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**The Book of Shmuel
Yeshivat Har Etzion**

Shiur #03: CHAPTER 2 CHANA'S PRAYER

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I. THE STRUCTURE OF THE PRAYER

After Chana was blessed with the son for whom she had so intensely longed and so strongly prayed, Chana brings him up to God's tabernacle in Shilo in fulfillment of her vow (I *Shemuel* 1:26-28). At this point, before describing Elkana's return home - "And Elkana went to Rama to his house" (2:11) – Scripture records Chana's prayer.

This prayer can be divided into four sections:

I.

(1) And Chana prayed, and said:

My heart rejoices in the Lord, my horn is exalted in the Lord:

My mouth is enlarged over my enemies; because I rejoice in your salvation.

(2) There is none holy as the Lord, for there is none beside You; neither is there any rock like our God.

II.

(3) Talk no more so very proudly; let not arrogance come out of your mouth. For the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by Him actions are weighed.

III.

(4) The bows of the mighty men are broken, and they that stumbled are girded with strength.

(5) They that were full have hired out themselves for bread; and they that were hungry have ceased. While the barren has born seven; and she that has many children has become wretched.

IV.

(6) The Lord kills, and gives life. He brings down to the grave, and brings up.

(7) The Lord makes poor, and makes rich. He brings low, and raises up.

(8) He raises up the poor out of the dust, and lifts up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and He has set the world upon them.

(9) He will keep the feet of the pious ones, and the wicked shall be silent in darkness; for it is not by strength that man prevails.

(10) The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken in pieces; out of heaven shall He thunder upon them. The Lord shall judge the ends of the earth; and He shall give strength to His king, and exalt the horn of His anointed.

The structure of the prayer is perfectly clear: the introduction (part I) gives expression to the gladness and the recognition of the greatness of God who stands behind the deliverance. Verse 3 (part II) puts forward the main argument: let man not be arrogant, for everything is in the hands of God. This argument is proven in verses 4-5 (part III), which bring three examples of the principle that the strong may become weak and the weak strong. The conceptual conclusion (part IV) is that God stands behind all the changes that transpire in the world. The concluding verse (10) contains a prayer that God should extend His help to His king and anointed one.

At first glance, the content of the song corresponds to Chana's situation. As opposed to all those who surrounded her, Chana believed that God was capable of changing her situation and freeing her from her barrenness, and indeed the birth of Shemuel proved that she was right. Now she can proclaim with greater force the credo in which she believed with all her heart: "Talk no more so very proudly... for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by Him actions are weighed."

II. THE DIFFICULTIES IN THE CONNECTION BETWEEN CHANA AND THE PRAYER

On closer examination, however, attributing the prayer to Chana raises certain difficulties. This lesson will be primarily devoted to this issue.^[1] Let us open with a list of these difficulties, starting with the most serious difficulties:

1) In the context of the entire story, we might have expected that Chana's prayer would be a prayer of thanksgiving, and if already it deals with conceptual issues, it would concentrate on trust in God and His ability to change for the better even a situation that appears hopeless. Why, then, does the prayer focus on a call not to be excessively boastful?

2) The prayer concludes with the words: "And He shall give strength to His king, and exalt the horn of His anointed." To which king/anointed one do these words refer? The first king to be appointed king by a prophet was, of course, Shaul, and he was anointed by Shemuel – who just now was weaned. Radak, therefore, explains (ad loc.):

Chana said this **as a prophecy or based on a tradition**, for she had a tradition that in the future a king would reign in Israel. She ended this song with words about the king, because she had mentioned the downfall of the wicked, namely, the enemies of Israel, and she said that God would give strength to the king of Israel, so that Israel would be delivered by him from the hands of their enemies. And if she said this by way of prophecy, she was alluding thereby that there would be a king in Israel by way of her son Shemuel, and that he would anoint him.^[2]

This explanation, however, is difficult: Why would Chana pray at this time on behalf of a king who would only be anointed many years later? Would it not be more logical for her to pray on behalf of her son, who would be faced with many difficult trials before the future king rises to the throne? In this context it should also be recalled that Chana's son, Shemuel, was the greatest opponent of the idea of the monarchy, and that he saw in it a rejection of God (see, for example, I *Shemuel* 8:6; 10:19; 12:17).

