

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Themes and Ideas in the Haftara Yeshivat Har Etzion

This haftara series is dedicated in memory of
our beloved Chaya Leah bat Efrayim Yitzchak
(Mrs. Claire Reinitz), zichronah livracha,
by her family.

VAYERA **"HE IS A HOLY MAN OF GOD"**

By Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein

REGARDING NATURE AND MIRACLES

Our *haftara* (II *Melakhim* 4:1-38[1]) deals with the story of Elisha and the Shunamite woman, the connection to the *parasha* being clear. Both the *parasha* and the *haftara* open with a barren woman who miraculously conceives a child, and in both the story continues with the loss of the child and dramatically concludes with his restoration to the world of the living. In the pages that follow we shall try to analyze the story of Elisha and reach an understanding of its underlying message.

The beginning of the *haftara*, which relates the story of the widow, the empty vessels and the oil, raises questions, both regarding its contents and regarding its place and role in the *haftara*. On the face of it, this incident does not seem to be connected in any way to the rest of the *haftara* nor does it appear to advance our understanding of the story related therein, for we are dealing with two different women and two distinct episodes that transpire at different times and in different places, unconnected one to the

other.[2] Furthermore, the very performance of an overt miracle that abrogates the laws of nature in order to provide a widow with support seems to stand in contradiction to the ordinary manner in which the world is governed and to the relationship between miracles and the natural order as we understand it. Notwithstanding the deep pain that finds expression in many places in Scripture over the misery of widows and orphans, and the moral demand that is placed upon their creditors to alleviate their suffering, nowhere is it suggested that a private miracle should be performed for a wretched widow in order to ease her difficulties.

It should be emphasized that the tendency to avoid miracles does not stem merely from a desire not to "bother" God, as it were, but rather it rests on fundamental metaphysical principles. The laws of nature that govern the world express the wisdom of the Creator, who established a permanent order that is capable of maintaining the world in an orderly manner forever. To the extent that further Divine intervention is required, the original planning is perceived as less perfect. This may be likened to the code of a computer program that dictates the proper operation of that program. The more updates that are needed in order to make the program compatible with additional cases, the more we perceive the original program as having been defective. And the smarter and the more talented the programmer, the stronger his program and the more capable it will be of answering future needs. The same is true regarding the laws of nature. The less they require deviations in order to be effective, the more they reflect the wisdom of the Creator. As a rule, therefore, Judaism is not interested in miracles and only resorts to them in extremely exceptional circumstances.

Even when miracles transpire, they are performed for the collective and not for individuals, and only in exceptional circumstances arising from a unique spiritual situation. None of these criteria are fulfilled in our case. Elisha performs an overt miracle on behalf of an individual suffering with a problem, which, unfortunately, is in no way exceptional, the Torah having already proclaimed: "For the poor shall never cease out of the land" (*Devarim* 15:11).

ELISHA AND HIS BAG OF MIRACLES

The performance of a miracle in these circumstances is, therefore, very surprising; in Elisha's world, however, it is by no means exceptional. Already his master Eliyahu performed many miracles (see I *Melakhim* 17-18), and Elisha, who was blessed in

that he was able to walk in his master's footsteps, continued and intensified this policy. Everywhere he went – a miracle! A river must be crossed and there is no bridge? No problem, he casts his mantle and the waters split. The food is poisonous? No problem, he scatters a little salt and the waters are purified! The neighborhood youths are vexing him? No problem, two bears appear and deal with them! Rav Yaakov Medan once described Elisha as rambling around the Land of Israel with a bag full of miracles ready to be scattered. To the point that one can almost say about him: "Why do something in the natural manner when it can be done by way of a miracle?"

The reasons for this require a discussion that goes beyond the framework of this series, but the massive use of miracles is what underlies our *haftara*, and therefore it is important that it begin with the story of the widow. Through this episode, we understand that the use of miracles characterizes Elisha's *modus operandi*, and that his reviving of the boy was in no way exceptional.

