

Every time I read Hannah's story, which is tomorrow morning's haftarah, I wonder how Hannah could give Shmuel to the cohenim, to be "lent to the lord", at such a young age. After praying to God for a child, she finally has her longed for child. And then, when he is weaned, she brings him to the House of God in Shiloh, to serve God. Rashi says Samuel was 22 months old, still a toddler.

He was just starting to get fun! He'd barely been with Hannah for a moment, and was just hitting a really magical stage of childhood. How could Hannah give him up, this child she had prayed for? Perhaps, I could understand giving up an older child to serve God, an 16 year old, maybe even one at 10 or 12. Eventually, we must let our children grow up and serve God their own ways, no matter how hard it is to let them go. But a 22 month old is just barely leaving babyhood! How could she give up this son she prayed for, before she has even seen him reared to childhood, much less adulthood?

Maybe there was something different about her, or the situation, that made it easier? But I don't think so. She didn't just move on and forget him. Every year, Hannah sewed Samuel a little robe, and brought it to him when her family made their annual pilgrimage. She was busy with 5 more children, but Samuel continued to have a place in her

heart. It wasn't an easy thing for Hannah to bring him up to the House of God. But she made a vow, and now she felt obligated to do so. [Why? What does it mean to be obligated?](#)

Americans are deeply uncomfortable with obligation. It chafes at our notions of bootstraps and individualism. Judaism is not. Our tradition is clear that we have an obligation that comes from indebtedness.

Heschel said, "All that we own, we owe." Our mitzvot provide us a blueprint of a life of obligation: to God, to our loved ones, and to other humans.

What does this indebtedness look like for Hannah? She is indebted to God for the child that she asked of God. It is from this debt, and her vow, that her obligation stems.

Rabbi Tali Adler says that her relationship and obligation to God are entwined with her relationship and obligation to her father of blessed memory. I know that for myself, I feel an obligation towards my ancestors to being Jewish and raising Jewish children. This is true even, or perhaps, all the more, because I only have one Jewish parent and converted to Judaism as a young person. I chose this obligation, but did I really choose it, or did it already sit within my heart?

I felt this obligation to ancestors and God clearly at my son's bris.

I always found Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Issac in the Akedah incomprehensible. What obligation could he feel which would require that sacrifice? And yet, at my son's bris, I understood Abraham, just a tiny bit. What a hard thing God asks of us, in brit milah. I was handing my beloved son over to a man with a scalpel, because God asked me to. A tiny bit like Abraham handed over his beloved son to a knife, because God asked him to. [Why did I feel obligated to do so? What does the obligation I feel to my ancestors and God mean?](#)

Years ago, I had a Muslim colleague I liked to compare religion with over lunch.

One day, she asked me "What do you think happens when you die?" I replied that with my standard 'don't really know, don't really care, what matters is what you do when you're alive' answer. "But..." she hesitated, "then, why follow God's laws, if you don't expect a reward for it after you die?"

I was floored. I have never, not once, been motivated to do mitzvot by the notion of a reward after I died. However, despite my serious

commitment to mitzvot and torah observance, I had no coherent answer. I'm not sure that it matters "why" I feel the obligation.

Instead, what matters is that I commit to the obligation - we turn towards it. This obligation to my ancestors, to God, I'm going to turn towards it, commit to it.

And I think that's why Hannah is able to bring Samuel to Shiloh. She made a commitment, an obligation that she is turning towards, even when it's hard.

It's not just these big moments in our lives, where an obligation requires sacrifice. In fact, it happens more often in the mundane day to day. Bedtime comes every night, and some nights, I am just too dang tired. I do not want to wrangle the kids to brush teeth and hair and stories and songs. I just want to lay down and go to sleep, or play games on my phone or read a book. I don't want to give from my empty cup of executive function and energy. And yet, on the nights when I can turn towards the obligation of bedtime with love and commitment, instead of resenting it, it can be a fun and wonderful moment of connection. Now, don't think that I do this all the time. It's HARD. But I'm trying.

Sometimes our obligations to God require big sacrifices. Hannah gave Samuel to serve God, like she had promised, even though it was hard. Sandy Koufax gave up pitching the first game in the world series when it fell on Yom Kippur. Sometimes, the obligation and the sacrifice are smaller. I get really tired of the same vegetarian options at restaurants. I would love a steak taco. In those moments, I have a choice about how I hold my commitments to kashrut: I can break my commitment, I can resent the obligation, or I can turn towards the commitment, and let it be a reminder of doing mitzvot out of love for HaShem.

When we turn towards the obligation with commitment born of love, it becomes a little bit less onerous, and sometimes even a moment of deep connection.

This Rosh Hashanah, I invite you to examine the obligations in your own life - to God, to a partner, your parents, your children, your friends. Where can you choose to turn towards your obligations with love and commitment, even when it's hard?

l'Shana Tova U'Metukah.