1) The prayer opens with sharp words concerning the enemy: "My mouth is enlarged over my enemies." To whom does this refer? Rashi explains: "About Penina." This explanation is difficult not only because the word "enemies" is in the plural,^[3] but also because of Chana's gentle nature, as portrayed in the previous chapter. We noted Chana's silence in the face of Penina's provocations, Elkana's insensitivity, and Eli's unjustified rebuke. Thus, it is difficult to understand why, precisely at her moment of deliverance, Chana would speak of victory over an enemy with respect to Penina!^[4]

2) Verses 4-5 mention, as stated above, three examples of the principle of changing circumstances: "[1] The bows of the mighty men are broken,^[5] and they that stumbled are girded with strength. [2] They that were full have hired out themselves for bread; and they that were hungry have ceased. [3] While the barren^[6] has born seven; and she that has many children has become wretched." It would seem that Chana should have opened with the last example, the one that is most relevant to her own situation.^[7] Why did she push this off to the end?

How are we to resolve these difficulties?

III. THE HEADINGS OF THE PSALMS IN THE BOOK OF *TEHILLIM*

The problem that we have raised here is not unique to Chana's prayer. In the book of *Tehillim* we find twelve psalms, which according to their headings, are connected to particular historical circumstances.^[8] We do not always find, however, a full correspondence between the heading and the contents of the psalm. In some of the psalms serious problems arise regarding this correlation. For example:

1) According to the heading of *Tehillim* 59, the psalm was said "when Shaul sent, and they watched the house to kill him," that is to say, it is connected to what is stated in I *Shemuel* 19:11 – "And Shaul sent messengers to David's house, to watch him, and to slay him in the morning," and to the story of his escape with

the help of his wife Michal. In the psalm itself, however, we find expressions that more aptly describe Israel readying itself for war against foreign nations: "You, therefore, O Lord God of hosts, the God of Israel, awake to punish **all the nations**: be not gracious to any wicked traitors. Sela" (v.6); "But You, O Lord, shall laugh at them: you shall have **all the nations** in distress" (v.9). And in general, the psalm does not fit in with David's reverential attitude toward Shaul throughout the book of *Shemuel*. The commentators suggest various approaches to resolve these difficulties,[\[9\]](#) but they still require explanation.

- 2.) The heading of *Tehillim* 3 is "A psalm of David, when he fled from Avshalom his son." David's fleeing from Avshalom is of course a very complex story, and David admonishes his officers not to harm Avshalom: "Deal gently for my sake with the young man, with Avshalom" (II *Shemuel* 18:5). After David is notified about Avshalom's death, he mourns in a manner that has no precedent in Scripture (see *ibid.* 19:1-5). In light of this, David's words in verse 8 of the psalm are very strange: "Arise, O Lord; save me, O my God: for You have smitten all my enemies upon the cheek; you have broken the teeth of the wicked."

- 3.) The heading of *Tehillim* 51 reads: "When Natan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bat-Sheva." The psalm does indeed give explicit expression to the feelings of a penitent sinner, but here too we find several details that do not exactly correspond to the incident involving Bat-Sheva. For example, v. 7 states: "Behold, I was shaped in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me," but nowhere does Scripture say that David was born in sin, as is implied by the plain meaning of this verse.[\[10\]](#) Verse 6 – "Against You, you alone, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in your sight" - is also very difficult: How can it be said that David sinned only against God when he is explicitly being accused of killing Uriya?[\[11\]](#)

