

Rosh Hashanna

Parents and Children; Prayers and Tears.

There are four texts, four stories that we read in our Keriyat Hatorah (Torah Reading) on Rosh Hashanna. Why are these texts in particular, chosen to accompany our Rosh Hashanna? What do they tell us about the nature of the day? I believe that they are united by a series of common themes, and that when we analyse these characteristics we emerge with some wonderful insights into Rosh Hashanna.

The four texts are:

Isaac's birth and the sending away of Hagar	Torah – 1 st day	Genesis ch.20-21
Channa and the birth of Shmuel	Haftara	Shmuel I ch.1-2
The Akeida	Torah – 2 nd day	Genesis ch.22
Promise of Israel's return from exile, and their Teshuva.	Haftara	Jeremiah ch.31

Each one of these chosen pieces is animated by tension and drama, emotion and exhilaration. Let us probe deeper into these dramatic stories. We shall examine some of the features that these episodes share:

Parents and Children

In each story the central drama is about parents and children and the love between them, the unbreakable emotional connection that binds parent and child. Let us take a quick survey:

- In the Torah reading of the first day, we celebrate Sarah giving birth to and nursing the child she has longed for. If that were not enough, the next episode of the reading is that of Hagar fraught with worry for the fate of her son Yishmael who is dehydrated and lost in the desert.
- In the Haftara, we look on as Channa cries desperately and prays passionately for a child, and exuberantly praises God after he is born.
- Avraham and Yitzchak at the Akeida is a story about the deep ties between a parent and the child who he loves, who is the next generation, his continuation, the future. One of the repeated words of the Akeida is simply "b'nee/avi" – "my son/father." The relationship of Yitzchak and Avraham is critical to the test of the Akeida.
- And then in the Haftara from Jeremiah, we read of Rachel, the crying inconsolable mother, who weeps for her children in Exile, waiting frantically for their return. In the words of the prophet, God Himself addresses the exiled tribes (called "Ephraim") as a parent:

"I have been for Israel as a father; Ephraim is my firstborn..."

Truly, Ephraim is a dear son to Me. He is my darling child... I yearn for him, I will surely have compassion on him, says the Lord."(31:9,20)

And so at the outset, we recognise a link between the passages chosen for Rosh Hashanna. We have to probe the question as to the reason why the parent-child connection is so central to Rosh Hashanna. But first, some further observations.

Death to Life

The other major feature of these stories is that each one contains a transition from death to life. In each situation, death is the most probable and most predictable outcome. Sarah should not give birth, should not create life, at ninety years old. Naturally Hagar would not have found water for Yishmael in the desert. Yishmael "should" have died. Yitzchak was earmarked for death as instructed by God, and carried out faithfully by Avraham until God changed death to life. Channa's story is one of giving life. And last of all – Yirmiyahu: Rationally after losing our independence and being made into a wandering refugee nation, all the odds should have been that the Jewish nation would lose its independent identity in the sea of nations, and cease to exist. And yet, unexpectedly "a nation of survivors of the sword" – the dead nation – is to be revived¹ and will be rehabilitated to live and joy.

Tears and Prayers, and God's Response

Quite obviously a third feature of this story is the notion that God listens; he responds to the cries, to the emotions of mortal humans:

"She (Hagar) sat at a distance and cried – and God listened to the voice of the child. An angel of God called to Hagar from the heavens ...don't worry for God has heard the voice of the child." (Bereshit 21:17)

"And Avraham called the name of the place – 'God will see...'"²

"She (Channa) was very bitter and she prayed to God, weeping intensely... and God remembered her." (I Samuel 1:11, 19)

"A voice is heard in Ramah, wailing bitter weeping. Rachel weeps for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children, who are gone³. So says God – withhold your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears; there is reward for your actions and they shall return from the land of the enemy." (Yirmiyahu 31:15-16)

¹ See note 3

² Interestingly, there is no crying or praying at the Akeida. Avraham faces the challenge without so much as challenging or beseeching God. Maybe that is part of the point of the story. It is interesting that in the Midrash, the angels cry!

³ Note how the phrase כי אינו use mirrors the expression that Yaakov/his sons use to describe Yosef as missing- presumed-dead in Bereishit 42:14, 36. Since this chapter talks about Ephrayim, the descendents of Yosef, the word reverberates with added meaning. Yosef certainly is a story of a "Dead person" who comes back to life. And his father comes back to life when he finds him – ותחי רוח יעקב אביהם (45:27)

Let us absorb this image of the parents crying and praying for their children, praying for their children's life – that death is turned into life - and then, God responding by changing the fortunes of these individuals. God listens to the cries.

