

Why Do We Read the Story of Chana on Rosh Hashana?

Chana and the Essence of Effectual Prayer

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On the first day of Rosh Hashana, we read as the *haftara* the story of Chana (*Shmuel Aleph, perakim aleph and bet*) – Chana's struggle with childlessness, her reaching out to God in prayer, God's response in the birth of her son Shmuel, and her consequent prayer of thanksgiving. Clearly, Chazal recognize a fundamental connection between the account of Chana's experience and the themes of Rosh Hashana. This correlation is strengthened by the following Talmudic passages:

On Rosh Hashana, God remembered [for childbirth] Sarah, Rachel, and Chana

Rosh Hashana 11a

How many most important laws [regarding prayer] can be learned from these verses relating to Chana!

Berachot 31a

בראש השנה נפקדה שרה רחל וחנה
ראש השנה יא.

כמה הלכתא גברוותא איכא למשמע מהני
קראי דחנה
ברכות לא.

Evidently, Chazal see Chana as an exemplary role model for efficacious prayer. What is unique about the prayer of Chana? When thinking about prayer, we often focus on God's role - praising God, asking things from God, thanking God. Chana teaches us to look at *tefilla* from another viewpoint as well. As we shall see, for Chana, the experience leading to effectual prayer was first and foremost an experience of introspection, a dialogue within herself, as a precursor to her dialogue with God. Chana teaches us that transformative *tefilla* begins with an intense internal experience which enables and empowers us, with God's response and help, to affect change in our lives.

Chana's Process of Change

Let us consider Chana and the dilemma in which she finds herself. As the *perakim* opens, Chana is at a fixed point in her life. Every year, she accompanies her husband Elkana on his pilgrimage to

Shiloh, and as the years pass, Chana finds herself returning to the same place, to the same circumstances. Chana wants change – she wants a child. Presumably, Chana hopes each year that the following one will be different, and she experiences the bitterness of recognizing that the change she desires has not occurred.

And as he did so year by year, when she went up to the house of the Lord, so she vexed her; therefore she wept, and would not eat.

Shmuel 1 1:7

וכן יעשה שנה בשנה מדי עלתה בבית ה'
 כן תכעסנה ותבכה ולא תאכל:
שמואל א א:ז

Let us now reflect upon the central people in Chana's life, and their impact upon her: her husband Elkana, and his other wife, Penina.

And it came to pass upon a day, when Elkana sacrificed, that he gave to Penina his wife, and to all her sons and her daughters, portions; But unto Chana he gave a double portion; for he loved Chana, but the Lord had shut up her womb. And her rival vexed her sore, to make her fret, because the Lord had shut up her womb.

Shmuel 1 1:4-6

ויהי היום ויזבח אלקנה ונתן לפננה
 אשתו ולכל בניה ובנותיה מנות:
 ולחנה יתן מנה אחת אפים כי את
 חנה אהב וה' סגר רחמה: וכעסתה
 צרתה גם כעס בעבור הרעמה כי
 סגר ה' בעד רחמה:
שמואל א א:ד-ו

According to Chazal (cited on the *pasuk* by Rashi) Penina's intentions are motivated by piety – she wishes to induce Chana to pray (presumably translating the word *har'imah* to mean “to make a loud noise”, as in the *pasuk* "ירעם הים ומלואו" - Let the sea, and all its fullness, roar” (Divrei HaYamim I 16:32). On the *peshat* level, the tension between the two wives is palpable: Chana watches as Penina and her many offspring receive multiple portions of food from Elkana, reinforcing her own lone and forlorn status, and Penina watches as Chana receives the choice portion from Elkana, reinforcing Elkana's preference for Chana over Penina. According to the *peshat*, then, we can deduce that as result of the jealous tension between herself and Chana, Penina is attempting to make Chana feel angry, frustrated and hurt, and trying to induce Chana to cry out against God in anger or rebellion.

Elkana, out of love and caring for his wife, implores her to accept her situation. He says to her

And Elkana her husband said unto her: 'Chana, why weepest thou? and why eatest thou not? and why is thy heart grieved? am not I better to thee than ten sons?'

Shmuel 1 1:8

ויאמר לה אלקנה אישה חנה למה תבכי
 ולמה לא תאכלי ולמה ירע לבבך הלווא
 אנכי טוב לך מעשרה בנים:
שמואל א א:ח

Penina urges Chana to bitterness; Elkana urges her to make peace with her lot, and accept her fate as it is.

Elkana and Penina have very different motivations and goals in their communications to Chana, but ultimately, the message to Chana from them is the same. They are both implying to Chana that she is powerless to effect change.

Chana, however, listens to neither of them, and instead does something quite different and even daring. She does not become angry or embittered, but neither does she become passive and hopeless. Rather, she decides to take action. If God will not come to her, she decides, she will go to God. Chana, quietly and resolutely, telling no one of her plans, brings herself to the *mishkan* in Shiloh, and engages in a prayer so personal and private that we are not told of its content, and which Chazal consider the ground-breaking template for silent and personal prayer. Chana “*midaberet al liba*” (1:13), she speaks to and within her heart. Only after this introspective experience does she turn to God. Chana engages in an inner transformative experience, which culminates in her *neder* –her vow to dedicate her son to God, committing herself to a different life course, a new course of action and personal initiative. In other words, Chana uses *tefilla* as a medium of personal change.

Chana’s Vow

By committing her unborn child to a life of *nezirut* and service of God, Chana is proposing something quite radically different from what *Bnei Yisrael* in this era have experienced up to this point. It is a time of spiritual darkness for *Bnei Yisrael*. *Sefer Shoftim* has closed on a note of sinfulness, anarchy, and distance from God (consider the last stories – those of the idol of the house of Micha, the rape and murder of the *pilegesh* in Giv’a, and the civil war between the tribes in which the entire tribe of Binyamin is almost entirely wiped out). It is instructive to consider the parallels between the story of the last *shofet*, Shimshon, and the story of Chana. Both Shimshon and Shmuel are *nezirim*, both attain this status pre-birth from the experience of their mothers. Why then, does Shimshon’s leadership, while ending in a blaze of glory, nevertheless produce no lasting results for the people, while Shmuel haNavi ushers in the era of the kings?

It is precisely in the uniqueness of Chana’s *neder* that we find the solution. Shimshon is a final opportunity provided by God, engineered primarily by Divine communication through an angel, to effect change and salvation in this time period characterized by passivity and despair. By contrast, Chana’s attempt at achieving salvation depends not on passivity or on reliance solely on deliverance from Above, but rather on initiative and action from below.

Thus, out of the depths of her crisis, Chana proposes a new resolution that she had not yet previously considered. She uses her difficult circumstance as a springboard for a new life course for herself and for her child. In doing so, Chana’s personal initiative becomes transformative not only in her own life, but for the entire nation as well. It is Shmuel HaNavi who is finally able to lead the nation out of the darkness and cyclical rut of *Sefer Shoftim* to an era of *teshuva* and change, and of ushering *Am Yisrael* into the era of kingship.

Chana’s message, in essence, is to call upon God as a partner in growth and change. She exhorts: I am not a victim in the hands of fate, but neither is the entire burden for my life’s outcome upon me alone. With God as my partner, I can shape my own future destiny. The outcome of this belief is the promise that she makes to God, and when she given a child, this dual perspective and partnership with God is reflected in the name she gives the child.

And it came to pass, when the time was come about, that Chana conceived, and bore a son; and she called his name Shmuel:

ויהי לתקפות הימים ותהר חנה
ותלד בן ותקרא את שמו שמואל כי

'because I have asked him of the Lord.'

Shmuel 1 1:20

Therefore I also have lent him to the Lord; as long as he liveth he is lent to the Lord.' And he worshipped the Lord there.

Shmuel 1 1:28

מה שאלתיו:

שמואל א א:כ

וגם אנכי השאלתהו לה' כל הימים אשר היה הוא שאול לה' וישתחו שם לה':

שמואל א א:כח

Ki mei Hashem She'altiv -- God has given him to me – *vegam hu sha'ul LaShem* – and at the same time, I have given and consecrated him to God.

Shirat Chana

These themes continue to be reflected in *Shirat Chana*, Chana's song of thanksgiving after Shmuel is born. In *Shirat Chana*, Chana asserts that God is in control of all, but that with insight into man's innermost thoughts and heart, God can bring about the most unexpected and extreme changes⁵. Essentially, Chana is championing the philosophy expounded by Rav Soloveitchik many centuries later in *Kol Dodi Dofek*, when he reflects upon the question of man's role in shaping his destiny.

Rav Soloveitchik describes the unconstructive experience of the man of fate, who is powerless in the face of his suffering. He describes two responses, which correspond entirely with the approaches suggested by Penina and Elkana.

*The fear of extinction assails him and crushes his body and soul. The sufferer wanders lost in the vacuousness of this world, with God's fear spread over him and his anger tensed against it, he is entirely shaken and agitated.*⁶

From the question and the inquiry ... he comes to terms with the evil and attempts to gloss it over. The sufferer employs the power of rational abstraction to the point of self-deception.

Neither of these attitudes, states Rav Soloveitchik, is the desired response to suffering. Instead, Rav Soloveitchik insists upon a different approach, that of the man of destiny:

*According to Judaism, man's mission in this world is to turn fate into destiny – an existence that is passive and influenced into an existence that is active and influential ... full of vision, will, and initiative. ... Thus he becomes God's partner in the work of creation.*⁷

⁵ See for example verses 2 and 3

אין-קדוש כיהוה, כי אין בלתי; ואין צור, כאלהינו. אל-תרבו תדברו גְבוּהָהּ גְבוּהָהּ, יצא עַתְק מִפִּיכֶם: כי אל דַּעוֹת יְהוָה, ולא (ולו) בתְּכֵנו עֲלָלוֹת.

"There is none holy as the Lord, for there is none beside Thee; neither is there any rock like our God. Multiply not exceeding proud talk; let not arrogance come out of your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by Him actions are weighed."

In the *shira*, Chana brings multiple examples of radical changes that God can effect in human experience: moving from poverty to wealth and vice versa, from childlessness to childbirth and from parenthood to losing children, power and weakness, life and death, etc.

⁶ *Kol Dodi Dofek*, Soloveitchik, R. Joseph B. Translated by David Z. Gordon. Edited by Jeffrey Woolf, New York: Yeshiva University and Hoboken, NJ: Ktav 2006. P.3-6.

⁷ Ibid.

Man, writes Rav Soloveitchik, should neither view himself as a victim of a jesting and meaningless fate (as Penina implies), neither should he acquiesce in passive silence to what he perceives as God's will (as Elkana suggests), rather he should view himself as an active participant, together with God, in shaping his own life outcome.

Chana and Rosh Hashana

The link between *Shirat Chana* and Rosh Hashana is reinforced when we consider the central themes of the day as they are expressed in the *kedushat hayom* – the portion of the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer of *musaf* that is unique to Rosh Hashana – *Malchuyot*, *Zichronot*, and *Shofarot*. Essentially, these themes are the themes of *Shirat Chana*: *Malchuyot* - God is King and is in control of the universe, *Zichronot* - God's ways are just, and God hears, retains memory of, and responds to human initiative and supplication, and finally, *Shofarot* - ultimately God's rule and justice will be revealed to all in the era of the final redemption. As the concluding *pasuk* of *Shirat Chana* states:

... *The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; and He will give strength unto His king, and exalt the horn of His anointed.*

Shmuel 1 2:10

... ה' ידין אפסי ארץ ויתן עז
למלכו וירם קרן משיחו:
שמואל א ב:י

This, then, can be seen as the essence of *tefilla*, and this is the lesson we can learn from Chana. *Tefilla* is about reaching inward, confronting, facing, and discovering our innermost selves, and then turning toward God in the recognition that we need Him and His help to accomplish and achieve our goals.

In the words of Rav Soloveitchik in his essay *Redemption, Prayer and Talmud Torah*:

*In short, through prayer, man finds himself... It tells man the story of his hidden hopes and expectations. It teaches him how to behold the vision, and how to strive to realize this vision. In a word, man finds his need-awareness, himself, in prayer.*⁸

May we all experience the ability and opportunity to deepen our understanding of *tefilla*, to engage in sincere prayer, and, like Chana, to learn how to become partners with God in shaping and creating a meaningful personal destiny, this Rosh Hashana and always.

⁸ *Redemption, Prayer and Talmud Torah*; Tradition 17:2, Spring, 1978, p55-73.