- 4.) *Tehillim* 52 opens: "To the chief musician. A Maskil of David, when Doeg the Edomite came and told Shaul, and said to him, David is come to the house of Achimelekh." This description relates to what is reported in I *Shemuel* 21-22 about David's arrival at the house of Achimelekh the priest in Nov when he first ran away from Shaul. Achimelekh gave David provisions and Goliath's sword. Doeg the Edomite informed Shaul about this, and then killed eighty-five

priests on Shaul's orders. In *Tehillim* 52, David does indeed refer to the wicked man who loves evil more than good, and lying rather than speaking righteousness, but he also adds and explains the contrast between that wicked man and himself: "Lo, this is the man who made not God His strength; but trusted in the abundance of his riches, and strengthened himself in his wickedness. But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God; I trust in the love of God for ever and ever." (vv. 9-10). The negative description of the wicked man as one who does not trust in God does not match what is related about Doeg ("Now a certain man of the servants of Shaul were there that day, detained before the Lord; and his name was Doeg the Edomite" – I *Shemuel* 21:8). It is especially difficult to understand why David describes himself as "a green olive tree in the house of God," when there is no house of God, and particularly at this point in time, when Nov is destroyed, and David is forced to flee to the wilderness of Judea. It is also difficult that the psalm makes no mention whatsoever of Doeg's killing of the priests of Nov.

In order to resolve these difficulties, I wish to suggest that the headings to these psalms do not mean to imply that David **composed** these psalms at those times, but only that he **said** them on those occasions. These psalms had been composed earlier, and David made use of them on the occasions appearing in the headings, because on the whole they matched his feelings at those times – just as we recite particular *Tehillim* on special occasions, at times of joy and times of trouble, even though not every detail corresponds to our specific circumstances.

This argument finds support in the book of *Tehillim* itself. Examination of *Tehillim* 108 teaches that two sections of the psalm appear in psalms that have historical headings: Verses 2-6 appear almost word for word in *Tehillim* 57:8-12, whose heading is: "To the chief musician, Al Tashchet, a Mikhtam of David, when he fled from Shaul in the cave"; and verses 7-14 appear word for word (with very slight changes) in *Tehillim* 60:7-14, the heading of which is: "To the chief musician upon Shushan-Edut, a Mikhtam of David, to teach; when he strove with Aram-Naharayim and with Aram-Tzova, and Yoav returned, and smote twelve thousand of Edom in the valley of salt." It stands to reason that *Tehillim* 108 is the original psalm, and that David **used** different parts of it at various points in his life, even though he did not **compose** them on those occasions.

This also explains why one psalm appears twice in the book of *Tehillim* (with slight changes) – in *Tehillim* 14 and *Tehillim* 53. The heading of *Tehillim* 14 is: "To the chief musician, of David. The fool has said in his heart, There is no God." *Tehillim* 53 is found among the psalms with historical headings, and while it lacks such a heading, it is clearly directed at Naval the Carmelite. This also stands to reason because the psalm is found between *Tehillim* 52, the heading of which is "When Doeg the Edomite came and told Shaul, and said to him, David is come to the house of Achimelekh," and which relates to what is reported in I *Shemuel* 21-22, and *Tehillim* 54, the heading of which is "When the Tzifim came and said to Shaul, Does not David hide himself with us?" and which relates to I *Shemuel* 23, that is, to the events that transpired close to the incident involving Naval the Carmelite, described in I *Shemuel* 25.^[12] It can be argued, then, that *Tehillim* 14 is the original psalm, which had been composed earlier. At the time of the incident involving Naval, David deemed this psalm appropriate for his specific circumstances, and therefore recited it again.

IV. LATER ADDITIONS TO THE PSALMS

Before returning to Chana's prayer, let us try to understand another phenomenon connected to the psalms of *Tehillim*. We already mentioned *Tehillim* 51, which according to its heading was said "when Natan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bat-Sheva." As was already suggested, David said this psalm on that occasion, even though it appears to have been composed under different circumstances. This explanation, however, does not suffice to explain the last two verses in the psalm:

Do good in your favor to Zion; build you the walls of Jerusalem. Then shall you be pleased with the sacrifices of righteousness, with burnt offering and whole burnt offering; then shall they offer bullocks upon Your altar. (vv. 20-21)

These verses imply that they were written at a time that Zion was in ruin and the walls of Jerusalem breached. How can this be reconciled with the heading? Ibn Ezra suggests the following (ad loc.):

One of the Spanish sages said that these two verses were added by one of the pious men in Babylonia who fell before God and prayed this psalm. He was forced to say this because it was only in David's old age that it became known that Zion was the chosen place. It is also correct that this was stated with the holy spirit.

According to the first approach suggested by Ibn Ezra, these verses are not part of the original psalm; they were added by one of the exiles in Babylonia, who recited the psalm – just as David had done, according to our understanding – in circumstances that were similar, though not identical, to those prevailing at the time that the psalm was originally composed. This addition was accepted by later generations and it became sanctified with the sanctity of the scriptural books. We see then that even though the heading describes the psalm as having been recited by David, it does not necessarily mean that David recited the entire psalm.

V. CHANA'S PRAYER

The difficulties that were raised in connection with Chana's prayer can now be resolved. It stands to reason that here too Scripture does not mean to say that the prayer was composed at that time, but only that Chana recited it then, the prayer being known previously. Thus, there is no serious difficulty in the fact that not every word in the prayer corresponds to Chana's situation, just as there is no full correlation between the situations in which David recited certain psalms and the contents of those psalms. Chana found important ideas in this prayer that corresponded to the truth in which she believed with all her heart: God's control over everything that happens, and thus, His ability to change situations that seem to be hopeless. She was certainly touched in particular by the line, "while the barren has born seven." Accordingly, Chana used this prayer to express her feelings. And just as David expressed his feelings at the time of Avshalom's rebellion with *Tehillim* 3, even though the wording "You have smitten all my enemies upon the cheek" did not exactly match his feelings, Chana expressed herself with this prayer, even though the words, "my mouth is enlarged over my enemies," did not exactly match her feelings.[\[13\]](#)

Thus, we can also understand the prayer's closing line: "And He shall give strength to His king, and exalt the horn of His anointed." It is very possible that these words were not said by Chana, but rather that they were added later, similar to what happened in *Tehillim* 51. Scripture, however, left them in place, because an interesting structure was thereby created by the three songs found in *Shemuel*: Chana's prayer at the beginning, David's lamentation over the death of Shaul and Yonatan in the middle (II *Shemuel* 1:17-27), and the psalm recited by David "in the day that the Lord delivered him out of the hand of all his enemies" (ibid. 22). Chana's prayer expresses the hope that God "shall give strength to **His king**, and exalt the horn of **His anointed**"; David's lamentation expresses his grief over the fact that "the shield of the mighty is vilely cast away, the shield of Shaul, as though not **anointed** with oil" (ibid. 1:21); and David's song closes the book with praise to God – "He is the tower [*migdol (magdil ketiv)*][[14](#)] of salvation for **His king**, and shows mercy to **His anointed**" (ibid. 22:51).

(Translated by David Strauss)

[1] This issue is discussed at length in my article, "Zeman Chibura shel Tefillat Chana," in: *Be-rosh Hashana Yikatevun – Kovetz Ma'amarim al Rosh Hashana*, Alon Shevut 2003, pp. 207-215.

[2] Ralbag and Metzudat David offer similar explanations.

[3] Radak accounts for the use of the plural: "Regarding Penina and those who provoked her about her being barren." Scripture, however, makes no mention of such people, and it is not at all clear why Chana would have related to them.

[4] Ralbag's explanation, according to which we are dealing here with a prophecy about the future regarding the Pelishtim who will fall into Shemuel's hands, also appears to be far from the plain meaning of the text.

[5] The word *keshet* ("bow") in the singular is modified by the word *chittim* ("broken") in the plural. The word "*chittim*" might have been influenced by the plural *gibborim* ("the mighty") (*Da'at Mikra*); or else the words should be rearranged: "*gibborei keshet chittim*" – the mighty men of the sword are broken (Rabbeinu Yeshayahu).

