

# Conversation through the Hidden Sounds



Dear Friends,

In shul or at home, **Rosh Hashanah has a set of sounds all its own.** The blast and wail of the shofar, piercing our hearts. The uplift of ancient melodies. The awe suffusing the chazan's crescendo. The sweet sound of children's Amen.

**There's another sound, too, hidden within.**



It's the laughter of Sarah Imeinu as she is promised a son, laughter that is immortalized in his name, Yitzchok. It's the silent cry of Chana as she stands in the Mishkan of Shiloh and lifts up her heart in a prayer that did not just pierce the heavens, but brought the Av Haneviim, the proto-type prophet—Shmuel—into this world.

We may not hear them right away, but they are there.

And their tefillos **are a guide to us**, ordinary women around the world, as thousands of years later we navigate our own tefillos on this day of the world's creation. Of our own re-creation.

We read about Chana's heartfelt prayer and wonder: can we daven with that level of intensity and passion? Is it accessible to any of us? **Can our Rosh Hashanah be invested with that type of tefillah?** And if not, is there another mode of tefillah that will carry us on its wings?

Three great women were remembered on Rosh Hashanah, the Gemara tells us: **Sara, Rochel, and Chana.** Of the three, on Rosh Hashanah we read accounts of two of them: Sara who gave birth then to Yitzchok and Chana, who brought Shmuel into the world.

Two great women, married to leaders of their generation. Two women struck with the agony of infertility. And in the climax of her trial, when Chana is falsely accused of being drunk in the Mishkan, we glimpse the connection between them. Although Eli thought that she was a שכרה, inebriated, really she was נשורה, an honorable woman. And not only that, the Vilna Gaon explains, **she is נשורה, like Sarah Imeinu** (Aderes Eliyahu).

So there is a deep connection between Sara and Chana: and both of these towering women take our hands and lead us through the davening on Rosh Hashanah.

## Crumbling Pillars

**A**ll of us have a belief system. For some, it's science, for others, politics. Some of us lean on psychology or self-help or simply cling to the premise that if we try hard enough, we'll meet success. Most of us believe in a mixture of all these.

But here's the thing. The pillars that we rely on to hold up our lives—whether the good job or the exercise regimen—help us to form a fantasy that we're in control. But every Rosh Hashanah—and more frequently, too)—**we're reminded that we're vulnerable**. A health scare. A child not doing well. An unexpected house repair that throws us off budget. And then we're filled with fear.

The Hebrew word for worry, *daagah*, has a gematria of 13. Remind you of anything? That's right, it's the same numerical value for Echad, One. Because the goal of our lives is not a worry-free existence, tempting though it may sound. It's to bring Hashem's Oneness into our worries. To know that the everyday challenges **prompt us to reach for Him and forge a relationship of trust and gratitude**. And deeper: our everyday worries build within us a newfound consciousness. The pillars that I relied on—they are just illusions. The Only One who can help me, the Only One I can rely on—is Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

Come Rosh Hashanah, this can feel scary.

If the only One I can rely on is Hakadosh Baruch Hu, and I'm totally dependent on His

kindness and goodness, then what about *din*? Do I really need to deserve it? If not, **then we'd better daven our hearts and souls out, or...**

It's confusing.

But let's allow Sarah and Chana to be our guides.

## Bow and Arrow

**W**hen Sarah received the news that she was going to give birth to Yitzchok, she laughed. The mefarshim look at this laughter from many angles, but according to some, **it expressed surprise and perhaps even bewilderment**. Why surprise? Because while of course Sarah and Avrohom davened for a child—and Sarah even gave Hagar to Avrohom in an act of supreme mesiras nefesh—she lived with an acceptance of Hakadosh Baruch Hu's decree. The pesukim do not highlight her storming the heavens with her prayers. They show her on a deeply internal journey—“within the tent”—within which she accepted Hashem's heavenly plan, and played out her role with a sense of joy, awe and privilege.

Chana took a different approach to prayer. The pesukim talk of her emotional state: her embitterment, the distress, the deep anguish of her childlessness. **And she forged an entirely new pathway to prayer**: the Shemoneh Esrei, that silent rendezvous with our Creator.

We see both modalities in the symbol which Chazal use for tefillah: the bow and arrow. Fit the arrow into place and pull it back, and

the tension grows and grows, until *twang!* it's released. And then, the bow grows slack. There's relief. Acceptance. We daven, we pull it all out of ourselves, we try to go to the deepest places possible. **And then we close our siddur and move into a different mode of being:** faith, trust, the deep peace that comes by leaning into a growth process that I might not have chosen, but that is stretching and softening and strengthening me nonetheless. We are both Sarah and Chana, and we vacillate between the two.

The pendulum of our heart swings back and forth, as we access our desire to change, our longing for release, as we touch the depth of our pain—and then move into a mode where we can hold tight to Hakadosh Baruch Hu's plan for us, **knowing that He carries us with love and truth.**

Understanding these two models on an even deeper dimension will also help us relate to the very essence of judgement.

## Entering the Space

Here are the words of the Chovos Halevovos:

*Know, brother, that our aim in teffila is to **express the longing of the soul to Hashem, its submission before Him, elevating its Creator, praising and thanking His Name, and casting all of its needs and its hope upon Him...***

Prayer is about relationship.

