



new west end synagogue
st petersburgh place

שִׁירַת חֲנָה

Chanah's Song

*An essay by Rabbi Dr. Moshe Freedman in
honour of the members of the New West End
Synagogue on the occasion of his induction as their minister*

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טַעֲמָה כִּי טוֹב סַחֲרָה - זוֹ חַנָּה. וּמָה סַחֲרָה
שֶׁל חַנָּה זֶה שְׁמוּאֵל כִּי מָה שֶׁאֶלְתִּיו. (מִדְרָשׁ)

'She sees that her business goes well' (Proverbs 31:18) - this is Chanah. What is Chanah's business? Samuel, for Chanah says, "I requested him from the Lord." (Midrash)

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Prayer, Prophecy and Music

What is the purpose of prayer?

וַתִּפְּלֵל חַנָּה וַתֹּאמֶר עָלַץ לִבִּי בַּיהוָה רָמָה קִרְנֵי בַּיהוָה רָחַב פִּי עַל אֹיְבֵי
כִּי שָׂמַחַתִּי בִישׁוּעָתְךָ:

And Chanah prayed and said: "My heart has rejoiced through the Lord; My pride has been raised by the Lord. My mouth is opened wide against my antagonists, for I have rejoiced in Your salvation."¹

The verse in Lamentations² exhorts us to 'pour out our hearts like water in front of God'. Yet prayer is a very misunderstood process; what are we actually hoping to achieve when we pray? Surely God, Who is omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent should know what our needs are better than we do and know how those needs should be met.

Furthermore, we view God as an All-Loving God. If He knows what our needs are and deems it appropriate to provide us with them, what would be stopping Him? If, on the other hand, He deems it appropriate to not act, what hope could prayer give us? Are we not deluding ourselves into thinking that we somehow have the power to change God's mind once He has decreed something?

¹ Samuel I 2:1

² Lamentations 2:19

When Jacob blessed Ephraim and Menashe, he said to his son Joseph³

וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל יוֹסֵף הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי מֹת וְהָיָה אֱלֹהִים עִמָּכֶם וְהָשִׁיב
אֶתְכֶם אֶל אֶרֶץ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם: וְאָנֹכִי נֹתַתִּי לְךָ שְׂכָם אֶחָד עַל אַחִידָא אֲשֶׁר
לְקַחְתִּי מִיַּד הָאֲמֹרִי בְּחַרְבִּי וּבְקִשְׁתִּי:

Behold, I am going to die, and God will be with you, and He will return you to the land of your forefathers. And I have given you one portion over your brothers, which I took from the hand of the Amorite with my sword and with my bow."

Targum Onkelos explains Jacob's words 'בְּחַרְבִּי וּבְקִשְׁתִּי' *'with my sword and with my bow'* to mean 'בְּצִלוֹתִי וּבִבְעוֹתִי', *'with my prayer and supplication'*.

In reality God wants to give us the blessings we ask for provided they accord with His greater plan for us and humanity. The problem is not with God knowing what is necessary; we don't have to remind Him there are sick and needy people in the world. The problem is with us.

Therefore, the process of prayer is not designed to petition God to change His mind, it is designed to change man so that he can become a receptacle for God's blessing. The greatest obstacle to this blessing is the distance we create between us and God through sin.

³ Genesis 48:21-22

We can choose to develop our relationship with Him through *mitzvot*,⁴ or we can choose to indulge and transgress leading to a breakdown in that relationship and a distancing between ourselves and God.

In Jewish philosophy it is the *yetzer hara* – the evil inclination which entices us to fall. This could occur by either failing to fulfil our spiritual obligations or by giving in to temptation and engaging in something which God proscribes.

Rabbi Azaryah Figo⁵ highlights the difference between the two weapons mentioned by Jacob which relate to prayer. While a sword is an appropriate weapon for fighting an enemy close at hand, a bow and arrow can strike from a distance. Standing up to the *yetzer hara* requires close-quarter combat which is best carried out with the sword.

Yet we are not only fighting for ourselves. Our sages teach⁶ that כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה – all the Jewish people are responsible for one another. Once we have successfully fought against the *yetzer hara* and humbled ourselves before God, we can use the bow and arrow to advocate for ourselves and others.

⁴ The word *mitzvah* (plural *mitzvot*) is often translated as commandment but is more accurately understood as connection, i.e. ways of developing a relationship with God.

⁵ Italian rabbi born in Venice (d. 1647).

⁶ Babylonian Talmud Tractate Shevuos 39a

The Brisker Rov⁷ cites another difference between the sword and the bow and arrow. Swords are sharp enough that even those who are not strong can utilise them whereas the bow and arrow requires skill to strike its target. A strong archer can pull the bow back which will make the arrow fly further but with great accuracy.

Similarly, there are two types of prayer. Standard daily prayers are recited by all and, like the sword may be effective for all. Yet personal supplications require great skill. This explains why the Gemara⁸ teaches that we should ask a wise person to pray on behalf of the sick.

Music, prophecy and the Divine service

The Book of Chronicles⁹ hints to a connection between music and prophecy when it describes how David selected certain Levites to sing and play instruments in the temple.

