



Chana's Lessons for Covid-19

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are a time of grandeur, and of tradition. Each year, as the summer draws to a close, and the familiar sound of the *shofar* becomes part of our daily experience, we realize just how much our souls long for the rituals that facilitate the *teshuva* process. We long for the sea of white that creates a sense of reverence, and for the familiar tunes that thunder through our synagogue halls. We long for the worn pages of *machzorim* that bring back memories of prayers past, and for the wrinkled hands that reach over every so often and pull us in close. We long for all the things we have come to associate with the high point of our religious calendar.

But this year is different. Cognizant of the fact that Jewish Law prioritizes human life above all else, Jews around the world will have a religious experience wholly different from what they are accustomed to. For many of us, the lack and the emptiness will be profound. And so perhaps this year, more than any other, we can draw insight from the *Haftarah* we read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. In this famous portion, we encounter Chana, Elkanah's barren wife, in the throes of despair and longing. And while Chana's struggle is unique to her, the depiction of her emotional

state is something to which many of us may currently relate. She is described as being frustrated with her reality, and sad about all the things she is missing. She is angry, maybe even irrationally, at herself and at the people around her. When the text describes her inability to even participate in her family's celebrations, one senses a profound loneliness and disconnection.

Chana doesn't remain mired in self-pity though. She breaks with convention and travels alone to the *Mishkan* in Shiloh. Once there, she doesn't engage with a *Kohen* or bring a sacrifice, as would have been expected. Instead, she utters a silent, personal prayer. The text seems to be saying that Chana is not relying on people around her, or on traditional rituals, to extricate her from her misery. She uses her loneliness to fuel a connection with G-d that is qualitatively different from anything her contemporaries – even Eli the High Priest – had ever seen. Rather than depending on things external, Chana reaches deeply into her pain, her desires, and her faith, to craft a prayer that sets the template for all subsequent *tefillot* (Berachot 31a).

Our history is filled with scenarios that have forced Jews to find creative

ways to uphold ritual norms. Wars, plagues, periods of oppression. Each historical contingency brought with it its own set of challenges. Our challenge this year is to find a way to connect, even as we are disconnected. Our challenge this year is to find inspiration, in the absence of those things we rely on to inspire us. Our challenge this year is to remember we are still a link in our chain of tradition, even if the wrinkled hands can't pull us in close to remind us.

And so, as we meet these challenges, let us look at Chana. Let us look at what it means to keep praying, even as we feel isolated, and know that what we're feeling now won't last forever. Let us remember that ultimately, our fate lies in G-d's hands and that it is not the volume of our *tefillot* that reverberates, but their sincerity.

As we listen to Chana's words, let us take comfort in knowing that even the quietest of prayers can breach the gates of Heaven.

Yael Leibowitz has taught Continuing Education courses and served as Resident Scholar in New York. She is currently teaching as she continues her studies at Bar-Ilan University.