

Wonder Women
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5774
September 5, 2013

A long time ago, in a land far, far away... an American television series, found an outlet for export, developed a world-wide audience and appeared, over the course of time, in Israel. This show, in Israel, was translated into Hebrew, and given an... interesting name. It was called *Eyshet Chayil*.

Now, *Eyshet Chayil* is a phrase with deep echoes in Jewish life. It roughly translates as “woman of valor.” It refers to the poem that a husband traditionally recites over his wife as they sit down for Shabbat dinner. “*Eyshet Chayil, mi yimtza, v’rachok m’pninim michra...* A woman of valor, who can find? She is more precious than fine pearls. Her husband trusts in her, and so he lacks nothing. She does him good, never harm, all the days of his life.”

In content and in execution, the recitation of *Eyshet Chayil* is a controversial custom. It sees the woman as dependent, some feminists say. No, others insist, look: she is resourceful and a source of support, a bread-winner as well as bread-baker. It is degrading, say some, and objectifies the woman. No, say others, it is romantic and deep, intimate and authentic.

Whatever your view of the practice, whether you recite these words, modify them, add to them, ignore them or did not know about this at all, this was a curious choice as a title for a TV show.

But there is more to the story. You see, when this television program appeared...it caused all kinds of problems. Because the program, this so-called *Eyshet Chayil*, was broadcast... on Shabbat. Imagine! There were... near riots in ultra-Orthodox communities. What? How dare you! A religious program, on Shabbat? We'd want to watch! But we can't!

It is hard to describe just how funny this reaction was. Because, after all, what was this American program, this version of "Woman of Valor" which the Orthodox so wanted to see?

It was, of course... *Wonder Woman*! The scantily-clad DC Comics super heroine, brought to life by one decidedly non-Jewish Lynda Carter.

On learning of the misunderstanding, realizing this was a show they (and all the rest of us?) could safely miss, the crisis passed. I wish I could say that this was the last time that there has been a culture-clash in Israel over issues relating to women, what they do and where they go... and how they dress. I wish... But, of course, I cannot.

Now, Jewish tradition has had issues with women for a long time. It has had a hard time with women stepping out of their expected roles – while at the same time providing us with examples of those who did just that! Recall the Haftarah, the prophetic passage we read this morning of Rosh Hashanah. It is the story of Hannah, a woman haunted, taunted and, it seems, misunderstood by all of the men in her life. Labeled a deviant, accused of being drunk when all she wanted was to fulfill her destiny, Hannah's tale nevertheless seems to

end well. Another infertile woman winds up with a baby; maternal role achieved, tradition affirmed, expectations upheld, everyone goes home happy!

But, as I learned this past summer from a leading Israeli feminist [Tova Hartman], this is much more subtle than it seems. Misunderstood, falsely accused, nevertheless look at what Hannah does! First, she refuses to eat the single share of the sacrificial offering deemed appropriate by the system under which she lived. But that world did not “see” her, did not know her heart or hear her pain. So it is a system which she, very literally, cannot swallow.

And then she steps into the realm of the sacred, and challenges the power structure head on. In the Temple of the Eternal, she strays, she stays, and she prays, in a brand new way, pouring out her own sense of spirituality, with intensity, and integrity. “*V’Chanah hi midaberet al libah; rak sifateha na’ot, v’kola lo yishma...* Hannah, she was speaking in her heart. Only her lips were moving, and her voice was not heard.” What she does is so radical... it is not even recognized as prayer.

The opening of the book of Samuel tells this tale, and then pulls back from it, afraid of the implications. The first chapter we have something fresh, and spontaneous – and then the second chapter claims to be the words she used. It is formulaic, generic, structured, cliché. Like so much of our experience this morning, like so many of the prayers it was someone else’s words, put into her mouth.

But in choosing chapter one of Samuel for the Haftarah, perhaps the rabbis of the Talmud are saying that rite and rote may be part of prayer, but they are not, they can never be the whole of it.

What is this chapter about? What does it do for us? To the woman I learned this from, at least, it is an affirmation – that you can stand up to a system that does not include you, that does not affirm you, that does not embrace or express or even seem to notice your own experience. That we can be empowered to say: there is another way, no one can close off this path to God for me! That we can bring in something new, and we can hear the ineffable yearning... of those who do not have a voice. **It is a chapter that reminds us that serious social criticism is a part of our tradition; it need not set us apart from it.**

If ever we, if ever Israel, have needed to hear Hannah's voice, and to really see that she is there, right there, in the center of the sacred, in the front of the bus, it is now.

