

# The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Themes and Ideas in the Haftara  
Yeshivat Har Etzion

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**This haftara series is dedicated in memory  
of our beloved Chaya Leah bat Efrayim Yitzchak  
(Mrs. Claire Reinitz), zichronah livracha,  
by her family.**

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## **Chana's Child**

**THE FIRST DAY OF ROSH HASHANA**

**Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein**

### I.

The *haftara* for the first day of *Rosh Hashana* (I *Shemuel* 1:1-2:10) is the account of God's remembering Chana, allowing her to have a child – which according to *Chazal* (*Rosh Hashana* 11a) took place on *Rosh Hashana* – and Chana's prayer in the wake of Shemuel's birth and weaning. Each of these factors is a good and sufficient reason to read this *haftara* on *Rosh Hashana*, though the primary factor seems to be God's remembering of Chana, as argued by Rashi,<sup>[1]</sup> and this will be the focus of our study.

We shall open with the first component in the narrative – the interpersonal relationships in the house of Elkana. Were we to choose a single word to summarize the matter, it would be: insensitivity. The whole story of the *haftara* is a series of

misunderstandings born out of a lack of sensitivity toward another person. A misunderstanding of the emotional reality is, of course, explicit in the story of Chana and Eli, but it is found in a much more basic and troubling form in the relationship between Chana and Elkana.

## CHANA'S BARRENNESS

Elkana shows no understanding of Chana's distress. The most fundamental aspect of her life is the fact that she is barren. Not a moment goes by that she does not experience her barrenness and the feeling of deficiency that accompanies it. She lives in a house that is full of the din and noise of children; the sounds of their laughter and their quarrels echo throughout the house; and the family's agenda and the domestic schedule revolve around their needs. But not one of those children is the fruit of her womb. Her world divides into the dichotomy of a barren woman and a woman with many children, this reality staring out at her from every corner of the house, every day of the year.

The difficulty of her situation, in all of its acuity, is emphasized by *Chazal*, who put the following words into the mouth of Penina:

"And her rival also provoked her sore" – she would provoke her over and over again. What would she say to her? Did you buy your older boy a scarf, a shirt, and a robe? Rav Nachman bar Abba said: Penina would rise up early and say to Chana: "Aren't you getting up to wash your children's faces so that they can go to school?" And at midday, she would say to Chana: "Aren't you getting up to receive your children who have returned from school?" Rav Tanchum bar Abba said: They would sit to eat and Elkana would give each of his children a portion. Penina would try to provoke Chana, and say to Elkana: "Give this son of mine his portion, and this son of mine his portion, but to this one you did not give his portion." (*Yalkut Shimoni*, I *Shemuel*1, s.v. *ve-ki'asta*)

This reality - the difficult struggle of a barren woman living in a neighborhood packed with children and in a society where everyone is having children - is familiar

to us from our own experience. There is no need to expand upon the constant difficulties which Chana must have faced in her day-to-day encounters with her environment or the unavoidable jealousy that must have been aroused in every routine situation.

Elkana, however, fails to understand this. From his perspective, Chana has no reason to cry, for surely "I am better to you than ten sons" (v. 8). If we examine the wording of this verse, we see that it emphasizes Elkana's great love for his wife and his closeness to her, but also his emotional blindness:

Then Elkana her husband sad to her, Chana, why do you weep? and why do you not eat? and why is your heart grieved? am I not better to you than ten sons? (I *Shemuel* 1:8)

He is described as "Elkana her husband" and his words express genuine feelings of love. The problem with his argument, however, is that the spousal relationship between husband and wife, strong and loving as it may be, cannot substitute for motherhood. Marriage is one thing, and parenthood another. The desire to have a child will never be satisfied by marriage, for we are dealing with a relationship of an entirely different quality. Parenthood is built on giving, on providing love and warmth, on fashioning the child and his world, and it is based on seeing the child as the natural and metaphysical continuation of the parent. None of this is found in the spousal relationship, which is based on mutuality and partnership, giving and receiving. Spouses view each other as equals, or more precisely, they look out upon the world through shared glasses, whereas parents look at their sons and daughters from above. Accordingly, the finest husband in the world cannot substitute whatsoever for the experience of motherhood and the joy of parenthood. They are two different things. Elkana is oblivious to this point, and so, despite his love, he is incapable of understanding his beloved wife.

