

# Of Fertility and Faith

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Emotions run high, eyes reddened, tears flow. Thoughts race. Anxiety competes with hope. Worry and *bitachon* vie. For couples experiencing infertility or subfertility, the weeks leading up to Rosh HaShana magnify the complex mix of emotions that envelopes their medical diagnosis.

Why?

Why do nearly all Jewish patients, observant of mitzvos or not, shul-going or not, choke up when I wish them a good Yom Tov, a *shana tova*? Patients are no more emotional than usual when we wish one another a *chag kasher v'sameach* on Pesach, or an easy fast on Tisha B'Av, or even a "good kvitel" on Hoshana Rabba. And the "happy new year" greeting I often receive from patients as the secular new year approaches is usually light and cheerful, lacking the gravitas, the raw emotion, of the *shana tova* greeting.

Why? Why does Rosh HaShana touch couples with infertility so deeply?

A strong connection certainly seems to exist between Rosh HaShana and fertility, which is overt to those who spend time in shul but seems to be intuited even by those who don't. The strength of this connection is reflected throughout the liturgy. Fertility themes permeate the *davening* experience on Rosh HaShana: The Torah *laining* on the first day begins with the birth of Yitzchak, which is the culmination of Sara's Divine fertility treatment; the *haftara* on the first day is the story of the birth of Sh'muel after years of infertility suffered by his mother Chana; the *piyyut* "Us Cheel" focuses on Hashem remembering Avraham and Sara; another *piyyut* invokes the fertility *t'filos* of Yitzchak and Rivka; the *piyyut* "Even Chug" reflects the experience of Rochel; another *piyyut* "Uvchain Va'Hashem Pakad Es Sara" expands on the theme of Hashem's remembering Sara; another *piyyut* ends with a recollection of the infertility experienced by Yitzchak and Rivka and asks Hashem to listen to our *t'filos* as He listened to theirs.

The Gemara seems to provide a possible basis for focusing on these stories in the Rosh HaShana *davening*, telling us that it was on Rosh HaShana that Hashem brought succor to the pain of these great women:

*On Rosh HaShana, Sara, Rochel, and Chana were remembered.*

**Talmud Bavli, Rosh HaShana 10b**

בראש השנה נפקדה שרה רחל ורחנה.  
ראש השנה י:

However, this same Gemara that seems to provide a basis for our focus on these fertility-related events creates more of a question than it answers – because it proceeds to list other Rosh HaShana occurrences. For example:

On Rosh HaShana, Yosef left prison, and on Rosh HaShana, the work of slavery for our forefathers in Egypt ended.

בראש השנה יצא יוסף מבית האסורין.  
בראש השנה בטלה עבודה מאבותינו  
במצרים.

Several important milestones in Jewish history were reached on Rosh HaShana, according to the Gemara -- and yet we choose to fix our attention not on the narrative of Yosef, or on the end of *shi'bud Mitzrayim* (our bondage in Egypt), but on the fertility-related milestones only.

Why? Why is Rosh HaShana connected so strongly with these infertility events?

Furthermore: the connection between Rosh HaShana and infertility seems not simply strong, but fundamental. Not only do we repeatedly reference these infertility narratives throughout Rosh HaShana, but the three central themes of the Rosh HaShana davening, the themes of *malchuyos* (kingship), *zichronos* (remembrance), and *shofros*, are rooted in one particular episode – the account of Chana and her infertility. The Gemara tells us:

The nine *b'rachos* (blessings) of [Musaf on] Rosh HaShana... correspond to the nine times Chana mentioned [Hashem's name] in her *t'fila*.

הני תשע דראש השנה כנגד מי? אמר רבי יצחק דמן  
קרטיגנין: כנגד תשעה אזכרות שאמרה חנה בתפלתה.  
ברכות כט.

**Talmud Bavli, B'rachos 29a**

What we have here is truly remarkable. On Rosh HaShana, the most solemn time of the year, the tripartite theme of *malchuyos*, *zichronos*, and *shofros*, which forms the backbone of *T'filas Musaf* (the *Musaf* service) and the nidus for thousands of pages of halachic and hashkafic writings over the generations, is rooted in the bedrock of *t'filas Chana*! Early Jewish history abounds with rousing tales and people to emulate; Tanach is replete with inspiring stories and beautiful poetry. And out of all of that richness, we choose Chana and her *t'fila* to form the core of *Yom HaDin* (the Day of Judgment).

Why? Why is the story of Chana's infertility so fundamental to Rosh HaShana?