THE KEY OF A WOMAN GIVING BIRTH

Let us turn now to the heart of the *haftara* and the story of the revival of the child. In large measure, the *haftara* comes to examine the prophet's conduct and his responses as he dispenses his miracles. However, in order to properly assess the significance of the miracle and its problematic nature, let us open with the citation of a midrash that speaks of three realms that were not handed over to man, because they belong uniquely to the Creator who exists above nature and not in it:

Rabbi Yochanan said: There are three keys in the hand of the Holy One, blessed be He, that were not entrusted to the hand of an agent, and these are they: The key of rains, **the key of a woman giving birth**, and the key of the resurrection of the dead. The key of rains, as it is stated (*Devarim* 28:12): "The Lord will open for His good treasure house, the heavens, to give the rain of your land in its time." From where do we derive **the key of a woman giving birth**? As it is written (*Bereishit* 30:22): "And God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb." From where do we derive the key of the resurrection of the dead? As it is written (*Yechezkel* 37:13): "And you will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves." (*Taanit* 2a)

Elisha's actions contradict this rule and cast him in a unique light as opposed to other prophets. Not only does he deliver the word of God, but he also conducts himself in the world as if it were his, even with regard to things that are defined as being outside the realm of human action. In this, he and his master Eliyahu stand apart from the other prophets who do not use these keys. The *haftara* revolves around the significance of Elisha's work as giver of life.

This point was already noted by Rav Mordechai Sabbato,[3] who focused the *haftara's* message on the fact that Elisha "crossed the border between principal and agent, between man – even if he is a prophet – and God." Despite his standing and sanctity, Elisha overstepped his bounds when he made use of a power that is inappropriate for man, and therefore the boy died. Only after recognizing his error and engaging in repentance accompanied by prayer, was order restored – the prophet was once again flesh and blood and the boy returned to the world of the living.

LINGUISTIC COMPARISON

A comparison of the wording of the *haftara* with that of the *parasha* lends support to Rav Sabbato's argument. Anyone who reads the *haftara* will immediately discern the conscious borrowing of expressions from the *parasha*: Elisha tells the Shunamite woman that she will conceive, saying: "About this time, in the coming year, you shall embrace a son" (4:15), reminiscent of course of what it says in the *parasha*: "I will certainly return to you at this season; and, lo, Sara your wife shall have a son" (*Bereishit* 18:10). The description of the birth of the child exactly parallels the description of the birth of Yitzchak: "And the woman conceived, and bore a son at that season of which Elisha had spoken to her" (4:17) - "And Sara conceived, and bore Avraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken" (*Bereishit* 21:2). If we take the second pair of verses, and set the verse from the Torah against the verse from the *haftara*, we see that the two verses are absolutely parallel, except for one word toward the end of each respective verse:

"For Sara conceived, and bore Avraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken."	And the woman conceived, and bore a son at that season of which Elisha had spoken to her"
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The irony is clear. Each word in the first verse has a corresponding word in the second verse, and thus Elisha parallels God. The same applies regarding the first pair of verses. In the Torah, God announces the tidings that "at this season... Sara your wife shall have a son," whereas in the *haftara*, Elisha assumes the role of God and uses the same formulation to announce that the Shunamite woman will conceive a child.

There is another parallel between the two stories. Regarding Yitzchak, the Torah says: "And the child grew, and was weaned" (*Bereishit* 21:8), and in the *haftara* we read: "And the child grew... and he went out to his father" (4:18). At this point, however, the two stories part, and the limits of a promise made by man as opposed to a promise made by the King of kings become evident. For a feast is made to mark Yitzchak's weaning and his ability to survive without his mother's nursing, whereas the second boy dies.

In summation, Rav Sabbato's approach appears to be supported by the verses. But while he focused on the issue of the relationship between man and God, we wish to consider the question of the relationship between man and his fellow that stands in the shadow of the miracle and finds expression in the story of the Shunamite woman.

Now, whether we accept the thesis mentioned above that the prophet improperly crossed a border when on his own initiative he gave life to a barren woman, or we reject it and assume that his special role as a miracle-working prophet justified his exploiting the miracle of an old woman^[4] giving birth to solve the problem of the Shunamite woman, it still may be argued that Elisha's handling of the Shunamite woman was problematic.