## **ELKANA'S CHILDREN**

It must be added, of course, that Elkana has children, whereas Chana does not. This is the reason that he is incapable of feeling on his own flesh what Chana is feeling. This by itself, however, should bring him to display greater empathy to her situation, in keeping with the maxim, "judge not a person until you are in his place." These elements automatically remind us of the parallel story of Yaakov and Rachel. There too we find a husband who has two wives, the hated wife having many children, while the beloved wife is barren, and there too the husband fails to understand the depth of his wife's inconsolable feelings. At this point, it is fitting to cite the penetrating words of Rachel, and *Chazal's* strident remark regarding Yaakov's reaction:

Rachel envied her sister; and said to Yaakov, Give me children, or else I die. (*Bereishit* 30:1)

Nothing more and nothing less – "or else I die"! Rachel cries out that without children she has no life, and she refuses to accept consolation. Yaakov's reaction, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" (v. 2) seems to be the legitimate response of a husband whose wife gives him no rest regarding a problem that is beyond his or anybody else's ability to fix, and who feels that his wife is exaggerating when she claims that she regards herself as dead. *Chazal*, however, did not see it this way:

The Rabbis of the south said in the name of Rabbi Alexandri, who said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: "Should a wise man answer with windy knowledge" (*Iyyov* 15:1) – this applies to Avraham [of whom it is written]: "And Avraham hearkened to the voice of Sara" (*Bereishit* 16:2). "And fill his belly with the east wind" (*Iyyov* 15:1) – this applies to Yaakov. As it says: "And Yaakov's anger was kindled" (*Bereishit* 30:2). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: "Is that a way to answer a woman in distress? By your life, your children will one day stand [in supplication] before her son [Yosef], who will answer them, "Am I in the place of God" (*Bereishit* 50:19).

"And he said, Am I in God's stead, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" From you he withheld it, but not from me. She said to him: "Did then your father act so to your mother? Did he not gird up his loins by her?" He answered: "He had no children, whereas I have children." (*Bereishit Rabba* 71:7)

Despite his good intentions, Elkana as well fails to respond to his wife's distress in the proper manner.

Another important point should be added in this context. The gap between Elkana and Chana, like the gap between Yaakov and Rachel, is not merely a gap between one who has children and one who does not. Another element enters into the picture, namely, the difference between a man and a woman in this context. There is no comparison between the distress and despair of a childless woman and that of a childless man. The cry of "or else I die" is felt in an entirely different way by a woman than by a man, this because the giving to a child and the subordination of the self in favor of providing warmth and love is more built in to a woman than to a man. Both love the child, both worry about his needs, and both protect him from the dangers that lie in wait. But a mother does this more naturally, the trait of giving being deeply impressed in her being, whereas a father is more focused upon himself. This asymmetry exists already in nature, which builds into a woman's body the means of bestowing physical sustenance upon her newborn child. A woman can nurse her infant, and thus give him life, whereas a man cannot provide for his child from his own body. In this context, it is fitting to cite an illuminating passage from Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's "Family Redeemed":

The Bible tells us that "the man called his wife's name Eve (*Havah*) because she was the mother of all living things" (*hai*) (*Bereishit* 3:20). But man's name is not identified with fatherhood; he is called *adam* or *ish*, but not *av*. His role as a father was not portrayed symbolically by his name, while Eve's role as a mother was; nothing reflects Adam's task as a father.

In the natural community, the woman is more concerned with motherhood than the man with fatherhood. Motherhood, in contrast to fatherhood, bespeaks a long-enduring peculiar state of body and mind. The nine months of pregnancy, with all its attendant biological and physiological changes, the birth of the child with pain and suffering, the nursing of the baby and, later, the caretaking of and attending to the youngster – all form part of the motherhood experience. In a word, the woman is bound up with the child and she experiences her motherhood role in all her thought and feeling. The father, if he wants, can deny his fatherhood and forego responsibility. The mother is bound up with the child; the father can roam around forgetting everything. Motherhood is an experience – unredeemed and hence brutish, yet an experience. Physically,

fatherhood implies nothing tangible and memorable. The male, bodily and mentally, does not experience his fatherhood.

In short, within the natural community the mother occupies a central position while the father is relegated to a role that is intangible and vague, since it does not imply any restrictive bonds. Motherhood is a fact that is foisted upon a woman. That is why the name of the woman was derived from her role as a mother, while Adam's name has nothing in common with his fatherhood. "Can a woman forget her baby or disown the child of her womb?" (*Yeshayahu* 49:15). (Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed*, pp. 105-107.

