

**SEFER MELAKHIM BET: THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS**  
**By Rav Alex Israel**

**Shiur #06: Chapter 4 Part 2: Elisha and the Shunammite Woman**

**4:8-37 THE SHUNAMMITE WOMAN AND HER SON**

The previous story depicted a desperately poor widow with two children and no food. We now encounter a lady, married and wealthy, who generously distributes food and provides lodgings, but who is childless. This is a "great lady" of Shunem, who hosts Elisha in her home due to the fact that he is a "holy man of God." In consultation with her husband, she builds Elisha an apartment where he can stay whenever he is in town. Elisha wishes to reward his hostess for all her trouble, and he promises her that "at this season, next year, you will be embracing a son." Indeed, a son is born at the designated time. However, years later, the child mysteriously dies. The Shunammite woman lays her dead child on Elisha's bed and hurries to find the prophet. Finding him at Mt. Carmel she insists that he immediately accompany her to Shunem. He finds the lifeless child and revives him.

Our tradition assigns this chapter as the *haftara* for *Parashat Va-yera*. What is the connection between the two stories? *Va-yera* is the Torah portion that narrates Avraham's hospitality to three wayfarers, later identified as angels, and their promise of Yitzchak's birth. At the close of *Va-yera*, we read of Yitzchak's birth, his brush with death, and God's sparing his life in the story of the *Akeida* (binding of Yitzchak.) The two stories<sup>1</sup> share several similarities. In both:

- An otherwise childless couple is blessed with a child in response to their enthusiastic and extraordinary hospitality.
- "And her husband is old" (*II Melakhim* 4:14); "and my husband is old" (*Bereishit* 18:12).
- The announcement is formulated as "at this season, next year ... a son." (*II Melakhim* 4:16 / *Bereishit* 18:10).
- The promise is made as the woman is positioned at the doorway (*II Melakhim* 4:15 / *Bereishit* 18:10).
- The woman expresses scepticism at the prediction.
- A child is born one year later.
- The son dies or is on the verge of death and is saved at the last moment.

In light of these parallels, we might categorize this story in the genre of the narratives of other childless biblical women— Sara, Rivka, Rachel, Le'ah, Mano'ach's wife, Channa – who miraculously conceive. This then, is a story of relief, joy and promise. In second focus is the power of the prophet who heralds

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<sup>1</sup> See Rav Yehuda Shaviv's article that draws connections between the first story of *II Melakhim* ch.4 and *Parashat Va-yera*. [www.vbm-torah.org/archive/haftora/04vayera.doc](http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/haftora/04vayera.doc)

the birth. In some of the above stories, God Himself "opens the womb" of the childless woman; in other cases, the announcement is made by an angel. Here Elisha assumes this auspicious role. And so, yet again this episode highlights Elisha's supernatural abilities. Moreover, with Elisha's revival of the boy coming on the heels of the previous episode (the pouring of the oil), we immediately identify the linkage between the episodes, as virtually identical recurrences of the miracles enacted by Eliyahu (*I Melakhim* 17:14-23). If so, then this is a story not merely about a Shunammite woman who enters the exclusive group of biblical women whose childlessness ends in a miraculous birth, but about Elisha functioning as God's agent in the image of his master Eliyahu.

## PROBLEMS

And yet, this initial perspective is challenged as we identify aspects of this story that are puzzling and disconcerting. Let us begin by examining the two chief protagonists of the story, Elisha and the Shunammite woman. Each of them undergoes a certain transformation or reversal as the chapter progresses.

