BOOK REVIEW

The Invention of Monotheist Ethics: Exploring the Book of Samuel by Hillel Millgram (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010), 2 volumes, 596 pages. Reviewed by Jack Riemer.

The Book of Samuel is one of my favorite books of the Bible. I love it for many reasons. One is because of the theme. For me, it is a play in three acts. In Act One, it is the story of old Samuel trying to hold on to power too long, and of young Saul trying to grab hold of power too soon. In Act Two, it becomes the story of old Saul trying to hold on to power too long, and of young David trying to seize power too soon. Then, in Act Three, it becomes the story of old David trying to hold on to power too long, and of his children trying to seize power too soon. It is the biblical equivalent of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, so I am always deeply moved by it.

Also, there are remarkable women in this book: Hannah, Michal, Abigail, Bathsheba, the Witch of Endor, and others. No other book in the Bible has so many women characters or such a fascinating group of women as this book does, and for that alone I am drawn to it.

Then there is David. Only Moses gets more space in the Bible than David does. He is a great shepherd, a great fighter, a great musician, a great sinner, and a great repenter. You have to love him, and be drawn into his story.

There is powerful drama in this book: The scene in which David defeats Goliath, the one in which David laments the loss of Jonathan, and the one in which David is heartbroken by the death of his son Absalom – these scenes are bound to move all but the most callous reader.

I love this book, so I delight in teaching it every chance I get. I had thought that I was now familiar with all the commentaries on it: Jewish or Christian, medieval or modern, scholarly or imaginative. But I must confess that Rabbi Hillel Millgram's new two-volume commentary on the Book of Samuel (which is exactly what this book is, despite what the title may imply) opened my eyes to many, many nuances that I had never noticed before. On almost every page, he enabled me to see a story that I thought I understood in a fresh and different way.

Rabbi Jack Riemer is a frequent reviewer for journals of Jewish thought in America and abroad. He is the co-editor of So That Your Values Live On: A Treasury of Ethical Wills*, and the editor of the three volumes of* The World of the High Holy Days.

For example, I thought I understood the first chapter of the book, the story of Hannah. After all, I reread it every year on Rosh Ha-Shanah, when it serves as the *haftarah* (prophetical reading) for the first day. However, Rabbi Millgram has enabled me to see at least three nuances in the first chapter that I had never previously observed.

First, I always thought the story was all about Hannah, the woman who could not have a child and who was therefore miserable and unable to participate in the festive meal. Yet Rabbi Millgram made me realize that this is the story of what he calls "a fractured family," all three of whose members – the husband, the other wife, and Hannah herself – are desperately unhappy. Elkanah, the husband, is miserable because, no matter how many presents he gives to Hannah, and no matter how kindly he speaks to her, nothing can comfort her. Peninah, the rival wife, is unhappy, because even though she has given Elkanah sons and daughters, they are not enough to buy his love. And so the three of them sit together in the annex to the Sanctuary at Shiloh, each absorbed in his or her own pain. Unable to even taste her food although her husband has given her the best portion, Hannah finally slips away from the table, goes back into the Sanctuary and prays to God. The other two are probably so immersed in their own unhappiness that they don't seem to notice her leaving.

The second nuance in the story that he has taught me is the irony in the fact that Eli, the priest in charge of the Sanctuary, the professional expert on worship, is unable to tell the difference between a drunkard and someone pouring her heart out to God. Since God can do so, He hears Hannah's prayer and gives her a child, one who will end up being a more faithful servant of the Lord than Eli's own children.

The third nuance that I learned from Rabbi Millgram is this: Hannah had surely prayed many times before. What was so different and so special about her prayer on this occasion? Every other time she must have prayed: "God, please give me a child." This time, she begged: "Please give me a child so that I may raise him up to Your service." That is an entirely different kind of prayer. There are many single women, and even some married women, who would be glad to have a husband who loves them; but until then, Hannah could only brood over what she did not have. That day in the Sanctuary, she began to think about what she could give, not just about what she did not

have. When you begin to think that way, about what you can give and not only about what you lack, your whole perspective on life changes. Hannah became a different person. Had she not been given a child, she might have adopted one or decided to become a teacher. That is one reason why we read her story on Rosh Ha-Shanah. Hannah is the model of prayerfulness, and her life serves as an example of how prayer can transform us.

There are a great many fine scholarly insights in this book, but the ones that impress me most of all show us how to live. Rabbi Millgram's commentary on the Book of Samuel provides fascinating glimpses of what life was like in biblical times, and it clarifies many passages in the biblical text; but for the general reader, what makes his book so valuable are the lessons it contains about living here and now which he has found in the ancient text. This is why I recommend his book, not only to scholars but to all who regard the Bible as *Torat Hayyim*, a living Torah, which speaks to us today just as it spoke to our ancestors some 3,000 years ago.

Full text of articles from Volumes 14 - 39 is available for download on our website:
http://jbq.jewishbible.org/jbq-past-issues/