Hannah’s Children: A Midrash

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Every time she went up to the house of the Lord, the other would taunt her, so that she wept and would not eat. Her husband Elkanah said to her, “Hannah, why are you crying and why aren’t you eating? Why are you so sad? Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?” I Samuel 1:7-8

Barren. Infertile and void. An unproductive field. I cannot tell if this is a state of lacking, or the precursor to becoming. My hands seek the surface of my belly. Beneath my palms, I feel the flutter of my longing, a beginning space in my core that waits for something to take root and grow. If I cannot have babies, what good am I? I see the wives and mothers in our village whispering when they think I am not looking. They smile at me with pity. Elkanah is kind, but selfish. Peninnah has already given him sons to protect his lineage. He does not need me to bear children, and perhaps does not want me to, because then he will no longer have my full attention and care.

Each year the family goes to Shiloh, to the house of Hashem, the One God—Elkanah, me, Peninnah and her brood of squawking offspring. Her belly is always full, and so is her mouth. “Look at you,” she says. Her lips curl into a sneer, “You are nothing.” Perhaps I should not believe her, but I do. In my emptiness, I stop eating. There seems to be nothing inside me worth nourishing. But my rival, even with all those children, is an unhappy woman. Like our ancestor, Leah, Peninnah is not loved. Elkanah loves only me. What will Peninnah’s children, born from her sadness, produce in this world? If by some miracle my own womb finally opens, will my infants be anything more than the same hollow husks?

Only once did I feel life quicken inside me, but after the third moon it slipped from my body, a small lump of dead flesh that I carried to the river at night and set free. Like a fish, it slid into the water and the current carried it away. I brought a jug to wash the uncleanliness of blood and death. The clay jar was smooth in my hands and the sand
gritty on my bare knees where I knelt at the river's edge, emptying and filling, over and over. I dipped the jar into the cool water, turning the open mouth into the current to catch the swirling water in its womb-like body, open and waiting for the life-giving waters to fill it until it could hold no more. I lifted the jug, dripping, and held the weight of it in my hands. My arm muscles quivered, then I tilted slowly, and let the water pour out, returning it to its source. I continued like this until the movement had no purpose beyond the simple act of itself. Emptying and filling. Emptying and filling. My husband padded down to the river from time to time to retrieve me, but the midwives from the village kept watch and told him, “It's not time yet.” My tears flowed until they became like the stream, until I no longer knew if I was the stream or the vessel, and the bloodstained image in my mind, of the little boy that swam out of my womb too soon, was returned to some place of beginning. I am empty, but the river is full.

Now I go to the temple at Shiloh to pray alone. Into the hours I whisper, hoping something will arise and take hold of me—some aspect of the One God or the host of old gods and fertility goddesses that populate this land with fist-sized clay figurines. Perhaps the One God and the many are all part of the same river, and their combined force will drive out the blackness and fill me with life. I feel like I am still kneeling at the river, emptying and filling. The words fill and tip from my mouth.

“Dear God, I am missing some part of myself. Where must I look to find it? I have searched in my family, in my village, in the same old rituals and rounds of time. The same stale blood that pours monthly from a crack in my body. The same seasons of 'I am not enough. I must become more.' I am wearing away, grain by grain, like the river erodes hard stone, until I am numb, naked, nothing. Please, God, if you fill my womb, I will give you anything.”

I travel a long distance on my knees in that small country temple, candle-lit and smoky from incense, by the time Eli the priest finds me muttering soundlessly, and
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accuses me of intoxication. I am intoxicated, but not with wine. The sound of the priest's voice breaks my trance and pulls me into the open heart of my prayer, and I see that I have already arrived where I need to go.

“Please, God,” I say once more, “If you open my womb, I will do anything—even give up my first child to Your service.”

My breath slices my throat like shards of glass. I have made an oath that now splits me apart. As soon as I say it, as soon as I offer up my first, still yet-to-be conceived child, I feel a flutter and kick deep in my belly, and I know it will happen, that a child will come—and that I will have to bring him here to serve something bigger than I can imagine. The social standing of motherhood does not matter any more. I already feel enormous, as if I contain and can birth endless possibilities into the world.

The deaf priest does not yet understand. He cannot decipher the new language I am speaking. He still only sees my lips moving. Eventually, I remember how to form words he will recognize: “If God will open my womb,” I tell him plainly, “I will lend my firstborn to His service.” Eli looks into my eyes and finally sees. It is as if feathers have grown in my soul and I am light. The priest nods and agrees that it will be as I have seen. His own sons will not serve the world. He has not taught them well enough.

I return home and finally eat. I taste an explosion of sweet and tart on my tongue when my teeth break open the smooth purple skin of a grape, and when I taste the salt on Elkanah's skin when we lie together down at the river. For nine months, as the baby grows inside me, I have the same dream: Barefoot, I walk to the river’s edge. I fashion children out of fallen feathers, rounded river stones, clay, and sand. They are almond-colored, olive green, earth brown, and midnight blue. They come alive and dance in the water, their bodies sinuous and shiny. Sometimes they appear voluptuous, curvy, and female. But from other angles, they seem hard and polished, muscular, masculine. The sun glints off their slick torsos and limbs, splashing in pools of clear light. Eventually they
move downstream and around the bend. I always allow them to go, knowing there will be more, knowing they never really belonged to me at all.

*The Story of Hannah*—Summarized from 1Samuel 1.
A man named Elkanah, from Ramah, had two wives: Peninnah had children, while Hannah was childless. Elkanah went to the temple at Shiloh every year to worship and offer a sacrifice for his wives and children. Even though Hannah was barren, she was his favorite, but Peninnah taunted her and made her miserable. Hannah would not eat during the sacrifices, which worried her husband. One year, weeping, Hannah prayed silently to God: She asked Him to open her womb, and she vowed that if she were granted a male child, she would dedicate him to the Lord for all the days of his life. Eli the priest saw Hannah's lips moving, but heard no words. Believing she was drunk, he chastised her. Hannah explained her grief and desire and Eli sent her home with the blessing that she receive what she had prayed for. Hannah conceived and bore a son, whom she named Samuel. She brought him to the priest when he was weaned and “lent” him to the service of God for the duration of his life.