



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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Ki Tavo / כ"י תבוא

SERMON TITLE:

The House of Prayer: A Place of Peace

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In loving memory of

ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
Emil W. Herman
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Ki Tavo

Name him after Father!

Who was the most famous Prime Minister of Israel? Anybody want to venture a guess? [Interact with crowd].

Well, most people will say David Ben-Gurion. A lot of other people will say Yitzchak Rabin. Other people might say Golda Meir, the first and so far only woman to be Israel's Prime Minister.

Now when Golda Meir was Prime Minister, the President of Israel was a man who considered himself a Chabad Chasid: Zalman Shazar.

I don't want you to think that he dressed like a Chasid. He didn't have a beard and he didn't wear a black hat (although actually, at times, he did wear a hat). But deep inside his heart he had the soul of a Chasid.

Shazar was the descendant of a Chasidic family, including his parents, and furthermore, his grandfather, Rabbi Moshe Ginsburg, was a full-fledged Chabad Chasid.

It was about this grandfather that Shazar spoke a lot. Rabbi Ginsburg had been a successful businessman, a naturally happy person to whom it was always a pleasure to speak, a man who was always happy to help anyone in any way. Likewise was Shazar's grandmother a wise and learned woman who always gladly took in guests.

But one thing weighed down on their happiness: children. It wasn't that they didn't have babies. It was that Mrs. Ginsburg would become pregnant and give birth, but the children didn't live too long, tragically.

Every year, Rabbi Ginsburg would travel to his Rebbe, and he would always ask for a blessing for “zara chaya v’kayama”—living and enduring seed. But, to his great anguish, the blessings never materialized.

So one year, before Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Ginsburg’s wife Zelda became expectant once again. This time, his wife warned him not to come home without a promise from the Rebbe that the child would be born healthy and live long.

So he assured her that he would do everything in his power to fulfill her request.

He got to the town of Lubavitch, the Rebbe’s city, where he found a great carnival-like atmosphere in the streets. After all, the High Holidays and the New Year were coming, and all the Chasidim were converging on Lubavitch to spend Tishrei, the month of holidays, with their Rebbe, their spiritual master.

So of course the streets were teeming with visitors.

There were people from cities throughout Russia and even beyond. People who hadn’t seen each other for years were bumping into each other and exchanging handshakes and hugs.

Now this time, Rabbi Ginsburg was in a particularly jolly mood. He felt that this particular visit to the Rebbe, the Maharash who just became the Rebbe, was the right time to get the right blessing that he and his wife had wanted for so long.

To digress a bit here, on Rosh Hashanah, we read the Haftarah that tells us about Chana, the mother of Shmuel Hanavi, the Prophet Samuel. It’s a story that happened about 3,000 years ago.

Chana was married to her husband, Elkanah, who was the leader of the Land of Israel at the time. She was also a prophetess in her own right. They lived together happily but there was one thing they didn’t have: children.

After 10 years of marriage and no kids, Chana suggested to Elkanah that he marry another wife (in those days polygamy was widely accepted and considered normal) so that at least he'd have kids—and that in the merit of her agreeing to share her husband with another woman, perhaps G-d would have mercy on her so that she too would have children.

As the Midrash says, "When Chana saw that she wasn't giving birth, she said, 'Tell my husband to bring my bondswoman [meaning the second wife] into my home, and because of this, G-d will see that I took my bondswomen into my house and He will remember me.'"

Now where did Chana get this idea? From Sarah, the wife of Avraham, our Patriarch.

She had also been a barren woman who struggled with infertility. After 10 years, she too had suggested to her husband Avraham to marry Hagar. She said, "Perhaps I will be built up from her"—which Rashi explains to mean, "In the merit of my bringing my bondswoman into my house." And indeed, Sarah ultimately merited having Yitzchok.

So Chana thought that she would do the same thing. And indeed, Elkanah married another woman. Her name was Penina. And indeed, "And Penina had children, but Chana had no children."

But Penina, instead of acknowledging Chana for this, for giving up her husband, constantly tormented Chana instead. She would always remind Chana that she didn't have kids. She would ask her: "When are you going to bring your kids home from school?" Or, "When will you be making lunch for your children?" Penina simply made Chana's life miserable.

Now, every year, the entire family would travel to Shiloh, where stood the Mishkan, the forerunner of the Beis Hamikdash. And every time they went there, Chana would pray and ask for a child. But it never happened.

Elkanah tried to console her. He said: "Am I not better to you than ten sons?" But for a woman pining away for a child, it was a very small consolation. And so, suddenly, she stood up and went to pray in the Mishkan.

She stepped inside and began to pray silently to G-d. She promised G-d that if G-d would grant her the merit of a son, she would dedicate him to the service of G-d, as the verse states, "And I shall give him to G-d all the days of his life." In other words, he will grow up to be a Prophet and serve the Jewish Nation.

But at the moment Chana was standing there and praying silently by herself, Ayli the Kohein Gadol, the High Priest, was sitting in the Mishkan.

In those days, there was no such thing as silent prayer the way we have it today. So he sat there and looked at her the same way most of us would look at that homeless man we see in the bus station, standing off to the side by the wall in a corner, rocking unsteadily on his feet and talking to himself: He thought she was a drunk.

