

Shiur #01: CHAPTER 1
THE CHARACTER OF CHANA (PART 1)

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I. THE CYCLE THAT IS BROKEN

The moving story of Chana, with which the book of *Shmuel* opens, proceeds from that singular moment that the fixed, recurring cycle that had governed Chana's life up until that point is broken. The first two verses present the main characters and the element that is most critical for understanding the rest of the narrative:

Now there was a certain man of Ramatayim-Tzofim, in Mount Ephraim, and his name was Elkana, the son of Yerocham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tochu, the son of Tzuf, an Ephratite.^{1[1]} And he had two wives; the name of the one was Chana, and the name of the other Penina. And Penina had children, but Chana had no children. ([I *Shmuel* 1:1-2](#)).

This is followed by the story itself, in which Scripture makes use of various different verb forms to combine its description of the behaviors that repeated themselves from year to year with its account of what happened the year with which the book of *Shmuel* opens:

And the man went up (*ve-ala*) out of his city year by year to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of hosts in Shilo; and the two sons of Eli, Chofni and Pinchas, the priests of the Lord, were there. And when the time was that Elkana offered, he gave (*ve-natan*) portions to Penina his wife, and to all her sons and

^{1[1]} This verse leave us with the impression that Elkana was of the tribe of Ephraim, for he came from Mount Ephraim and he is called the Ephratite. Elsewhere (*I Divrei Ha-yamim* 6:1-13), however, it is explicitly stated that Elkana was of the tribe of Levi. According to this, he is called the Ephratite on account of his geographical background, rather than his tribal affiliation. We shall see below that the use of this designation might have special significance.

her daughters. But to Chana he gave (*yiten*) a worthy portion; for he loved Chana. Even though the Lord had shut up her womb. And her rival also provoked (*ve-ki'asata*) her sore, to make her fret, because the Lord had shut up her womb. And as he did so (*ya'ase*) year by year, when she went up to the house of the Lord, so she provoked her; therefore she wept, and did not eat. (vv. 3-7)

The bold-faced verbs which are formulated in the simple future (*yiten, ya'ase*) or in the inverted future (*ve-ala, ve-natan*) express, as elsewhere in Scripture, fixed and repeated behaviors. Every year Elkana would go with his family to offer a special sacrifice in Shilo; every year he would relate to Chana in a special manner; and every year Penina would provoke her. This situation might have continued forever, had it not been for the fact that that year – "And when the time was" – Chana could no longer restrain herself: "Therefore she wept, and did not eat."

II. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ELKANA AND PENINA

Chana's weeping brings Elkana to turn to his wife in an attempt to alleviate her distress:

Then Elkana her husband said to her, Chana, why do you weep? and why do you not eat? and why is your heart grieved? am I not better to you than ten sons? (v. 8)

This response, however, fails to soothe Chana; it only exacerbates her crying (v. 10: "and she wept bitterly"). In effect, Elkana's response exposes Chana's true situation and the fact that she must contend with two factors – Penina and Elkana.

Scripture compares Elkana to Penina, presenting them as operating, albeit from opposite directions, on the same assumption that Chana's barrenness was unalterable: "But to Chana he gave a worthy portion; for he loved Chana. **But the Lord had shut up her**

womb.^{2[2]} And her rival also provoked her sore, to make her fret,^{3[3]} **because the Lord had shut up her womb.**" On the simple level, it is Penina who causes Chana distress, provoking her about her barrenness.^{4[4]} But the truth is that Chana's real "enemy" is Elkana. Elkana's intentions are good, but his behavior is very distressing to Chana on two levels. On the simple level, it is precisely the preferential treatment that Elkana gives Chana that worsens her situation, owing to Penina's provocations: "**And as he did so** year by year, when she went up to the house of the Lord, **so she provoked her.**" On the deeper level, Elkana tries to convince Chana to reconcile herself with her lot; had he succeeded, Chana would not have conceived, and the current situation would have continued in coming years as well.

The problematic nature of Elkana's attitude toward his beloved wife might also find expression in what he says to Chana: "Am I not better to you than ten sons?" It seems that it would have been more appropriate for him to have said to her: "Are you not better to me than ten sons?" and thus at least relieve her of feelings of inferiority vis-à-vis Penina. Instead he expresses his confidence in his own ability to satisfy Chana's needs better than ten sons. These words seem to express considerable insensitivity to Chana's distress.

This difficult situation left Chana with two alternatives. One possibility was to give up and reconcile herself with her lot, finding comfort in Elkana's warm attitude toward her. A second possibility, which in the end she chooses, was to try a new approach: personally beseeching God from the depth of her heart.