To begin to understand this question, we must take a closer look at the Chana narrative, with which Sefer Sh'muel (the Book of Samuel) begins. When we do so, we immediately notice that this narrative is not new to us. From a literary point of view, the story of Chana can be called a type scene – an episode set in a familiar setting. In this case, the scene's familiarity stems from its similarity to the other two major infertility narratives in Tanach – those of Sara and Rochel.

These three episodes share certain key elements:

- (1) A woman who is aching to have children (Sara, Rochel, and Chana);
- (2) A rival wife or quasi-wife who does have children (Hagar, Leah, and Penina);
- (3) A husband who is a person of importance (Avraham, Yaakov, and Elkana<sup>7</sup>);
- (4) A husband who has a special affection for his infertile wife;
- (5) A husband who is, nonetheless, imperfectly sensitive to his wife's plight;<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Elkana, according to Divrei HaYamim I 5:8, was a descendant of Korach, and, according to the *Targum Yonasan*, perhaps a *navi*, a prophet – see Radak on the first *pasuk* [verse] of Sh'muel.)

- (6) A *n'vua* (prophecy) or *b'racha* (blessing) that the woman will conceive;<sup>9</sup>
- (7) Resolution of the infertility, with the birth of a child (Yitzchak, Yosef, and Sh'muel);
- (8) An important role in Jewish history played by the child.

The literary value of a type scene manifests most dramatically when such a scene deviates from type. In our case, we have three similar infertility episodes, which share the above elements. However, a close look at the three shows that the story of Chana differs in two critical ways from the others. First, Chana *davens* – speaks with Hashem. Unlike Sara and Rochel whose *t'filos* are not explicit in the text, Chana *davens* explicitly not only once, but three times. She *davens* the first time in basic language, in a short, straightforward, contractual way, making a *neder* (vow) to Hashem, promising that if Hashem grants her a child, she will devote the child to His service. She *davens* a second time, silently, with words in her heart only, not revealed at all in the *p'sukim* (verses). And she *davens* a third time after her son Sh'muel is born, when she brings him to the Mishkan (Tabernacle) to give him over to the service of Hashem as she had promised; this last *t'fila* is expressive, firm, lofty, poetic.

Second, and most critically, the Chana story differs in its emotional poignancy. For Chana, the narrative stage is set much more extensively, and the characters' roles described more intricately, than for either Sara or Rochel. The *p'sukim*, here, paint a vivid picture of Chana's pain. We watch Chana in living color, yearning to be a mother, surrounded daily by another woman's children, taunted by this other woman, humiliated annually at the family's pilgrimage to the Mishkan when the fact of her childlessness is thrown in her face at a time full of joyous celebration for everyone else. We feel her pain; our hearts constrict and our breath shortens as we read these *p'sukim*. We feel the walls closing in on her; we watch her color darken by the day. And the climax of our empathy occurs with her silent *t'fila*. After days, months, years of crying, begging, craving; now utterly spent, a hollow husk of hopelessness; she sits there, alone, deserted, bereft of words, empty of energy to speak. Her lips move (“*Rak s'faseha na'os*”), but nothing issues forth except heartrending silence (“*V'kolah lo yishamai'a*”).

In addition to this emotional aspect of the Chana story which is clearly highlighted by its deviation from narrative type, there is another interesting aspect to Chana's infertility journey which emerges from a close reading of the words of her two verbal *t'filos*. In her short, initial *t'fila* (Sh'muel I 1:11), called a *neder* in the *pasuk*, Chana makes three requests:

1. She wants Hashem to see her suffering: אִם רָאָה תִּרְאֶה בְּעֵי אִמְתֶּךָ
2. She wants Hashem to remember her: וְזָכַרְתָּנִי וְלֹא תִשְׁכַּח אֶת אִמְתֶּךָ
3. She wants Hashem to give her “seeds of people”: וְנָתַתָּה לְאִמְתֶּךָ זֶרַע אֲנָשִׁים

These three phrases seem to be distinctive; Chana seems to be conveying to Hashem a request comprising three distinct aspects. And if we examine the poetry of Chana's final *t'fila* (Sh'muel I

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<sup>8</sup> When Hagar becomes pregnant and begins treating Sara with disrespect, Sara accuses Avraham: “My anger is your fault ... Hashem should judge between me and you.” (B'reishis 16:5). When Rochel says to Yaakov, “Give me children or I will die” (Bereishis 30:1), Yaakov responds with anger, and is scolded for this according to Chazal (B'reishis Rabba 71:10). Elkana asks Chana, “Am I not better for you than ten children?” (Sh'muel I 1:8)

<sup>9</sup> For Sara, delivered via a *mal'ach* (angel); for Rochel, delivered by Hashem Himself (B'reishis 30:22, *B'reishis Rabba* 71:10); and for Chana, delivered via Ailey, the *Kohain Gadol* (High Priest).

