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Community and Faith-Based Organizing and Development Resources

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INTRODUCTORY DEVAR TORAH TO “G-D REMEMBERED CHANNAH” READERS’ THEATRE*

By Magidah Khulda bat Sarah & Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, PhD

- The prophetess Channah—from our Haftarah reading—comes to us this morning with a question: What is the future that we want for our children?
- How would *we*, here today, answer such a question? What do we want most for the children in *our* lives? And I don’t mean only our *own* children. *Every* child in this congregation and in the community belongs to *all* of us.
- Most of us, if we answer this question, are thinking about the immediate future—so we pray: “Please G-d, protect my child from pain and suffering, let him or her get a good education, a good job, a good marriage”—to sum it up in one word, happiness.
- Channah has *another* answer.
- On the face of it, Channah prays, as any of us who are childless might, for a child.
- The scripture (I Samuel 1:12) says: *V’ha-ya ki hir-b’tah l’hit-pa-leil* (וְהָיָה כִּי הִרְבַּתָּה לְהִתְפַּלֵּל): And it came to pass as she prayed before G-d at length. . . .
- Now the word that is used in this verse for prayer is *l’hitpaleil*.
- It comes from the root *pei-lamed-lamed* (פ-ל-ל), meaning to judge, and in this particular reflexive form it means to judge oneself.
 1. But according to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, it is also related to the root *bet-lamed-lamed* (ב-ל-ל), meaning to incorporate something into a mix.
 2. Kind of like putting gravel into a cement mixer, that’s already filled with cement.
- In regard to *prayer*, Rabbi Hirsch tells us, it means to take an element of G-d’s Truth and make it penetrate all the places and conditions of our being and our life.

- Jewish *tefilah* or prayer, therefore, is very different from what is generally called “prayer.”
 1. Jewish prayer is *not* an out-flowing from *within*, an expression of that with which the heart is *already* filled.
 2. Rather it is a renewed *taking-in* and penetration of truth from the *outside*, that is, from the Torah.
- Practically, what this means is *working* to penetrate one’s self with what one is saying in the prayer; and also, *evaluating* oneself by that same yardstick.
- In other words, the desire of Channah’s heart is to incorporate G-d’s will . . . as her own.
- Channah is also, our rabbis say, the first to call G-d by the name *Adoshem Tzevaot* (ה'י צבאות)—G-d of hosts.
 1. The hosts are all the elements of the universe, the stars, the moon, the sun, etc.
 2. Each, according to the tradition, serving G-d in its own way.
- And in using that name *Adoshem Tzevaot*, our rabbis say, Channah demonstrates that that is also what *she* wants: to serve G-d, meaning to serve the greater purpose of perfecting the *world* in G-d’s image.
- But what has all this about serving G-d got to do with praying for a *child*?
- It is for this reason that Channah prays for the child: Channah desires that her service to G-d may go on beyond her own lifetime.
- Therefore Channah says: I will *loan* this child to G-d.
- So Channah gives us a big message for *our* children. . . .
- But . . . how many people do you know who, when they look at a newborn baby, say something like: “This child is going to remake the world in G-d’s image”?
 1. Probably not too many.
 2. And why is that?
- Maybe . . . we don’t like the idea of giving up or *loaning* a child to G-d.
 1. Most of us would say: Hey, I’m not loaning my kid to *G-d*.
 2. I want my kid to be successful in the world.
- Or maybe we fear the pain and suffering that are inherent in the role of remaking the world in G-d’s image.
- I think there’s another reason we don’t want to loan our child to G-d: Many of us don’t really believe it—we don’t *believe* that *we* can perfect the world.

1. Which is not unlike what our children experience when they become frustrated in learning something new—let’s say, picking up their toys.
 2. Often, our children may react to that frustration by saying: “I’m too little.”
 3. Of course, when we give in and do it for them, the message we give them is: Yes, you *are* too little.
- And when we ourselves look at the world and its problems, we sometimes tell our kids and ourselves that the world *is* too *big*, and *we* are too *little* to change it.
 1. But maybe we need to think of it *not* from the *world’s* point of view but from our *child’s* point of view.
 2. For our *children’s* sake, what message do we want to give them about their *role* in the world?
 - If Channah were here now, and, of course, in a way, she is, I believe she would ask us: What do we want to be the *meaning* for our children’s lives?
 1. I don’t mean what life means to *them*, but rather what *they mean to life*.
 2. What do we tell them is the *purpose* of life?
 3. Why are we on this planet?
 - I believe the message that Channah would want us to give our children is that they *are* big.
 1. We and they are G-d’s partners.
 2. And as such, we have the potential to *change* the world, to perfect it in G-d’s image.
 - I believe she would also caution us to humility.
 1. It’s neither for us *nor* our children to *know* what changes we or they will be able to make.
 2. But, in *spite* of that, we must act.
 - And in doing so, we give our children a strong sense of purpose.
 1. Anything less, and our children may find their *own* answers about the purpose of life, and they may not be the ones that we would like them to have.
 2. Anything less is to make our children less than they *are*. . . .
 - How do we get such a message across to them?
 - Imagine yourself asking your child: What is the *purpose* of life?
 - If the answer you imagine is not the one you would like, then think about the following:
 1. The first thing that we have to do is to make sure that our kids know what’s important to *us*.

2. And we don't do that with our *words*.
 3. Young people are the first ones to see through any hypocrisy.
 4. Young people are the first ones to say: Why do *I* have to learn Hebrew or the Torah *if you don't?*
 5. Why do *I* have to do a mitzvah, *if you don't?*
- We adults must study and act on the Torah *ourselves*.
 - And, yes, you *can*.
 - Channah's answer can be *our* answer, if we choose.
 - Rabbi Hirsch teaches that, with her eyes opened, Channah saw the goal of *history!*
 - As a prophetess gazing down the halls of time, Channah imagined her own son, then only a young child, anointing King David, the future king of the Jewish people.
 - So, for our *children's* sake, for our *future's* sake, *think like Channah! Think big!*
 - What exactly would it mean for us to think big?
 1. We're about to find out.
 2. Our teachers for today's Reader's Theatre are: The Voice of G-d, the Narrator, Elkanah, Peninah, Eli, and Channah, otherwise known as: [INSERT NAMES HERE OF THOSE PLAYING PARTS IN THE READERS' THEATRE].
 - And just to keep *you* on your toes, we also have one line built into this play for the congregation—that is, for all of *you*.
 1. So, very early in the play, when you hear the narrator say: “And wherever they went, people would ask. . . ?”
 2. You all will say: “*Where are you going?*”
 3. So let's try it right now. The narrator will say: “Wherever they went people would ask. . . ?”
 4. And you say: [CONGREGATION RESPONDS: “WHERE ARE YOU GOING?”]
 - And now: “G-d Remembered Channah”

* Much of this *devar Torah* is based on the Haftarah commentary of Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch.

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