

Rabbi Rebecca Richman

Rosh Hashanah 5781 Introduction to Haftarah Reading

1 Samuel 1:1-2:10

The haftarah reading for the first day of Rosh Hashanah, 1 Samuel 1:1-2:10, presents us with yet another biblical woman who is, at the start of the story, barren and desperately wanting a child. Chanah waits for quite some time, yearning all the while. Ultimately, her whole-hearted prayer to G!d became a model for the rabbis as they instructed each other and generations to come on the correct, most impactful way to pray.

1 Sameul 1:6 closes with the words כִּי־סָגַר יְהוָה בְּעַד רַחֲמָהּ - *G!d had closed her womb*. The word for womb, *rechem*, shared a the three-letter *shoresh*, or root, with the word *rachamim*, often translated as compassion or mercy. So although Chanah's womb, *rechem*, was closed at the start of her story, the very word for womb is, in a sense, a hint at the *rachamim* (the mercy) that would come her way through her story - she would, ultimately, bear a child, Samuel.

But her journey to motherhood was long and painful, and she prayed with a fervor and in a fashion we don't see from many other biblical characters.

וְהָיָא מִרַת גִּפְשׁ [וַתִּתְפַּלֵּל עַל־יְהוָה וּבְכָה תְּבַכֶּה]:

From her place of bitterness and resentment, she prayed to G!d, weeping as she did (1:10).

Chanah does not leave behind her resentment, her hurt, her yearning - she brings those hard feelings to her prayer, which, in turn, is heartfelt.

וְחָנָּה הָיָא מְדַבֵּרַת עַל-לִבָּהּ [רַק שִׁפְתֶיהָ נָעוֹת וְקוֹלָהּ לֹא יִשְׁמָע
וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ עָלֶי לְשֹׁכְרָה]:

Now Chanah was praying in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard. So Eli (the priest, watching from the doorpost of the room) thought she was drunk (1:13).

Rashi explains that Eli thought Chanah was drunk *because they were not accustomed to praying b'lachash, silently* (Rashi on 1 Samuel 1:13).

But, as it would turn out, Chanah's mode of prayer - emotional, quiet, filled with the movement of her lips, and sober - these qualities would become central to the rabbis' idea of what and how prayer should be.

The Talmud records that Rav Chamunah said: *How many significant halakhot (laws) can be derived from these verses of Chanah's prayer?* The rabbis declare in this passage declare four halakhot, four laws regarding prayer:

1. Like Chanah, לְמַתְפַּלֵּל צָרִיךְ שִׁיכֻיֵּין לִבּוֹ - *one who prays must focus their heart*
2. Chanah moved her lips as she prayed. From here, the *halakha* is that *one who prays must enunciate words with their lips*
3. Chanah's voice could not be heard (even though she moved her lips), so too the rabbis teach that *a person is forbidden to raise their voice during the Amidah prayer*
4. Chanah prayed powerfully in her sobriety. And so the rabbis rule that *a drunk person is forbidden to pray* (Berakhot 31a).

These halakhot, these laws, inspired by Chanah's prayer, are important for us all to internalize, especially in this moment.

We cannot leave behind the hard stuff when we come to pray - we must bring it with us. Let us welcome our heartfelt sorrows and yearnings to prayer, letting them exist as they are, sober and unmasked.

Especially as so many of us pray at a distance and separated from other people, let us rest assured that our prayers, even though they cannot be heard by others, are sacred in their quietness.

Chanah joins Sarah and Hagar as a third biblical woman who is open to the possibility of transformation, this time, through powerful prayer. May we, like Chanah, G!d can hold all that our hearts carry, and may even our quietest of prayers be received and answered.