2:1-10) when she brings Sh'muel to the Mishkan to dedicate him to the service of Hashem, we note that three lines, and three lines only, begin with Hashem's name:

1. "Hashem brings death and life" ה' ממית ומחיה
2. "Hashem impoverishes and enriches" ה' מוריש ומעשיר
3. "Hashem's contender shall be destroyed... and He shall give strength to His king and elevate His anointed one." ה' יחתו מריבו... ויתן עז למלכו וירם קרן משיחו

Perhaps Chana's three requests of Hashem in her first *t'fila*, and the three powers attributed to Hashem in her third and final *t'fila*, are related, and reflect three aspects of Chana's yearning to have children. In fact, every day, I witness three distinct aspects to the emotional turmoil that my patients experience as they ache to become parents, which I believe are invoked in these *p'sukim* of Chana's *t'filos*.

First, the biologic aspect. The ability to reproduce is a core component of our biologic beings. For a species to survive, its individuals must have the ability to do three things successfully: eat, breathe, and reproduce. When the ability to reproduce is called into question, that debility cuts to the quick of a person's biologically-programmed identity. The person feels less whole, less capable, and consequently suffers. People do not feel this way with other medical diagnoses; diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, hepatitis, kidney stones, gout – these do not affect a person's biologic identity. But reproduction does.

And Chana shows us how she feels in this regard. She wants Hashem to recognize her biologic suffering. She uses the words, "*Ra'oh sir'eh*," which is a phrase used previously by Hashem (Sh'mos 3:7) when telling Moshe Rabbeinu that He sees the suffering of the Jewish people in *Mitzrayim*. "Seeing" is a biologic word, referring not to spiritual vision, but to physical sight. Hashem told Moshe that He sees our physical suffering, the biologic suffering of a slave whose body is not his own – and Chana now recalls this to Hashem, imploring Him to also see her biologic deficiency. Ultimately, when Hashem delivers Chana from her suffering, she praises Him in her poetic *t'fila* as a bringer of death and life – again, terms that refer to a person's biology and ability to survive. Like Chana, Rochel also compares infertility to death, telling Yaakov that if she cannot have children, "*Maisa anochi*." ("I will die.") Which now makes sense -- just as a person cannot survive without eating and breathing and would face death, so do people without children feel a fundamental blemish in their core human functioning in this world.

Interestingly, the Gemara, in *Berachos* 31b, seems to highlight this biologic aspect of Chana's suffering even in her second *t'fila*, her *t'fila* of silence. The Gemara says that the words Chana spoke in her heart were the following:

*"Hashem! Everything that you created in a woman has a purpose: eyes to see; ears to hear; a nose to smell; a mouth to speak; hands to do work; feet to walk; and breasts to nurse. These breasts that You have placed over my heart – are they not to nurse with? Give me a child so that I can nurse with them."*

"והנה היא מדברת על לבה" אמרה לפניו: רבוננו של עולם! כל מה שבראת באשה לא בראת דבר אחד לבטלה: עינים לראות ואזנים לשמוע; חוטם להריח; פה לדבר; ידים לעשות בהם מלאכה; רגלים להלך בהן; דדים להניק בהם. דדים הללו שנתת על לבי למה...לא להניק בהן? תן לי בן ואניק בהן.

This is a simple, eloquent plea: My body was created by You, to be able to have and raise a child. Please let me fulfill this basic biologic function.

Second, couples with infertility experience metaphysical suffering, stemming from a perceived fundamental flaw in their humanity. Children generally grow up with a strong emotional and psychological connection to their parents, and, from their youngest years and continuing into adulthood, envision themselves forging the same bonds someday with their own children. This is the way of humanity. Most people see the job of raising children as an essence of their lives. When a wife and husband do not have children, they feel foundationally deficient. They feel lost; a major job, a basic task in this world, an essential definition of their identities as people, evaporates.

