



SARAH AND CHANA: TWO MODELS FOR PRAYER ON ROSH HASHANA

If we were to ask a child what they might expect to learn about from the Torah reading at shul on Rosh Hashana, the child might respond with an answer related to shofar, the creation of the world, or details related to the holiday itself. Most children would be surprised to learn that we do not actually read about these ideas, but rather about two famous and inspiring women: Sarah Imeinu and Chana, two of the *sheva neviot* (seven prophetesses). This choice is not one that came without debate. Indeed, *Masechet Megillah*, 31a, records a dispute about the Torah reading and haftara of Rosh Hashana.

בְּרֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁבִיעִי וּמִפְטִירֵינוּ הֵבֵן
יִקְרֶה לִּי אֶפְרַיִם וְיֵשׁ אֹמְרִים וְה' פָּקַד אֶת שָׂרָה
וּמִפְטִירֵינוּ בַּחֲנָה.

On Rosh Hashana, the Torah reading is, "In the seventh month etc. [Bamidbar 29:1-6] and the haftara is "Ephraim is dear to me" [Jeremiah 31]. There are those that say "And Hashem

remembered Sarah" [Bereishit 21] and the haftarah is [the story of] Chana [Shmuel I 1:2-10]

The Gemara explains that the first opinion holds that the Torah reading for Rosh Hashana should be from Bamidbar, 29:1–6, which details the korbanot offered in the Mikdash on Rosh Hashana, while the haftara should be from Sefer Yirmiyahu 31:1–20, which contains pesukim that remind the reader of Hashem's love for the Jewish people. The second opinion states that the Torah reading should be from Bereishit 21, which describes how Hashem remembered Sarah and granted her a child, while the haftara should be from Shmuel I 1:2–10, which tells the story of Chana. Rashi, commenting on this Gemara, explains that the reasoning behind this second opinion's choice of haftara is that Chana was "remembered" on Rosh Hashana.

Rashi's comment is based on a Gemara in *Rosh Hashana* 11a, which states that Sarah, Rachel and Chana were all remembered on Rosh Hashana, namely that they conceived on Rosh Hashana. Rabbi Elazar explains that this understanding is based on a connection utilizing the word *zechira*. This term is used to describe Hashem remembering Chana (*vayizkereha Hashem*, Shmuel I 1:19) and Rachel (*vayizkor Elokim et Rachel*, Bereishit 30:22). It is also used with regard to Rosh Hashana itself, "*Shabbaton zichron teruah*" — It is a day of rest "remembered" through the blast of the shofar (Vayikra 23:24). Rabbi Elazar continues to explain that since the word *pakad*, remembrance, is then used to describe Chana and Sarah, we can derive that the way Chana was remembered on Rosh Hashana, so too Sarah was remembered on Rosh Hashana.

When examining both of these

passages in the Gemara, we must ask two important questions: Why were the stories of Sarah and Chana selected over the first option presented in the *braita* to serve as our Torah reading for Rosh Hashana? Second, what can we learn from both of these stories as inspiration for ourselves on Rosh Hashana?

I would like to propose two potential understandings as to why we read about Sarah and Chana on Rosh Hashana, rather than reading about the communal korbanot offered and Hashem's love for Bnei Yisrael. According to the Mishna, *Rosh Hashana* 1:1-2, the first of Tishrei is a significant date for many reasons. The first of Tishrei is a marker for counting years, as well as many of the agricultural mitzvot of Eretz Yisrael, namely *shemita*, *yovel*, *orla* and *maaser*. In addition, it is also the date where all the creations of the world are judged. The Mishna states:

בְּרֵאשִׁית הַשָּׁנָה כָּל בְּאֵי הָעוֹלָם עוֹבְרִין לְפָנָיו כְּבָנֵי מְרוֹן, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (תהלים לג) הַיּוֹצֵר יַחַד לִבָּם, הַמְבִּין אֶל כָּל מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם.

On Rosh Hashana, all creatures pass before Him like sheep [benei maron], as it is stated: "He Who fashions their hearts alike, Who considers all their deeds" (Psalms 33:15).

