

**“Don’t Jump to Conclusions, Seek Out the Facts First” –
Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon
By Rabbi Brad Bloom – 5779 September 10, 2018**

A woman is standing inside the ancient Israelite holy shrine at Shiloh by herself praying to God when a man, Eli, the chief priest of this sacred place, sees her and grows annoyed.

Who was this mysterious woman? Her name was Hannah and she was the first wife of man named Elkana who had two wives-Hannah and Peninah. The latter already had two children but Hannah was barren. It used to be that folks would go on a pilgrimage to Shiloh, the holy site of the Israelites before Jerusalem became the unified capital of the Jewish people. So Elkana brought his wives and his children with him for this moment to offer the sacrifices to God. In the meantime Eli, the chief priest at Shiloh, had two sons whose names were Pinhas and Hophni. Even though she had no children Elkana gave some portion of his family sacrifice to her as a sign of his love for her. Her rival Peninah did whatever she could to irritate and harass Hannah.

So what was Hannah to do with the empty feeling both physically and emotionally? According to the story told in the book of first Samuel, Hannah wept bitterly at her condition and showed her melancholy despite all attempts by her husband to comfort her. To no avail she was stricken with sadness because she could not bear a child. Finally after all her prayers, Hannah stands before the holy site at Shilo and makes an oath that if God will enable her to bear a child she would promise to bring that child back to Shiloh and give that child to the priests to be raised in the service of God.

Still Hannah keeps on praying. Eli notices this strange woman by herself moving her lips but unable to hear exactly what she was saying. He immediately assumed the worse and castigated her. Thinking she was drunk he says, “How long will you be drunk? Put away your wine from you.”

Hannah replies that she is not drunk, but, simply a woman sad and disheartened and praying to God for a child. She tells him she is pouring out her heart to God. Eli accepts her claim and tells her to leave and go in peace. She eventually became pregnant. She gives birth to a boy and names him Samuel. She weans him for about three years and fulfills her promise by bringing the lad back to Shiloh and to Eli the priest. She gives him the child to raise him in the Priesthood of ancient Israel.

Samuel became the great judge of the Jewish people and prophet who would one day anoint Saul and eventually David as kings of Israel. Hannah eventually even had three more children. At the end of the day, even though Eli the Priest blesses Elkana and their family, God did not view him and his two sons favorably. God tells him that his sons will not succeed him nor will any of his family line become priests in the future. The rest of the chapters in First Samuel tell the story of the ascendancy of Samuel as chief religious leader of the people.

A tragic end to Eli's lineage considering that they might have lasted for generations to come. It seemed back to prejudging and jumping to conclusions to condemn Hannah. He assumed the worst and was completely wrong and the rest is history.

Part of this story tells us about the dangers of jumping to conclusions and making humiliating and incorrect assumptions about another person's actions that turn out to be wrong. Is there a point here from the Hannah story of this morning's Rosh Hashanah Haphtarach for us to consider when we reflect upon our own behavior at this season?

The rabbis in Pirke Avot say, 'judge each person based upon their merit.' In other words give someone the benefit of the doubt before making judgments about their actions let alone their intentions.

Today does it feel like we relish the attack posture looking to find the worst in people? How can we learn to get the facts first before rushing to judgment about another person's actions? When will society value the ethos of get the facts first before jumping to a conclusion? When will we resist the temptation of our own self righteousness, like Eli the Priest, to humiliate another human being?

The wisdom of the Rabbis tell us "Do not look at the bottle, rather, seek out what is inside it" (Ethics of the Fathers). Why do people have so much trouble following this ethos? Even science says that our neurology is inclined to make us treat people unfairly. For example, researchers believe an area of the brain causes us to switch from gradual learning to 'one-shot' learning - or jumping to conclusions. They believe that we are most likely to jump to conclusions when we are uncertain about a situation. They say that the more uncertainty there is about the relationship, the more likely it is that one-shot learning will take place. One scientist at CalTech said in an article, 'If you are uncertain, or lack evidence, about whether a particular outcome was caused by a preceding event, you are more likely to quickly associate them together.'

Aside from the neurological perspective, we have the spiritual one. It explains how we fear new things in life, why we treat people not like us poorly and how we treat people in a demeaning way who do not fit neatly into the categories that we create for ourselves. It could be race, religion, ethnic groups, sexual orientation, gender (like Hannah) and age - to name a few examples. Then consider the consequences when we discover that what we assumed and pre-judged about another person was wrong. The consequences of our ignoring the facts will come back to bite us. As Proverbs says;

"Do not hastily bring into court, for what will you do in the end, when your neighbor puts you to shame?" (25:8)

Judaism has all sorts of maxims warning us about not pre-judging people. "Do not attribute the fault in you to your neighbor" (BTalmud Baba Metzia 59b). "Do not judge your neighbor until you have put yourself in his place." (Pirke Avot). Then a story is told about a man who was hired out to another man for a period of three years service. Yom Kippur came and the term of work ended as the man asked for his pay. The employer said, "I'm sorry I can't pay you with money, fruit, grain, land, cattle or furnishings." The employee left without anything.

After the holiday of Sukkoth ended, the employer found the laborer and brought his accumulated wage and many more gifts.

He said to the worker, “What did you think when I told you I had nothing left to pay you?”

The man answered, “Well sir I thought that maybe in an unguarded moment you donated everything to the Temple in Jerusalem.”

“You are right,” said the employer. “I was angry with my son then. (So I was going to give the Temple my wealth to forgive him for misdeeds.) Later the sages annulled my vow. Since you have judged me by giving me the benefit of the doubt for my intentions, may God judge you likewise.” (BTalmud Shabbat 127).

I hope this story reminds us of these important principles about jumping to conclusions about people.

1. Be thoughtful before making that nasty comment or judgment. Remember you can take back bad thoughts but we can't take back so easily when we utter those words.
2. Look at your own behavior before judging someone else's actions.
3. Learn how to give people the benefit of the doubt, at least for the first time.
4. Feel good about you because when we make a habit of being judgmental about people and engage in prejudging people without the facts then it says more about us than the person being unfairly judged. Remember judging a person does not define who they are as much as it defines who we are.
5. Avoid the fight-flight mode meaning when we attack another person verbally and judge them and then we fire and then flee the situation. How is that fair to the person we have just tried to destroy?
6. Education, try to understand where people are coming from before making the assumption about their motivations.

Our Tradition teaches that prejudging, or jumping to conclusions about people is wrong. Judaism, instead, always teaches us to see the truth of words and intentions before judging another person. The Psalmist said; “Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart: (51:6).Our teachings urge us to take a step back and reject one shot learning. We are living in a society today, especially with 24hr news that whether we are judging news events or people in our community or in our family to be extra careful before reaching a final judgment about another person.

Creating a false narrative about another person dehumanizes them and sets us all farther apart from the standards of high ethical behavior incumbent upon us because that is what our religion teaches. Learning how to listen properly and assess people's actions is critical. Only God can truly judge our intentions even though we still use our predisposition to judge them harshly. If we do that then everyone gets hurt. Seek peace and pursue it means seek out the truth and the facts and pursue it before confronting another person. Why is this maxim so simple to grasp and so hard to practice? The answer requires us to think and reflect on our own actions.