

09/18/14

Barren: A Fertile Encounter for the New Year

Dr. Judith Rosenbaum | The Bronfman Fellowships | Caring Committee Torah

This year, as part of the work of the BYFI Alumni Caring Committee, we will be hosting a monthly Dvar Torah on Facing Life's Challenges. This month we reflect on the experience of infertility, raised by the traditional Haftorah reading for Rosh haShana which tells of Hannah's Prayer, a barren woman on the outskirts of society who became the mother of Samuel the Prophet ([Read the Haftorah text here](#)). In this piece, Judith Rosenbaum reflects on her own relationship with this text in her life.

Dr. Judith Rosenbaum ('90), recent BYFI Faculty member and new Executive Director of Jewish Women's Archive (www.jwa.org), lives in Boston with her husband and two children, Maayan and Aviv. As a BYFI alum she received an Alumni Venture Fund grant for her work on contemporary Bat Mitzva celebrations. This piece was [originally featured on Kveller](#).

I had been [trying to get pregnant](#) for a year. Twelve months of charting my body's rhythms, of turning sex from an art into a [science](#); twelve times allowing my hopes to soar and then scraping them (and sometimes myself) off the floor.



I felt like I was beginning to lose my mind. Every pregnant woman on the street was a personal affront, every [baby shower](#) invitation an assault. When Britney Spears announced her pregnancy, I ranted about it to anyone who would listen. I organized our schedule around my ovulation and measured upcoming events by what month I would be in if we were successful this time around. I stopped sleeping. The lack of control was maddening for a control freak like me, but even worse was the waiting. I'm task oriented; if I had to wait around for this pregnancy thing to happen, I needed to feel like I was taking concrete steps that would contribute to our eventual success. Give up caffeine? Done. Track my temperature? Daily. [Obsessively](#) check for fertile cervical mucous? More often than I care to admit. Though it put us into a new and scary category of "medical problem," I was actually relieved when the insurance company finally cleared us to

09/18/14

begin [fertility treatment](#), because it meant there would be new action to take and new partners helping us in this seemingly intractable process of getting pregnant. As the new Jewish year approached, however, I felt stuck, frustrated, and powerless. We had to wait until the beginning of my next cycle to do the first round of fertility tests and then it would be at least another month until we could begin any treatment. What was I supposed to do in the meantime? In the dark hours of my insomnia, I picked up a book about the [High Holy Days](#), figuring I might as well use my very empty time for some spiritual reflection.



That was when I remembered the story of [Hannah](#) and suddenly found myself in unexpectedly comforting company. Hannah was happily married to a devoted husband, but did not have any children. (She also had a very fertile sister wife, which made her situation worse than mine). Though her husband wondered why his love wasn't enough for her, Hannah yearned for a child. One year, when her family made pilgrimage to the temple in Shiloh, Hannah's desperation brought her to appeal directly to the ultimate Source. Her silent prayer was so fervent that the priest who witnessed it was sure she was drunk. The pure intensity of her prayer not only worked—she conceived—it also earned her honored status in the eyes of the rabbis of the Talmud, who cite her petition as the model of heartfelt worship.

Though I had no intention of offering any child I bore to the service of the Temple priests as Hannah did, I felt a kinship with her. The determination and boldness of her plea bolstered my own growing urge to call out to God with wild abandon.

09/18/14

Hannah's words gave me the opportunity to do so, and I requested the honor of reading the Haftarah on Rosh Hashanah. Standing on the *bima* that day, I began chanting quietly, hesitantly, a little bit afraid of my own emotions. My voice wavered but soon rose strong and clear. I immersed myself in the words so deeply that when I reached the final verses— my eyes brimming with tears, my voice thick—I was surprised to look up and see the congregation seated before me. Like Hannah, I had been alone with my impassioned prayer, momentarily unaware of the others in the room.

I've chanted that Rosh Hashanah Haftarah every year since then. Sometimes it's the only time I've been present in the service, the remaining hours spent chasing my [twins](#) around outside or noshing with them on apples and honey. And every year, it's meant something different to me—a prayer of thanks the second year, when my belly was big and full and my breath short from the two little beings kicking where my lungs used to be. The next year, as I approached weaning, sadness seeped into my chanting, and I focused on the verses in which Hannah [weaned](#) her son, Samuel, and brought him to the priests to begin his service. Each year, the haftarah is my own deep, unmediated mother's prayer of gratitude and yearning, looking forward to what the new year will bring even as I mourn what is lost in time's swift passage.