וַיִּבְדֵּל דָּוִד וְשָׂרֵי הַצָּבָא לְעִבְדָּהּ לְבָנֵי אָסָף וְהִימָן וַיְדוּתוּן הַנְּבָאִים
בְּכִנְרוֹת בְּנִבְלִים וּבַמְצַלְתִּים...

Then David and the generals of the army separated for the service of the sons of Asaph, Heman and Yedusun, who prophesied with harps, with lyres, and with cymbals...

⁷ Rabbi Yitzchok Zev Halevi Soloveitchik, d. 1959.

⁸ Bava Batra 116a

⁹ Chronicles I 25:1

Rashi¹⁰ (*loc. cit.*) explains that when they played these musical instruments they would experience prophecy. Radak¹¹ (*loc. cit.*) explains further that the sons of Asaph would play their instruments while he sang and they all received *Ruach HaKodesh* (Divine inspiration) while singing the Psalms in the Temple.

There are many incidents in the bible where music is employed to elicit a positive mood in others. For example, David was employed by King Saul to play the harp and sing to help restore Saul's happiness.¹²

Similarly, in the second Book of Kings¹³ Yehosaphat the king of Judah, came together with wicked Yehoram ben Achav¹⁴, king of Israel and the king of Edom to consult with the prophet Elisha before waging war against Moav. Yet Elisha was deeply upset by the presence of Yehoram.

Not only was he himself wicked but his parents (Achav and Izevel¹⁵) had been the arch-enemies of his teacher and mentor, the prophet Elijah.

¹⁰ Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, French commentator on the Bible and most of the Talmud (d. 1105).

¹¹ Rabbi Dovid Kimchi, France (d. 1235).

¹² Samuel I 16:14-23

¹³ Kings II 3:14-15.

¹⁴ Not to be confused with Yehoram ben Navat of Judah. Both were evil and while Yehoram ben Achav didn't worship the idol Baal which his parents had forced the people to worship, he was a follower of Yehoram ben Navat. See Kings I 16, 17 and 18.

¹⁵ Known as Jezebel

Rashi explains that due to this anger, God's presence left him and he was unable to prophesy until he summoned a musician to play. The music calmed his mood and restored the Divine presence. As the power of prophecy returned to him he was able to prophesy victory over Moav.

Both the Temple in Jerusalem, the sacrificial services and the opportunity to connect with God through prophecy no longer exist. The second Temple was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70CE and prophecy ceased after the time of Malachi.

Although mere shadows of the Temple, our synagogues have become places for Divine worship, while our prayers have replaced the offerings brought by our ancestors.¹⁶ Yet one thing remains. We continue to sing.

The connection between song and prayer

The power of song and its connection to prayer endures. Our sages write¹⁷ that when king David began a psalm with לדוד מזמור, '*to David, a psalm*' it meant that the Divine presence rested on him before he sang the psalm. Yet when he began the psalm with מזמור לדוד, '*a Psalm of David*' it meant that he began to sing the psalm and during his song the Divine presence rested on him.

Combining this with the story above relating to Elisha and Yehoram, our sages explain that this teaches us that God's

¹⁶ See Hoshea 14:3 which says that 'the service of our lips shall replace the bulls we once offered.'

¹⁷ Pesachim 117a

presence does not rest in a place where there is laziness, sorrow, jokiness, lightheaded behaviour or idle chatter. Rather it requires joy associated with the mitzvah. Therefore, at the most basic level, song lifts our spirits and in turn helps us to focus our prayers with reverence and joy.

This is reflected in the practical *halacha*¹⁸ which dictates that it is forbidden to pray in a state of anger, confusion or other negative emotions.¹⁹ The Orchos Tzaddikim²⁰ explains that firstly one will not have proper concentration but also, because the Divine presence will not rest on someone who is angry.²¹

The Maharal²² compares two apparently conflicting Tanaaic sources (discussions of our sages redacted c. 200 CE). One source requires a person to have a reverent mind (כבוד ראש, *lit.* a heavy head) when praying whereas the other requires a person to be happy.²³ The Maharal explains that in truth, both are necessary.²⁴

Reverence and awe is necessary when we pray; we are standing in front of God, King of kings and master of the Universe.

¹⁸ Jewish law (*lit.* way)

¹⁹ Rambam, Laws of Prayer 4:18, Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 93:2

²⁰ The Ways of the Righteous, written in Germany in the 15th century, unknown author.

²¹ Orchos Tzaddikim 212

²² Rabbi Yehudah Loew ben Bezalel, rabbi of Prague (d. 1609)

²³ Babylonian Talmud Tractate Brachot 31a

²⁴ Netzach Yisrael 23 (מאמר על תפילה).

Yet prayer must also be infused with happiness because positive emotions in turn lead to what he refers to as שלימות הנפש, *lit.* completeness of the soul. This means that only when a person has a sense of wholeness, integrity and inner unity can the Divine presence rest upon them.

Music and song were employed in Temple times to engender these feelings of happiness, as we mentioned earlier just as David's music helped restore Saul's happiness and when Elisha used it when prophesying over war with Moav.