SENSITIVITY TO HUMAN NEEDS

The story opens with the Shunamite woman offering Elisha a quiet and comfortable spot, where he could rest in privacy and relieve himself for a moment of the heavy communal burden cast upon him. Besides being a leader occupied with the needs of his people, whose time was not in his own hands but given over to the community, we must assume that many people waited at his door each morning so that he might perform a miracle on their behalf. It was only natural that unfortunate men and women would seek the help of the man of God, in order to solve problems of livelihood, health, and/or fertility, and he would try to help them. One example - the woman who cried out to Elisha

because of the creditor who wished to collect from her – appears at the beginning of the *haftara*, and it would be a mistake to assume that she was unique. Seeing all this, the Shunamite woman, graced with deep human emotion and true sensitivity, decided to provide the prophet with a private, restful spot. In other words, she succeeded in seeing Elisha the man, the private individual behind the prophet, and in understanding his needs. Unlike many others who saw him merely as an office holder and servant of the holy people, she understood that behind that persona stands a person, and she saw fit to worry about the prophet's needs as a human being.

The prophet, in contrast, out of his great desire to repay her kindness and benefit her, ignores the emotional needs of the Shunamite woman. The most amazing thing in the entire story of the promise of a child is not necessarily that the prophet was so confident in his ability to promise her that child, but that he did not even consult with her. Elisha and Gehazi decided to provide the woman with a son, without discussing the matter with her at all.

The question whether to have a child in general, and in the case of a couple suffering with fertility problems in particular, is an exceedingly personal issue given over to the discretion of each particular couple. Dealing with fertility problems involves constant emotional tension, with hope and despair alternating with each other time and time again. Even today, with all the medical advances in the area, a couple undergoing fertility treatments still experience themselves as on an emotional roller coaster, and suffer from frequent disappointments. There are those who decide to persist and endure the moments of "the deep pit" out of the hope that in the end they will reach "the high roof." And there are couples who reach a certain point and then pass on continued treatments, putting their trust in God that He will do what appears good in His eyes. It is easy to imagine the disappointment that was the Shunamite woman's lot prior to her encounter with Elisha. How during her early years of marriage she surely prepared herself for her night of immersion, hoping and praying that this month she would succeed in conceiving. How much anxious expectation and tension must have accompanied the days until she had her next period; how hard must she have tried to calculate her day of ovulation; and how much disappointment must she have felt each time she menstruated at the end of the month and realized that once again it wouldn't happen.

Let us also not forget that Elisha asked her whether there was anything that she needed and he could provide for her, and her definite answer was that he had nothing to offer her. Did she not know that she was childless? Why did she not express her heart's desire to be a mother and to hear the cry of a baby in her house? It seems that it was not

merely because she regarded such a request as unreasonable, but also because she had already tired of the attempts to have a child and the accompanying disappointment, and she had decided to reach inner emotional equilibrium based on trust in God, and on the promise and understanding that there exists the idea of "a memorial better than sons and daughters" (*Yeshayahu* 56:5) that is reserved for those who hope in God and accept His providence with love.

Her immediate reaction to Elisha's tidings regarding her future conception is not gratitude, but a warning about the expected disappointment: "No, my lord, you man of God, do not lie to your handmaid" (4:16). Her concern about additional disappointment is mentioned once again when she meets Elisha again: "Did I desire a son of my lord? Did I not say, Do not deceive me" (4:28). It is absolutely clear that she had already had her full of disappointment and shattered hopes, and therefore she does not want to enter into the tension and expectation that would accompany another attempt to conceive.

Elisha, however, ignores all this, and without any hesitation and with total self-confidence, he enters into her inner world, thus upsetting the balance and emotional equilibrium that the Shunamite woman had succeeded to reach. He and Gehazi decide about the child without consulting her, and without imagining her possible reservations or fears. Simply put, he does see her as a subject with whom he must create an I-thou relationship by listening to her inner voice, but rather he deals with her problem as a case for which a solution must be found. While the woman sees the person behind the prophet, Elisha fails to see the person behind the woman who had opened her house to him.

