

RH1

I find this day very difficult.

My issue is with the underlying theme of today's Torah and Haftarah selections. The specific issue which is seemingly addressed through the lives of Sarah and Hannah is bad enough under normal circumstances; for those who have to live with the modern reality of infertility, it is often painful and one of the reasons that some people's High Holiday experience feels much more threatening than spiritual.

The problem I have with these texts is quite simple. It's a sanitized fairy tale. When you achieve your happily ever after, you can point to these particular moments as inspirations, if you choose to. What happens when life is closer to the traditional fairy tale? You know, the ones where the story ends, but there isn't all that much happiness to go around? What kind of Biblical character can we turn to during those moments for inspiration, hope and some suggestion for how to cope?

I invite you all to think about the characters you know from the TaNaKH, all the biblical stories which you have heard over the years. Which character's prayers are never answered?

When I look over the text as a whole, from the beginning of everything through the construction of the Second Temple, God is the one character within the TaNaKH whose prayers never seem to be answered.

I would like to take a moment and run through some of God's coping mechanisms as expressed in the text, and see which one is worth copying, because it seems to work.

One reaction to life when it doesn't go the way it should is anger. God made use of anger a few times, and, according to my reading of the text, it did not seem to do the trick. Much of the world was flooded out, and yet the people mostly remained the same. Different groups of complaining Israelites were whomped on, yet the Israelites as a whole somehow missed the point. Even after they get into the Land, God keeps using other nations to chastise them, and they still keep on missing the point. Anger, it seems, is not the answer.

You might engage in some vocal wishful thinking. When you are God, speaking seems to be effective, after a fashion. It worked for the cosmos as a whole, so it would be a tiny jump to anticipate that it would work with people. On one level, most of us must think that it does work, because we spend some time demanding that things get better. We clarify that we want the world to work in the way we envision it. Not only that, we want people to understand us in precisely the manner we desire. I do believe that every single one of us is guilty of presuming that people know exactly what you

mean when you say something. I can tell you from personal experience that even when the words coming out of my mouth are the same as the words rehearsed in my head, it is often the case that the person to whom I am speaking wants a bit of clarification. No matter how much I engage in wishful thinking, even if I state my wishes out loud, nothing in the world seems to happen just because I demand it. I could have saved myself a lot of trouble and learned this from the wilderness journey. Moses was transmitting God's demands (in the form of commandments) constantly, and yet the people never seemed to fully get the point of the commandments, not even when Moses spelled it out for them. "You shall love Adonai, your God, with all your intellect, existence and substance." Vocalizing our desires does not provide the answer, either.

You may have already figured out what the answer is. I would like to take a little bit longer before ending the suspense. In the Talmud, from the general section Nezikin (jurisprudence), specifically Makkot (lashes), the following discussion (more or less) appears:

The Rabbis asked – "How many commandments are there?" Rav Simlai said there are 613 commandments. 365 of them are things we shouldn't do, one for every day of the solar year. 248 are the number of things we should do, which is one for each component of the human body. Rav Hamnuna asked how we know this from the Torah text, and answered his own question: we know this from the verse in Deuteronomy 33:4 "Torah was commanded us by Moses." The Hebrew letters of the word Torah equal 611, and there were two things which God told us directly, bringing the total to 613. King David in Psalm 15 brought the number down to 11, namely

- 1) Walking perfectly with God,
- 2) Performing good and just deeds,
- 3) Speaking truth from the heart,
- 4) Keeping far from lies,
- 5) Not impinging on another's trade,
- 6) Drawing one's family closer,
- 7) Rejecting those whom God rejects,
- 8) Honoring those who have awe of God,
- 9) Keeping oaths which harm one's self,
- 10) Not lending with interest, even to Gentiles,
- 11) Not taking money which remotely resembles a bribe.

Isaiah then came in 33:16 and reduced these even further to 6 items.

- 1) Walking with just and good deeds,
- 2) Speaking evenly and non-incitefully,
- 3) Rejecting money which appears like a bribe,
- 4) Wiping one's hands from the appearance of supporting financial corruption,

- 5) Sealing one's ears from hearing and accepting slander,
- 6) Refusing to look at forbidden sights.

Micah in 6:8 reduced all this to three things:

- 1) do/make justice,
- 2) love kindness,
- 3) humbly walk with God.

Isaiah then brought it down to two items in 56:1

- 1) pay attention to justice
- 2) do/make righteousness.

Amos in 5:4 narrowed everything to one item "God says, 'make yourself understand me by seeking me out so that you can live.'" Others say that Habakuk condensed it best in 2:4, "a righteous person exists by means of steadfast faithfulness."

You could say, then, that the answer to how best to cope with unanswered prayers is faith and understanding. I like to say the same thing just a little bit differently. The answer of how God copes with the disappointment of unanswered prayer is patience and love.

I have found that we accept gifts from our children that are given out of a loving impulse, because we used to be children and understand their impulse. We may not love the gift, yet it often becomes precious in our eyes as the item seems to borrow a bit of the emotion we feel towards them. When an adult gives us something similar, we need to fully understand who they are to imagine that this thing is given to us out for a good reason. When we love the world we are in, it is often because we have achieved some kind of understanding of it, and we can sometimes choose to reflect on this love in times of crisis. We have a hint of the connection between patience and faithfulness in one of the last verses of Psalm 27, the Psalm we recite during these days of returning towards God. "In spite of this, I have been certain that the goodness of Adonai will be seen by me in this world of life." Expressing the hope that things will appear better is a matter of faith; hanging on to Judaism in the meantime is a matter of patience.

After all of this, some of you might be thinking to yourselves, "Well, that might be fine for the Rabbi, but I really don't want to try to humanize God enough that I can copy God's coping skill set." If that is your concern, then take a look at the humans who I believe are fashioned in God's image. Find an example you like from your friends for how unanswered prayers are coped with, since all humans have some prayers that remain unanswered.