So too our liturgical music inspires us to feel positive, stirring our hearts towards our prayers and settling our minds and souls.

The deeper meaning of music

Yet the importance of liturgical music does not end with the mere idea that it helps to put us in the right mood and frame of mind. Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev²⁵ explains the phrase in one of our daily prayers, ובשירי דוד עבדך – 'and the songs of your servant David'²⁶ to highlight a connection between Divine service (whether in the Temple or our synagogues) and song.

David's psalms were not just written masterpieces, they were composed with music to serve God with both words and song.

²⁵ Known as the Kedushat Levi after his *magnum opus* (d. 1810).

²⁶ In the prayer ברוך שאמר, 'Blessed is He Who spoke', see Chief Rabbi's siddur page 40.

Rabbi Yisrael Taub (d. 1920) the Modzhitzer Rebbe²⁷, delves even deeper to find a connection between music and the spiritual world. The reason that music has the capacity to stir emotions and elicit powerful feelings is that the fundamental nature and essential qualities of music resonate with deep spiritual ideas.

During the drought in Canaan, the Torah²⁸ describes Jacob's instruction to his sons before they embark on a journey to acquire food from Egypt. Unbeknownst to them, Joseph had been elevated by Pharaoh to oversee the allocation of food and supplies. Jacob advised them to take gifts to this man.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲבִיהֶם אִם כֵּן אֶפְּוֹא זֹאת עֲשׂוּ קָחוּ מִזְמַרְת הָאָרֶץ
בְּכֻלֵּיכֶם וְהוֹרִידוּ לְאִישׁ מִנְחָה מְעַט צָרִי וּמְעַט דְּבַשׁ נְכֹאת וְלֹט בְּטָנִים
וּשְׁקָדִים:

So Israel, their father, said to them, "If so, then do this: take from the choice products of the land in your vessels, and take down to the man as a gift, a little balm and a little honey, wax and lotus, pistachios and almonds.

Rashi explains that the phrase *מִזְמַרְת הָאָרֶץ*, 'from the choice products of the land' literally means 'from the song of the land' as the Hebrew root *ז.מ.ר* means song.²⁹

²⁷ Leader of the Modzhitzer Chassidim who originated in Modzhitz in Poland. As well as producing wonderful works and commentaries on Torah, they have a strong musical tradition.

²⁸ Genesis 43:11

²⁹ Rashi also notes that this is not the same word used in Leviticus 25:3 which describes pruning or cutting. There the Torah describes the commandment of *shmittah*, the Sabbatical year for produce which

Quoting the Targumim³⁰ he explains that the sons should take from ‘that which is praised in the land,’ about which everyone sings, and rejoices over the fact that it came into the world.

Yet the Modzhitzer Rebbe³¹ sees a deeper connection to the use of the word זָמַר. He cites this as a hint that the sons were instructed to take to Egypt the ‘secrets of the wisdom of serving God with song.’ What does this mean and how does it relate to Jacob’s sons going down to Egypt?

The Modzhitzer Rebbe explains that everything in the physical world has a source in the spiritual world. The Tikkunei Zohar³² makes that association by citing the songs and praises sung by the ministering angels who praise God.

The point of the Tikkunei Zohar is that when music and song is used in this world to serve God, it has the capacity to resonate and harmonise with the music and song produced by the angels themselves in their praise of God.

The link can also be seen in the music produced by the Levites in the Temple in Jerusalem. Our sages³³ teach that the harps

contains the commandment וְכַרְמְךָ לֹא תִזְמַר meaning ‘nor shall you prune your vineyard.’ This use of the root זָמַר relates to cutting or pruning, not to music.

³⁰ Aramaic translations and explanations of the Bible.

³¹ Divrei Yisrael on Parshat Mikkeitz.

³² Aramaic Midrash (rabbinic exposition) on Genesis divided into seventy sections. Composed by the second century sage, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his son Elazar and first printed in the 16th century. Tikkun 11.

³³ Babylonian Talmud Tractate Arachin 13b

used to produce the music in the Temple had a particular number of strings.

כנור של מקדש של שבעת נימין היה, שנאמר: (תהלים ט"ז) שובע שמחות [את] פניך, אל תיקרי שובע אלא שבע; ושל ימות המשיח שמונה, שנאמר: (תהלים י"ב) למנצח על השמינית, על נימא שמינית.

The harp of the Temple was of seven strings, as it is stated (Psalms 16:11): 'The fullness of joys is in your presence.' Do not read this as if it is written *sova* (fullness), rather read it as if it were written *sheva* (seven). [Whereas] the harp of the days of the Messiah will be of eight strings, as it is stated (Psalms 12:1): 'For the conductor upon the eighth.' This verse teaches that the music of the days of the Messiah will be played on [a harp of] eight strings.

The Maharsha comments on the above and explains that there is a very deep connection between a seven stringed harp and the natural world.

In the same way that the world was created in six days with a seventh day of rest, so too the number seven is associated with the natural world – both physical (six days of creation) and spiritual (Shabbat).³⁴ This is reflected in a number of natural phenomena that contain the number seven.

