

Studying Prayerfully¹

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Avi, Adoni, Dodi , My father, my master, my friend, my beloved.

I enter into this study in order to draw close to You – for the sake of holy service and the fulfillment of Your will for me and for all of Israel and for this entire planet. Please assist my efforts and guide my understandings.

Let me internalize Your Torah to the depth of my being so that I become transformed by Your will and its truths.

Let neither myself nor anyone else come into stumbling as a result of this study.

Gal einai v'abita niflaot m'toratecha², Open my eyes that I may behold wonders from Your Torah.

This is a prayer I wrote many years ago, when I first began studying Torah . I continue to say this prayer every day before I begin learning, and I say it with my students before I begin teaching. To better understand this prayer and its deep roots, we must first put on a wide angle lens and examine some of the broad and archetypal themes that are raised by the Biblical story of Chana,³ the quintessential role model of Jewish prayer. In particular, we want to look at the fact that Chana, a woman, had such an enormous impact on the way we, as Jews, pray. And secondly, we want to explore why it is that her watershed prayer was, significantly, a prayer for child.

There is perhaps no other instance of a woman having such a profound, direct and acknowledged impact on Jewish practice.⁴ And it is not just prayer in general that we learn from Chana... it is our Amida, the silent prayer, the prayer that is the very essence of Jewish prayer. All other Jewish liturgy is either building up to or winding down from the Amida. The Talmud and Midrashim list many essential features of this prayer that are modeled after Chana's prayer, including the fact that it is a whispered prayer, and even the fact that it comprises eighteen blessings.⁵

I believe that HaShem chose Chana to bring all this down, not just because she possessed exceptional personal qualities, but because it was appropriate, and even necessary, that our collective prayer bear the imprint of a woman.

¹ Published in: From *Break and Fire: Jewish Women Find God in the Everyday*, Rivkah Slonim (editor), 2008 (Urim Publications, Jerusalem), p. 75-79.

² Psalms 119:18.

³ Chana was the mother of the prophet/judge Samuel. Her story is told in the first two chapters of the book of Samuel. She was childless for many years and the bible describes her pilgrimage to the Temple where she poured out her anguished prayer inaudibly, with only her lips moving, and vowing to dedicate any son born to her to the Temple where he would dedicate his life to the service of God. She gives birth to Samuel and the Bible recounts her glorious prayer of thanksgiving.

⁴ *Kama hilchita gavrivata ika le-mishma mei-hanei kra'ei de-Chana*, Masechet Brochot 31a.

⁵ Yalkut Shemoni, I Shmuel.

It is certainly true that in chassidut and kabala, prayer is considered a feminine mode of service, and study, a more masculine one. The conventions of gender here echo the physical differences between men and women. Bestowing is a masculine role, receiving is a feminine one.

The prayer we are discussing here is a prayer of request (as opposed to prayer of praise and thanksgiving). This is the actual mitzvah of prayer, which Ramban defines as the obligation “to entreat HaShem for all that we lack.”⁶ Only when prayer comes from a place of lack and longing does it attain the status of mitzvah and the unique opportunity for closeness with HaShem that such longing provides.

Rabbi Tsadok HaKohen⁷ explains that prayer (unlike study) cannot happen without G-d in the picture. Prompted by lack, a person turns to HaShem and asks that his or her deficiency be removed. In this sense prayer is feminine, for in prayer we are not only receptive, we are begging to be filled. A master of prayer knows the secret of turning lack into an empty-space-of-longing that has enough vacuum power to pull its answer down from the heavens. This was Chana’s expertise. Conversely, says Rabbi Tsadok, study can happen, at least theoretically, without ever touching a place of lack. Study is empowering, and the acquisition of knowledge enables one to feel they can control their reality because of what they now know about the laws of nature (both human and physical). Knowledge is a good thing, but it is also why, in study, there is the danger of forgetting that one needs HaShem.

Nevertheless, traditionally, study is more valued than prayer. Numerous sources suggest this hierarchy. Rabbis are even rebuked for drawing out their prayer: *Manichin chayei olam v’oskim b’chayei sha’a?*⁸ - They forsake eternal life [i.e. study] to occupy themselves with temporal life [i.e. prayer]? The idea is that study expands consciousness, which is an eternal acquisition for the soul. Once a mind opens there is no turning back. And the truths and wisdom a soul absorbs in the course of its life pass straight through the pearly gates. They are not touched by the body’s demise.

Conversely, the “good life” that we pray for—health, livelihood and even peace—are earthbound concerns. They improve our quality of life in *this* world, but don’t join us in the next, as the Zohar testifies, anything heavier than a mustard seed gets left behind.⁹

So the Talmud questions the wisdom of taking time that could be used for study, with its *eternal* fruits, and using it instead for what, by Talmudic standards, is simply a glorified form of immediate gratification.