According to Tosfot Yom Tov, *Rosh Hashana* 1:2, the imagery of sheep is significant in this Mishna. The same way that a shepherd analyzes his sheep one by one, so too, Hashem analyzes and examines each individual, one by one, on Rosh Hashana. This theme is included in the tefillot of Rosh Hashana and is emphasized specifically in the tefillah of U'Netaneh Tokef, one of the highlights of the Chazzan's repetition of Mussaf Shemoneh Esrai. U'Netaneh Tokef elaborates on this

idea, detailing it in a chilling and inspiring manner:

וְכָל בְּאֵי עוֹלָם יַעֲבְרוּן לְפָנָיו כְּבָנֵי מְרוֹן. כְּבִקְרַת רוּחָה עֶדְרוֹ. מֵעֵבִיר צִאֲנוּ תַּחַת שִׁבְטוֹ. כֵּן תֵּעֲבִיר וְתִסְפֹּר וְתִמְנֶה. וְתִפְקֹד נַפְשׁ כָּל חַי. וְתִחְתָּךְ קִצְבָה לְכָל בְּרִיּוֹתָיִךְ. וְתִכְתֹּב אֶת גְּזֵר דִּינָם:

As a shepherd inspects his flock, making his sheep pass under his rod, so do You cause to pass, count, number, and review the soul of every living being, determining the lifespan of every creature; and You record the decree of their judgment.

Perhaps this focus helps us understand the choice of our Torah reading and haftara. Rosh Hashana is a day that is more primarily focused on the judgement of the individual, as opposed to the judgement of the nation. Therefore, the Torah reading and haftara are specifically focused on the stories of individuals, stories that give us true examples of how closely Hashem is involved in each and every individual's life.

Another significant theme of Rosh Hashana is the concept of *zichronot*. This idea also plays a large role in our Rosh Hashana tefillot, since one of the three primary brachot in the Mussaf Shemoneh Esrai is *zichronot*. The bracha of *Zichronot*, as well as the brachot of *Malchuyot* and *Shofarot*, are composed of pesukim taken from all three portions of Tanach, serving as proof-texts of the larger concept and themes of the day. Perhaps the Torah reading and haftara fit into this concept of proof-texts as well. They are an elaboration of one of the significant themes of the day, two examples that demonstrate Hashem's strength in the area of *zichronot* and the impact this power could have on our lives.

The choice of using these two texts, stories of individuals who were remembered for the good, reminds us that each Rosh Hashana presents a new opportunity for the individual to be judged anew, due to Hashem's *koach hazikaron*.

A deeper analysis of both of these stories, however, finds that they contain a tremendous insight into the power of tefillah, perhaps making them appropriate to our reading on Rosh Hashana as well. When we look closely at both of these stories, we might notice that there is a significant difference in the sequence of events leading up to the remembrance of Sarah and Chana. In the story of Sarah Imeinu, we might notice that there is an absence of tefillah in the *peshat* of the pesukim. We assume Sarah must have davened as a barren woman yearning for a child, based on the midrash, *Bereishit Rabba* 45:4, and Gemara, *Yevamot* 64a, which emphasize that the reason Hashem made the Avot and Imahot barren was that Hashem desires the prayers of tzadikkim. However, from a midrashic standpoint, Sarah's conception came both as a response to the tefillot of Avraham and Sarah, as well as a response to Avraham's tefillah for another with a similar need. Rashi, *Bereishit* 20:1, citing the Gemara, *Bava Batra* 92a, explains that the juxtaposition of the story of Avimelech and Hashem remembering Sarah is not happenstance, but is meant to teach us an important lesson: When we pray for mercy on behalf of another when we are also in need of that very thing, we will first receive a positive response from Hashem. Avimelech desired that his wife conceive again, and it was Avraham's tefillah for him that made it possible for Sarah to conceive as well.