³⁴ See the Maharal in *Gevurot HaShem* 46 for a discussion about the number 7 relating to the natural world and the number 8 relating to a dimension above and beyond our comprehension. See also 'Strive for Truth', by Rabbi Eliyahu E. Dessler, volume II, page 151. This also

Most importantly, a musical scale is divided into seven different notes (A, B, C, D, E, F and G) with the eighth note either half or double the frequency³⁵ of the original note. This division is called an octave.³⁶

When two sounds with a pitch are played simultaneously, we hear the complex sound which results from the sound waves interfering with one another. Certain combinations of notes produce a pleasant sound and are said to be consonant.

These combinations of notes form the basis of intervals in music. For example, an octave has a frequency ratio of 2:1, the major third has a ratio of 5:4, the perfect fourth and fifth ratios of 4:3 and 3:2 respectively.

The Modzhitzer Rebbe continues in his analysis of music and explains that just as music is based on the concept of the octave, so too Divine service contains stages which are

explains why the harp in the time of Moshiach (the Messiah) when the Temple will be rebuilt (a period of time beyond the natural world), will contain eight strings.

³⁵ Frequency is a concept in physics which describes how quickly a medium is oscillating. Sound is merely an oscillation of a particular medium such as air. The faster the oscillations, the higher the pitch of sound.

³⁶ An octave is the division of musical pitches with either half or double the frequency into eight notes. According to Paul Cooper in his book, *Perspectives in Music Theory: An Historical-Analytical Approach* (1973), the octave relationship is a natural phenomenon that has been referred to as the "basic miracle of music", the use of which is "common in most musical systems."

designed to elevate us closer towards God. Correspondingly, God's influence in this world also goes through various stages. While the depth of connection from a Jewish mystical nature cannot be fully explored in this essay, in essence the message of the nature of music and 'the secrets of the wisdom of serving God with song' is that while God represents the Definitive Unity for 'he is One and His name is One,' He created a diverse physical world.

This natural world which includes the spiritual realms as well, is one of multiplicity with many different parts. When these parts work together in harmony, they remind us that they are in reality all part of God's ultimate whole.

Therefore, the service of God through music and song helps to remind us how all of us play a critical part in this world. When we work together in the service of God, our diverse efforts harmonise and in doing so, create the most beautiful music. In contrast, when we sin or work against each other, we produce discord and conflict.

We can now understand Jacob's message to his sons. When Jacob told his sons to bring gifts, קָחוּ מִזְמֵרֵת הָאָרֶץ בְּכֵלֵיכֶם 'take from the choice products of the land in your vessels' he meant bring to the viceroy of Egypt the 'secrets of the wisdom of serving God with song,' implying that mankind should work together for the greater good of the world. Only by helping each other and harmonising our efforts can our service truly resonate with God. This is why music and song has always been so important in our Divine worship and why it remains important today.

Chanah composed her song in praise of God after He had granted her a son. She named that son Samuel (שמואל) because, 'שאלתי'ו כי מה' 'She asked [for a son] from the Lord.'³⁷ King Solomon wrote in Proverbs³⁸ regarding an אִשֶּׁת חַיִּל, a woman of strength that:

טַעֲמָה כִּי טוֹב סַחְרָה לֹא יִכָּבֵה בַלַּיְלָה גְּרָה:

She sees that her business goes well; her lamp never goes out at night.

The Midrash³⁹ states that this refers to Chanah. 'Her business' refers to the prayers she offered up to God that were answered positively. The fact that 'her lamp never goes out at night' refers to the lamps of the Menorah that were still lit in the Tabernacle while Samuel received his first prophecy.⁴⁰ With this in mind, we can now begin to understand the profound connection between prayer, prophecy and song. May we all learn the beauty of praising and praying to God with song and may the Almighty grant us all of the blessings we desire to help bring about His glory in the world.



³⁷ Samuel I 1:20

³⁸ Proverbs 31:18

³⁹ Batei Midrashot 2, page 148 on Eishet Chayil.

⁴⁰ Samuel I 3:3

שירת חנה: שמואל א' פרק ב:א – י

1. And Chanah prayed and said:
"My heart has rejoiced through
the Lord; My pride has been raised
by the Lord. My mouth is opened
wide against my antagonists, for I
have rejoiced in Your salvation.

(א) וַתִּתְפַלֵּל חַנָּה
וַתֹּאמֶר עָלַץ לִבִּי
בַּה' רָמָה קַרְנֵי
בַּה' רָחַב פִּי עַל
אֹיְבֵי כִּי שָׂמַחְתִּי
בְּיִשׁוּעָתְךָ:

פירוש שירת חנה

And Chanah prayed: The *Targum*⁴¹ on Song of Songs (1:1) includes Chanah's prayer among the ten prophetic songs in *Tanach*⁴². The underlying theme of Chanah's song is that God can grant blessing and success as part of His Divine plan for humanity. Of all the other songs cited by the *Targum*, only Chanah's begins with the verb לִהְיוֹת, to pray. Others include verbs to sing, to speak or to say. It is fitting therefore that we learn the laws of prayer from both Chanah's song and from her prayer prior to conceiving Samuel (Samuel I 1:11-13).