And a relationship is never one person—it takes

two. That means that tefillah is a two-way street. It's not just asking for the extended list of things that I need to be worry-free. It requires of us to clear our minds, affirm Him as the Source of everything, and as our loving Father, who asks of us to turn to Him and acknowledge our need for just about everything, but above all and beneath all, for Him. In mouthing the words but not saying them aloud, **Chana taught us that tefillah means entering a silent, intimate space.** It's just us and Him and what happens between us.

When we come to that space we do something that every couple does. We express our needs and desires, but we also listen. Chana spoke, the Navi tells us, **not just to Him, but to her heart.** A conversation was enacted. Chana understood: there is what I want, and there is what Hashem wants. I want a child. Hashem wants His Oneness and goodness to be manifest in the world. Now, let's talk. In fact, the Nefesh Hachaim writes the most astounding thing: that even though Chana was embittered, in her prayer she related to the *tzaar* of the Shechinah.

Can we even imagine her greatness? Amidst the disappointment and the emptiness and the longing and the bitterness, she stands to daven in front of Hashem, asking that He will give her a child. But she doesn't daven for herself, only for the *tzaar* of the Shechinah—**the Shechinah which is hurting because she is hurting.**

Let's think about this. The words of her tefillah may not have changed too much. She wants

a child and davens for a child. She is still standing in prayer. But she's made an inner transformation. She's not simply davening to Hashem and wanting an answer. She's engaged in a conversation. I talk, but I also listen. And the hidden words tell me that You're also hurting for this child, for this pain, for the process of darkness that fills us with weariness and even despair. It takes two to be in a relationship. And Chana moved into that relationship, putting herself to the side to daven for the Shechinah. **It sounds lofty, but it was a simple act of love.**

### The Relationship of Rosh Hashanah

If Chana was able to move into that relationship, how can we take this into our own lives?

Let's think of the way relationships develop. When children are small, we feed them, bathe them, listen and love them and expect nothing in return. But as they grow, slowly but surely an awareness grows in them. Mommy is a separate being. I might offer her a piece of *bissli*, but she prefers broccoli (or chocolate). And there are times when she says no, or is busy. While it starts off as a shock, slowly child absorbs the understanding that Mommy and me are not enmeshed. **We are separate people. And that's the very beginning of a genuine bond.**

As the child grows, **he realizes that he can't simply ask and ask.** There are also expectations. But that's okay. Because child

is no longer an infant, and his heart is ready to move out of self-absorption into the joy of relationship.

Judgement feels difficult. Rosh Hashanah can feel scary. It would be nice if every way we went wrong could dissolve, if our old patterns of relating to others were fine and didn't require effort and thought and maybe even change. **But if that was the case, then it wouldn't be an act of relationship.** We'd be asking: Hashem, could You simply shower me with Your goodness. We'd regress back to infancy, to that state where we seek only food and comfort. Tempting at times, but missing the exquisite beauty of self-expression, of bringing our uniqueness into the world.

And so, Rosh Hashanah brings up a level of soul-searching that can be uncomfortable: what kind of a mother am I? Am I present and engaged in my marriage? Am I "showing up" in my relationship with Hashem? Most times, the answers are not the most important part of the process. It's asking the question. Because asking the question means **that we are present. We are engaged.** There is an I, and I am in the sphere of relationship. When that basic dynamic is in place, we can ask for understanding and patience and compassion and a thousand extra chances. When there is *din*, there is room for *rachamim*. After all, *din* means that we are in a relationship, and every relationship needs two. So am I in? And if not, then how can I open myself up and move into a space where I'm in, for a small amount of time each day or week?

## Chana and Sarah

As we ready ourselves for Rosh Hashanah, preparing the simanim and baking honey cake, we can find our equilibrium strangely out of balance. Instead of awe, we feel anxiety. Instead of calm, we feel tense and confused. And then, when Yom tov enters and we reach for our machzorim, again, we feel a sense of disquiet. **Did we daven well enough? Will we really have a good year ahead of us?** We can even feel silently frustrated by the *nusach hatefillah*—the *malchuyos* can feel far away from what we really want to ask for.

It's a challenge.

But here's when we draw on Sarah and Chana.

Sarah: that no matter what happens, I am a vessel for Your Oneness to be manifest in the world. I will live within **the calm beauty of bitachon, leaning in to Your plan for me.**

Chana: I will storm the heavens **with my prayers, but I will do so in the private, silent sphere** of our love for each other. I will talk but also listen, stepping into a place of relationship as I ask for what I need, knowing that my lack causes You pain, too, and relating

to that as I whisper my entreaties.

As Rosh Hashanah progresses, we move through so many places in our hearts and minds. We vacillate between the different modes, drawing strength from both, finding **meaning within the fluidity of our authentic selves.**

We ask. We turn inward and soul search. We plead. We accept Hashem's kingship. We find joy in the beautiful vision of His magnificent plan. We find faith and express trust and find peace. We turn again in prayer, pulling back the bow deep into our hearts as we feel all that we need and lack, as we face our individual sorrow and ask for renewal, just as the world is being recreated. We challenge ourselves and comfort ourselves. And most of all, **we take our place in that relationship** that is the judgement of Rosh Hashanah. We are present, leaning in as it takes us to unexpected places and we open up to find that at the silent center of who we are, we are never alone.

My tefillah to all of us this year is that we are blessed with a year of sweetness and growth, of meaning and serenity, of comfort and connection.

כתיבה וחתימה טובה,

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