Chana's story, on the other hand, seems to be the exact opposite. Chana's story heavily emphasizes the prayer experience that she goes through prior to her conception of Shmuel HaNavi. Malbim explains that there are four key elements to Chana's tefillah that made it accepted by Hashem. The pesukim, Shmuel I 1:10-11 state:

וְהִיא מָרַת נַפְשָׁהּ וַתִּתְפַּלֵּל עַל ה' וּבָכָה תְּבָכָה.
וַתִּדְרֹךְ נֶדֶר וַתֹּאמֶר ה' צֶבֶךָ-אֹת אִם רָאָה תִרְאֶה
בְּעֵינֵי אֲמָתְךָ וּזְכַרְתָּנִי וְלֹא תִשְׁכַּח אֶת אֲמָתְךָ
וְנָתַתָּה לְאֲמָתְךָ יָרֵעַ אֲנָשִׁים וְנִתְּתִיו לָהּ כָּל יְמֵי
חַיֶּיהָ וּמִזְרָהּ לֹא יַעֲלֶה עַל רֹאשׁוֹ.

And she was bitter in her soul, she prayed to Hashem, cried heavily, and made an oath and said, Hashem, Lord of Hosts if You will look upon the suffering of Your maidservant and will remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to the Lord for all the days of his life; and no razor shall ever touch his head.

Malbim explains that each of these phrases in the pasuk is a key component of what made her tefillah successful. 1) She was *marat nefesh* (bitter in her soul) and Hashem listens to the prayers of those who are broken-hearted and vulnerable. 2) She prayed to Hashem, namely that she had complete *kavanah*, praying directly to him, with no hope in anyone else. 3) Chana cried deeply from her soul, and tears are a direct access point to Hashem — through the gate of tears in Shamayaim that is never sealed. 4) Last, she made an oath, an acceptance upon herself, which always helps in a time of need.

According to Malbim, Commentary to Shmuel I 1:9, the tefillah process mentioned in this pasuk is the first time that Chana prayed completely for a child. Until now, Chana had

relied on the prayers of her husband, Elkana, who she viewed as a righteous individual. She believed that his tefillot were powerful enough to grant her a child. However, upon hearing his response to her despair, Chana understood that Elkana was no longer praying with the fervor they needed to be granted a child, and so she took it upon herself to pray for herself — which made the difference. Abarbanel explicitly says that it is these tefillot that cause Hashem to grant Chana a child, as he explains that the phrase “*vayizkereha Hashem*” does not only mean that Hashem remembered her, but also means Hashem remembered her prayers and granted her a child.

Comparing these two stories highlights an important, fundamental difference in what may have prompted Hashem to remember both women. For Chana, the opening of her womb seems to be due to her own efforts toward Hashem, her own sacrifice and her complete devotion to the depth of her tefillah. For Sarah, Hashem's response was not only due to Sarah's own tefillot, but also Avraham's tefillah for another human being. The care and compassion demonstrated by Avraham toward Avimelech not only impacted Avimelech, it also prompted a difference in their own situation as well.

Another difference in analyzing these two stories reveals two modalities of prayer as well. Relying on the midrashic understanding that Sarah did pray for a child, we might view Sarah as a model of private prayer, prayer that is done independently by the individual with only Hashem knowing about it. It is done in quiet and in secret, hidden from the view of others, the way that Sarah's prayer is hidden in the *peshat* of the text. Chana's tefillah, on the other hand, is

a tefillah that was done publicly, in a place where others could see. It's the kind of prayer that has the potential to inspire others and move others to participate in the experience as well.

When looking at these stories together, we are presented with many models of prayer that have the potential to prompt Hashem's *koach hazikaron*. The story of Chana highlights the power of an individual's own tefillah, especially when the tefillah emanates from a place of sincerity, dedication and depth. The story of Sarah teaches us about the power of an individual's prayer for another, and the impact it can have for both the individual and the one being prayed for. Together, these women teach us about the power of prayer, whether publicly or privately, for the world to see or for only ourselves to experience.

Perhaps these teachings provide us with a third reason as to why these stories were selected to be read, together, on Rosh Hashana. These stories give those of us davening — whether in shul or at home — on Rosh Hashana inspiration as to what our tefillah can look like, and hope that our tefillot might be answered. They push us as individuals to remember to pray sincerely for ourselves, as well as for those sitting around us. Their contrast highlights that there is not one model for Hashem's *koach hazikaron*, but rather that Hashem has the ability to alter the decree of each individual, *ba'asher hu sham* — each person on an individual basis.

May we be *zoche* that through our collective tefillot, both for ourselves and for others, on this Rosh Hashana to find all our tefillot answered *l'tovah*.