It is also important to note that this narrative is the only instance recorded in Tanach in which an individual prays in the same place that animal sacrifices were offered. Chanah's song therefore highlights the connection between prayer and the Temple service.

⁴¹ Aramaic translation of sections of Tanach often containing their own explanations and exegeses.

⁴² Tanach is an acronym for Torah (the five books of Moses), Neviim (Prophets) and Ketuvim (Writings) which together constitute the Hebrew Bible.

Since the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE by the Romans, our daily offerings have been replaced with prayer in our synagogues.

After acknowledging that the destruction of the Temple and consequential cessation of Temple offerings was due to our sins as a people, Hoshea⁴³ writes that וְנִשְׁלַמָּה פְּרִים שְׁפָתֵינוּ – the service of our lips shall replace the bulls we once offered.

My pride has been raised: The phrase קָרְנִי קָרְמָה literally means ‘my horn has been raised.’ Rabbi David Kimche⁴⁴ explains that when an animal raises its head, its horn symbolises its pride.

My mouth is opened wide against my antagonists: Radak explains that the antagonist Chanah is referring to is Penina, who was Elkanah’s⁴⁵ other wife (Samuel I 1:2). Penina had many children and had taunted Chanah over her barrenness.

for I have rejoiced in Your salvation: Chanah acknowledges that her blessing of a child has come from God’s intervention alone. Very often we associate our success with our own efforts and blame God when things go wrong when we should be attributing our success and blessing to God while looking internally when challenged by difficulty (see Lamentations 2:40).

⁴³ Hosea 14:3.

⁴⁴ Known as the Radak (d. 1235)

⁴⁵ Elkanah was Chanah’s husband.

2. There is nothing as holy as the Lord, For there is none besides You; And there is no rock like our God.

(ב) אֵין קָדוֹשׁ כֶּה' כִּי אֵין בְּלִתְדָּךְ וְאֵין צוּר כְּאֱלֹהֵינוּ:

פִּירוּשׁ שִׁירַת חֲנָה

There is nothing as holy as the Lord: Holiness as defined by the Hebrew root ש.ד.ק means separated from the mundane. For example, Shabbat is separated from the regular weekdays through reciting Kiddush (קידוש), a couple separate themselves from everyone else by doing kiddushin (קידושין), betrothal and God describes us as a goy kadosh (גוי קדוש), a 'holy' nation, to be given an extra set of responsibilities and obligations that are different from the non-Jewish nations. As such, Chanah's declaration that there is nothing 'as holy' as the Lord requires discussion. God is of course separate from the mundane, physical world. Despite His immanence, he is not bound by the same physical constraints that we experience.

For there is none besides You: meaning, there is nothing else in the Universe besides God. This does not mean that everything in the Universe is God. Such a position would be a form of Pantheism⁴⁶, which is against Jewish thought. As mentioned above, God is entirely separate from the physical world and yet every part of the physical world; both time and space are intimately connected to God. This means that there is nothing which is removed from potentially having a connection to God. Everything can be used for a Godly purpose regardless of how lowly or mundane it may seem.

⁴⁶ This is in contrast to Panentheism which preserves a distinction between the divine and non-divine, but retains the significance of both.

And there is no rock like our God: The Radak explains that there is no power in this world like God's for He can change the course of nature, changing a barren woman into a fertile, childbearing one. The Babylonian Talmud interprets the word צור as צַיָּר meaning artisan. The verse then reads that there is no craftsman like God.

The Gemara explains that Chanah was expressing a philosophical point which also relates to how different God is from anything in the physical world. Although we have the capacity to create by drawing or sculpting the human form, only God can endow physical stuff with life. Just as He took 'dust from the ground' and formed Adam (Genesis 2:7), so too He takes the seed from a man and woman and 'shapes a form inside another form' and then bestows life upon the foetus.⁴⁷

3. Do not increasingly speak in an arrogant manner; Let not arrogance come out of your mouth, For the Lord is a God of thoughts, And to Him are deeds counted.

(ג) אֵל תִּרְבוּ
 תִּדְבְּרוּ גְבוּהָהּ
 גְבוּהָהּ יֵצֵא עֲתִק
 מִפִּיכֶם כִּי אֵל
 דְּעוֹת ה' וְלֹא וְלוֹ
 נִתְכַּנּוּ עַל־לוֹת:

פירוש שירת חנה

Do not increasingly speak in an arrogant manner etc.: Success often breeds contempt for other people and for God.

⁴⁷ Megillah 14b

For the Lord is a God of thoughts, And to Him are deeds counted: ultimately, while mankind can plan, the execution of events is in God's hands. He will only allow that which helps Him to realise His Ultimate plan. Arrogance leads people to believe that they can achieve success even though their evil schemes are against God's wishes.

The Targum relates Chanah's words prophetically to the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar who both blasphemed against God and acted with contempt against Him while destroying the Temple and Jerusalem. Yet he was repaid in kind, and was ultimately humiliated by God.

