

Heroines of the Bible

Chana

With Rebbetzin Adina Landa

Introduction:

Over the span of a lifetime, every woman prays. We pray for things simple, like the perfect pair of shoes. We pray for things important, like a healthy family and beautiful children. And we pray that the world in which we live and raise our families should be warm and embracing.

At times, when we are down, or when life just seems to overwhelm us, we pray for change: I am not in such a good place – I need change! I am lonely and hurting – things need to become different!

And, sometimes we pray just to acknowledge all the blessings and goodness in our lives.

But what does it all mean? Why do we truly pray? And how can our simple prayers ever really make a difference? When we are in the deepest lows, how can our prayers raise us up to the greatest heights? When we are in a desperate situation, how can our prayers comfort us and make the situation better? When we are stuck in a monotonous routine, how can our prayers ever create change?

When we pray, is it for our own selfish gains, or for the greater good of all mankind?

In this lesson, we will look into the depths of the heart and mind of one of the Heroines of the Bible, Chana. By understanding her exchanges with G-d and her changes of self, we shall come to discover the secret to all gratifying success and fulfillment, indeed the ability to birth something miraculous.

Opening Exercise:

1. Have you ever gone on a spiritual journey?
2. What would constitute a spiritual journey for you?
3. What makes a journey spiritual?

Text 1: Shmuel/Samuel 1:3

And that man was wont to go up from his city from appointed time to appointed time, to prostrate himself and to slaughter (peace offerings) to the Lord of Hosts in Shiloh...

Questions for Discussion:

1. Even though the Temple is no longer with us, can we still experience such levels of spiritual transcendence today?
2. What does it even mean to be spiritually transcendent?

Text 2: Samuel 1:3:

...and there the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinhas, were serving the Lord.

Practical Application #1:

This is a very important lesson for each and every one of us, one we shall elaborate later on in this lesson: no matter what spiritual journey one is on, one must always remember to embrace others and invite them to join in the journey. The above teaches us that every spiritual experience is enhanced – not interrupted – by welcoming all the join in the joy.

The First Protagonist: Elkana:

Text 3: Samuel 1:1:

And there was one man from Ramathaim Zophim, from Mt. Ephraim, and his name was Elkanah, the son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite.

We have caught a brief glance at Elkanah. From the above verse, let us try to glean a deeper understanding of this man. As we break down the verse, there are three elements attributed to Elkanah – underlined here- characterizing his essence and his public persona:

1. There was a certain man
2. From his hometown of Ramataim-Tsofim
3. Who was an Efraimite

The Second Protagonist: Our heroine, Chana:

Text 4: Samuel 1:2:

And he had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah and the name of the second was Peninnah; and Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.

Text 5: Samuel 1:4-8:

And when it was the day, and Elkanah slaughtered (peace offerings), and he would give to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and daughters portions. And to Hannah he would give one choice portion, for he loved Hannah, and the Lord had shut up her womb. And her rival would frequently anger her, in order to make her complain, for the Lord had shut up her womb. And so he would do year by year, as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, so she would anger her, and she wept and would not eat. And Elkanah her husband said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not better to you than ten sons?"

Text 6: Samuel 1:9-10:

And Hannah arose after eating and after drinking, and Eli the priest was sitting on the chair beside the doorpost of the Temple of the Lord. And she was bitter in spirit, and she prayed to the Lord, and wept.

Text 7: Samuel 1:12-16:

And it was, as she prayed long before the Lord, that Eli watched her mouth. But Hannah, she was speaking in her heart, only her lips were moving, and her voice was not heard, and Eli thought her to be a drunken woman. And Eli said to her: Until when will you be drunk? Throw off your wine from upon yourself. And Hannah answered and said: No, my lord, I am a woman of sorrowful spirit, and neither new wine nor old wine have I drunk, and I poured out my soul before the Lord. Deliver not your bondswoman before the unscrupulous woman, for out of the abundance of my complaint and my vexation have I spoken until now.

Text 8: Samuel 1:17:

And Eli answered and said: Go in peace, and the God of Israel will grant your request which you have asked of Him.

Text 9: Samuel 1:18-19:

And she said: May your bondswoman find favor in your eyes; and the woman went on her way and ate, and her face was not (sad) anymore. And they arose early in the morning, and prostrated themselves before the Lord: and they returned and came to their house, to Ramah, and Elkanah knew Hannah, his wife, and the Lord remembered her.

Practical Lesson #2

This is a very powerful lesson: spirituality can become complacent and redundant, following the same routines year after year.