Rebbe Nachman explains, however, that there are two kinds of prayer.¹⁰ One is lower than study, and secondary to it, for precisely the reasons explained. Yet there is another kind of prayer, he says, that is equal to study and actually, perhaps, even higher than it. In this prayer, one asks for help in translating study into practice. One prays to be transformed by the Torah one learns, to turn its teachings into deeds, to embody its truths. This kind of prayer, says Rebbe

⁶ Ramban, *Sefer HaMitzvot*, Positive Commandment #5: *Shulchan Aruch* 98:3.

⁷ R. Tzadok HaCohen, *Tzidkat HaTzadik*, Essay 211.

⁸ Masechet Shabbat 10a.

⁹ Zohar II 197a.

¹⁰R. Natan Steinholtz, *Likutei Halachot, Orach Chaim, Rosh Chodesh*, 5.

Nachman, goes beyond study, fulfilling the Talmudic maxim, “The real goal is not study but action.”¹¹ Higher prayer is the secret of turning study into action.

I wrote the prayer that I share above because as I began to go deeply into the study of Jewish text I felt a gap between what I was able to absorb with my head and what I could integrate into my heart. I always saw my learning as a spiritual path, so this gap was quite painful for me. I felt the only way I could have any fighting chance of solving this dilemma was to study prayerfully, to bring HaShem into the picture because HaShem can do anything.

I say this prayer every day before I study because I believe it aids me in translating my studies into my life. One could say that in higher prayer one is seeking to become pregnant with the lights of study, which also include the lessons of daily life, as the Talmud clearly states, *ein emet ela Torah*¹² – There is no truth except Torah. Whenever one discovers truth, one acquires a spark of Torah.

In the higher prayer that Rebbe Nachman speaks of one is asking to birth the Torah he or she is learning into the world as a physical deed. For what does it mean to bring forth child? It means that a soul, a bundle of lights, comes into a body. Similarly the lights of Torah, when embodied as behavior, are thus born into the world. And so, it is no coincidence that Chana’s archetypal prayer was a prayer for child, for that is the essence of higher prayer, the longing to bring light down into body, both literally, as child, and metaphorically, as rectified behavior.

Now this can also, perhaps, help to explain the halachic difference in the way Torah study has traditionally applied to men and women. Professor Susan Handelman¹³ explores this difference in an essay she wrote based on a discussion by the Lubavitcher Rebbe in *Likutei Sichot* where the Rebbe states that it is possible that there might be no difference in what, or how much men and women learn. The only difference might be in the source of their obligation. Men are obligated to study *lishma*, for its own sake, because of the mitzvah itself. Women are also obligated to study, but only to the extent that it is required to complement their practice. For some women this might mean the study of the bare minimum of practical *halacha*, whereas others might find that their obligations to love and fear HaShem, and the mitzvah to believe in His oneness, require a constant exploration of text and tradition.

By defining women's obligation to study in more practical terms, it is perhaps acknowledging their greater drive and/or capacity to make their learning practical, to translate it into life and deed. In other words, to become pregnant with their study.

Now everything has its up-side and down-side. As a female teacher of women I can certainly say that I see this and appreciate it, and yet sometimes feel frustrated by my students’ need for every idea to be turned into practical Torah within a class period. There is little patience for teachings that can’t impregnate immediately. And yet, on the other hand, on the other side of the mechitza, there are too many learned minds that have little ability to connect their knowledge with their actions. There’s not enough pregnancy happening there.

¹¹ Pirkei Avot 1:17, *Ki lo ha-midrash hu ha-ikar ele ha-ma’ase*.

¹² Talmud Yerushalmi, Rosh Hashanah 18a.

¹³ Susan Handelman, ‘Women and the Study of Torah in the Thought of the Lubavitcher Rebbe’ in Micah Halpern and Chana Safrai (ed.), *Jewish Legal Writings By Women* (Urim Publications and Lambada Publishing Inc., 1998), 143-178.

And so, addressing this problem, Rabbi Tsadok emphasizes the need for their interinclusion. *Lah garsi ela haycha de'matzli*¹⁴ ...*lah havah matzlayna, ela haycha de'garesna*¹⁵ – “I don't learn except where I pray... I don't pray except where I learn.” Study must be prayerful, and must be accompanied by an explicit plea to absorb truth and be changed by it. And conversely, the prayerful yearning to grow and transform requires the fortification of study. For learning, says Rabbi Tsadok, stretches one's capacity to bear the discomfort of not-yet-answered prayer, and increases one's tolerance for the delayed gratification of not-easily-integrated teachings.

For this we must thank Chana, the mistress of higher prayer, who gave voice to our yearning to birth holy lights into the world.

¹⁴ Masechet Megila 29a.

¹⁵ Masechet Brachot 8a.