

# On the Haftarah: The Power of Chana's Prayer

For the first day of Rosh Hashana, from the teachings of the Rebbe

By Yitzi Hurwitz

On the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we read the haftorah about Chana, a barren woman who was blessed with a son, our prophet Samuel.

There are several reasons why this haftorah is read on Rosh Hashanah.

The first is because of its similarity to the Torah reading, where our matriarch, Sarah, also a barren woman, was blessed with a son, our patriarch Isaac. But a question remains: Why read about barren women whose fates were changed on this day?

Another reason this is read is because Chana's prayer to have a child was said (according to many) on Rosh Hashanah, and Eli the High Priest who blessed Chana had been appointed leader on that very day, Rosh Hashanah.

What message are we meant to take from the story?

Looking at the haftorah, it is clear that a central theme of Rosh Hashanah is prayer and requesting our needs for the year. However, thinking of the holiness of the day, we must ask: "Why would we be asking for our selfish needs and wants on such a holy day? Shouldn't we be focusing on G-d, and what He wants?"

The question becomes even stronger when you think about the essential motif of Rosh Hashanah, asking G-d to be our king for the next year. When crowning a king, a key aspect is the nation's humility and subservience to the king. It hardly seems like a time to request things. To be thinking about yourself is the opposite of self-nullification and subservience to the king. If so, why do we ask for our needs on Rosh Hashanah?

We must conclude that the requests we make on Rosh Hashanah are not selfish at all, but part of our service to our King. When we coronate G-d as our King, we are accepting His mission as well. Asking for what we need to accomplish His mission is not selfish at all; it is only for His sake that we ask for them.

On a deeper level, the Baal Shem Tov explains that each of us has a part of the world that we are meant to refine—to make it ready for G-d's presence. Our souls are attracted to those objects and the places it has been charged with refining. This is why our bodies crave those things and those places.

Asking for the things you want is asking for what your soul wants, and your soul is part of G-d. In actuality, you are asking for what the King wants.

We see this in the haftorah. Chana was pleading for her deepest desire—to have a child. Seeing how she was praying, Eli asked her "How long will you be drunk?" (meaning how long will you be drunk in prayer)? Is it appropriate to stand here, before G-d, on this holy day, asking for your personal desires?

To this, she responded: "I am pouring out my soul before G-d." Meaning, this is not my selfish desire, this is my soul's desire.

Eli accepted this answer and replied: "Go in peace, and G-d of Israel will give you the request you asked for." In other words, he agreed with Chana's mode of prayer, asking for the soul's desires.

The Talmud tells us that "Rav Hamnuna said: 'Several major laws can be derived from these verses of Chana.'"

What is unique about Chana's prayer that we chose to learn these "major laws" specifically from her?

In general, our prayers are divided into two categories. There are daily prayers, where we pray for our regular needs. Then there are prayers in a time of crisis, when praying to end a drought, for a sick person or to have a baby.

The difference between the two could be understood by looking at the difference between *brachah* (blessing) and *tefilah* (prayer).

A *brachah* draws down already existing blessings that for one reason or another had been held back. The *brachah* removes the blockage, allowing your blessing to flow freely to you.

Sometimes, however, what we are asking for is not in our cards, and we entreat G-d to create a new will and grant us something that was not meant to be. This is *tefilah*, in which we use the words, "May it be Your will . . ."

Daily prayers, like a *brachah*, are to draw down the blessing that is already coming to us. Crisis prayers, like *tefilah*, are trying to create, so to speak, a new will in G-d.

Within crisis prayers, there are two categories. First, there is asking for a bad decree to be annulled. For example, when it is decreed from above that there be no rain, asking to annul the decree is asking for a new will, but not for a change in the nature that G-d imbued in creation. Asking for a sick person to be healed is the same.

But the most powerful form of prayer is when what is being asked for, goes completely against nature—like a barren woman asking to have a child, when it is naturally not possible.

What Chana was asking for was a change in G-d's creation. Even more, she asked that G-d give her "seed of men," which Rashi explains to mean that the child be holy and righteous. That not only goes against nature, but possibly against the Torah's rule that "everything is in the hands of Heaven, aside for fear of Heaven." Yet so powerful was her prayer that G-d changed nature and bent the rules, so to speak, and gave her the child she asked for—our holy and righteous prophet Shmuel.

Now we can understand why major laws of prayer are learned specifically from Chana and why we read about barren women, whose fates were changed, to be blessed with children on Rosh Hashanah.

The prayer of Chana represents the most powerful type of prayer—one that creates a new will in Hashem.

Rosh Hashanah is a time for creating new will. It is when we coronate our King. How do we do this? Through prayer, we generate a new will in Hashem, to be our King for another year. And that as our King, He grant us all, even if it is not in our cards, a happy and sweet year.

---

Major laws of prayer that are learned from Chana:

1. Focus your heart on the words you are saying.
  2. Form the words of the prayers with your lips.
  3. Do not raise your voice during (Amidah) prayer.
  4. Do not pray when drunk.
- 

*Dedicated to Jewish women praying for G-d to grant their deepest desire—to have a child of their own. May He grant you what you are asking for.*

**By Yitzi Hurwitz**

---



Rabbi Yitzi Hurwitz—father of seven, husband of Dina, and spiritual leader at Chabad Jewish Center in Temecula, Calif.—has been rendered immobile by ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease). Unable to speak or type, he uses his eyes to write heartfelt thoughts on the weekly Torah portion.

Please support the Hurwitz Family Fund.

© Copyright, all rights reserved. If you enjoyed this article, we encourage you to distribute it further, provided that you comply with Chabad.org's copyright policy.