The past few years have produced scenes that should shock us to the core. It is an ugly tale of spit and broken glass, of rotten eggs and dirty diapers, of venom and violence we usually associate only with the most extreme segments... of other faiths. Is this a ghastly glimpse of a reactionary future or a last gasp of fanatics backed into a corner by the inexorable sweep of change? Here, in the middle of what we thought would be a decent and democratic Jewish state: gender-segregated buses, with women literally relegated to the

back of the bus, complete with screaming madmen hurling obscenities and lying down preventing forward movement when they cannot otherwise frighten or intimidate their victims into submission to what was, by law, supposed to be voluntary. It is here: advertisers acquiescing, knuckling under to pressure to depict no female faces or form on any of their posters or ads. It is here: a Jewish army built on equality, in which so-called religious male soldiers feel free to disobey orders and simply walk out of mandatory appearances where a woman sings. It is here: a neighborhood actually trying to enforce separate sidewalks for men and women on holidays, so men won't have to pass a corrupting influence on a sacred day. It is here: beastly-behavior, calling dignified women terrible names and throwing stones and much worse at those who wish to pray in their way at the most sacred site of our tradition. My friend and colleague, just last July, had an egg thrown at her as she stood there in her beautiful tallit; fortunately it bounced off, and broke on the stone floor...but the look in the eyes of those who confronted her was more than mild disagreement. It was wild, visceral, rabid and out of control. Ah, but there was a hand behind the hatred... One extremist rabbi, looking out at all of the imported young, Charedi girls who had been bused in to block Women of the Wall from gaining access to the women's section of the Kotel, made a sweeping gesture towards all of the girls. "You see these soldiers of God?" he asked. "Each of them will have ten children. We win."

Many of you know that I am... hesitant to give sermons which are too critical, or which paint too negative a picture about what is going on in Israel. As I have said in numerous ways in the past, I really believe that too many American Jews don't have enough of a core connection, not enough direct experience to place all the much-deserved criticism in the proper context. I am still afraid of that impulse to be disgusted by this mess. And so often the overriding concerns of security and survival, terrorists and territories push all these internally problematic pictures far into the background. Even this week, our minds are more on Syria – which I may address on Kol Nidrei -- and these gender issues fade.

But this issue, this question of the role and place of women in Israeli society, it has gotten too toxic to ignore. This is a battle that needs to be had out, now. And it is a battle that the liberal and democratic voices in Israel need to win...now. Because, even now, Charedi schoolchildren make up 18% of the students in Israeli schools. And that number is going up. They are getting an education largely devoid of math, without science, shielded from the internet, forbidden foreign languages, unacquainted with universal ethics, absent civics – in fact they are taught to despise the state in which they live – self-reinforcing the most narrow possible vision of Judaism. The result is now at least a fourth-generation of those completely unequipped to function in or earn a living from or productively contribute to a modern society.

It is getting so bad, the scenes are so ugly it is almost enough to pull back, to give up, to turn off and tune out, a plague on your house; you are strangers in a strange land and if you want to live in the 16th century do it yourself. We won't be there. Almost enough to turn away, except for two things. First: we can, without even trying too hard, come up with almost equally appalling scenes in our own country. (I mean, really, you want to be an elected official and you don't understand basic biology? And you're not ashamed of that?) And secondly, this Israeli tale, too, this modern story is more subtle than it seems at first.

For there are wonder women among us. Those who are standing up, and sticking out. Those who will not yield, and will not bow. Remember that Israel is a society with a female Chief Justice of the Supreme Court – which we have not had, female heads of three major political parties – which we have not had, and a female head of state in the past, which we have also not yet had. And of the heroines of the present, Hannahs of our time, suggested by a colleague this past summer, I name three: Daphni Leef, and Ruth Calderon, and Anat Hoffman.

Who are these women, these latter-day heroes? Daphni Leef is a filmmaker in her early 20's, who in June of 2011 received an eviction notice from the owner of her apartment in Tel Aviv. She began a search for someplace new to live – and discovered that rents in the city had more than doubled in the past five years. Unable to afford anything else, she pitched a tent on

Rothschild Boulevard. [Ironic, isn't it? That name, for this kind of protest? Was that a coincidence? I don't know.] She posted about her plight on Facebook, and hit a nerve beyond anything she could have anticipated. First there were five people with her, then ten, and by the middle of that summer hundreds of thousands of Israelis in every city in the country were pitching tents, or at least coming together, protesting the high cost of living in general, the erosion of the social contract, the glaring gap between rich and poor in a country which had once prided itself on everyone taking care of one another. It was a call to social justice that is shaking Israeli political culture to this day.

