our relationships. We become resilient to the vicissitudes of life.

The following is a poem that embodies the spirituality that connects all of this, that we cannot explain, but we can experience. I invite you to close your eyes if you wish. "Only Love," by James Crews.

¹ Pirke Avot 4:1

² The traits of gratitude and generosity are studied in Mussar, the Jewish study and practice of character traits. Awareness is foundational to the study and practice of all character traits.

And so I imagine the entire earth
as one beating heart held in the space
of this universe, inside a larger body
we can't fathom, filling with enough
love to lead each of us out of the cave
of our personal pain and into the light –
enough love to lead all humans as one
out of collective fear, rage, and hate
into a place of peace that is found only
within our own hearts, beating in sync
with the pulse of this planet we were
born to inhabit, despite the daily storms
which overtake us and make us forget
we are the lifeblood pumped into these
veins, every particle of love we generate
running into rivers, lakes, and creeks,
evaporating into the air we breathe,
give back, and breathe again.³

As we open our eyes and hearts to the potential of this year 5784, may we walk with awareness, gratitude and generosity, and *become a source* of resilience, hope, and healing.

Shana tovah tikateivu,
May you be inscribed for a good year!
Rabbi Lisa Bock

³ “**Only Love**” by James Crews