

ראש השנה תשס"ו Rosh Hashanah 5766
דבר תורה for Second Day of
"As We Are"

Thank you to Rabbi Seth Gordon for his immense help with this דבר תורה.

The HafTorah today tells the story of a strong and heroic woman. A woman of deep emotion and prayer. A woman whose prayer is answered.

Channah had no children. Her husband had another wife, who had given him sons and daughters (1 Saumuel 1:4). But Channah was alone. She had no children of her own. She had a husband who loved her, but did not understand her, asking her "Why do you cry . . . am I not better to you than 10 sons?" In her pain and anguish, with no one to understand and comfort her, she comes before God: "והיא מרת נפש ותתפלל על ה' ובכה תבכה" *And she was of bitter soul, and she prayed to God, and cried* (1 Sam 1:10)."

Hannah's prayers are answered. She bears a son, Samuel, who becomes one of the great prophets of Israel. Not only that, but the Talmud learns many rules of prayer from Hannah. Hannah's lips move during her prayer, which teaches us that we should speak the words of our prayers. From the fact that Eli the High Priest could not hear her, we learn that we should not pray loudly. The HafTorah says that Hannah "Prayed to her heart," which shows that prayer must have feeling (1 Sam. 1:13, Babylonian Talmud Berachot 31a). Hannah's prayer - filled with its anguish and pain, becomes the very model of Jewish prayer.

Why is Channah such a great example of prayer? Why do we read her story on Rosh Hashanah, and emulate her behavior every day in our prayers? Why does she become the mother of the great prophet Samuel? I think the answer to that question lies in the words that introduce her prayer - "והיא מרת נפש ותתפלל על ה' ובכה תבכה" *And she was of bitter soul, and she prayed to God, and cried* (1 Sam 1:10)." Hannah is bitter, anguished. Her hurt, however, rather than becoming a reason for her to turn away from God leads her to turn her face towards God. She pours out her emotion towards God, who hears her cry.

Life, of course, is not always about pain. We also know great joy, triumph, and success. And there is Hannah. Now the mother of a child. She comes to God's Temple again. This time, it is her immeasurable joy that prompts her prayer: " . . . ונתפלל חנה ותאמר עלץ לבי בה' . . ." (1 Sam 2:1). All these emotions have a place in our religious experience. We come before God not as machines who pray on command, but as emotional beings, whose emotions inspire and inform our prayers.

Life presents us with many emotional moments. At each of those moments, we have an opportunity to bring those emotions towards strengthening our relationship with God. Consider the joy you experienced when you were married, or when your first grandchild had a *bris*. Each of those moments should serve not only as a reason for joy in the moment and fond memories thereafter, but as reason to give thanks to our Creator.

Judaism has three prayer services each day, more on holidays. In each prayer service, the *Amidah* contains a blessing of thanksgiving, which I would like to take a look at now. As we do, let's ask ourselves how we might relate those words to things that have happened in our lives. Think about what happened this year that should make you thankful.

לך מודים אנחנו לך: *We give thanks to You*

שאתה הוא ה' א-להינו וא-להי אבותינו לעולם ועד: *For You are A-donay our God and God of our forebarers for all eternity.* Our relationship with God is not a fleeting matter. God for us is a constant - in trouble and woe, in success and joy. We are thankful that God is part of our life.

צור חיינו מגן ישענו אתה הוא לדור ודור: *You are forever the rock of our lives, the shield of our salvation.* Our hopes are with You, God. You are the source of our potential, the source of our hope.

נודה לך ונספר תהלתך: *We will give thanks to You and sing Your praises.*

על חיינו המסורים בידך: *For our lives which are controlled by You.* You are our guide, You direct our lives.

ועל נשמותינו הפקודות לך: *and for our souls that are entrusted to You.* Each day is a gift from You.

ועל נסיך שבכל יום עמנו: *and for Your miracles that are always with us.* Sometimes we walk through life without noticing Your wonders - Your oceans, Your rivers, Your wildlife. they are Your miracles.