Who is Ruth Calderon? She is a woman of mixed Sephardic-Ashkenazic background, who earned a PhD in Talmud, founded Israel's first secular, pluralistic egalitarian yeshivah, introducing non-religious Israelis to the texts and sources of our heritage. She was recently elected to the Knesset with the Yesh Atid party, and stunned other lawmakers and the Jewish world with her opening speech – still available on You Tube -- a plea for tolerance based squarely on traditional sources, a Talmud lesson so compelling that she even drew ultra-Orthodox legislators into a substantive and respectful interaction. I think they were... shocked...to find themselves participating!

And Anat Hoffman? She is chair of Women of the Wall, the interdenominational women's prayer group which for more than 20 years now has sought to pray in the women's section of the wall on Rosh Chodesh, the first day of the Hebrew month, in an almost Orthodox-style service no less – or

at least a very traditional one, but with women wearing tallit and tefillin and reading from the Torah. She is also the Executive Director of our Reform movement's Israel Religious Action Center, where she has led Selma-style sit-ins on gender-segregated buses, built coalitions with liberal-minded Orthodox women, fought for religious rights in the courts, and stood up for equal treatment under the law for all minorities, whether Arabs, Christians or Muslims, or African or Asian refugees with nowhere else to go.

These three women, whose lips moved, their voices will be heard. It is, indeed that lesson from Hannah: that the voice of serious social criticism is part of the system. It need not, it should not, it must not set us apart from it!

To those of us who would give up in disgust remember: they need help. They need heart. They need us. They need you.

Instead of turning away, in the face of such courage we must not pull back but lean in. For an Israel we can still or may yet be proud of, we need to be there. In spirit. In mind. And in person.

To be there in spirit. As you leave the Sanctuary today, in the lobby, there are flyers and brochures about Women of the Wall. There are ways of supporting these progressive voices from here. And, indeed, I have heard there are plans for a day of solidarity with Women of the Wall and the women of

Israel, on November 4, 2013. I don't know details yet but hopefully we will all hear more about that as those plans materialize.

To be there in mind. I ask you today to make a commitment, to learn more about these topics. There are issues that center on an ancient stone plaza, the Western Wall: the Scharansky plan, the Robinson's arch alternative and other proposals. And there are issues of justice and gender, equality and morality that play out on the larger stage of the Jewish state. This Fall a consortium of Reform congregations will launch a new Israel initiative, with exciting opportunities about which you will hear shortly. The Israel initiative culminates with Engaging Israel 2.0, the next installment in the Shalom Hartman Institute's cutting edge approach to going beyond the crisis of the day, to drill down to deep values behind current events. I will be teaching that series, offered here at Temple Shalom.

To be there in person. There is no better form of engagement, of course, than one which involves our entire being – our heart, our mind...and our body. I have said before that I believe that nothing is as important for contemporary Jewish identity than a personal connection with Israel, and while possible to begin such a connection from a distance, nothing beats being there in person. Our next congregational trip to Israel will take place, we hope, on July 6-20, 2014. There are flyers in the lobby, and a planning meeting will take place on October 6. Please be in touch with me with any questions you have – your input can shape the content and character of such a trip.

In television terms, *Wonder Woman* seems almost as ancient as the original *Eyshet Chayil* by now. Recently I have been watching – sort of “binge-watching” -- the Netflix series *Orange is the New Black*. Apparently, the woman who was the inspiration for the show married her fiancée after her time in jail. (It’s not looking so good at the moment for their fictionalized counterparts.) And he, the real-life husband, is the creator of something called “the six word project.” I’m a rabbi; I don’t know if I can put anything in six words, but I’ll try:

Big trouble, but heroes need allies.

Towards the end of Proverbs 31, at the conclusion of *Eyshet Chayil*, we hear the following words: “*Oz v’hadar levusha, vatischak l’yom acharon.*” The words mean something like: “strength and dignity enrobe her.” And then, either: “she looks to the future cheerfully,” or, “She is optimistic about the future.”

There is so much that is so very wrong with the world, so many problems; there is so much work to do. The ugliness can overwhelm us, making it almost impossible to look ahead and smile.

But there are those who stand with dignity and strength, who ever keep the courage of their convictions. To know this... to know them... let us stand with them, with hope, and optimism, energy and excitement. And so we can, indeed, build a better world.

We have come a long way. And tomorrow can yet be better than today.

L’shanah Tovah.