The Shunammite woman is initially depicted as content with her life and undemanding of the prophet. This "great lady," (4:8) a term indicative of aristocratic lineage or wealth, venerates Elisha, yet is uninterested in any special privilege she might merit from her close association with him. When Elisha offers her the opportunity to "talk to the king or to the head of the army," he is rebuffed by the Shunammite woman's modest response: "I live among my own people" (4:13). When he promises her a child, her response is self-effacing: "Please my lord, man of God, do not delude your maidservant" (4:16) as if to say that she is unworthy of this tremendous gift.<sup>2</sup>

And yet, in the latter segment of the story, her assertiveness and confidence commands our attention as she bursts into activity, rushing to the prophet, seizing his feet<sup>3</sup> and berating him: "Did I ask my lord for a son?" (4:28). When Elisha suggests that Geichazi proceed to Shunem to revive her son, she becomes insistent, demanding that Elisha accompany her personally: "As the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you!"

Thus, we identify a dramatic shift in the Shunammite woman's behavior vis-a-vis Elisha. One wonders whether this is the critical focus of the narrative.

However Elisha too finds himself in an unexpected role reversal. At first, we meet him as "a holy man of God" (4:9) who can produce the miracle of childbearing with the same ease with which he can talk to the king or the army chief. He announces the miraculous birth without a second thought, and indeed God fulfils his decree: "The woman conceived and bore a son **at the set time of which Elisha had spoken**" (4:17).

But in the latter section of the story, Elisha falters. When the child dies, and he is confronted by the desperate mother, Elisha remarks "she is in bitter distress **and the Lord has hidden it from me and has not told me**" (4:27).

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<sup>2</sup> Uriel Simon, pg.296, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, Jerusalem (1997) [Hebrew]

<sup>3</sup> This is act of desperation, worded as "*va-tachazek beraglav*" is in direct contrast to the similar phrase used earlier to express her generous hospitality: "*va-tachazek bo.*"

This double phraseology expresses Elisha's dismay that something is seriously amiss. Why is God not granting Elisha this information? Elisha is in crisis.

In the next scene, Elisha dispatches Geichazi with his staff, expecting it to revive the dead child. Yet the attempt is ineffective: "The boy has not awakened" (4:31). Yet again, Elisha's intuition has failed him. The prophet who was so strident, who had dispensed miracles freely, suddenly discovers that his supernatural powers elude him. Why does Elisha experience this failure? What does this chapter tell us about him?

Finally, we reach the most critical question of the story: Why did the boy die? The prophet has endowed a generous and spiritually attuned lady with a divine gift. Why did God allow the miracle-child to die?

Both classical and contemporary scholars have addressed these problems extensively. We shall present several approaches, each from the *Beit Midrash* of Yeshivat Har Etzion.

### **RAV ELCHANAN SAMET– THE SHUNAMMITE WOMAN**

We begin with Rav Elchanan Samet<sup>4</sup> who views the entire episode as one which revolves around the character of the Shunammite woman. In a dramatic assertion, he proposes that she herself was primarily responsible for her son's untimely death. God's endowment of a child to a previously childless woman generally results in a child who is destined to become a leader, a person who will make a significant contribution, like Shimshon, or Shmuel. Accordingly, the Shunammite woman should have celebrated the miraculous birth of a son, as promised by the prophet, with thanksgiving to God. And yet, she verbally disregards the gift that has been granted to her: "Did I ask ... for a son?" (4:28). Rav Samet suggests that she had accommodated her life to a childless family structure.<sup>5</sup> She failed to comprehend and appreciate the special responsibility of raising her miracle-child. Instead of studying Torah, we find the boy accompanying his father into the fields. It was this lack of concern for the child's spiritual upbringing that precipitated his untimely death. It is only after this tragedy that the Shunammite woman begins to comprehend the enormous gift that she had received, and she begins to fight for her son, at which point God grants Elisha the power to revive him. As she bows to the floor, she acknowledges not only the prophet, but also the God in whose name he acts. As she carries her resurrected son from Elisha's room, she experiences the rebirth of her son as she now appreciates the great gift that she received.

### **RAV SABATO – ELISHA DISCOVERS HIS LIMITS**

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<sup>4</sup> *Megadim* #13, "The Double Embrace," pgs. 73-97, Herzog College, Adar 5751 (1191).

