

The Torah reading on the first day of Rosh Hashanah is the story of God remembering Sarah and her bearing Isaac to Abraham. The Haftorah is the story of Chana and her anguish over being barren and her quest to bear a child and, after her prayer is answered, then dedicating him to the Service of God in Shiloh. In fact, the Talmud (Berakhot 29a) says Chana's thanksgiving prayer after bearing a child (Samuel Book 1: 2-1) is the source for the 9 blessings that comprise the Musaf prayer on Rosh Hashanah. What is the connection between these two readings?

The obvious connection is Sarah and Chana are two of the four barren women who desperately tried to have a child and God ultimately granted their wish. The other two being Rebecca and Rachel. Yet we do not read their story on this day. Why read Sarah's and Chana's?

Chana lives her life through others, by proxy. Her co-wife, Pnina, has children, she does not. She observes the daily grind of parenthood, the hubbub involved with the family traveling to Shiloh for the festivals. However, her angst over her lack of participation in the joy of parenthood kept building in her till she could take it no more. Her husband, who superficially was good to her, could not, or would not, empathize with her pain. He gave her excuses as to why she should be happy. "Am I not better to you than 10 children?" he asks. He may have sought to console her, but he was adding fuel to the fire burning inside Chana. Chana wanted to experience the pain of childbirth, the anxiety, the emotions, the hopes, and dreams of adding a link to the chain of the Mesorah. Elkanah could not help with that. She goes to Shiloh and the high priest Eli does not understand her. She feels completely alone, with no one to rely on except God.

We say on Tisha B'Av, באשה עקרה שלא ילדה, like a barren woman who has not given birth. Why the redundancy? It's one thing to be physically incapable to bear children, it's another problem to grapple mentally with the inability to give birth, to participate in nature like all of God's creation, to be fruitful and multiply. Such an individual, and only such a depressed and sad personality, knows the meaning of loneliness, to be among people but remain alone. Only such an individual understands what it means to pray and rely on God alone. No one else can help her.

Not Pnina, not Eli, not Elkanah. Only God. That is the way we must approach Rosh Hashana. When we pray on Rosh Hashanah, our mindset must be “No one else can help us, only God”. We combine words and the simple sound of the Shofar because together they express the full range of our emotions and needs. Only when we put ourselves into Chana’s shoes can we pray. Therefore, we read Chana’s story as the Haftorah and use her experience as the basis for the Amidah on Rosh Hashanah. Without Chana we would not know how to approach God on Rosh Hashanah.

However, why is Chana linked with Sarah as opposed to Rebecca or Rachel? We need to look at the context of the Torah Reading the first day of Rosh Hashanah. The reading starts with **וה' פקד את שרה כאשר אמר**, but that is not the beginning of the story. Abram, like Sarah, was barren for many years. Finally at Sarah’s urging, he takes Hagar as a concubine, and she immediately bears him a child. Sarah voices her anger at Abram for remaining silent while she is shamed by Hagar. Hagar said apparently Sarah did not live up to her reputation for righteousness, as Sarah was with Abram for so many years without bearing him a child, while she immediately bore him a son. When God informs Abram that he will have a son to carry on His covenant with Abram’s children, Abram’s reaction is odd. He says **לֹא יִשְׁמַעֵל יְחִיָּה לִפְנֵי**, he would be content for Ishmael to carry on the covenant. What happened to his connection to Sarah? Why was Abram so willing to forego Sarah’s role in bearing his successor?

Apparently, Abram like Elkanah, expressed love for his wife but once he had a child his perspective changed. He was sympathetic to Sarah but no longer as empathetic as he was before the birth of Ishmael. After he was informed by the visiting angels that Sarah would bear him a child, he realized his error. By the time Abraham and Sarah relocate to Plishtim, Sarah was pregnant, but showed no outward indication of her pregnancy. Abimelech takes Sarah and God punishes Abimelech and his household. He is told to ask Abraham to pray on his behalf, which he does, and Abimelech and family are healed. Immediately afterwards, our reading for the first day of Rosh Hashanah picks up. Rashi quotes the Gemara (**בבא (בתרא צב:א**):

אמר ליה רבא לרבה בר מרי מנא הא מילתא דאמור רבנן כל המבקש רחמים על חבירו והוא צריך לאותו דבר הוא נענה תחילה אמר ליה דכתיב וה' שב את שבות איוב בהתפללו בעד רעהו אמר ליה את אמרת מהתם ואנא אמינא מהכא ויתפלל אברהם אל האלהים וירפא אלהים את אבימלך ואת אשתו ואמהותיו [וגו'] וכתיב וה' פקד את שרה כאשר אמר וגו' כאשר אמר אברהם אל אבימלך

The Rabbis said that one who requires help with a problem and prays on behalf of someone else with a similar need, his own request will be answered first. This is derived from the story of Abraham and Abimelech. Tosfot says that Abraham's need was that his wife Sarah should successfully bear a healthy child. By praying that God open the wombs of Abimelech's wives that had been obstructed as retribution for taking Sarah, his own need was answered.

The connection of the stories of Abraham and Sarah, and Chana to Rosh Hashanah is that an individual in dire need can only rely on God, no one else, not even his closest loved ones. However, if the individual focuses only on his own needs, and does not think of others undergoing the same challenge, his prayer will still be incomplete. To ensure your prayer will be successful, include someone else who has the same need, like Abraham. If you are praying for a sick relative, pray on behalf of another who has a similar need. If you are praying for sustenance and a proper livelihood, pray for another who is experiencing financial hardship. If you are seeking a proper spouse for your own child, pray on behalf of another family in a similar situation. By opening your heart to another and feeling their need and pain, God will see yours as well and your prayer will move to the head of the line for an appropriate response.

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