In a midrash connected to our *haftara*, *Chazal* instructively combined together a woman's heart and breasts, thus emphasizing the idea that nursing is essential for a woman and deeply implanted in her nature:

"Now Chana spoke in her heart" (I *Shemuel* 1:13). Rabbi Elazar said in the name of Rabbi Yose ben Zimra: [She spoke] about matters of her heart. She said before Him: "Master of the universe, of everything that You created in a woman, nothing was created in vain. Eyes to see, ears to hear, a nose to smell, a mouth to speak, hands to do work, feet to walk, breasts to nurse. These breasts that you placed over my heart – why should they not be used for nursing? Give me a son and I will nurse with them." (*Berakhot* 31b).

According to the plain sense of the verse, "in her heart" notes the manner of her speech as coming from her heart. Rabbi Yose ben Zimra, however, interprets the expression, "she spoke in her heart," as Chana's relating to what is found above her heart, namely, her breasts. This is not only an example of sophisticated hermeneutics, which allows for a new and surprising interpretation of these words, and not only a statement about the importance of nursing to a woman. We have here a midrashic combination of the heart and the breasts, based on the insight that a woman's heart is intimately connected to her ability to nurse and give. The giving heart and the nursing breast are connected, and therefore Chana emphasizes this point when she comes to pray about her distress.

In another midrash, *Chazal* express the idea that Chana's distress undermines her very existence in this world and her own identification with the human community:

Rabbi Yehuda said in the name of Rabbi Simon: Chana said to the Holy One, blessed be He: "Master of the universe, there is a host above, and there is a host below. The host above do not eat, or drink, or reproduce, or die, but rather they live forever. The host below eat, and drink, and reproduce, and die, and do not live. I do not know to which host I belong. If I belong to the host above, I should not eat, or drink, or give birth, or die, but rather live forever. And if I belong to the host below, I should give birth, and eat, and drink. (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shemuel 1, 1, s.v. amar*)

This was lost on Elkana, who sees the world through male eyes, and therefore does not appreciate the full significance of the cost of barrenness for Chana. We see then that Elkana and Yaakov's problem to feel the cry of "or else I die" does not follow only from the fact that they both had children from a second wife, but also from the fact that they do not understand a woman's yearning for motherhood, because their yearning is for fatherhood and not for motherhood.

## **THE DISAPPOINTMENT IN THE MEETING WITH ELI**

The same lack of understanding her situation repeats itself in Chana's encounter with Eli. Eli is not her husband, and he is not expected to know her in the way that Elkana does. On the other hand, he is the highest spiritual authority of his time, a person who is anointed with the sanctity of the High Priesthood and wears the crown of Torah,<sup>[2]</sup> the leader and teacher of the generation. Chana did not expect that such a person would display such lack of understanding towards a bitter woman, for who if not him can understand a pained and afflicted heart. However, even Eli cannot understand what is going over her, and he deems her a drunkard. Loneliness reveals itself to Chana in all its intensity; nobody understands her – not those who are closest to her and not those who are closest to God. She is forced to deal with the difficulties of childlessness on her own, with the emotional powers that she can draw from her inner wellsprings and with her own personal strengths, without any help from the outside. On her personal day of judgment, when the book of the living and the book of the dead<sup>[3]</sup> lay open for her, she must stand on her own and turn to the King, King of kings, all by herself, with her own tears.

Chana's strengths, however, bring Eli to recognize her intensity and genuineness, and he blesses her from the depths of his heart, understanding her situation. Even Elkana seems to have arrived at this recognition. At the end of their pilgrimage, "they returned, and came to their house to Rama: and Elkana *knew* (*va-yeda*) Chana his wife, and the Lord remembered her" (v. 19). As opposed to what many people are accustomed to think, the term *va-yeda*, "he knew," is used to indicate sexual relations, not as a euphemism in place of *va-yavo*, "he went in" (which is used in a sexual sense many times in Scripture), but to note sexual relations in the framework of the emotional intimacy of marriage.<sup>[4]</sup> This is especially striking in the context of relations built on trust that follows a crisis. This is what we find with respect to Adam and (apparently) to Yehuda at the end of the story of Tamar, and this is what we find here. "Knowing" alludes to Elkana's new understanding of Chana's situation and to his recognition that their sexual relations cannot only be an expression of their marital relationship, as important as that might be, but rather they are meant to be a tool to fulfill Chana's desire for children. In the end, following her prayer, Chana merits to have Elkana understand and know her, and together they build their home with the help of heaven.

II.

