

A New Reading of Haftorah on Rosh Hashanah

Clare Feinson

It started out as a scheduling error. I was supposed to do the Haftorah for the second day of Rosh Hashanah, a reading I had done many times before. But someone else was also scheduled to do the same reading. No one had been assigned to read the Haftorah for the first day, which neither of us knew or wanted to learn in the short time left before the holidays. That was how I came to really read the story of the birth of Shmuel (Samuel) for the first time, a story I thought I knew well, but actually did not know at all.

I never realized how sad the story was about his mother, Chana (Hannah), especially when read with the mournful tune of the Haftorah trop. I never realized how contemporary her issues were—infertility! anorexia! dysfunctional families! I never realized how much the story springs from the feminine point of view, not a common occurrence in Biblical readings.

I thought about how, after the ceremonial excitement of the Torah reading, it is easy to pay little attention to the Haftorah. The children disappear downstairs, the adults lean back and rest their eyes, and everyone takes a little break until the service “starts” again. But Chana’s story seemed very compelling to me, and I felt it deserved more.

The two of us who were reading Haftorah had discussed doing some lines in English, but I felt that a line here or there would not do justice to the story. No, the whole story had to be in English—and it had to preserve the trop. So I called my friend and told him he could do the Haftorah for the second day, and I would take on the reading for the first day myself.

Then I sat down and went to work. I took the Hebrew text and several different English translations and went through the text line by line, fitting the English to the trop, in the same way the Hebrew words fit the music. I kept the Hebrew names of people and places, to preserve the

religious tone of the reading. And I left Chana’s hymn of praise at the end in Hebrew.

I told no one what I was doing, so when I got up to sing the Haftorah, it was a complete surprise to the congregation. The children were riveted in their seats. Many of the adults were crying—I could not look at the audience, for fear I would burst into tears myself.

Afterwards, a friend came up to me and said, “It was just like sitting around a fire in an encampment in the desert and listening to an old storyteller pass on an important piece of the tribe’s history.”

Adonai had given me what I asked.



Clare Feinson is a long-time member of the Fabrangen havurah in Washington, DC. When she is not organizing High Holiday logistics, she works as a science writer and health policy consultant.

1 Samuel 1

Now there was a certain man of Ramathaim, a Zuphite from Ephraim's hills;
 And his name was Elkanah son of Jeroham son of Elihu
 son of Tohu son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. And two wives had he:
 Chana was the name of the first, and the name of the second was Penninah;
 And Penninah was the mother of many children, but Chana had none.
 Now this man went up from his town every year
 To worship and to sacrifice to Adonai Tzva'ot in Shiloh;
 And there two sons of Eli, Hophni and Pinchas were priests to Adonai.
 And when the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice,
 He gave to Penninah his wife and all her daughters and sons their part.
 But to Chana he gave a double part, a double part,
 Because of his great love for Chana, though Adonai had given her no child.
 And Penninah did all that she could to make Chana cry
 Because Adonai had given Chana no child.
 And so it went on for year after year;
 The family would go up to the house of Adonai
 And Penninah would tease Chana, and Chana would refuse to eat.
 Then her husband, Elkanah, spoke to her, and he said,
 "Chana, why are you weeping? And why are you not eating?
 And why does your heart grieve so?
 Am I not better for you than ten sons?"
 So Chana arose after they had eaten in Shiloh and after they had drunk;

And Eli, the priest, was sitting in his chair by the door of the house of Adonai.
 And with grief in her soul, Chana prayed to Adonai and she wept bitter tears.
 And she took a vow, and she said,
 "Adonai Tzva'ot, look at me and see the plight of your servant.
 If you do not forget me, but remember, and grant a child to your servant,
 I will give him to Adonai all the days of his life,
 And his hair shall never be cut."
 And it happened that as Chana continued to pray to Adonai
 That Eli observed what she did.
 For Chana, she spoke within her heart, only her lips moved,
 But her voice could not be heard, and so Eli thought she was drunk.
 And Eli said to her, "How long will you be drunk?
 Stay away from the wine, now stay away."
 And Chana answered and said, "Oh no, my lord.
 I am a woman whose spirit is heavy within me.
 I have drunk no wine, nor any spirit at all,
 But I pour out my soul before Adonai.
 Please, oh please do not judge me as wicked or worthless;
 For out of my sorrow and pain I spoke until now."
 Then Eli answered her and said, "Go in peace.
 May Elohai Yisrael hear the prayer you make and grant you the favor you ask."
 And Chana said, "May your servant find grace in your eyes;"
 And Chana went away and she ate and her face was sad no more.