Practical Application #3:

The above frustrations and prayers, of Chana, can probably reflect similar thoughts and feelings each and every one of us has had at some time or another (if not all the time): We enter these destructive cycles; we get lost in the mundane monotony of life – year after year doing the same stale things with no obvious change. Why doesn't it change? We beseech, pray, to go beyond and be different, think different, and do different. But how?

The breakthrough happened with the words brought in above, at text 6 "So Chana rose up." Chana was no longer succumbing to the stagnant pattern of repetitiveness. She rose up from her private awareness to an expanded one. She got up with the determination to make a difference, to bring about the much-needed change.

Practical Application #4:

How can we be different? By rising up, standing up, getting up, and not allowing for anything to keep us down. And how do we raise ourselves up? As follows:

Chana was no longer an individual consumed with her grief. "And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the L-rd, and wept bitterly (Samuel 1:10)" Chana's bitterness was focused on the lack of spirituality in her people, a bitterness of spirit, not a bitterness of matter. This verse, describing her prayer, literally translates as "and she prayed FOR the L-rd (al Hashem)". Now she was not asking something of G-d; she was praying *for* the sake of G-d's purpose, and dedicating herself to its advancement. She was now praying for the permanent return of G-dliness into the lives of the people. She wept bitterly about the decadence that had become the norm.

Practical Application #5:

We raise ourselves up and create change by praying for what really matters. When we pray for the broken spirit as much as for the broken matter, when we ask, "Why, why is this world seemingly so devoid of revealed purpose, and people would rather hurt each other than embrace each other," this creates change! When we really cry for all the pain and suffering in the world – a bitterness for the lack of spirit – that cry inspires us, and the world to become different! And take it one step further, after the why, since we will never truly know until Moshiach comes, are main question should be, WHAT NOW?

Text 10: Samuel 1:11:

And she vowed a vow, and said: to Lord of Hosts, if You will look upon the affliction of Your bondswoman, and You will remember me, and You will not forget Your bondswoman and You will give Your bondswoman a man-child, and I shall give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall come upon his head.

Practical Application #6:

Today, we do not have the Jewish kingdoms of then. However, Chana, in order to create change, took a vow: a hardcore action with tangible results and pragmatic applications. And indeed, her actions birthed the miraculous leader, Shmuel, who would usher in the era of King David and King Solomon, and the first Temple in Jerusalem. So, in order to create change, we too must take an action, a vow; do something, and something will happen!

Discussion Point:

We all make resolutions – New Year’s and otherwise; we all vow to do this and accomplish that; I am going to lose weight, read this book, learn how to dance etc. And then, before we know it, another year has passed and another, and we are once again stuck in the same routine. Doing the same thing, expecting different results – definition of insanity.

Learning Exercise:

Apply what we have learned here today to inspire change, growth, and personal and collective fulfillment:

1. Take a spiritual journey, inviting friends to join you.
2. Be provoked, incited, and enticed to make the world and yourself better.
3. Learn to pray, not only for yourself, but for the world; not only for matter, but for spirit.
4. Raise yourself up by asking, “How can I make a difference?”
5. And make that difference with action: Take upon yourself one good deed, big or small, that you vow to follow all the way through.

This is the challenge for every individual; to ensure that we are not going through the same old grind. True, it is a new cycle. But it should be seen as an upward spiral, not a stagnant circle where we end up in the same place we began. This is the message that must resonate with us every day, and certainly at the beginning of a New Year – and yes, a new day! See yourself as an active partner in achieving G-d’s goals.

Closing:

We take a cue from Chana’s example of breaking a pattern and making a change. Instead of focusing primarily on herself, she sought to play a part in the larger picture of ushering in the monarchy.

After Chana’s request was fulfilled and she brought Shmuel (At the age of 3, after he was weaned) to the Sanctuary, she recited a second prayer – a jubilant outpouring of thanksgiving to G-d. This second prayer concludes, “May He raise high the standard of His anointed (literally, ‘...of his Mashiach’) With this prayer, she indicated what she was seeking, in asking for a son who would establish the kingship. She was not asking for a national leader in a simple sense; she was asking for a son who would lay the foundation for the ultimate King, Mashiach.

This prayer is also included in the Rosh Hashana Haftorah. Mashiach’s role is to unite all people under the rule of the King of Kings, G-d. And every single one of us can – and shall – make this type of spiritual journey, to inspire a world of unity, both individually and collectively!