The Sugya of *Penina*-‘*Avera Lishma’*

In the relationship between *Chana* and *Penina* and *Elkanah*, there are some serious questions which we must address.

1. How could *Elkanah* be so naïve to his wife’s pain? When he says:

‘Am I not better for you than 10 sons’, does he not realize that this is no comfort at all to *Chana*’s desperation for a child.

1. How could *Penina* behave so badly towards *Chana*? We are told in various *midrashim* that *Penina* taunted *Chana* continually about the fact that she had children whereas *Chana* did not. What could possibly be gained from such taunts?
2. When *Penina* is punished and she loses almost all of her children, how does this punishment fit the ‘crime’ which she committed of taunting *Chana?* Can such a severe punishment be understood in this way?

Rav Levi attempts to bring some meaning to the whole episode and to our lives in general as Jews who care about human dignity and feelings.

He initially quotes the *Midrash* as to *Penina*’s behaviour.

**מדרש שמואל (בובר) פרשה א ד"ה [ח] ויהי היום**

 וכעסתה צרתה גם כעס. מכעסת וחוזרת ומכעסת, מה הות אמרה לה, זבנת לברך רבה סודר ולתנינא חלוק. בעבור הרעימה.

‘Her co-wife angered her exceedingly’: What did she say to her? ‘Have you bought baby clothing for your child?’ This caused *Chana* extreme grief.’

From here we see how she was trying to encourage *Chana* to pray even more deeply for a child. She had been childless for 19 years and one feels that this is now a last attempt to achieve her dream and *Penina* tries to spur her on to a deeper and more meaningful prayer. *Elkanah* by the same token can be seen to be doing the same. Rav Bachrach suggests that his lack of sensitivity (*nichumin shel hevel* as he calls it) is really *Elkanah*’s own way of getting *Chana* to pray more fervently than before. Her desperation is exacerbated by his comments and her utter reliance on God is absolute and she prays accordingly.

The punishment *Penina* receives is highlighted in the following *Midrashic* passage:

**מדרש שמואל (בובר) פרשה ה**

 שבעים בלחם נשכרו. זו פנינה שהיתה שבעה בבנים ונשתכרה. (אלא) ורעבים חדלו, חנה שהיתה רעבה מבנים חדלה, הא כיצד רבי יהודה ורבי נחמיה, רבי יהודה אומר בני בנים כבנים, רבי נחמיה אומר היה לפנינה עשרה בנים, היתה חנה יולדת אחד, ופנינה קוברת שנים, חנה יולדת שנים ופנינה קוברת ארבעה, שלשה ופנינה קוברת ששה, ארבעה ופנינה קוברת שמונה, כיון שעברה חמישי, באתה פנינה ונשתטחה על רגליה, אמרה לה בבקשה ממך התפללי על שנים ויחיו, התפללה עליהן והיו נקראין על שמה.

‘ Those who are satiated with bread become intoxicated’. This refers to *Penina* who was satiated with children and ‘became intoxicated’.In contrast, *Chana* was ‘starving’ for children. …………….R’ *Nechemiah* says: *Penina* had 10 children. When *Chana* (finally) had a child, *Penina* buried two of her own children……... two children and *Penina* buried four of her own……3..6..4..8..Once a fifth child was born to *Chana*, *Penina* fell at her feet to beg her to pray that her last two children would not die.*Chana* duly prayed and they were saved and they were called her (i.e.

*Chana*’s) children as she was responsible for their survival.’

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How are we to understand such a severe response to her words to *Chana*?

Rav Levi suggests two possibilities.

1. *Netziv.*

He discusses a concept found in *Talmud* known as ‘*Avera Lishma’.*

**תלמוד בבלי מסכת נזיר דף כג עמוד ב**

 אמר ר"נ בר יצחק: גדולה עבירה לשמה ממצוה שלא לשמה

**רש"י מסכת נזיר דף כג עמוד ב**

 גדולה עבירה לשמה - כלומר לשם מצוה.

‘Greater is a sin ‘for the sake of heaven’ (*Rashi*: i.e.done for the sake of a *mitzvah*) than a *mitzva* which is not done for the sake of heaven.’

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This refers to a unique situation where a person feels that the only way to bring about a salvation for the Jewish people is by committing a sin for the sake of heaven. Examples of this include *Yael*, who commits immorality with *Sisera* in order to entice him into her tent to kill him. Also *Esther and Achashverosh* continue to live together after the Purim story ‘officially’ ends and they have a son, *Darius*, who allows the Jews to finally rebuild the 2nd Temple in Jerusalem. This could explain the motivation of *Peninah* as well. She was clearly harming *Chana*’s feelings, which is an *avera* but she would argue that it is *lishma* as her intention is for *Chana* to *daven* and receive a child to become a major personality in Jewish history. The problem however is that to justify doing such an ‘*Avera Lishma’* could not come about, especially as *Penina* did not know what the outcome would be and in such a case the *avera* could not be justified and so she was punished.

1. Another approach is based on the writings of *Rav Chaim Shmulevitz z’l*, the *Rosh Yeshiva* of Mir. He explains that in a situation of interpersonal relationships if one means well but in the process one causes ‘damage’ to the person you are trying to help, then this disqualifies the whole effort of assistance in the first place. This is *Penina*’s mistake.In the process of trying to help *Chana*, she caused her some major upset and grief and the effects of this are not easily removed. Her punishment is severe but this is the way that God deals with the ‘righteous’ ones of Israel. She was a *‘zaddekess’* (righteous woman)and she was accorded a punishment which fits her elevated status, as with *Moshe*, even though the mechanics of the punishment are incredibly difficult to comprehend.

We read this story on the first day of *Rosh Hashana*. As well as *tefillat Chana*, this *Haftara* contains incredible role models and examples from our great ancestors. Even in their time of trouble their greatness can be seen even in terms of the way *God*  judges them. It is not for us to invent new ways to serve *God* even if they are *lishma*, and this is an important lesson when we consider our acts of *teshuva* and preparation for the coming year.