<sup>5</sup> Rav Moshe Lichtenstein categorically rejects this approach; he defends the Shunammite woman as someone who has experienced years, possibly decades, of torment and pain due to the inability to have children. The Shunammite woman's reticence is a result of her deep scars of infertility, as she dreads the torment of the anticipation of a child, only to have her dreams and yearnings disappointed. If anything, Elisha was guilty for playing with a childless woman's sensitive and frayed emotions: <http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/haftara/04haftara.htm>

Rav Mordechai Sabato<sup>6</sup> rejects Rav Samet's approach:

A comparison with other stories in *Tanakh* of barren women who miraculously conceived shows that there is no mention of any of them having taken extra care in raising their children. Yet, none of them were punished.

Although in midrashic conceptions, the place of children is studying Torah, and not going into the fields, this is rarely evidenced explicitly in the text. In fact, the reason the *Tanakh* focuses so little attention on the Shunammite woman's son results from the nature and purpose of the story. The focus is on the stature and power of the prophet, not on the birth of the child. (Sabato, pg.45)

Instead, Rav Sabato unveils his own theory, which points an accusatory finger at Elisha. He begins with a *midrash*:

Three keys are in the hands of God, and no being has control over them: the key to revive the dead, the key of childbirth, and the key of rainfall. (*Devarim Rabba* 7)

Rav Sabato extrapolates from here:

Surprisingly, Elisha neglects to request of God the power to bring life. In fact, he manipulates the "key" by force without the consent of its owner... Elisha overstepped the boundaries of his authority when he decreed: "This time next year you will embrace a son." He was a messenger of God, yet behaved as though he could grant life on his own. This lies in contrast to any other episode in *Tanakh*, where it is exclusively God's prerogative. (pg. 46)

Elisha starts the chapter having independently granted the gift of life. The entire story narrates the process whereby God educates Elisha, teaching him his prophetic limitations. Elisha's presumptuous granting of a child overstepped the mandate of the prophet; even the Shunammite woman was taken aback by Elisha's offer to grant a son: "Please, my lord, man of God, do not delude your maidservant" (4:16). She senses something inappropriate.

One compelling support for this theory emerges from a textual parallel with the promise of Yitzchak's birth. When Yitzchak is born, we read:

"Sarah conceived and bore Avraham a son ...at the set time **of which God had spoken.**" (*Bereshit* 21:2)

But with the birth of the Shunammite woman's son, the verse states:

"The woman conceived and bore a son at the set time **of which Elisha had spoken.**" (*II Melakhim* 4:17)

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<sup>6</sup> *Megadim* #15, "The Story of the Shunammite Woman," pgs. 45-53. Herzog College, *Marcheshvan* 5752 (1991). It may be accessed online at [www.vbm-torah.org/alei/7-4sabato.rtf](http://www.vbm-torah.org/alei/7-4sabato.rtf), translated by Zev Jacobson.

This comparison demonstrates quite convincingly that Elisha has usurped God's role.

Nevertheless, God allows the child to be born – and then to die – in order to explain to Elisha the limits of his role. When Elisha confesses that he is ignorant of the child's death, he is acknowledging that "his divinely inspired ability to discern hidden events has been taken away from him" (pg.48). However, he still imagines that his staff in the hand of Geichazi can revive the child; initially he doesn't even consider traveling to Shunem!

However, with lightning speed, Elisha's illusions are smashed. Upon arrival, Elisha sees the full extent of his error: the boy, stiff and cold, lying on his bed. Face-to-face with the lifeless form of the boy, Elisha, reeling from the impact of his discovery, finally turns to God and, in recognition of his own utter insignificance, prays.

Viewed in this context, the child's unexpected death was destined from birth. He entered the world with the sole purpose of dying when he grew up, in order to teach the lesson that life created by man is non-existent and has no validity. The theme of the narrative is not the miracle of the birth, but rather the power of the prophet, or more accurately, his limitations. As mentioned previously, the focus of the story is not the Shunammite woman and her son, but the transformation and maturation of Elisha the prophet." (pgs. 48-49)

According to Rav Sabato, Elisha's mistake is thinking that he can independently generate life. In the chapter's final scene, Elisha is forced to turn to God directly, praying to Him, acknowledging God's exclusive role as life-giver. Only once Elisha has appealed to God will the boy be revived. While Rav Samet relates to the story as the transformation of the Shunammite woman, Rav Sabato<sup>7</sup> sees Elisha as the chapter's key figure. The story here is the process by which God guides Elisha to a realization of the limits of his prophetic role.