Chana illustrates this aspect to us as well. “*Uzchartani*” (“and remember me”) in her first *t’fila* – this refers not to Hashem’s simply seeing us as biologic beings, but to His metaphysical involvement with us. The word “*z’chira*” (remembering) appears throughout Tanach, usually referring to Hashem’s connection with us on a spiritual level – He remembers the covenant He made with Noach, for example; He remembers the covenant He made with the Jewish people. He remembers our humanity, and Chana is referring to the spiritual and humanistic aspect of her infertility when she asks Hashem to remember her. Chana refers to this aspect also in her last, poetic *t’fila*, when she states that Hashem impoverishes and enriches – these are humanistic functions. A poor person and a wealthy person are equally functional from a biologic point of view; they can differ only from a humanistic perspective -- a poor person might have more humility, for example, or a wealthy person might be better able to accomplish charitable goals. It is this metaphysical aspect of her pain on which Chana focuses when she asks Hashem to remember her, and describes His ability to be “*morish uma’ashir*.”

Finally, there is the social/communal aspect of the suffering of childless couples. Every person is a member of the larger human community, and every person with children contributes towards the continuity of the greater community of people. Aside from the biologic functioning of the individual person, and aside from the metaphysical nature of the individual as a “parent,” a child is a major contribution of his or her parents to society and to the family tree of humanity. Particularly for the Jewish people, whose family tree is small and each new branch therefore measurably significant, parents feel the comfort and fulfillment of knowing that they are doing their job to sustain and immortalize the tree. For couples without children, the inverse is true; they suffer from the pain of knowing that their family limb might end, and from the fear of a transient impact – the fear that they may not leave a lasting legacy in this world.

And yes, Chana focuses on this aspect of her suffering as well, when she asks Hashem to give her “*zera anashim*” – “*zera*” is a seed, and implies the planting of a family tree that will grow into a large forest -- just as Lot’s daughters thought they would re-populate humanity with their father (“*un’chaye mai’avinu zara*”), and just as Hashem promised Avraham that he will become a great people through Yitzchak (“*ki v’Yitzchak yikarei l’cha zara*”). Likewise, in her final *t’fila*, in the last of the three *p’sukim* that begin with the invocation of Hashem’s name, Chana asks Hashem to strengthen the lineage of Dovid HaMelech (King Dovid), whose success will eventually lead to

the bringing of the Mashiach – clearly a focus on the perpetuation of the Jewish people, which reflects this third aspect of her infertility-related suffering.

If we think about it, the Rosh HaShana themes of *malchuyos*, *zichronos*, and *shofros* reflect these same three aspects. *Malchuyos* is all about Hashem's sovereignty over the physical and biological world. Hashem created the world and everything in it, and has dominion over all. "*La'Hashem ha'aretz umlo'ah*" – everything in this world was created by Hashem, and belongs to Hashem, including us. "*She'hu noteh shamayim v'yoseid aretz*" – He stretches the sky and forms the foundation of the earth. *Zichronos*, on the other hand, is all about Hashem's metaphysical interaction with each of us: "*Zochair ha'b'ris*" – He remembers the covenant; "*L'hipakeid kol ruach va'nafesh*" – He remembers every spirit and soul." And *shofros* represents the third aspect, the communal aspect. *Shofros* recalls the majestic appearance of Hashem to the entire Jewish people at *Har Sinai* (Mount Sinai); *Shofros* summons the *kibutz galuyos*, the ingathering of the exiles, the arrival of the same Mashiach that Chana invokes in her *t'fila*.

We now return to our original questions. Why does Rosh HaShana touch couples with infertility so deeply? Why is Chana's story so strongly and fundamentally connected to Rosh HaShana? Why is the central trivalent theme of the Rosh HaShana *davening* rooted in Chana's *t'fila*? The answer is now clear, simple, and powerful: Because the agony that Chana endured, and the same agony that every couple with infertility endures, is three-pronged, emanating from a perceived inadequacy in biologic identity, humanistic nature, and societal legacy. And these three prongs, as seen in Chana's *t'filos*, comprise what everyone in the world needs to be focusing on during Rosh HaShana. Many of us may not reflect as much as we should on our relationship with Hashem and His world, but at least on Rosh HaShana, *Yom HaDin*, we must. And when we do, we must reflect on all three aspects of this relationship – the biologic, the metaphysical, and the communal. People with infertility, with Chana as a paradigm, reflect, and agonize, on all of these aspects daily. People with infertility, with Chana as a paradigm, know what *t'fila* means – true *t'fila*, a from-the-heart outpouring of raw emotion, sometimes wordless. People with infertility, with Chana as a paradigm, know how not to give up, how to keep reflecting, how to keep at least that small ember of hope glowing. People I see in my office every day, struggling to stay strong through grueling medical treatments, determined to keep going, resolved to do what they have to do, working to maintain their *bitachon* that their *t'filos* will be answered – these virtuous people, with Chana as a paradigm, are models for all of us at this time of year.