4. The bows of the mighty are broken; And those who stumbled, are girded with strength.

(ד) קִשְׁתֵּי גִבּוֹרִים
חֲתִימִם וְנִכְשָׁלִים
אֶזְרוּ חֵיִל:

פירוש שירת חנה

The bows of the mighty are broken: An archer wields great power and can strike his enemy even though he is far away. When he does so, he is also protected by the distance that separates him from his target. In contrast, his target is vulnerable and may not even know the danger that lies ahead until it is too late.

The bow therefore represents God's power in contrast to the mighty mortals who believe that they are in control of their own destiny and the providence of others. God is both aware of their real motives and has the capacity to disarm their evil efforts, without them knowing that their plans are in danger of being upturned.

The Targum once again prophetically relates Chanah's words to the story of Chanukah during which a tiny, underequipped Jewish army lead by the Hasmoneans defeated the mighty Seleucid armies.

And those who stumbled, are girded with strength: Rabbi Yitzchak Weis⁴⁸ in his book *Siach Yitzchak* explains that those who believe that they are mighty have much to fear on the day of judgement.

This is what Chanah means when she says 'the bows of the mighty are broken.' Yet someone who recognises that he has stumbled admits that he has weaknesses. He takes a realistic view of his own abilities and comes before God with a contrite heart to repent. This person who recognises that he has stumbled will be 'girded with strength.'

This means that God will strengthen those who admit their faults so they can battle against their *yetzer hara*. Someone who fantasises that they are a *gibbor* when they have spiritual failings are only fooling themselves. Ultimately as soon as they are confronted by temptation, their 'bow will be broken' and they will fall into the grip of sin.

⁴⁸ Rabbi Yitzchak Weis was born in Vrbové, Slovakia he perished in the Holocaust in 1942.

5. Those who were satiated have hired themselves out for bread, while the hungry have ceased. While the barren woman has born seven, she that had many children, has been bereaved.

(ה) שְׂבֵעִים בִּלְהֵם
נִשְׁכְּרוּ וְרַעֲבִים
חָדְלוּ עַד עֲקָרָה
יָלְדָה שִׁבְעָה וְרַבַּת
בָּנִים אֲמָלְלָה:

פירוש שירת חנה

Those who were satiated have hired themselves out for bread: The Yalkut Meam Loez explains that Chanah's analogy relates to the difference between her and Penina. *Those who were* [initially] *satiated have hired themselves out for bread* to increase their profits. This is referring to Penina who was blessed with many children (Samuel I 1:2). She was 'satiated' but provoked Chanah. The Gemara (Bava Basra 16a) relates that when Chanah was barren Penina asked her questions that aggravated Chanah's pain at being childless when Penina had many children. She would ask Chanah: 'did you buy a cloak for your older child today' and 'did you buy an outfit for your younger one?' The Gemara (*ibid.*) indicates that Penina's intentions were honourable. She wanted to stir Chanah to not accept her status and to pray to God for a child. Penina had *hired herself out for bread*. Yet the Gemara also relates that while Penina's intentions had been honourable and for the sake of Heaven, she is likened to the Satan – the accusing angel who provoked Job to repent. His intentions may have been for the sake of Heaven but his methods were evil. Good intentions do not excuse cruel words and hurtful schemes.

While the hungry have ceased. Chanah, who had been barren desisted from giving unsolicited spiritual advice to others for while she was barren and lacked in the physical world, she was still satiated, for she accepted this as God's will and part of His plan. It was due to this acceptance that Chanah merited to bear children. When she prayed to God for a child she declared that she would give her child over as a servant of God. This was not a mere bargaining plea on her behalf that God acquiesced to. She was demonstrating her belief that everything ultimately belongs to God; without Him we would have nothing and be nothing.

While the barren woman has born seven: here Chanah refers to herself. She did not actually bear seven children as the verse (Samuel I 2:21) indicates that she had three sons and two daughters. The Radak explains that the number seven is not literal, but that Shmuel was like the blessing of seven children.

She that had many children, has been bereaved: Penina was severely punished for her actions and witnessed the death of eight of her ten children.

6. The Lord brings death and makes life; He brings down to the grave and raises up.

(ו) ה' מְמִית וּמְחַיֶּה
מוֹרִיד שְׂאוֹל וְנִעַל

פירוש שירת חנה

The Lord brings death and makes life: Chanah meant this literally; God has dominion over life and death itself. There are no external forces at work and the laws of nature are not outside His control. If He wishes to make a barren woman fertile, it is in His power to do so.

He brings down to the grave and raises up: The Gemara (Sanhedrin 108a) notes a connection between Chanah and Korach (see Numbers chapters 16-17). The Maharsha explains that Chanah prayed for Korach to be raised from the earthly pit which had consumed him and his followers and receive a share in the world to come (Numbers 16:32). Her motive was that Korach had seen prophetically that Samuel would be equal in stature to Moses and Aharon. This vision had given him the erroneous supposition that his uprising against them would succeed. Chanah didn't want him to suffer on her account, even though it was his transgression and selfish intent that caused his downfall. Therefore, she prayed that he be rescued from the 'pit'.