## **GEICHAZI – DIRECT OR INDIRECT**

Rav Sabato fails to adequately answer all the questions, for if God wishes to inform Elisha of the limits of his supernatural abilities, why did he allow the child to be born at all? If Elisha's original prophecy had not been actualized, Elisha would have easily intuited that he lacked the ability to grant life. Did the Shunammite woman and her family have to suffer for a lesson that could have been learned by other means?

There are two secondary characters in the story. The Shunammite woman's husband plays a passive role and, although his wife seems more dominant, serves as a stereotypical master of the house; he is the address for the family finances regarding the building of the apartment for Elisha, and his wife

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<sup>7</sup> A similar approach is adopted by Uriel Simon using his method of close reading, pp 279-316, *bid.*

must inform him when she leaves the homestead.<sup>8</sup> However, he is uninterested in the holy man who visits frequently; they never interact.

The second character is far more critical to the storyline: Geichazi. Elisha's assistant features in every key scene. Elisha repeatedly employs him as a loyal intermediary, as his messenger. And yet, we discover that in each circumstance, Geichazi's actions are met with failure, a failure that may be viewed, ultimately, as a shortcoming of Elisha.

In the initial scene, Elisha seeks a way in which to thank the Shunammite woman for her hospitality. He sends Geichazi to approach the woman and offer her the opportunity to "talk to the king or the head of the army," (4:13) but she informs him that she lacks nothing. It is interesting that in this conversation Elisha does not address the Shunammite woman in person; the entire conversation transpires through the mediation of Geichazi. After the woman rejects Elisha's offer, he expresses his frustration: "What can we do for her?" Geichazi responds: "She has no son, and her husband is old." Although Elisha eventually announces the miracle, it is Geichazi, not Elisha, who first proposes the idea of endowing the woman with a son. And of course, the son dies.

After the child collapses and dies,<sup>9</sup> the Shunammite woman hurries to Elisha at Mt. Carmel. Again, it is Geichazi who is sent to interact with her: "How are you? How is your husband? How is the child?" (4:26). However, she curtly dismisses Geichazi and engages Elisha directly. Geichazi blunders yet again as he "stepped forward to push her away." Elisha corrects him: "Leave her alone, for she is in bitter distress." Once again, Elisha's use of Geichazi as a mediator is unsuccessful, and he misses the mark a second time when he fails to see the woman's deep pain. Moreover, as we have mentioned, it is at this point that Elisha expresses the fact that God had hidden the child's death from him. He must wait for the Shunammite woman to inform him of the problem.

In the third scene, the revival, Elisha entrusts Geichazi yet again, anticipating that his staff will resuscitate the child. Geichazi's actions are proven inadequate: "The boy has not awakened" (4:31). Only then does Elisha engage in a personal effort to revive the child: praying, placing himself over the child, and breathing into him and warming him - the Radak suggests that this is some form of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation – and only at that point does the child return to life. In this scene too, Geichazi's involvement generates a setback which only Elisha can redress.

What is the importance of Geichazi in this story? The promise of a child, his death, and his subsequent resurrection could have been ably communicated without reference to Geichazi, and yet, his role is central to each segment of the narrative. His failures seem to reflect poorly upon Elisha. What does his presence add to the chapter?

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<sup>8</sup> Rav Sabato suggests that in the two instances that he is mentioned he features as a passive contrast to his wife's impressive alacrity.

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, the Shunammite woman never states that the child is dead. Possibly this is a case of language creating the facts. She is frightened that if she says that he is dead, that indeed will be the case. On the other hand, if she vaguely alludes to his condition, there is always room for hope.

