

SICHA SUMMARY

Likkutei Sichos, Vol. 29

Rosh Hashana - Vov Tishrei

The Context:

The Gemara derives several guidelines for prayer from the narrative of Chana praying for a child despite her bareness. “How many significant laws can be derived from these verses of the prayer of Chana? From the verse: “And Chana spoke in her heart,” we learn that one who prays must focus his heart on his prayer. From “Only her lips moved,” we derive that one who prays must enunciate the words with his lips, not only contemplate them in his heart. From “And her voice could not be heard,” we derive that one is forbidden to raise his voice in his Amida prayer as it must be recited silently. From the continuation of the verse here: “So Eli thought her to be drunk,” we learn that a drunk person is forbidden to pray.” (Berachos 31a)

The Question:

These verses are not a generative source of these halachos, they serve as scriptural

support, or allusions, for existing laws that are sourced elsewhere. If this is the case, then why does the Gemara use the story of Chana related in the Neviim as the source for these “significant laws” of prayer, and not find allusions to these guidelines in earlier, more foundational stories of the forefathers and mothers prayers, such as Yitzchak and Rivkah’s prayer for a child?

The Explanation:

In order to understand why Chana’s prayer in particular was seen as so seminal, we need to examine the difference between tefillah, prayer, and bracha, blessing. The word bracha is related to the words for a pool of water (bricha), or to grafting a branch (hamavrich). Meaning, the object or entity that one seeks already exists, yet one must perform some action to move the object from one place to another — the water needs to be drawn from the pool to the desired destination, the branch needs to be grafted to a new tree to stimulate growth. A bracha, therefore, is an appeal to draw down sustenance that has been allocated for a specific person, but for some

reason has not manifested yet in reality. The blessing asks G-d to channel that existing Divine good into this person's life.

Tefillah, however, in its classic formulation of "let it be Your will," is an attempt to create a new channel for a good or sustenance that does not yet exist within the Divine will. In prayer, we ask to heal the person who in the natural order, has a slim chance of recovery, we ask for material sustenance that maybe cannot be envisioned in the natural course of a career. Requests made in prayer are asking G-d to create a new will, even if that runs against the natural world G-d has ordained.

The more drastic and counter to natural law the request is, the more emblematic it is of a true tefillah. This is why Chana's prayer was seen as paradigmatic of what prayer is: Chana was barren and requested a child, asking for G-d to change her very physical constitution. This is unlike requesting rain during a drought, which is a natural eventuality. But there are many other prayers for children in the Torah. Chana, however, did not just ask for a child, she asked that the child be righteous from the womb, something that runs counter to G-d's own protocols of ensuring free choice for every person. While material circumstances can be predetermined, one's spiritual destiny and identity are left entirely to them. Yet Chana boldly asked not just for potentially righteous children, but for G-d to guarantee that the child would actually be devoted to G-d his entire life. With the birth

of Shmuel, this request was granted, which illustrates that Chana's profoundly novel prayer was accepted, and that G-d altered not just His natural law, but the Torah as well, so to speak.

This is why we derive the importance of intention and focus from Chana. Prayer is unique in that intent is essential to its formulation and existence. What is prayer without intent aside for random utterances? A blessing, whose purpose is to actualize that exists in potential, can suffice with words alone, since the physical words can effect the drawing down of the blessing into the material realm. But a prayer whose purpose is to fashion a new Divine will can only do so if the person nullifies themselves to the Divine will, which can only be accomplished with intense concentration. Thus, Chana's prayer serves as a concrete example of how intention creates a meaningful prayer that can even alter the Divine natural and Torah law.

This also explains why we read this narrative as the Haftarah on Rosh Hashanah. On Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish people recreate the Divine will for creation through subjugating ourselves to G-d and pledging our complete fealty to His will. Chana's prayer, suffused with brokenness, humility, and longing for a radically new reality, is the model for our efforts on Rosh Hashanah to invite G-d to act as King and Creator once again.