ALIENATED MIRACLE AND PERSONAL ENCOUNTER

Following the birth, Elisha and the Shunamite woman part ways until the death of the child and the renewed encounter that comes in its wake. The Shunamite woman's conduct when she goes to Elisha and her refusal to deal with Gehazi must be understood in light of their different approaches.

When the woman comes to Mount Carmel to meet Elisha, the prophet sends Gehazi to meet her, but she refuses to relate to him and insists on talking to Elisha himself. Thus she brings about a face-to-face confrontation regarding the prophet's

attitude towards those in need of his services. Elisha sends his aide as a matter of course; and indeed, from the perspective of the efficient running of his court, dealing with the problem through his aide is logical and expected. The woman, however, is not looking for an efficient and bureaucratic solution to her problem, but rather for a personal relationship with Elisha and the prophet's involvement in her problems as a person who understands what is going on in her heart. For this, of course, there is no substitute for an unmediated encounter between the woman and Elisha, the aide being unable to serve in his place.

At this point, the paths of Elisha and Gehazi begin to part. Gehazi is totally deaf to her distress, and he sees her as a woman who upsets the orderly functioning of the court and disturbs the work of the prophet. Elisha, on the other hand, senses that he is dealing here with personal distress that requires a personal relationship, "for her soul is grieved within her" (4:27). Nevertheless, his astonishment that "the Lord has hid it [=her distress] from me, and has not told me" (ibid.), testifies to the fact that he has still not reached a deep understanding of the matter. Elisha sees knowledge of the reason for her bitterness as information that is necessary for the treatment of her problem, and therefore he expects that God will reveal her secret to His servant the prophet. However, the concealment of her feelings from him is not an accidental absence of prophetic information, but is essential to the heart of the matter, for what she needs is not knowledge of the facts, but rather the human sensitivity that is necessary in order to understand another person's suffering. No prophecy can substitute for that, for sensitivity to another person must flow from within the human soul, and cannot come from an outside source, even if that source is God Himself.

Elisha's later conduct also testifies that he still does not fully understand the root of the problem and the message of the Shunamite woman who is seeking to establish a personal relationship with him. He does not go to solve her problem personally, but rather he contents himself with sending Gehazi with his staff to revive the boy. As already stated, the use that he makes of his aide is justified from a utilitarian perspective, and therefore Elisha entrusts him with the assignment. By making Gehazi his agent and giving him his blessing and his staff, he sees himself as transferring to him his miraculous power to revive the boy, and thus to resolve the woman's problem. What is missing, however, in this efficient plan is personal contact between the prophet and the Shunamite woman. It is this that she refuses to accept: "And the mother of the child said, As the Lord lives, and as your soul lives, I will not leave you" (4:30). She insists that he come with her because the revival of the child must be done in a personal manner and in the framework of an I-thou relationship with the mother and her child, and not by way of a miraculous act that lacks a personal dimension. "As your soul lives" – I will only go if you become personally involved, for only then would it be right to do that.

THE REPAIR

Through the strength of her character and her demand for a human relationship emanating from the depth of her distress, she overpowers the prophet and he goes with her. In this exchange lies the human drama of the *haftara*, as well as its message regarding the need for empathy and human understanding as a prior and necessary condition for the performance of a miracle.

The continuation of the *haftara* emphasizes this point by creating a contrast between Gechazi's attempt to revive the boy, acting upon the previous instructions received from Elisha, and the revival that Elisha himself performs. Gechazi approaches the boy and places his staff upon him. Thus, he attempts to revive the boy through an impersonal miracle, relying on the metaphysical power of the prophet to overcome nature. The drama is impersonal, and there is no relationship between the one person and the other. Rather it is a struggle between man and the powers of nature, and the action is based on the connection between the metaphysical world beyond nature and the world of nature. But "there is neither voice, nor sound" (4:31), because the human dimension is missing.

Elisha, in contrast, acts in the wake of the lesson that he learned from the Shunamite woman. His path parts company with that of Gechazi in three places:

- 1) "And he prayed to the Lord" (4:33).
- 2) "And he shut the door upon them both" (ibid.)
- 3) "And he lay upon the child, and put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands, and he stretched himself upon the child" (4:34).