[6] The meaning of the expression "*ad akara*" is unclear. See *Da'at Mikra*, ad loc., and note 21 there.

[7] The commentators note that in any event Chana is not referring to herself in the expression, "While the barren has born **seven**," for Chana had only 5 or 6 children (v. 21: "And the Lord visited Chana, so that she conceived, and

bore three sons and two daughters" – it is not clear whether or not this verse includes Shemuel). Thus, it has been understood that the number seven is just an example, indicating many children (see Radak). Rashi cites an opinion that the numerical value of the letters comprising the word "*shiva*" equals that of the word "*Shemuel*."

[8] 3:1; 18:1; 34:1; 51:1-2; 52:1-2; 54:1-2; 56:1; 57:1; 59:1; 60:1-2; 63:1; 142:1.

[9] For example, Rashi explains verse 6: "Awake to punish all the nations" – judge the wicked **according to the laws of the nations** and show them no mercy." A similar explanation is offered by Metzudat David.

[10] The commentators suggest several understandings. Rashi: "My formation was through marital relations, which lead to various iniquities. Alternatively: My formation was through a male and a female, all of whom are filled with iniquity." See also Ibn Ezra and Metzudat David.

[11] Here too the commentators propose several solutions. Rashi writes: "Even in my wronging with respect to Uriya, I sinned only to You who had warned about the matter."

[12] My revered teacher, Rav Yaakov Medan suggested a similar approach in his: "*Amar Naval be-Libo Ein Elohim*," *Megadim* 4, 1988, pp. 30-32, and see his additional proofs. Note especially his inference from the Targum to *Tehillim*, which in *Tehillim* 14 renders "*amar naval*" – "the fool has said," whereas in *Tehillim* 53, it renders that same phrase as "Naval has said."

[13] There is a striking similarity between Chana's prayer and *Tehillim* 113 recited as part of *Hallel*. In Chana's prayer we read: "The Lord makes poor, and makes rich; He brings low, and raises up. **He raises up the poor out of the dust, and lifts up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes**, and to make them inherit the throne of glory. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's." This is very reminiscent of the verses: "Who is like the Lord our God, who is enthroned on high, and yet **looks far down** to behold the things that are in heaven, and on the earth! **He raises up the poor out of the dust, and lifts the needy out of the ash heap; that he may set him with nobles**, with the nobles of the people" (*Tehillim* 113, 5-8). From here as well it is clear that the composers and the reciters of the *Tehillim* made use of earlier material.

[14] This psalm appears with tens of slight differences in *Tehilim* 18, where it is stated (v. 51): "Great deliverance [*magdil* (*migdol* – *ketiv*) He gives to his king." In light of this, the author of the *Torah Temima*, R. Baruch Halevi Epstein, in his book *Barukh She'amar*, writes that the reason why in *Birkat Ha-mazon*, we say *magdil* during the week and *migdol* on *Shabbat* is: "One of the copyists noted in the margin: '*Beshab*' *migdol*.' He meant to say that in II *Shemuel* the reading is *migdol*, and '*Beshab*' is an abbreviation for 'in II *Shemuel*.' A later copyist misunderstood and read it as an abbreviation for '*Beshabbat*' – on *Shabbat*. The mistake was passed on from one copy to the next, and from there to the printed editions."

This, however, is very difficult. The custom of reciting *migdol* on *Shabbat* appears already and is explained by the *Abudraham* (*Birkat Ha-lechem, Zimmun*): "And the reason seems to me that *Shabbat* is a great king in relation to the weekdays, and *migdol* is plene with a vav, and a *cholam* with a vav is a great king, whereas *magdil* is missing a *yod*, and a *chirik* without a *yod* is a small king. And furthermore, *magdil* is in *Tehilim*, when David was not yet king, whereas *migdol* is in the Prophets, when he was already a king." The division of *Shemuel* into two books was not known to the *Rishonim* (R. David Abudraham lived in Spain in the 14th century), and they never used it. Thus, despite all its originality, the *Torah Temima's* explanation has no basis.