Interim Summary

Clearly, these perakim are chosen with care. On Rosh Hashanna we stand between life and death and we seek life. We appeal to *Avinu Malkeinu* that he relate to us as a father, not as a king. We "remind" Him of the natural instinct of parents to love their children:

אם כבנים אם כעבדים - אם כבנים רחמינו כרחם אב על בנים!

Most of Rosh Hashanna our prayers refer to God's majesty - *המלך הקדוש; ה' מלך ה' מלך, ה' ימלוך לעולם ועד* - but our *Kriyat Hatorah* would appear to be "hinting" to God a different role. We recall by quoting the Torah and Navi how humans have special love feelings towards their children. We read how God has witnessed that in the past and has responded to that human need. We look to God as our *Avinu*, asking him to respond accordingly and turn death to life.

The Story of Channa

Rav Soloveichik once asked a powerful question regarding the story of Channa⁴. The text tell us how repeatedly, year by year, Channa would visit Shiloh and revisit the same upsetting experience:

"Year after year, every time that she went up to the House of the Lord ... she wept and would not eat." (1:7)

That was her annual behaviour. But this year, she acted differently. In a radical departure from her normal conduct:

"After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Channa arose... In her distraught and bitter state of mind, she prayed to the Lord, weeping endlessly." (1:9)

This year she didn't cry at the meal. She even ate! But when she finished, she entered the *Mishkan* and poured out all her bitter frustration in prayer.

What happened? What changed Channa? Why this year of all years did she direct her passionate frustration at God? What made her transform herself from object to subject, from a passive character to a striking figure of bold demanding prayer? The metamorphosis is so striking! What acted as the catalyst to this change?

If you check the *pesukim* quoted above, Channa's old behaviour is in verse 7. Her new direction is in verse 9. The cause of change must be in verse 8. Let us read it:

"Her husband Elkanah said to her, 'Hannah, why do you cry and why do you not eat? Why are you so sad? Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?'"(1:8)

Elkanah is expressing his love and sensitivity. The verse uses the description "her husband" to indicate this fact. But in truth Elkanah's words struck a deep emotional chord that released a volcano of emotion. How so?

What was Elkanah saying? He spoke gently to his wife and said: Darling, lets face it. We've been trying for a long time to have a child. We've been to every specialist; we've tried every therapy. It's time to come to terms with it. We have a wonderful relationship. It's time to stop crying. "Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?" Maybe you won't have ten sons, but I am totally and absolutely dedicated to you. In essence, he was asking her to accept the fact that she would never have a child, she would never be a mother.

As I said, Elkanah was trying to comfort his wife, to placate her emotional turmoil. But Channa felt a roar from within.

What did Channa feel? I think that she was confronted with two realisations. The first relates to prayer.

If a person is in distress, in sickness or in some other crisis, as long as there exists a rational avenue, a possible escape route, a person does not reach the pinnacle of prayer. The feeling is that if one tries one more drug, another hospital, another consultant, then there is a chance. When does a person truly pray? When there is no rational way! When the negotiations have failed, when the doctors have given up- then there is only one single path: prayer. Channa realised what her husband was saying. The odds were stacked hopelessly against her. All the probabilities, all the wisdom said that she was infertile. But she insisted that there was another way.

But Channa realised a second thing. She realised that she was alone! Suddenly she understood that no one, not even her beloved husband had an inkling of her pain, her distress, her daily trauma. After all, her husband already had children from Penina. However sensitive he may try to be, he could not experience the endless depths of her suffering. No! Channa knew that she had to thrust her pain and her bitterness at God.

And she sought her redemption in prayer, and in God she found her relief, her answer.

Channa's crisis

Channa's crisis may be compared to that of our ancestor Rachel. Rachel too had a sister who competed for her husband's love. Rachel too watched on as her co-wife had child after child whilst she had none. When Rachel first cries out, desperate for a child, she turns to her husband and demands a way out:

"Give me a child or I shall be dead." (Bereshit 30:1)

Again here the Torah depicts the existential torture of the childless woman. Without a child, Rachel, like Channa, feels death within her. Here we gain a small portal into the soul of the woman who feels an intense instinctive and emotional need to bring a child into the world, a sense of self that goes to the core of her biology her psychology. If she does not have children, she feels like a non-person, she feels dead.

