

BENEFITING FROM THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

On the first day of Rosh HaShana, we read in the Haftorah about Chana, the mother of the prophet Shmuel. Chana was married to Elkana, who had a second wife as well, Penina. Penina had children; Chana did not.

Elkana used to take his family with him to visit the Mishkan in the city of Shiloh. On one occasion, Chana was so saddened as she did not have a child that she broke down in tears and prayed to G-d, silently. The verses (Shmuel I 1:12-15) tell us *"And it came to pass, as she continued praying before Hashem, that Eli (the Priest) observed her mouth. And Chana spoke in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought that she was drunk. And Eli said to her, How long will you be drunk? Take away your wine from you. And Chana answered and said, No, my lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but have poured out my soul before Hashem."*

The Talmud (Brachos 31b) contains a discussion of this exchange. *"'And Chana answered and said, No, my lord.'* Ulla, or as some say Rav Yose bar Chanina, said: She said to him: You are no lord in this matter, nor does the holy spirit rest on you, that you suspect me of this thing. Some say, She said to him: You are no lord, [meaning] the Shechinah and the holy spirit is not with you in that you take the harsher and not the more lenient view of my conduct."

It appears from this discussion that Chana criticized Eli for not giving her the benefit of the doubt when he accused her of being drunk. However, the Talmud explains that Chana's use of the word "master" was intended to highlight a deeper flaw in Eli - that he did not have the holy spirit rest upon him, as he made an improper judgment. The Vilna Gaon comments that this criticism seems unusual. We are all exhorted to judge our fellow man favorably, giving the benefit of the doubt. Why here do we see the implication that specifically one who has the spirit of G-d rest upon him must judge favorably?

To make the matter more confusing, the Talmud (Megillah 14a) tells us that Chana was one of the 7 prophetesses. She was clearly a righteous and unique person. The Medrash additionally tells us that she was like Sarah, Rivka and Rachel, who were all great women who were barren. Eli should have recognized the greatness of Chana, and assumed that she was acting properly. Yet he erred. What happened?

When the Cohen needed to seek heavenly advice, he would turn to the Urim V'Tumim. This was a

writing of G-d's explicit name that was placed into the Choshen, the breastplate that contained the names of the 12 tribes, engraved on 12 stones that the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) wore. When the Kohen Gadol needed an answer, letters on the Choshen would illuminate. The Kohen Gadol then had to assemble the letters together to form the response. This task of assembling the letters together, using the Tumim, required the holy spirit, divine inspiration.

Eli saw Chana doing something unusual. Chana was a great woman, and the behavior that she exhibited was uncharacteristic. Eli was perplexed - so he turned to the Urim V'Tumim for an answer. Four letters illuminated: shin, chaf, resh and heh. These four letters spell "shikora," a drunk. Eli thought he had his answer.

Eli was wrong. These four letters also spell "k'Sarah," "like Sarah." Eli was really being told that Chana, like our mother Sarah, was barren, and, like Sarah, was praying that she should bear a child. Chana, upon being confronted by Eli, pointed out to him that he must not be endowed with divine inspiration - as he assembled the letters incorrectly. Furthermore, he failed to judge her favorably - as the letters could have been assembled in a way that did not reflect negatively on Chana, yet Eli did not do such.

Eli was no ordinary person. He was an individual who justifiably had the expectation that the Urim V'Tumim would provide him with the answer to his query. And, in fact, he was provided an answer through this special manner. Yet, Eli erred. He failed to judge Chana properly. This lapse in judgment is memorialized in the verses that appear in Shmuel, and elaborated upon, as we have seen, in the Talmud. Ultimately, Eli recognized he erred, blessed Chana, and Chana gave birth to the individual whom we know as Shmuel HaNavi.

On Rosh HaShana, we read about this entire episode. We see how an individual prayed to G-d, out of sorrow and pain, for help. We see how G-d remembered this woman and gave her the child she so desperately wanted. These actions are recalled as they relate to our behavior on Rosh HaShana - we ask G-d, via heartfelt prayer, to remember us for the good in the coming year. We ask that G-d give us life and happiness. However, we also have to treat our fellow man properly in order for G-d to judge us favorably. We read about an incident where an innocent was wrongly accused of acting inappropriately. The accuser, upon discovering his error, blessed his victim, and she was indeed blessed. We can only hope that if we behave similarly, treating our fellow man with proper respect and making amends for those times when we fell short, we will similarly be blessed.

Dear readers,

Thank you for your continued readership over the past 13 years, and for those of you who purchased my book, for your support in that fashion as well. May we all be blessed with a year of health and happiness! B'birkas k'siva v'chasima tova, Yehudah Prero and family