

**“Hear our Prayer”**  
**Introduction to the Haftarah Reading**  
**Rosh Hashanah Morning 5775**  
**September 25, 2014**

An obviously incorrect etymology is always a red flag. It says that something interesting is going on, or something was forgotten and recast, or something important is missing.

And here, now, in this Haftarah reading from the beginning of the book of Samuel, we have an explanation of a name that is slightly... off. The Hebrew is just...wrong.

Hannah pleads with God for a child. She yearns, she prays, she practically begs. And then, her prayer is answered; she conceives, she gives birth. And we read: “*Vateled ben, vatic’ra et sh’mo Shmu’el, ki Mei’Adonai Sh’altiv*; she bore a son, and she named him *Shmu’el*, because from God I asked for him.”

But the root, here, is wrong. The root of “ask” is “*sha’al*”. The root of the name *Shmue’l* could be one of two things. It could be “*shem*,” meaning “name,” – and so the name would have meant “name of God.” Or. Assuming that an almost silent sounding letter was dropped – which often happens, by the way – the root would be the familiar word “*sh’ma*,” and the name would mean... “and God heard.”

Why does this matter? Well, remember, the traditional Torah reading for this first morning of Rosh Hashanah is not, as we heard today, Genesis 22, the Binding of Isaac. The reading for the first day is Genesis 21, the story of...well, of Ishmael. *Yishmae’l*. A name which means “May God hear,” or “God will hear.” It can’t be a coincidence that the Haftarah reading paired with it, then, comes from *Shmu’el*, a name meaning “God has heard.”

What is one of the central commandments, one of the most important *mitzvot* of Rosh Hashanah. It is the shofar. But not just the shofar. Indeed, not even seeing it blown. The blessing we will recite in a few moments tells us what the commandment is: “*asher kiddishanu b’mitzvotov, v’tzivanu lishmo’ah kol Shofar!* Who has sanctified us by the commandments, and commanded us *to hear* the sound of the Shofar.”

This is a holiday of the ear. We hope, we pray, we implore that our prayer may be heard. We listen, we learn, we absorb the sound, the meaning, the hope, the aspiration. From Ishmael to Samuel, from the Shofar to the words of our prayer, may God hear, may we hear. May we hear ourselves. May we hear each other.