III. PRAYER AND VOW

^{2[2]} Regarding Elkana, it says "*Va-Hashem*," in the sense of "even though the Lord had shut up her womb. The *vav* is used here in the sense of: "And Avraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak to the Lord, even though I am (*va-ani*) but dust and ashes" ([Bereishit 18:27](#)).

^{3[3]} "To make her fret (*har'ima*)" – this difficult expression seems to mean: "in order that she complain." The words, "And the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured (*va-yilonu*) against Moshe" ([Shemot 16:2](#)), is rendered by Onkelos as "*ve-itra'amu*...." See also [Bamidbar 14:2](#), and *Targum Onkelos* ad loc.

^{4[4]} The Gemara cites the position of Levi (the Amora) that Penina's intention was "for the sake of heaven" ([Bava Batra 16a](#)) – in order to cause Chana to pray, and thus be answered. Other *midrashim*, however, are sharply critical of Penina. The *Peskikta Rabbati* (*parasha* 43) says that whenever Chana had a child, two of Penina's children died, and when she was left with only two children, she approached Chana saying: "I know that I sinned against you; forgive me so that my two remaining sons may live." "At that same time, Chana prayed before the Holy One, blessed be He, saying: Forgive her that her two sons may live. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to her: By your life, they are fit to die, but since you prayed for them that they may live, I will call them by your name."

So Chana rose up after they had eaten in Shilo, and after they had drunk. Now Eli the priest sat upon a seat by the gate post of the temple of the Lord. And she was in bitterness of soul, and **prayed** to the Lord, and wept bitterly. And she **vowed a vow**, and said, O Lord of hosts, If you will indeed look on the affliction of your handmaid, and remember me, and not forget your handmaid, but will give to your handmaid a man child, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall come upon his head. And it came to pass, as she continued **praying** before the Lord...(vv. 9-12)

Scripture does not recount everything that Chana said ("she continued praying"), but we are left with one clear impression: Chana interweaves a vow into her prayer. This combination has no precedent in Scripture. Thus far we have come across many prayers that are not accompanied by vows, and a number of vows^{5[5]} that are not accompanied by prayers. Indeed, a vow contains a certain element that is lacking in prayer, and prayer contains a certain element that is lacking in a vow. On the one hand, a vow is better, because not only does the person ask something of God, but he also obligates himself to give something substantial in the event that his request is fulfilled, and thus to express his gratitude and faith in the fact that it was God who answered his prayer. In this very point, however, lies the deficiency of a vow: a person who takes a vow is liable to feel that he is making a deal with God, and that he is paying a fair price for what he receives. This stands in contrast to prayer, where a person stands in his human smallness before the greatness of God and asks Him for a free gift of which he is unworthy.

Chana's unique combination expresses the positive aspects of both realms. On the one hand, she demonstrates a readiness to give, in a way that is different from other vows, for Chana is prepared to give God the very object of her request – "Then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life." On the other hand, attaching the prayer to the vow emphasizes that Chana is not standing before God as an equal, but rather she recognizes God's greatness and her own smallness. This feeling is intensified by certain formulations in Chana's prayer that, on the one hand, stress her smallness – "If you will indeed look on the affliction of **your handmaid**, and remember me, and not forget **your handmaid**, but will give to **your handmaid**..." – while on the other hand, stress God's greatness, as the Gemara notes in connection with the verse, "And she vowed a vow, and said, O Lord of hosts...":

"And she vowed a vow and said, O Lord of hosts." Rabbi Elazar said: From the day that God created His world there was no man called the Holy One,

^{5[5]} The vows appearing thus far in Scripture are the vow of Yaakov ([Bereishit 28:20-22](#)), the vow of Israel during their battle against the Canaanites ([Bamidbar 21:2](#)), and the vow of Yiftach ([Shoftim 11:30-31](#)).

blessed be He, "[Lord of] hosts" until Chana came and called Him "[Lord of] hosts." ([Berakhot 31b](#))⁶[6]

Chana adopted a new approach: a unique prayer, from the depth of the heart that combines a vow with humble standing before God – all this based on the belief that her difficult situation is not unalterable, and that by turning to God, she can change her lot.