7. The Lord impoverishes and makes rich. He humbles; He also exalts.

(ז) ה' מוֹרִישׁ
וּמַעֲשִׂיר מִשְׁפִּיל אֶף
מְרוֹמָם:

פירוש שירת חנה

The Lord impoverishes and makes rich: The Ralbag explains that just as God has mastery and dominion over life and death, He can also alter a person's financial success. The rich should not become haughty as their wealth and fortunes may change while the poor should not despair for no one knows what may lie around the corner. We often attribute our financial success to our own business acumen or commercial talents, while we blame God for our failures. In reality, our attitude should be reversed; we should attribute our business success to God while accepting our failures as a result of our own shortcomings.

He humbles: it is easy for the rich to lose their wealth, but in reality **He also exalts:** The poor can be raised and find suitable income, thus lifting them out of the trap of poverty and the dependency it brings.

8. He raises the poor from the dust;
From the rubbish heap He raises the
destitute, to seat them with nobles.
And He bequeaths to them a seat of
honour, for the Pillars of the Earth
are the Lord's, and He placed the
world upon them.

(ח) מְקִיִּים מֵעֶפְרָה דָּל
מֵאֲשָׁפֶת יָרִים אֲבִיּוֹן
לְהוֹשִׁיב עִם גְּדִיבִים
וְכֶסֶף כְּבוֹד יִנְחֵלֵם
כִּי לַה' מְצַקִּי אֶרֶץ
וַיָּשֶׂת עָלֵיהֶם תְּבֵל:

פירוש שירת חנה

He raises the poor from the dust: Yalkut Meam Loez points out that the verse begins by talking about financial poverty but concludes with a contrast to honour and reputation. This leads us to the conclusion that unlike the previous verse, the 'poor' does not refer to those who are in monetary need or lack sustenance, but rather those who suffer from a lack of status. Chanah likens her barren state to that of someone who is destitute, deprived of the most basic needs.

From the rubbish heap He raises the destitute, to seat them with nobles: The Davar Shmuel explains that an אביון (destitute) is far lowlier than a דל (someone who is poor). While the poor are raised from the dust, the destitute is raised from the rubbish heap, a much dirtier place than from mere dust. Yalkut Meam Loez goes on to compare this to the Jewish people at two different junctures in Jewish History.

‘He raises the poor from the dust’ refers to the period of Shaul when the Jewish people became subservient to the Philistines until the time when David redeemed them. After that ‘From the rubbish heap He raises the destitute, to seat them with nobles’ refers to the kingship of David who fought and defeated all of Israel’s enemies. Chanah recounts this prophetically as both kings were anointed by Samuel.

Yalkut Shimoni explains further that the character of God is not like the character of man, for when man sees a rich person he elevates him and supports him in the hope that he will benefit. But when he sees a poor person he pays scant attention or worse still, pushes him down with contempt and scorn. In contrast, when God sees someone who is haughty, He may well bring him down and when He sees someone who has fallen, He raises him up. Compare this with Psalms:⁴⁹

מְקִימֵי מַעֲפָר דָּל מֵאַשְׁפֹּת יָרִים אֲבִיוֹן: לְהוֹשִׁיבֵי עִם נְדִיבִים עִם נְדִיבֵי
עַמּוֹ: מוֹשִׁיבֵי עֵקֶרֶת הַבַּיִת אִם הַבְּנִים שְׂמִחָה הִלְלוּקָה:

He lifts the pauper up from the dust, from the dungheap He raises up the needy, To seat [him] with princes, with the princes of His people. He seats the barren woman of the house as a happy mother of children. Hallelujah!

There, Rashi explains that the barren woman is not Chanah but a metaphor for Zion who will ‘give birth’ to the nation of Israel at the time of true redemption.

⁴⁹ Psalms 113:7-9

And He bequeaths to them a seat of honour: The Abravanel explains that to *sit with nobles* and have bequeathed a *seat of honour* refers to a change in social status. This could both refer to Chanah who had been barren and had now given birth to Samuel or to the Jewish people who had been raised from the subjugation of enemy nation.

for the Pillars of the Earth are the Lord's: in this part, the 'Pillars of the Earth' refer to the righteous who are small in number but play a critical role in recognising God as the source for this blessing. Therefore **[and] He placed the world upon them:** meaning, in each and every generation God pays back the righteous for their deeds.

9. The feet of His pious ones He will guard, And the wicked shall be cut off in darkness, For not by strength will man prevail.

(ט) רגלי תְּסִידּוֹ
 יִשְׁמַר וְרָשָׁעִים
 בְּחֹשֶׁךְ יִדְמוּ כִּי לֹא
 בְּכַח יִגְבֵּר אִישׁ:

פירוש שירת חנה

The feet of His pious ones He will guard: This phrase continues the theme of the previous verse regarding God rewarding the righteous in every generation for bringing good to the world. Here however, it explains that this 'reward' is not like the payment a servant receives from his master. Rather it is far greater; it is the reward of a relationship with God through love. Through this relationship, the lives of the righteous are no longer subject to the randomness of the world, but rather governed by God.