## **SELF-SACRIFICE**

Thus far, we have considered Chana's distress. We shall now turn our attention to her being remembered. To no surprise, *Chazal* draw a connection between Chana and other biblical heroines who were remembered with a child, as we find in the following statement: "On *Rosh Hashana*, Sara, Rachel and Chana were remembered" (*Rosh Hashana* 11a). Now, if we examine the common denominator connecting these barren women, we find self-sacrifice. All three of them expressed a readiness to sacrifice their dream and give up on what was most dear to them for the sake of a higher goal. As *Chazal* put it, Sara and Rachel were ready to open their homes to a rival wife, and thus make a very painful personal sacrifice.

## **SARA**

We shall open with Sara. Unlike Rivka, who married Yitzchak after he had already matured and was not a partner in those experiences that fashioned his personality, first and foremost of which being the *Akeida*, Sara accompanies Avraham from the very beginning of his journey. The moment that the Torah's curtain rises and allows us to see Avraham, Sara is at his side. The fact that they had wandered together for decades, sharing dreams and reaching heights and depths together, finds expression between the lines of Avraham's own words, when he speaks of Sara who had accompanied him during his period of wandering:

And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's houses, that I said to her, This is your kindness which you shall show to me; at every place where we shall come, say of me, He is my brother. (*Bereishit* 20:13)

Nevertheless, the day comes – after countless prayers and innumerable tears – that Sara turns to Avraham and proposes that he take a concubine, so that Sara may build her house through her:

And Sarai said to Avram, Behold now, the Lord has restrained me from bearing: I pray you, go in to my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Avram hearkened to the voice of Sarai. And Sarai Avram's wife took Hagar, her maid, the Egyptian, after Avram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Avram for a wife. (*ibid.* 16:2-3)

Let us consider the significance of this action and the emotional strength required for its execution. After all those shared years and the dream to establish a nation together, Sara turns to Avraham and suggests that he take Hagar as a wife and father with her an heir through whom that nation will be built. She thereby gives up on her dream to have children, and in particular to have a child together with Avraham, with all the personal and communal ramifications, and hands over that privilege to another woman, all for Avraham's benefit. She recognizes the asymmetry that will be caused to the marriage when Avraham's situation is no longer identical to her own, but this does not stop her. She is ready to sacrifice her own good and give up on her own wishes.

In the wake of this self-sacrifice, she merits to hear the tidings that she too will give birth to a child. As has already been noted by the Ramban,<sup>[5]</sup> at the time of the Covenant of the Pieces (*Bereishit* 15), Sara was not promised a child. The first explicit promise that not only Avraham, but Sara too would have a child, was given at the time of the command regarding the covenant of circumcision. What happened between these two covenants and what changed between them? The episode involving Hagar! We see then that Sara's self-sacrifice and readiness to give up on children is what earned her the blessing of progeny.

## **RACHEL**

Rachel, as well, brought a rival wife into her house, and made it possible for her sister to marry her husband, this without even knowing whether she herself would join the family. In this context, it is fitting to cite the continuation of the aforementioned Midrash regarding Rachel's barrenness and her argument with Yaakov:

[Rachel] said to [Yaakov]: "And did not your grandfather [Avraham] have children, yet he too girded up his loins by Sara?" He asked her: "Can you then do what my grandmother did?" "What did she do?" He answered: "She brought her rival into her home." She said: "If that is the obstacle, 'Behold, my maid Bilha, go in unto her... and I also may be built up through her" (ibid.). As she [Sara] was built up through her rival, so was she [Rachel] built up through her rival. (*Bereishit Rabba* 71:7)

As is evident, the Midrash attributes God's remembering Sara and Rachel with a child to the sacrifice that each one had made to her rival and to her husband.

## **CHANA**

Now, let us return to Chana. The secret of her being remembered lies in the immense sacrifice and concession that she made when she promised the child to God. Let us try to imagine the situation: After years of distress, her entire being revolving around her fertility problems, she being wrapped in constant misery owing to her barrenness – something unbelievable will happen and she will give birth to a son. But rather than raise him, she will hand him over to God. The most precious and important thing that she had waited for all those years will finally come, but she will not enjoy bringing him up, but rather she will give him as a gift to the *Mishkan*. Instead of getting up every morning and sending her boy off to school and waiting for him when he comes home in the afternoon, instead of filling his plate at the *Shabbat* table, and instead of going out to shop with him and buy his first pair of shoes and outfit him for summer and winter, she will consciously and from the outset give up on all these things for the sake of God's name. The answer to all her troubles and all of Penina's provocations will arrive, but she will not reap the benefits. Is there self-sacrifice greater than this? This, however, is precisely what Chana does! She promises God that if she has a child she will dedicate him to heaven. By the merit of this self-sacrifice, she will merit to give birth to Shemuel and those who will come after him.<sup>[6]</sup> It is difficult to grasp the enormity of her actions and we stand dumbfounded by them – not only did she have a rival in her own house, but she was ready to give up her long-awaited son. Our hearts and souls are amazed by Chana's sacrifice. *Chazal* were aware of this sacrifice and said about it as follows:

Rabbi Yona said in the name of Rabbi Chama: When Chana saw that she had not given birth, she said to him [her husband] that he should bring a rival into her house, and thus the Holy One, blessed be He, will see and remember her. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to her: "Chana, by My life, I will reward you." And God remembered Chana, and she conceived and gave birth to three sons and two daughters. (*Yalkut Shimoni* 77)

In short, the secret of being favorably remembered on *Rosh Hashana* lies in waving one's ego, one's aspirations and one's dreams (legitimate as they may be), and sacrificing them for the sake of God.<sup>[7]</sup>

May it be God's will that we all be favorably remembered with salvation and mercy, and that we all be inscribed for a good and peaceful life.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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[1] *Megila* 31a, s.v. *maftirin be-Chana*.

[2] See Rambam, Introduction to *Mishne Torah*, where he includes Eli in his list of the bearers of tradition: "And Eli received [it] from the Elders and from Pinchas, and Shemuel received [it] from Eli and his court."

[3] "Rabbi Yochanan ben Levi said: Anyone who does not have children is regarded as dead. As it is stated: 'Give me children, or else I die'" (*Nedarim* 64b).

[4] *Yedi'a* in the sense of sexual relations is found with respect to Adam, Kayin, Yehuda and Elkana. Strangely, it is also found in the account of the concubine in Giv'a. In my opinion, we are dealing there with a linguistic perversion that is used to allude to the moral perversion of their actions. Designating gang rape as *yedi'a* serves as a reversed linguistic signpost; their self-image as humane and moral people corresponds to the truth in the same measure as their actions correspond to the word *yedi'a*. The truth is that the distance between their actions and "knowing" the woman is like the distance between their actions and humane conduct.

In addition, *yedi'a* is negated with respect to Rivka and Avishag (*lo yada*), and there too to indicate the absence of any strong connection.

In this context, it should be pointed out that Scripture is careful to note that Avraham "went in" to Hagar ("And he went in (*va-yavo*) to Hagar, and she conceived"; *Bereishit* 16:4). And so too the word "go in" appears throughout the story of Yaakov and his wives in *Parashat Vayetze*.

[5] See Ramban, *Bereishit* 15:5.

[6] Needless to say, that from our perspective as readers of the biblical story, this is the way that things appear. This is also the way that *Chazal* saw the matter, as we shall see below. Chana, of course, is not aware of this, and she is not employing a strategy in order to have children, for if so, her sacrifice would be meaningless. From her perspective, she was prepared to totally surrender her most precious dream.

[7] The idea of self-sacrifice plays an important role in the thought of Rabbi Soloveitchik, who deals with the matter in various places. It is no surprise then that he too deals with Chana's sacrifice. He, however, sets Chana as an archetype of parenthood that differs from what we have

seen thus far, and thus his words do not correspond to what we have said. I cite here his most explicit discussion of Chana's sacrifice, taken from his essay, "Parenthood: Natural and Redeemed," which appears in his book, "Family Redeemed," pp. 113-114:

"Hannah is the woman who proclaimed that motherhood asserts itself in the consecration of the child, in giving him away, in surrendering him to God. "O Lord of hosts, if Thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of Your handmaid and remember me and not forget Thy handmaid but wilt give to Thy handmaid a man-child, I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life..." (I Samuel 1:11). And what did the Jewish mothers do throughout the millenia if not exactly the same thing that Hannah pledged? What does a Jewish mother do now when she brings her child to a yeshiva?

Jews introduced a system of public compulsory education 2100 years ago, while the so-called Western world was roaming the forests in Northern and Central Europe. "It was enacted to establish teachers of young children at every city and town, and to bring the children to them at the age of six or seven" (*Bava Batra* 21a). The child used to be taken away from the embrace of his mother at a very tender age and brought into a new world of Torah, teaching and training. Even now a Jewish child leaves home early in the morning and comes home late in the evening. When Hanna said, "For as long as he lives he is lent to the Lord" (I Samuel 1:28), she did not mean the he would retreat into some cloister; she did not think of physical solitude or a monastic life. Judaism has always opposed an unnatural life. What she had in mind was a life in service to God by serving the covenantal community. We are all still practicing this."