IV. A NEW TYPE OF A NAZIRITESHIP

The content of Chana's vow is that "I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, **and no razor shall come upon his head.**" These words recall the words of God's angel to Manoach's wife regarding the son that she will bear: "For, lo, you shall conceive, and bear a son; **and no razor shall come on his head.** For the child shall be a nazir to God from the womb" ([Shoftim 13:5](#)). This comparison might lead us to the conclusion that Chana consecrated her son as a nazir. However, the two additional prohibitions of naziriteship – the prohibition to drink wine and the prohibition to contract ritual impurity through contact with a corpse – are not mentioned in Chana's vow. What then is the nature of Shmuel's "naziriteship"?⁷[7]

An examination of the Torah section dealing with the nazir teaches us that the word "nazir" has two meanings: 1) abstention, as stated there: "He shall abstain (*yazir*) from wine and strong drink" ([Bamidbar 6:3](#)); 2) crown, as stated in the verse: "He shall not make himself unclean for his father, or for his mother, for his brother, or for his sister, when they die; because the crown (*nezer*) of his God is upon his head" (ibid. v. 7). These two meanings represent the two aspects of naziriteship: On the one hand, naziriteship expresses abstinence and distancing from certain features of this world; on the other hand, it expresses a special level, similar to what is stated about the High Priest – "Neither shall he go in to any dead body, nor defile himself for his father, or for his mother; neither shall he go out

⁶[6] Surprisingly, after noting this point, the Gemara explains the words of Chana as a complaint: "Chana said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Master of the Universe, of all the hosts and hosts that You have created in Your world, is it so hard in Your eyes to give me one son? A parable: To what is this matter like? To a king who made a feast for his servants, and a poor man came and stood by the door and said to them, Give me a bite, and no one took any notice of him, so he forced his way into the presence of the king and said to him, Your Majesty, out of all the feast which you hast made, is it so hard in you eyes to give me one bite?" This is also what follows from the continuation of the passage. According to the simple understanding, Chana's prayer seems to express modesty and humility.

⁷[7] The Tannaim disagree ([Nazir 9:5](#)) whether Shmuel was a nazir: Rabbi Nehorai learns from the comparison to Shimshon that Shmuel was indeed a nazir, whereas Rabbi Yose maintains that the word *mora* refers not to a razor, but to the fear of man which shall not come upon Shmuel's head.

of the sanctuary, nor profane the sanctuary of his God; **for the crown of the anointing oil of his God** is upon Him; I am the Lord" ([Vayikra 21:11-12](#)). The difference between the High Priest and the nazir lies in the fact that the High Priest's sanctity is rooted in the anointing oil of his God that is on his head, whereas the nazir's sanctity finds expression in his hair, which itself comprises "the crown of his God."

In light of this it might be argued that Shmuel was designated to be a nazir only in the narrow, positive sense of "the crown of his God is upon his head," and therefore his mother mentions only the commitment that "no razor shall come upon his head." Chana designates Shmuel to be a nazir of a unique type: a person who is consecrated to God, but not by way of abstention and distancing himself from this world.

V. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CHANA AND RACHEL

There are many similarities between the story of Chana and the account of Rachel's barrenness prior to the birth of Yosef.^{8[8]}

- 1) In both stories we meet a man who is married to two women, one of whom is loved ("And Yaakov loved Rachel" [[Bereishit 29:18](#); and see *ibid.* 29:20, 30], "For he loved Chana" ([I Shmuel 1:5](#)), and the other not, and it is precisely the loved wife who is barren.
- 2) In both stories the beloved but barren wife faces the provocative vexing of the other wife (Leah/Penina). Rachel names the son of her handmaiden Naftali, because "With great wrestlings [*naftulei*] have I wrestled with my sister, and I have prevailed" ([Bereishit 30:8](#)); and regarding Penina it is stated: "And her rival also provoked her sore, to make her fret... when she went up to the house of the Lord, so she provoked her" ([I Shmuel 1:6-7](#)).
- 3) In both stories the husband turns to his wife in a way that demonstrates his lack of understanding of her behavior. Elkana we have already discussed. As for Rachel, in response to her words to Yaakov, "Give me children, or else I die," he argues

^{8[8]} This parallel between an event occurring in the book of *Shmuel* and an earlier scriptural event is the first of many such events that we will deal with over the coming year. This phenomenon is characteristic of the book of *Shmuel*, and in each instance we will examine the meaning of the parallel, and the lesson that Scripture wishes to teach thereby. I dealt with this issue at length in my book, "*Makbilot Nifgashot – Makbilot Sifrutiyot be-Sefer Shmuel*," recently published by Tevunot Press, Herzog College, Alon Shevut. In the book, I deal with these parallels at length; in this framework, I will deal with them in briefer fashion.

against her, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" ([Bereishit 30:1-20](#)). There is a great deal of truth in this response of Yaakov, but its sharpness attests to his insensitivity to Rachel's distress.^{9[9]}