So Ayli called out to her and said, "Ad mosai tishtakarin?" Until when will you remain drunk? Stop talking to yourself over there for so long!

But Chana turned to him and said, "Sir, I'm not drunk!" As the verse states, "I am a woman of difficult spirit"—meaning, I am a woman in pain. I'm praying to G-d for a son.

So when Ayli discovered that she wasn't some kind of homeless bag lady and that he had suspected for nothing, he immediately heaped blessings upon her that G-d should fulfill her request. "May the G-d of Israel give you what you asked for," he said—which Rashi explains to mean, "He gave her the news that her prayer had been accepted."

In the merit of Ayli's blessing, Shmuel Hanavi was born the next year.

And now, back to our story of Rabbi Ginsburg.

So there was Rabbi Ginsburg, the grandfather of Zalman Shazar, standing in the main synagogue of Lubavitch during Rosh Hashanah while the Rebbe, Rabbi Shmuel of Lubavitch, was reading the Haftarah about Chana out loud.

Rabbi Ginsburg was facing the Rebbe. And lo and behold, while the Rebbe was reciting the Haftarah while standing at the table in the middle of the room, he suddenly lifted his eyes and gazed upon Rabbi Ginsburg.

At that very moment, Rabbi Ginsburg immediately felt in his heart that he had been answered—that he had already received his blessing. He felt that since the Rebbe had been reading a Haftarah about a woman who wanted children and had looked at him at that moment—especially since the Rebbe himself was named Shmuel—Rabbi Ginsburg felt that this is it: his request had been fulfilled.

Immediately after Rosh Hashanah, he was ready to go home and, at the moment, he needed to go into the Rebbe's office to say goodbye to the Rebbe and to explicitly ask for that much-desired blessing—especially since he had promised his wife that this time he would not be embarrassed and would give the Rebbe his wife's request.

So Rabbi Ginsburg stood in line.

The line in front of him got shorter and shorter, and here he was about to go into the Rebbe's office. The door then opened and he found himself in the Rebbe's office.

Suddenly, he heard the Rebbe humming, almost to himself, the notes to which are chanted the Haftarah for Rosh Hashanah. Upon hearing that, he was so deeply touched that he burst out in tears like a baby. He then told the Rebbe that his wife kept on having babies but they would not survive—and now, his wife was expecting again and he profusely asked the Rebbe for a blessing for healthy kids who would live long lives.

The Rebbe listened to Rabbi Ginsburg's tearful words. The Rebbe lifted his eyes to him and said: "Go in peace. You prayed with intensity, and your prayers will G-d-willing be accepted."

After a brief pause, the Rebbe added in Yiddish, "A nomen zulst du geben noch'n tat'n"—name the child after the father.

When Rabbi Ginsburg heard these words, he didn't just leave the Rebbe's office—he simply jumped out of the office in joy. He immediately ran to catch the first train, the sooner to tell his wife the good news of the blessing that he had gotten.

Once he was sitting on the moving train and could relax a bit, he started pondering the Rebbe's words. He remembered that the Rebbe had said, "Name the child after the father"—but the Rebbe hadn't said which father to name him after!

Was the Rebbe referring to his own father, who had died that year and whose name was Menachem Mendel? Or was the Rebbe referring to Rabbi Ginsburg's father, whose name was Shaul?

On the one hand, there was the mitzvah of honoring one's father, part of which is the custom of naming your kids after your departed parents (or living parents, in some Sephardic communities).

On the other hand, the custom among Chasidim was (and is) to name children after the Rebbe.

And so, Rabbi Ginsburg sat on the train pondering this question. Lost in thought, he got off the train when it arrived, went home and happily told his wife the news, and both of them waited for the blessing to come true.

And so, on the holiday of Purim, on a day of miracles, Zalman Shazar's grandmother Zelda gave birth to... twins!

The Ginsburgs named their two boys "after the father"—one after the Rebbe's father and the other after Rabbi Ginsburg's father.

And now we come to this week's Torah portion: Ki Savo.

In this week's Parshah, we read about the blessings that will come about if we keep G-d's commandments. And right away, at the very start of the very first blessing, we are told: "Baruch pri bitnicha"—blessed will be the fruit of your womb: a blessing for children.

The Torah repeats this blessing—which really is the greatest blessing a person could wish for himself.

And now, here we are, approaching Rosh Hashanah.

Ever since the times of our Matriarch Sarah, close to 4,000 years ago; ever since our Matriarch Rachel, and from the era of the Tanach through Chana, the mother of Shmuel Hanavi; up to our very day, including the story of Zalman Shazar's grandfather which happened about 150 years ago; they were all answered on Rosh Hashanah.

But the saga doesn't end. It continues with you. It continues with me. It continues with all of us sitting here in shul right now.

So as we approach Rosh Hashanah, the message of this week's Torah portion is: Don't be too embarrassed to approach G-d. Anyone who has anything that is burdening his or her heart should not be embarrassed to ask G-d for it when Rosh Hashanah arrives.

We need to take advantage of this special day, this golden opportunity, to ask G-d for what we want and need most in our deepest heart of hearts—and we can be sure that G-d, our Merciful Father, will fulfill our request.

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