⁴ My answer is a reworking of the ideas of Rav Soloveitchik, but does not follow his thoughts precisely. After I wrote this article I discovered some beautiful pieces related to Channa in "Family Redeemed." – one of the books published posthumously from the Rav's notebooks and public addresses.

In that story, Rachel too is rejected by her husband⁵. The Ramban says:

"When Rachel saw that **she could not rely on the prayers of Yaakov, she began to pray for herself**, to He who heard the cries, and hence 'God listened to her' (30:22)"

Rachel too, in her loneliness realises that the only outlet, the only recourse to action is prayer, is God.

Zikaron

"And God **remembered** Rachel, and God listened to her, and he opened her womb, she became pregnant and gave birth." (Bereshit 30:22)

"...look upon the suffering of your maidservant and **remember** me and not forget Your maidservant and give your maidservant a child And God **remembered** her; Channa became pregnant and at the turn of the year bore a son." (Shmuel I 1:11,19-20)

In the Tanach, the word to "remember" as attributed to God does not indicate a cognitive gesture, a moment of memory. Rather it is indicative of action, of the manner in which God turns the tables, reverses the fortunes in a difficult situation. When God "remembers" Noah in his ark⁶, it indicates that the floodwaters begin to recede. When God "remembers"⁷ the Jewish slave nation he does not simply think about them; he summons Moses to save them. We are in the realm of action; in fact "Vayizkor" represents what we call nowadays "the tipping point," the moment in which fortunes are reversed.

God reverses the situation for Channa. He gives her life. When she returns to the Temple some years later, this time with her child, she prays again. But this time she praises God as she expresses her faith – her complete understanding - of God's absolute control of human events. Her beautiful Tefilla is a prayer that sounds rather like our "Unetane Tokef":

"There is no rock like our God
...by him all action is measured.

The bows of the mighty can be broken,
And the faltering can be girded with strength.
...The barren woman can bear seven children,
And the mother of many can be bereaved.
The Lord deals death and gives life,
Casts down to Sheol and raises up.
The Lord makes poor, and makes rich,
He casts down and lifts high.

... for the pillars of the earth are the Lord's
He has set the world upon them.

Who will live, who will die? God controls the destiny of man. He can reverse any situation – however fortunate, however desperate. God has the power. The question is whether he will "remember." The question is whether our prayers will reach Him. Or maybe, Channa and Rachel suggest a different thesis. The question is whether we are truly praying!

Rosh Hashanna – Yom Hazikaron

"Sarah, Rachel and Channa all conceived on Rosh Hashanna" (Talmud Rosh Hashanna 11a)

Rosh Hashanna is the Yom Hazikaron. It is the day in which God may change our fortunes. We stand at the threshold of a new year, between life and death, each of us alone, beseeching life. Our prayers can make that difference. Prayer which emerges from the depths of a distressed soul. And we cry to our father in heaven because he is a parent, and he understands that parents need to give life, to preserve and nurture the lives of their children. He also understands that children make mistakes.

We take this inspiration and this example from our Keriyat Hatorah so that we shall know how to approach God on this most special day.

לשנה טובה נכתב ונחתם לאלתר חיים טובים ולשלום
May this be a year of peace, blessing and prosperity for you
and your families and for all Am Yisrael.

Shanna Tova!
Alex

⁵ The Midrash relates to the fact that Yaakov already had children. The passion with which he could pray would be incomparable to the prayers of a person who personally experienced childlessness.

"רבנן דרומאה בשם ר' אלכסנדר בן ר' יוחנן אמר (איוב טו) החכם יענה דעת רוח, זה אברהם, (בראשית טז) וישמע אברהם לקול שרי, וימלא קדים בטנו, זה יעקב, ויחר אף יעקב ברחל ויאמר וגו', א"ל הקב"ה כך עונים את המעיקות חייך שבניך עתידים לעמוד לפני בנה, ויאמר התחת אלהים אנכי אשר מנע ממך פרי בטן, ממך מנע ממני לא מנע, אמרה לו כך עשה אביך לאמר לא חגר מתניו כנגדה, אמר לא אבי לא היה לו בנים אבל אני יש לי בנים". (בראשית רבה ע"א, ז)

⁶ Bereshit 8:1

⁷ Shemot 2:24