- 4) In the end, in both stories the woman is remembered with a child, the same wording being found in both accounts: "And God remembered Rachel...and she conceived, and bore a son" (ibid. 22-23); "And God remembered her...and Chana conceived, and bore a son" ([I Shmuel 1:19-20](#)). This wording is not used in connection with other barren women in Scripture – Sara, Rivka, and the wife of Manoach.
- 5) The two women call their sons by names that express their belief that God had heard their cries: "And she conceived, and bore a son; and said, God has taken away my reproach: and she called his name Yosef; and said, The Lord shall add to me another son" ([Bereishit 30:23-24](#)); "And Chana conceived, and bore a son, and she called his name Shmuel, Because I have asked him of the Lord" ([I Shmuel 1:20](#)).

What does Scripture mean to teach us with these literary similarities? It seems that the comparison comes only to sharpen the differences between the two main characters, Rachel and Chana, especially with respect to the way they contended with their barrenness.

The path taken by Rachel until she gave birth to Yosef was long and winding. Already at the beginning of the story we come across a problematic formulation: "And when Rachel saw that she bore Yaakov no children, Rachel envied her sister" ([Bereishit 30:1](#)). This is followed by a description of the various steps she took in order to overcome her barrenness.

- 1) Rachel first turns to Yaakov with the demand: "Give children, or else I die" ([Bereishit 30:1](#)). As stated above, Yaakov's response was sharp, intimating that she must turn to God.
- 2) Afterwards, Rachel tries to be remembered with a child in a different manner: "And she said, Behold, my maid Bilha, go in to her; and she shall bear upon my knees, and I will also have children by her" (ibid. v. 3) Rachel seems to be following in Sara's footsteps, but attention should be paid to two important differences between her and Sara: "And Sarai said to Avram, behold, please (*na*), the Lord has restrained

^{9[9]} *Chazal* were aware of this insensitivity: "'And fill his belly with the east wind' (*Iyyov* 15:2) – this refers to Yaakov, as it is stated: 'And Yaakov's anger burned' ([Bereishit 30:2](#)). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: 'Is this any way to respond to those who are distressed? Upon your life, your other sons shall stand up before her son'" ([Bereishit Rabba 71:2](#)).

me from bearing. Please (*na*), go in to my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her" (ibid. 16:2-3). First of all, Sarai turns to Avram with a request, twice repeating the term "*na*" (please), while Rachel's words seem to be more of a demand. Second, while Sarai is doubtful about the benefits to be achieved through her course of action – "It **may be** that I may obtain children by her" – Rachel is convinced that "I **will** also have children by her."

- 3) In the continuation, Rachel asks Leah for the mandrakes, which according to most commentators (see Radak, Seforno, Ibn Ezra and others) were known to be a remedy for infertility.

Only after all these stages do we read that Rachel was remembered with a child:

And God remembered Rachel, and God hearkened to her, and opened her womb. And she conceived, and bore a son; and said, God has taken away my reproach: and she called his name Yosef; and said, The Lord shall add to me another son. (ibid. 30:22-24)

From now on Rachel does not cease to pray: a prayer about the past - thanksgiving to God who had taken away her reproach; a request for the future, that He will grant her another son. Finally, Rachel reaches full trust in God. And now, when the matter becomes clear to Yaakov, he understands that the time has come to return home: "And it came to pass, when Rachel had born Yosef, that Yaakov said to Lavan, Send me away, that I may go to my own place, and to my country" (30:25).

We can return to Chana and her story. Against the background of the long process that Rachel had undergone, Chana's greatness is striking. First, whereas Rachel is jealous of her sister, Chana remains silent. Second (and this apparently is the essence of the comparison), Rachel followed a long process until she turned to God in prayer, whereas with Chana this took place immediately. And furthermore, whereas after she was remembered with a child, Rachel continued to ask, "The Lord shall add to me another son," Chana says, "I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life." Through the literary similarity with Rachel, Scripture strengthens Chana's personality, both in her great faith in God and in her relations with those around her.^{10[10]}

^{10[10]} We can now return to note 1 above, where we noted that Elkana is referred to as the "Ephratite," even though he belongs to the tribe of Levi. It is possible that this designation comes to strengthen the comparison to Rachel, who was buried on the road to Efrat, and whose descendants include Ephraim.

It might very well be that the name Chana derives from the root *ch-n-n*, in the sense of supplication. If this is true, then Chana's name expresses the very principle that her story comes to teach: the power of prayer.

(Translated by David Strauss)
