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I am going to focus my comments around one line that haunts me from the Haftarah portion.

“In bitter grief, she prayed to the Lord, weeping copious tears.”

Some of us have been in a similar state of anguish, but for those of us who have not, can you picture emotions so strong that your pleas to G-d become one of the earliest, if not the first, documented examples of prayer?

“In bitter grief, she prayed to the Lord, weeping copious tears.”

Our Haftarah portion depicts a pivotal moment in the life of Chanah, one of Elkanah’s two wives. This line of text describes her as she prayed. The way she made her plea to G-d occurred in such a striking manner that Eli, a priest at Shiloh, the major worship center of the time, believed her to be drunk.

What caused Chanah such bitter grief?: her deep desperation to conceive, carry, and deliver a healthy son.

The reading makes sure that we understand a few things about Chanah. For instance, Peninah, Elkanah’s other wife, makes Chanah’s life miserable by throwing verbal barbs about her barrenness and causing enough distress that Chanah “would weep and not eat.”

Second, Chanah’s value to her husband was not defined by her ability to have children. Chanah’s pain was noticed by Elkanah, who –perhaps unhelpfully—asked “Why are you so unhappy? Am I not dearer to you than ten sons?” Elkanah was not angry or disrespectful of her because of her child-less-ness; rather, he was attempting to understand her feelings and help her put her barrenness in a different perspective.

And third, while Chanah’s life was far from perfect, I imagine that for the time in which she lived, her life was stable and often better off than many around her, much like my life and, hopefully, many of yours.

“In bitter grief, she prayed to the Lord, weeping copious tears.”

Chanah was blessed by having her prayer answered. She gave birth to Samuel, who became the first of the major prophets in the land of Israel. Yet, for me, the price would have been painfully high. In her prayers, Chanah took a vow: “if you give your

servant a son, I will dedicate him to the Lord for life.”

We do not have an easy parallel for this vow in 2017. The best way I can imagine fulfilling that vow today would be to raise my child with deep and thorough knowledge of Torah and its commentaries, prioritize our temple community over all other activities, interact with the world through focus on mitzvot, brachot, and tikkun olam, and prepare my child to hopefully enter rabbinical or cantorial school after college. In other words, I would not be making nearly as great of a sacrifice as Chanah. I would always get to be responsible for the love and care of my child. For Chanah, she turned her son over to Eli the priest when Samuel was weaned, an age when my children would still have been in daycare. At that point, Chanah would no longer have Samuel as part of her daily life.

Even if this practice was common in Chanah’s time, even if you knew from day one that you would dedicate your child to G-d’s work, even if you believed you were only borrowing this child for a few years before returning him to G-d, I imagine it was still difficult to actually let go of the child. To me, this sounds like an incredibly high price to pay for having my prayer answered.

“In bitter grief, she prayed to the Lord, weeping copious tears.”

In trying to wrap my head around what kind of person Chanah must have been to ask for a son with such fervency, to have her prayer answered, to let her child go at a very young age, and then to have that child grow up to be a revered prophet, I think she must have been an incredibly G-d – filled person; she must have been special in the best ways possible.

So, why do we read this portion on Rosh Hashanah? How is it relevant in 2017, or – more appropriately – in 5778? I find that reflecting on what kind of person Chanah must have been can provide us a meaningful start to these high holy days. Text study makes space to consider ideas and questions such as what parts of myself do I see in Chanah? Do I actually dream of being that g-dly? I am rather reserved and cautious in my prayers—should I reconsider that? With thanks to Chanah, we are contemplating prayer as we begin these Days of Awe.

Samuel I

There was a man from Ramatayim, a Zuphite from the highlands of ePHRAim, whose name was Elkana son of Yerucham. He had two wives, one named Chanah and the other Peninah. Peninah had children, but Chanah had none. This man used to go up from his town annually to worship and to offer sacrifice to the Lord of Hosts in Shiloh. There, Eli's two sons, Chofni and Pinchas, were priests of the Lord. When Elkanah offered a sacrifice, he would give portions to Peninah his wife and to each of her sons and daughters; but, although he loved her, he would give to Chanah only one portion, since the Lord had made her barren. Her rival would torment her about her misfortune, that the Lord had made her barren. This went on year by year; when they went up to the house of the Lord, her rival would so torment her that **she would weep and not eat**. Elkanah would say to her: 'Chanah, why do you weep? Why don't you eat? Why are you so unhappy? Am I not dearer to you than ten sons?'

Once Chanah rose after they had eaten in Shiloh and went to the temple of the lord, at whose entrance was sitting Eli the priest. **In bitter grief she prayed to the Lord, weeping copious tears**. She took a vow, saying: 'Lord of Hosts, if You take notice of Your servant's affliction, if You keep me in mind and do not forget Your servant, giving Your servant a son, I will dedicate him to the Lord for life....'

As she continued to pray before the Lord, Eli's attention was drawn to her lips. Chanah was praying silently; though her lips were moving, she made no sound, so that Eli took her for a drunkard. Eli said to her: 'How long to you propose to carry on drunk like this! Get rid of your wine!' 'You mistake me, my lord,' Chanah replied. 'I am a sober woman; I have had neither wine nor liquor, but have been pouring out my heart before the Lord. Do not think your servant so debased. All this time I have been speaking out of my great sorrow and grief.' Then Eli replied: 'Go in peace; and may the God of Israel grant your request.' 'May your humble servant always find favor with you,' she said. So the woman went on her way. She ate, and was downcast no longer.

Early in the morning they arose, worshipped before the Lord, and returned to their home in Ramah. Then the Lord was mindful of her. In due time, Chanah conceived and gave birth to a son, whom she named Samuel, saying: 'I asked him of the Lord (and was heard).'

When she had weaned him, she brought him up to the house of the Lord at Shiloh, together with a three-year-old bull, an Ephah of meal, and a skin of wine, though he was still but a child. They slaughtered the bull, and brought the lad to Eli. Then she said: 'O my lord, I am the woman who stood near you right here, praying to the Lord. It was for this lad that I prayed, and the Lord has granted my request. I therefore dedicate him to the Lord. So long as he lives he is dedicated to the Lord.' And they worshipped the Lord there.