And they woke in the morning and they worshipped Adonai.
 And they left Shiloh and returned to their home in Ramah;
 And Elkanah spent time with Chana his wife,
 and Adonai remembered her prayer.
 So in time, Chana became pregnant and gave birth to a son;
 And she named the child "Shmu'el" because he was "borrowed" from Adonai...
 And when she had weaned the child she took him to Shiloh;
 Along with her three oxen
 And one ephah of meal and one skin of wine,
 And she brought Shmu'el to the house of Adonai,
 And Shmu'el was just a child.
 And when the oxen were slain, she brought the child to Eli.
 And she said, "Oh, my lord, as I swore on your life, oh my lord.
 I am the woman who stood by your side right here and prayed to Adonai.
 For this child before you I prayed;
 I asked Adonai for this child, and Adonai gave to me what I asked.
 And so I have dedicated my child to Adonai.
 For all the days of his life, my child is lent to Adonai...
 And Chana prayed, and she said:

(continue with Hebrew text of Haftorah....)

עָלַץ לְבִי בַיהוָה
 רָמָה קָרַנִי בַיהוָה רָחַב פִּי עַל-אוֹיְבֵי כִי
 שָׁמַחֲתִי בִישׁוּעֹתֶיךָ: אֵין-קָדוֹשׁ כִּיהוָה
 כִּי-אֵין בְּלִתֵּךְ וְאֵין צוּר כִּאֲלֵהֵינוּ: אֶל-תִּרְבּוּ
 תִּדְבְּרוּ גְבוּהָהּ גְבוּהָהּ יֵצֵא עֲתָק מִפִּיכֶם כִּי אֶל
 דְּעוֹת יְהוָה וְלוֹן נִתְכַנּוּ עַלְלוֹת: קִשְׁת
 גְּבוּרִים חֲתִים וְנִכְשָׁלִים אֲזוּרוֹ-חֵיל: שְׁבַעִים
 בְּלַחֲמֹם נִשְׁכְּרוּ וּרְעֵבִים חִדְלוּ עַד-עֲקָרָה יִלְדָה
 שְׁבַעָה וּרְבַת בָּנִים אֲמַלְלָהּ: יְהוָה מִמֵּית
 וּמְחַיֶּה מוֹרִיד שְׁאוֹל וַיַּעַל: יְהוָה מוֹרִישׁ
 וּמַעֲשִׂיר מִשְׁפִּיל אֶף-מְרוֹמִם: מְקִים מַעֲפָר
 דָּל מֵאֲשַׁפֵּת יָרִים אֲבִיוֹן לְהוֹשִׁיב עַם-נְדִיבִים
 וְכֹסֵא כְבוֹד יִנְחֹלֶם כִּי לַיהוָה מִצְקֵי אֶרֶץ
 וַיִּשֶׁת עֲלֵיהֶם תִּבְלֵ: רַגְלֵי חֲסִידָיו
 יִשְׁמֵר וּרְשָׁעִים בַּחֲשָׁךְ יִדְמוּ כִי-לֹא בִכַח
 יִגְבֵּר-אִישׁ: יְהוָה יַחַתּוּ מְרִיבָיו
 עָלָיו בְּשָׁמַיִם יִרְעֶם יְהוָה יִדְּיֵן אֶפְסֵי-אֶרֶץ
 וַיִּתְּנֵ-עֵז לְמַלְכוֹ וַיִּרֶם קֶרֶן מְשִׁיחוֹ:

