

Rosh Hashanah: Torah Reading Day 1

Chana's Prayer

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Many of the laws and customs of prayer are learned from the way Chana prayed. We also learn the deepest secrets of how to pray, to know what we need, to ask Hashem for it and how to make requests that are answered.

The story takes place approximately three thousand years ago. Chana, who has no children, is one of Elkana's two wives. His other wife is Penina and she has many children. We imagine this reality is never easy for Chana but never is it more painful as when the entire family goes to Shiloh for a yearly pilgrimage, to bring offerings to Hashem. Penina and her children are given portions of food while Chana is given a special portion because Elkana loves her so much. But every year she cries and cries. Elkana, a good husband, tries to show his love - "Isn't my love for you greater than of ten children?!" Yet, Chana feels that something is missing - something is not right.

One year, Chana leaves the thanksgiving celebration and finds herself a quiet place to pray. Tears stream down her face as her emotions soar. Her lips are moving as she pronounces the words with no sound emerging. Her body is completely immersed in concentration. Chana calls out to G-d and the Talmud fills in her words. Prayer that comes from such a deep and real place brings about a miracle. These are words that so to speak force G-d to change her reality.

The most common of the Hebrew words for prayer, *tefillah*, means introspection. In *tefillah* experience, we look into ourselves. Who am I? What is my purpose? How can I use the gifts G-d has given me? For example, every morning we thank G-d for a whole list of things: Thank you Hashem for eyes that see, Thank you Hashem for legs that walk, Thank you for a mind that can process to list but a few. G-d does not need our thanks. So why do we go through the process of thanking him in such detail? We verbally give thanks because it teaches us the importance of appreciation, to always recognize our blessings.

This recognition is meant to be taken a step further. We are tasked to give an honest appraisal of what we have done and what we plan to do with all the gifts granted to us. Each one of us is directed to think about what are we going to do with all that I have been given? These gifts were given to us specifically for a reason so we have the responsibility to use them wisely and intentionally.

This is the purpose of three daily prayers. In the morning we start with my daily plan of how to use all of our gifts. Midday is an opportunity to stop to assess if the plan is on track and refocus on these goals. The day ends looking back on the day's achievements. The Talmud in Berachot 31 describes Chana's self-appraisal. "Hashem- You have given me eyes to see, ears to hear, a nose to smell, a mouth to speak, hands with which to perform labor, feet with which to walk, breasts with which to nurse. Please give me a child to nurse!"

I imagine she did not just mention these limbs as a lengthy list. Chana was evaluating how she used her gifts. My eyes, how have I used them? I have used them only for good - to see the good in people, to see what is needed, to appreciate your world. My ears, what have I done with them? I listened and empathized with my husband. I heard poor people's cry. My mouth has spoken no evil, my words have soothed my family and friends. My hands and feet have rushed to do your mitzvot. Amazingly Chana can say she has used all the gifts she has been given completely! She judges herself and everything she has. After a complete head to toe evaluation Chana concludes that she has used every single gift, every single opportunity completely and absolutely, totally for its spiritual purpose with nothing has been wasted. Imagine that one can say and know that he or she has maximized everything in life for its spiritual purpose.

Only one thing is left, she says and that is her female reproductive organs. "Those I have not been able to use Hashem!" she cries. "If I have used everything I am meant to use then my life can be over. I will have

completed my purpose. But if I am to live, give me a child so that I can use these parts of myself as well. These organs must achieve their spiritual purpose." Chana speaks strongly but her prayer comes from a place of humility. She states, "Hashem, you are the master of all worlds. Everything is you." And she continues, "Everything in this world is for you. Everything I do is for you. I need you to be part of everything in my life!" Chana's prayers are answered with a child. She continues her life with her son Shmuel, with the same focus of godliness and spirituality in everything.

We are often taught that all prayers are answered, except sometimes the answer is no. I never liked that as a child and to be honest I do not like it as an adult. I like prayer when the answer is yes. While one cannot promise a specific physical outcome of prayer or miracles, I would like to share a method in prayer where the response from Hashem is always a resounding yes.

Rav Dessler in his famous philosophical work *Michtav Me'Eliyahu, Strive for Truth*, teaches us which prayer will always be answered in the positive. It is the same approach that Chana uses and a concept we can learn ourselves. We are asked to look in Tehillim 145- a chapter that we actually say twice a day - *ashrei*. In one of the verses we say - *karov Hashem Ichol kor'av* - Hashem is close to all those that call out to him, *lechol asher yikre'uhu be'emet* - to all those that call out to Him sincerely. Hashem is close to all those that call out to him. How does this happen, how does this work? Many people ascribe to the "Amazon method of prayer", referably Prime. I pray for a whole list of things that I want and since I am a pretty good person and I have prayed very hard, I should get those things. This method works amazingly online but does it work with G-d? If I send G-d a shopping list, maybe I will get some of the things I ask for - maybe some money although usually not as much as I think I need; some health, not always as good as what I would want; a new car, though perhaps not the convertible I'd specifically requested. The Amazon shopping list approach to prayer is not guaranteed at all. Rav Dessler described another prayer method. The key to prayer, he teaches, is in WHAT we ask. Hashem is close to all those who call out to him. When we call out and ask Hashem to be close, He will

always be there. The prayer asking to find G-d in our lives is always answered with a yes!

Often we think we have ourselves covered. We are capable and in control. Things are going well and perhaps we turn to G-d to ask for more. Sometimes it may not going so well. I may have made half-hearted decisions and I may turn to G-d to ask for changes. Maybe He solves the problems in the way that we wanted or maybe not. But this is not the guaranteed prayer. The guaranteed prayer is when we turn to Hashem and say, "My life is perfect and I need you to be part of it. I need to know that this is your connection with me." It is then that Hashem says "Here I am. I am with you." Or we turn to Gd and we say "I am confused. This is not what I had planned. I need you to be part of this, I need to know that through this all, You are with me." And Hashem says "Here I am. I am with you."

Rav Dessler's method of prayer is when we ask Hashem to be close to us, to be part of everything we do, and then the answer is always yes. Chana turned to G-d and said, "There is no purpose to anything unless I can use it to be close to you and to feel that you are close to me." Everything we are given in life has a purpose, everything we are not given in life has a purpose. The purpose is always G-dliness. The challenge is for us to bring Hashem into my life and to see him everywhere. The Kotzker rebbe, who was known for his wit, asks and answers, where can one find Hashem? His response is wherever we let him in.

We read the story of Chana's prayer on Rosh Hashanah - the day we are judged for what the next year will bring. Rosh Hashanah is the time to honestly focus and genuinely think, much like Chana, what do I dream of for this coming year? We turn to G-d and say that everything that we will be given, we ask for it so that we can see you close, so we can bring you into our lives, so we can share spirituality with others. All the things we will not be given, we see Hashem there too. He is close to us there too. This prayer calls out to G-d from the true depths of our being acknowledging that everything we do is for His glory, to create a spiritual reality in this physical world. When we open ourselves to seeing Him, He is always close. When we ask Hashem to be part of our lives, the answer is always yes.