

הַפְּטָרָה לְיוֹם רֵאשׁוֹן שֶׁל רֵאשׁ הַשָּׁנָה
HAFTORAH FOR THE FIRST DAY OF ROSH HASHONNOH

The Haftorah for the First Day of Rosh HaShonnoh is taken from the First Book of Shmuel from Chapter 1, verse 1 till Chapter 2, verse 10.

1. The connexion between the Torah reading of the day and its Haftorah is pretty self-evident. The Torah reading tells of how HaShem remembered Soroh, the wife of Avrohom, and in their old age granted them a son, Yitzchok. And the Haftorah, too, tells of a couple being remembered by HaShem and being granted a child, Shmuel. Another connexion is that our Chachommim tell us that both these righteous women, Soroh and Channah, were remembered by HaShem on Rosh HaShonnoh. Channah's intense and sincere prayer to HaShem is a lesson which shows how HaShem listens to our prayers and this too is a further connexion with Rosh HaShonnoh for a central theme of Rosh HaShonnoh is prayer.
2. Elkonnoh is married to two wives. From Peninah he has ten children but Channah is childless. Elkonnoh is a righteous man who observes especially diligently the Mitzvah of going up to the Mishkan three times a year despite the great inconvenience and difficulties involved. In this, he is an example to others and indeed is instrumental that they should do the Mitzvah, too. He is well aware of Channah's unhappiness because of her childlessness and he tries to comfort her but Channah is quite clearly not comforted.
3. When they come to the Mishkan, she prays hard, begging HaShem that He should grant her a son. She vows that if HaShem would grant her request for a child, she would dedicate him to the service of HaShem, because that is the only reason that she wants a son — that he should be a servant of HaShem.
4. From Channah we learn that it is altogether correct to address one's prayers directly to HaShem, for Channah does just that. We learn further that after praying the carefully-worded prayers painstakingly composed, with Divine inspiration, by our Sages, one may in addition pray to HaShem in one's own words. (We are told, however, that those words must be carefully chosen, for HaShem often grants a request exactly as spoken — almost as if to show that He pays careful attention to each word spoken to Him.) Another thing we see from our Haftorah is that prayer should be spoken quietly, without the prayers being heard by others, again, just like Channah. (This is something new and Eli, the Kohen Ga'dol, who watches Channah as she prays at the Mishkan, mistakes her unusual behaviour for drunkenness. After all, normal, sober people do not talk to themselves! Of course, when she makes him aware of his mistake, he blesses her that her request to HaShem should be granted.)
5. But a most important lesson we learn from these events (and possibly another reason why this is the chosen Haftorah on this "Day of Prayer") is that HaShem wants to hear from each of us as we are, without any intermediary, indeed even without relying on righteous people to intercede on our behalf. And this lesson we learn through the selflessness of Peninah.

6. The Possuk tells us that Peninah would tease Channah for her childlessness. “What a lovely little baby-wrap you’ve bought for your firstborn child!” she would chide her mockingly. She would tease her by asking, “Why don’t you get your children ready for their lessons?” and, “Aren’t you going to welcome your children home from their lessons?” And why? Our Chachommim tell us that *“פְּנִינָה לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם נִתְּכַוְּנָה”* — that Peninah’s intentions were pure and only for the best. For Peninah knows, like only a co-wife can know, that Channah is indeed a very righteous woman. But Peninah knows too that Channah is humble and that she feels that her own prayers to HaShem cannot be as effective as her virtuous husband’s prayers on her behalf.
7. But Peninah knows that HaShem waits for the personal prayer of the individual and that she must get Channah to pray for herself. However much she hates doing it, Peninah sets it as her task (even though it will cost her terribly) to get Channah to pray for herself to HaShem with a broken heart, to indeed “storm at HaShem” because of those hurtful taunts by Peninah, that HaShem shall grant her a child — even if only to end the teasing by Peninah! And it works! Provoked by Peninah, Channah prays fervently to HaShem — by herself, for herself — and she is answered! And the answer to her prayers is Shmuel, one of the most selfless leaders that the Jewish People have ever merited and a prophet who, in a certain way, our Chachommim tell us, even outweighed Mosheh and Aharon combined! That is the power of prayer!
8. This, then, is one of the powerful lessons of the Haftorah of the First Day of Rosh HaShonnoh. On this Day of Judgement, we each of us stand in the presence of HaShem to ask Him for all that we need for the coming year, whether these be spiritual needs or material needs, and we must remember that He wants to hear from each of us, whoever we are. Each of us stands in His Presence, each of us an individual who is given the opportunity to personally ask our Father, our King, for whatever it is we think we need. Rosh HaShonnoh is not a national event so much as a private event — Rosh HaShonnoh is not one of the national Pilgrimage Festivals — it is, as it were, Private Audience Day!
9. Furthermore, even though Rosh HaShonnoh is often called “Jewish New Year,” this is false. Rosh HaShonnoh is not exclusively our Day of Judgement, for it is the New Year of the whole world — *הַיּוֹם הַרְּת עוֹלָם* — “today is the birthday of the world.” It’s just that we are the only People in the whole world who have been told about it in the Torah and we know therefore to utilize the opportunity to come before HaShem and pray to Him for what we need. So of course, we do. But at the same time, we must not be self-centred. Indeed, our prayers to HaShem should reflect the fact that HaShem is the G-d of all Mankind and our prayers to HaShem should be on behalf of all humankind, that all humankind should be blessed by HaShem in the coming year with all things good.
10. In this connexion, it would do us well to remember that HaShem is inclined to more quickly fulfil the request of those that pray not only for themselves but on behalf of others, too, as our Chachommim tell us: “He who prays on behalf of another despite that he himself needs that very thing — his needs are answered first.”