

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Book of Shmuel
Yeshivat Har Etzion

LECTURE 2: CHAPTER 1 - THE CHARACTER OF CHANA (PART 2) Rav Amnon Bazak

VI. THE FIRST CONFRONTATION WITH ELI

Chana's moving prayer was not only a turning point, but another test of her virtuous personality and qualities. Even before we reach the prayer itself, Scripture prepares us with the information that another person is observing the scene from the sidelines:

Now Eli the Priest sat upon a seat by the gatepost of the temple of the Lord.
(9)

The continuation of the story, however, is quite surprising. As we saw in the previous lesson, Chana's prayer stemmed from a broken heart and deep faith. But Eli, the presiding priest and judge, regarded the manner in which she was praying as inappropriate:

Now Chana spoke in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore, Eli thought she was drunk. And Eli said to her, How long will you be drunk?! put away your wine from you. (13-14)

It is clear from this description that prayers were ordinarily offered out loud – "It was not the common practice to pray silently" (Rashi) – and that this was the root of Eli's error. Nevertheless, Eli's severe conclusion, that Chana's conduct stemmed from drunkenness, set Chana before another test. Two possible responses were available to her. On the one hand, Chana could have lashed out in anger against Eli, who instead of being sensitive to her feelings, scolded her and accused her falsely; on the other hand, Chana could have concluded from Eli's reaction that God too does not accept her prayer. Chana's greatness lies in the fact that she did not choose either one of these radical possibilities. While she related to Eli with modesty and humility, she did not retract her prayer, but rather she patiently explained her behavior to him:

And Chana answered and said, No, **my lord**, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit: I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but have poured out my soul before the Lord. Take not **your handmaid** for a worthless woman; for out of the greatness of my complaint and grief have I been speaking. (15-16)

Chana uses the same expressions in her answer to Eli as she had used in her prayer to God – "my lord" and "your handmaid" – and thus she expresses her humility

before the important priest standing before her. The modesty that had characterized her thus far, as she stood before Penina and Elkana without complaining, continues to be an inseparable element of her personality at this time as well.

In contrast to Chana's greatness, Eli's weakness of character is striking. Eli failed to understand what was happening before him, and he wrongly attacked Chana. Eli's severe reproach stands out, in particular, in light of what we will read regarding his relationship with own sons, that despite their serious offences, "he restrained them not" (3:13). It seems that it is not by chance that Scripture puts into Chana's mouth: "Take not your handmaiden for a **worthless** (*beliya'al*) **woman**," which alludes to the play on words that we will encounter in the next chapter – "the sons of Eli were worthless (*beliya'al*) men" (2:12). The entire scene stirs up disturbing thoughts about Eli: his own sons, worthless men, he fails to rebuke for their serious offenses, but Chana, who pours out her heart in prayer, he wrongly reproaches!

Eli will accompany us in the upcoming chapters, and our first impression of him will only be strengthened. Eli is the first in a series of tragic characters in the book of *Shmuel*: a character who is basically moral, but whose errors exact an exceedingly heavy price.

In any event, among Eli's vices, we also find his virtue, for after hearing Chana out, his attitude toward her radically changes:

Then Eli answered and said, Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant you your petition which you have asked of Him. 1[1] (17)

1[1] Is this a promise, or perhaps only a blessing and prayer? It is difficult to decide the matter from the verse itself, and the commentators raise both suggestions. An important discussion of this issue is found in the commentary of Rabbi Yosef Kra to the verse. Counted among the disciples of Rashi, R"Y Kra was one of the most important biblical commentators following the plain sense of the text during the period of the *Rishonim*. Incidental to his discussion of our question, R"Y Kra presents his credo regarding the study of the plain sense of Scripture, and his words here should serve as a guide to all students of Scripture in our day as well: "Know, that when prophecy was committed to writing, it was written in full with whatever is necessary [for understanding], so that later generations should not stumble, and nothing is missing in its place. There is no need to bring proof from other places or from the Midrash, for the Torah was given in perfect form and written in perfect fashion, with nothing at all missing. The Midrash of our Sages comes to enhance the Torah and glorify it. But one who does not understand the plain sense of Scripture and inclines after a midrashic interpretation, may be likened to one who had been washed away by the current of a river and inundated by the depths of the waters, and he seizes onto anything that comes into his hand in order to save himself. Had he paid attention to the word of God, he would have investigated the plain meaning of the matter, and he would have found it, in fulfillment of what is stated: 'If you seek her like silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then shall you understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God' (*Mishlei* 2:4-

And indeed, after hearing Eli's consoling words, Chana goes home with a good feeling and with the hope of deliverance:

And she said, Let your handmaid find favor in your sight. So the woman went her way, and did eat, and her countenance was no more sad. (18)

VII. "AND SHE CALLED HIS NAME SHMUEL, BECAUSE I HAVE ASKED HIM OF THE LORD"

After being remembered by God, Chana names her son Shmuel. This name is somewhat surprising, for from the verse cited in the heading to this section one might have expected that the child would be named Shaul. This impression is reinforced by the fact that the root *shin-alef-lamed* appears seven times in this chapter, mostly in direct connection to Shmuel himself:

Then Eli answered and said, Go in peace: and the God of Israel grant you **your petition** (*shelatekh*) which **you have asked** (*sha'alta*) of him... (17)
And in the course, Chana conceived and bore a son, and she called him Shmuel, Because **I have asked him** (*she'iltiv*) of the Lord.... (20)
For this child I prayed: and the Lord has given me **my petition** (*she'elati*) which **I asked** (*sha'alti*) of Him. Therefore also **I have presented him** (*hish'iltihu*) to the Lord; as long as he lives **he shall be devoted** (*sha'ul*) to the Lord. And he bowed down to the Lord there. (27-28)

What then is the meaning of the name "Shmuel"? It seems that there is no fundamental connection between the name and the root *shin-alef-lamed*. Rather, the name should be interpreted in a different direction, one that was proposed by Ibn Ezra in his commentary to the Torah (*Shemot* 18:3):

What seems right to me is that the *shuruk* comes in place of a *cholam*... Thus, Shmuel is derived from Shemo-El ["His name is God"]. His mother called him by the name of God, because God gave him to her as she had asked. Do not ask how can a person be given the name of God, for it is like Tzurishadai (*Bamidbar* 7:36), and many others like it.

Shmuel then is "Shemo El," that is to say, he is called by the name of God.^{2[2]} This name has great symbolic meaning: Shmuel was only born after Chana had prayed intensely to God and vowed to give him to God all the days of his life. Moreover,

5)." According to R"Y Kra, all the information needed to understand a biblical passage is found in Scripture itself, and the Midrash should not be consulted to resolve problems on the level of the plain sense of the biblical text.

2[2] It is also possible that "Shemo-El" should be understood as "Shem-El," and that the *vav* at the end of "Shemo" is merely an element of florid style, as in "*beno be'or*" (*Bamidbar* 24:3, 15), "*lema'ayano mayyim*" (*Tehillim* 114:8), and elsewhere.

Shmuel's most important achievement in life was anointing the first two kings of Israel, Shaul and David, which effectively established the kingdom in Israel. We shall deal with the complexity of the idea of kingdom in Israel in a later lesson. But we can already appreciate the significance of calling the founder of the kingdom by the name of God, thereby emphasizing the idea that human kingdom does not come to replace God's kingdom over Israel.

Thus, it may be suggested that the interpretation given to Shmuel's name, "Because I have asked him of the Lord," is only a secondary interpretation, as in many other cases in Scripture.^{3[3]} After a name is given to a child, it is open to interpretation; additional meanings may be attached to the name which do not substitute for its original meaning, but add to it.

VIII. THE HIDDEN CONFRONTATION WITH ELKANA

And the man Elkana, and all his house, went up to offer to the Lord his yearly sacrifice, and vow. But Chana did not go up; for she said to her husband, I will not go up until the child is weaned, and then I will bring him, that he may appear before the Lord, and there abide for ever. And Elkana her husband said to her. Do what seems good in your eyes; tarry until you have weaned him; only may the Lord establish His word. So the woman remained and nursed her son until she weaned him. (21-23)

Following the first confrontation between Elkana, who tried to persuade Chana to accept her situation, and Chana, who refused to give up, which we discussed in the previous lesson, we now face another confrontation between the two. Here again we are not dealing with a frontal struggle, and certainly not with a violent clash, but the echoes of a disagreement between Elkana and Chana are clearly audible in these verses as well. Elkana's words imply that he does not want to confront Chana directly about her not going up to Shilo with her son, but he is nevertheless concerned about suffering harm on account of what he regards as her failure to fulfill her vow. Surely Chana had vowed: "I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life"; why then does she not hasten to fulfill her vow? Is she not concerned that this violation of her vow will cost her son his life?^{4[4]}

Why indeed did Chana behave as she did? The answer to this question is very simple. Chana's vow, like many other vows, has both a formal dimension and a substantive dimension. Formally Elkana was right, for Chana had vowed to give Shmuel

^{3[3]} Thus, for example, Rachel gives two meanings to the name Yosef. First she says: "God has taken away [*asaf*] my reproach" (*Bereishit* 30:23), but afterwards she explains: "The Lord shall add [*yosef*] to me another son" (*ibid.* v. 24). For this issue, see at length M. Garciel, *Midreshei Shemot ba-Mikra*, Ramat Gan, 1987.

^{4[4]} According to this, the words, "Only may the Lord establish His word," mean "May He keep His promise." It seems from here that Elkana understood Eli's words as a promise, and not only a blessing and prayer (see above, note 1). In any event, this is the meaning of the expression in other places in Scripture; see I *Melakhim* 2:3-4; 6:12.

to God all the days of his life. On the practical level, however, what value would there be in giving Shmuel to God prior to his weaning? What benefit could such a young child bring to the *Mishkan* of God, when he still needs his mother? Chana is not trying to avoid fulfilling her vow, but she insists on fulfilling it in a meaningful, rather than a formal manner.