The first point takes place in the framework of Elisha's relationship with God. Rav Sabbato, in the aforementioned article, emphasizes the upheaval that is expressed by this payer that was missing at the beginning of the story.

The two other points, in contrast, are connected to the issue of the interpersonal relationship. First, closing the door. Gechazi, it would appear, did not close the door, because he saw what was happening as metaphysical drama, and therefore he saw no need to create a situation of intimacy and being alone with the child. On the contrary, the greater the number of people who see the miracle, the greater the sanctification of God's name in the world. Gechazi saw the place where the incident was taking place like an operating room that is open to anyone who has a medical interest in the operation. Elisha, in the wake of his encounter with the Shunamite woman, understands that his revival of the child must be based on a personal relationship, and therefore he closes the door in order to create an intimate atmosphere shared exclusively by him and the child.

The way that the child is revived expresses the change in Elisha in the clearest way. If his instructions to Gechazi were to revive the boy by placing on his face an object having metaphysical powers, Elisha's attempt to revive him involves his own participation as a subject. There is no placement of an inanimate object, but rather face-to-face and eye-to-eye contact in order to indicate that we are dealing with one subject approaching another. Placing his face on the face of the child expresses Elisha's relationship to him as one person to another person.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, we can summarize the drama of the *haftara* as focusing on the meaning of an expression found at the beginning of the passage. The Shunamite woman describes Elisha as "a holy man of God." This expression is widely used in Scripture and is not unique to Elisha, and according to the plain sense of the text, it describes a person who acts on behalf of God, feels his presence and remains in constant connection with Him; it is by no means a problematic expression. *Chazal*, however, point to the hidden, but profound tension in the expression, "man of God." A midrash on the verse, "A prayer of Moshe, the man of God" (*Tehilim* 90:1), asks:

If a man, why [mention] God, and if God, why [mention] man? (*Midrash Shochar Tov*, 90)

The balance between these two elements in Elisha's soul is what stands at the basis of the *haftara*. According to the approach cited in the name of Rav Sabbato, we are dealing with the tension between human powers and the powers that are reserved for God. In contrast to Rav Sabbato's approach, according to our suggestion, expression is given to the danger posed by neglecting the "man" and failing to empathize with the human experience when dealing with "Godly" powers (even when using them is legitimate).

There is no better way to conclude than by citing the well-known comment of the Kotzker Rebbe regarding the Torah's ideal of "You shall be holy men to Me" (*Shemot* 22:30), that the verse emphasizes the fact that holiness must be integrated into the human experience.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] According to the longer Ashkenazi custom; according to the custom of the Sefardi communities, the *haftara* ends at verse 23.

[2] The consideration of the length of the *haftara* does not appear to be significant, for in total only seven verses are added. This certainly seems to be true according to the Ashkenazi custom that the *haftara* has 38 verses. But even according to the Sefardi custom, this consideration does not appear persuasive. It is true that with the addition, the *haftara* reaches the length of 21 verses, which is the minimum length of a *haftara* mentioned in the Gemara. But as we have already noted in the past, there are many *Shabbatot* on which we are not particular about this requirement. Moreover, were this the consideration, the obvious solution would be to continue with the second half of the story and thus achieve the desired length. In this manner, the story would reach its conclusion, and the *haftara* would end with the child's revival, and we would not part from the story with the child dead and the woman going to the prophet angry and hurt.

To sum up, it seems absolutely clear that introducing the *haftara* with the story of the oil is not an artificial solution to a technical problem, but rather some substantive reason must underlie the matter.

[3] M. Sabbato, "*Sippur ha-Shunamit*," *Megadim* 15 (5752), 45-52.

[4] In light of the parallels between *Parashat Vayera* and the *haftara*, it may be suggested that Gechazi's words "And her husband is old" (4:14) were directed at the Shunamite woman herself, but were formulated in reference to her husband in order to promote peaceful relations between the two.

(Translated by David Strauss)