Sometimes life is not as kind as we like. Sometimes human factors such as September 11th deal us heavy blows. Other times nature attacks us. This year was no different. We saw our brethren - Jew and non-Jew alike, displaced by a hurricane. And without regards to whether agreed with the reason or not, we saw other Jewish brethren taken out of cities they had called home for several decades. Channah teaches that disappointment with these events is not a reason to go away from God, but to go towards God. And so we saw thousands of Jews in Gaza peacefully praying in the synagogues that they would soon have to leave. And the internet circulated pictures of one Jew wading through waist deep waters to remove scrolls of the Torah from a flooded synagogue.

Our tradition teaches that it is OK to bring our emotions of disappointment and anguish to our prayers. "והיא מרת נפש ותתפלל על ה' ובכה תבכה." *And she was of bitter soul, and she prayed to God, and cried (1 Sam 1:10).*" Our sorrow and pain also brings us closer to God and to the Jewish people. It brings us together as a family and as a community.

Of course, it is not every day that we celebrate a birth, or that we mourn a loss. But every day is a day for us to be close to God. To thank God for the good in our life, and to hope for better for us, and for those around us.

Prayer is not only about when we feel that God has done good for us, or when life deals us a sad situation. Prayer is also there when we succeed and when we fail. Did you ever think about why we say a blessing before we do a mitzvah? Why bother? We're doing what God asked us to do? Why make a production out of it? Why not just get on with the show? The ברכה (blessing) is our reminder that the act that we perform is an act that brings us closer to God.

ברוך אתה ה' *Blessed are You God - You are blessed, God.* And we are fortunate to follow Your law.

א-להינו מלך העולם: *our God, sovereign of the world.*

אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו: *who sanctified us by Your commandments and commanded us.* God, You bring us close to You by guiding our way. We celebrate our ability to follow Your commandments, to make ourselves sanctified by following Your Torah.

Sometimes, however, we miss the mark - when we have not done as well with our lives as we could have. Our failures, however, are not an excuse to further distance ourselves from God, but instead is an invitation to strive harder to go towards God. This is why we spend these days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur in prayer. We recognize what we have done wrong, and we hope to do better. We start to work towards doing better through prayer - confessing our wrongs and praying for the strength to do better. Our prior mistakes are a reason to turn ourselves towards God's path.

Each of us is less than perfect. But we are all part of God's people. R. Abba b. Zabda (Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 41a) reflected on the words of God to Joshua (Joshua 7:11) "חטא ישראל Israel has sinned." He said that these words demonstrate that even when Jews sin . . . they are still Jews. They still are a part of the people, and still have a chance to get things right. Just as we can come before God with our emotions of joy and grief, so too can we come before God with the recognition that we have missed our mark, and with the hope that we will do better next time around. Our prior wrongs are not an excuse to stop our religious growth.

It's time. It is time for each of us to find the religious experience that we are capable of. Time to remove pretense, to discard excuse. Just as we should approach God as part of our reaction to every part of our lives, God is ready to receive us whenever we are ready. And you . . . each of you . . . is ready to take a first step in that direction.

That step may be different for each of you. Some of you out there have not participated in Jewish life since last Yom Kippur. For you that first step may be a commitment to come to synagogue on a once a month basis. Some of you may be struggling to tell the difference between an Alef and a Bet. For you, the first step may be the Hebrew Reading Crash Course we are offering starting early in November, perhaps followed by the rest of our Basic Judaism course. Others of you are regulars here on Shabbat morning, and could begin attending other services, such as Friday night, Saturday afternoon, and weekday services. For some of you, the next step may be choosing to pray at home on those days that you can't make it to synagogue. Perhaps your next step is to start keeping a kosher home, or to increase your observance of the Sabbath.

Whoever you are, whatever you have done in the past - you are capable of at least a little bit more. On this Rosh Hashanah, as we celebrate what we have gotten right in the last year, and lament what we might not have done, let us all remember that we are capable, with God's help, of doing more.

It is time for each of us to approach God with the sincerity of Hannah. It is time to admit to ourselves who we are, and who we are capable of becoming. It is time to turn towards God. With our joys, and with our sorrows. With our successes, and with our failures. May we all continually strive towards our God and our Torah. May we all have a year in which we realize our own religious potential.