There is an interesting parallel between the two confrontations between Elkana and Chana in the chapter. In both of them Elkana sees only the formal, routine dimension that is not amenable to change, whereas Chana represents the belief in seeing the more profound meaning of things, beyond the formal framework. This hidden confrontation is but another dimension of the differences between the two characters.

IX. THE HIDDEN CONFRONTATION WITH ELI

Just as we find a hidden confrontation between Chana and Elkana in the second half of the chapter, so too we find such a confrontation also with Eli. After Chana brings Shmuel up to Shilo, we read about her words to Eli:

And they slew a bullock, and brought the child to Eli. And she said, O my lord, as your soul lives, my lord, I am the woman that stood by you here, praying to the Lord. For this child I prayed; and the Lord has given me my petition which I asked of Him. Therefore also I have presented him to the Lord; so long as he lives he shall be devoted to the Lord. And he bowed down to the Lord there. (25-28)

These verses imply that Chana had to beg Eli – "O my lord, as your soul lives, my lord" – to accept her son. *Chazal* were attentive to this note, and picturesquely described the second confrontation between the two:

Rabbi Elazar said: Shmuel was guilty of giving a decision in the presence of his teacher; for it says: "And they slew a bullock, and brought the child to Eli" (I *Shmuel* 1:25). Because the bullock was slain, did they bring the child to Eli? What it means is this. Eli said to them: Call a priest and let him come and kill [the animal]. When Shmuel saw them looking for a priest to kill it, he said to them: Why do you go looking for a priest to kill it? The slaughter may be performed by a layman! They brought him to Eli, who asked him: How do you know this? He replied: Is it written: "The priest shall kill"? It is written: "The priests shall present [the blood]" (*Vayikra* 1:5): the office of the priest begins with the receiving of the blood, which shows that the slaughter may be performed by a layman. He said to him: You have spoken very well, but all the same you are guilty of giving a decision in the presence of your teacher, and whoever gives a decision in the presence of his teacher is liable to the death penalty. Thereupon Chana came and cried before him: I am the woman that stood by you here, etc. He said to her: Let me punish him and I will pray to God and He will give you a better one than this. She then said to him: "For this child I prayed." (*Berakhot* 31b)

The Midrash relates that Shmuel proved from Scripture that ritual slaughter is valid even when performed by a non-priest. Eli agreed with Shmuel but he maintained that Shmuel was liable for the death penalty for issuing a halakhic ruling in the presence of his teacher, and he consented to waive the death penalty only in response to Chana's supplications. It seems that the conceptual kernel of the Midrash emerges directly from the plain sense of the text. It stands to reason that Eli did not view with favor Shmuel's being brought to serve in the sanctuary, because formally there is no room for a layman to serve there. But Chana asked Eli to relate to Shmuel in a special way, owing to the special circumstances surrounding his birth. In this confrontation as well Chana faces formal inflexibility, while she tries to create a new framework and an exceptional path in the service of God. In the end, Eli accepts the child, and thus confirms the legitimacy of paving within the formalistic framework new paths of turning to God and consecrating a child to the service of God.

X. "AND HE BOWED DOWN TO THE LORD THERE"

With these words (v. 28) the chapter comes to an end, but Scripture does not clarify to whom they refer. We are faced with three possible interpretations, each of them constituting a different end to the story:

- 1) Rashi in his first explanation writes that the reference is to Shmuel. According to this understanding, Shmuel was listening on the side to the debate between Eli and Chana, and when he heard Eli's readiness to accept him for Divine service in the Temple, he bowed down before God, thanking Him for the privilege: "He bowed down in order to thank God for allowing him to be included among those who serve God" (Metzudat David).⁵[5]
- 2) In his second explanation, Rashi writes that the reference is to Elkana. According to this understanding, in the end Elkana participated in Chana's plan and rejoiced when he saw that she had succeeded in convincing Eli to accept the child.⁶[6]
- 3) Ralbag explains in what appears to be the simplest manner that the reference is to Eli: "Now Eli bowed down to God in order to thank Him when he saw that God had given her what she had asked for, as Eli had promised her." In her words to Eli, Chana says, "And the Lord has given me my petition which I asked of Him," and thus in effect she repeats the blessing that Eli had given her after having been convinced of the sincerity of her prayer: "The God of Israel grant you your petition which you have asked of Him." Thus, there is reason to assume that Eli was moved to see that his blessing had been actualized.

⁵[5] In contrast, there are those who understood that at the time Shmuel was only two years old, and thus it is difficult to understand his bowing down as a meaningful act, but at most: "Even though he was only two years old, he had been taught to bow down to God."

⁶[6] Or more simply: "As one who asks permission to leave the house of God" (Radak).

Nevertheless, it is difficult to decide between the various interpretations. Perhaps, Scripture means to say that they all bowed down to God.

In any event, bowing down before God is a fitting way to end this story, the entire message of which is to believe in God even in the most difficult moments, based on the recognition that God's deliverance can arrive in the blink of an eye.

(Translated by David Strauss)