This concept is known as Divine Providence, the idea that events are governed and manipulated by God. It forms a fundamental and axiomatic part of Jewish philosophy although commentators and Jewish philosophers differ regarding how God involves himself in the running of the world and whether it applies to all individuals at all times. For those righteous people who achieve this level of relationship with God however, even the most mundane events are not coincidences determined merely by what came before, but arranged and influenced by God to bring about His Will and Divine purpose in this world.

Yet one should be careful not to think that Divine Providence means that righteousness brings success in whatever areas of life one wishes to be successful. What we believe we lack is not necessarily what God deems to be right for us. There is a difference between what we want in life and what God recognises we need.

This concept is epitomised by the story brought by our sages of Nachum Ish Gamzu, the second century CE sage who experienced many trials and challenges in his life but was always willing to declare "גַּם זֶה לְטוֹבָה", this too is for the good.⁵⁰ Similarly, one of Nachum Ish Gamzu's students was the famous Rabbi Akiva who would say "כָּל דְּעָבִיד רַחֲמָנָא לְטַב עָבִיד" – All that the Merciful One does, He does for good. It is important to highlight that in each case the declared that the event was לְטוֹבָה or לְטַב. The prefix ל denoting the preposition "for" means that neither sage thought that events that were objectively bad were really good, but rather that they occurred for a greater purpose which was ultimately good.

⁵⁰ Babylonian Talmud Tractate Taanis 21a

From a human perspective there is therefore no correlation between righteousness and success, and evil and failure. That is because at any point in our lives, we only see a fraction of the true picture, both with respect to our own individual lives and with respect to God's ultimate purpose and goal for His creation.

In contrast however **the wicked shall be cut off in darkness**: to be 'cut off in darkness' refers to a absence of Divine Providence. One may think that life is great and that success has been forthcoming but someone who is in the dark cannot see the bigger picture. They fail to grasp reality and may find happiness but ultimately their success is limited.

Therefore, the verse concludes by stating that **For not by strength will man prevail**: meaning, success achieved without God cannot last.

10. May those who fight with God will be shattered; let the Heavens thunder against them; God will judge to the ends of the earth. And He will grant strength to His King, And raise the horn of His anointed one.

(י) ה' יַסְתּוּ מְרִיבָיו
עָלָיו בַּשָּׁמַיִם יִרְעַם
ה' יִדִּין אֶפְסֵי אָרֶץ
וַיִּתֵּן עֹז לְמַלְכוֹ וַיָּרֵם
קֶרֶן מְשִׁיחוֹ:

פירוש שירת חנה

May those who fight with God will be shattered; let the Heavens thunder against them: The Ralbag and Metzudos Dovid explains that after praising God for giving her the opportunity to have a child, Chanah sought to pray for her son.

She prayed that Samuel would be protected from his enemies who would 'fight with God'. This included but was not exclusive to the Philistines, arch enemies of the Jewish people who rejected God and began many wars with them.

The Radak explains that this also refers to those who oppose the righteous who are God's representatives.

God will judge to the ends of the earth: According to the Metzudos Dovid, this also refers to the fact that Chanah saw prophetically that her son Samuel will judge the people all over the land of Israel, as it says (Samuel I 7:16) וְהִלֵּךְ מִדֵּי שָׁנָה בְּשָׁנָה וְסָבַב בַּיִת אֵל וְהַגִּלְגָּל וְהַמִּצְפָּה וְשָׁפֵט אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת כָּל הַמְּקוֹמוֹת הָאֵלֶּה:
- *And from year to year, he [Samuel] would set forth, and go around to Bethel, and Gilgal, and Mizpah, and he would judge Israel in all these places.*

And He will grant strength to His King: This refers to Shaul, who was anointed by Samuel as the first king of Israel.

And raise the horn of His anointed one: This refers to David, for Samuel only anointed David with the anointing oil while Shaul was still king, but died before David actually became king.



Glossary of Biblical Commentators

Abravanel: Rabbi Yitzchal ben Yehudah Abravanel from Spain (d. 1508)

Kedushat Levi: Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (d. 1810)

Maharal: Rabbi Yehudah Loew ben Bezalel, rabbi of Prague (d. 1609).

Maharsha: Rabbi Shmuel Eidels (d. 1631)

Metzudos Dovid: Rabbi David Altshuler and his son Rabbi Yechiel Altshuler (18th Century).

Rabbi Azaryah Figo: Italian rabbi born in Venice (d. 1647).

Rabbi Yitzchak Weiss: Born in Vrbové, Slovakia he perished in the Holocaust in 1942.

Radak: Rabbi Dovid Kimchi, France (d. 1235)

Ralbag: Rabbi Levi ben Gershon, also known as Gersonides, born in France (d. 1344).

Rashi: Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, French commentator on the Bible and most of the Talmud (d. 1105).

Targum Onkelos: Aramaic translation of many parts of the bible, attributed to Onkelos a Roman convert to Judaism (d. 120 CE).

Targumim: Aramaic translations of the Bible.

Yalkut Meam Loez: Commentary on the bible by various authors, initiated in Ladino by Spanish rabbi, Yaakov Culi in 1730.