## GEICHAZI'S SINS

In the broader context of *II Melakhim*, Geichazi is portrayed as a highly negative character. In the chapter we shall study next week, Geichazi deceives Elisha and the prophet afflicts him with leprosy. The *Mishna* impugns Geichazi's reputation even more by condemning him as one of "four commoners who have no place in the World to Come" (*Sanhedrin*, chapter 10). That being said, for now, we shall view Geichazi on the basis of our chapter alone.

Rav Sabato portrays Geichazi as intoxicated with his master's miraculous powers:

He ... believes that his master is all-powerful. In the eyes of Geichazi, nothing is beyond Elisha's prowess – not even the ability to bring life into the world. In fact, Geichazi suggested that Elisha grant the Shunammite woman a son. Elisha never imagined that granting a child was within his power, yet Geichazi's suggestion triggers a thought-process within the prophet that leads to his unauthorized decree – "this time next year you will embrace a son." (Sabato, pg.49)

In this vein, we might quote the following midrash which depicts the scene as Geichazi journeys to Shunem, bearing Elisha's staff, to revive the boy:

They said to him, "Where are you going, Geichazi?"

He said to them, "To resurrect the dead."

They said to him, "And can you resurrect the dead? And is it not the Holy One, blessed be he, who resurrects the dead? 'The Lord kills and brings to life' (1 Sam. 2:6)."

He said to them, "So too my lord can kill and bring back to life." (*Mekhilta Amalek 1*)

Indeed, the very portrayal of a conversation involving Geichazi reflects a certain criticism of Geichazi. After all, Elisha had specifically instructed Geichazi: "Take my staff in your hand and go. When you meet anyone, do not greet him; and if anyone greets you do not answer him." (4:29) When this midrash depicts Geichazi as conversing with people on the way, it is suggesting that Geichazi imagined Elisha to be so powerful that the restrictions and instructions were immaterial; Geichazi supposed that this would be easy for Elisha.

If we consider a second image, when the Shunammite woman seizes Elisha's legs and Geichazi tries to distance her,<sup>10</sup> we may assess that he was so

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<sup>10</sup> The Rabbis see this scene as yet another of Geichazi's flaws. See *Berakhot* 10b: "'He is a holy man.' R. Yosi son of Chanina said: 'He is holy but his assistant is not holy, for it says, 'And Geichazi came near to thrust her away.'" R. Yosi son of Chanina said, "he seized her by her breast." This Gemara is interesting because it touches upon a latent sexuality in this scene as the Shunammite woman seizes Elisha's legs, and in the story as a whole. The Talmud suggests that Elisha was free of any untoward intent, but the same could not be said about his assistant. Similarly, see *Talmud Yerushalmi, Sanhedrin* 10:2. In this connection, see Admiel Kosman, "The Modesty Squad in the Prophet's Court" *Haaretz*, 28, November, 1997.

focused on the prestige of the prophet, that he didn't even notice how distraught she was.

This reading proposes that Geichazi was obsessed with his master and idolized him, possibly suggesting miracles that were inappropriate. At the same time, the eagerness of the prophet's attendant is hardly a crime. We shall suggest another approach.<sup>11</sup>

## THE PROPHET'S COURT

The chapter begins with the Shunammite woman, who was interested in hosting Elisha because he was "a holy man of God" (4:2). The text says she "urged him" to eat with her family, but the phrase is "*va-tachazek bo*" – literally translated as "she seized him." It appears that this woman is excited about religion: she attends the prophet's gatherings every Shabbat and Rosh Chodesh. She seeks closer contact with the prophet, or merely the opportunity to host him, as he tours the country, teaching, preaching and assisting people, and this is why she wishes to host him in her home.

And yet, every time Elisha "converses" with the woman, Geichazi is the mediator in the discussion. Perhaps the prophet acts this way out of modesty. But possibly, as the prophet becomes busier with more demands on his time, he needs to delegate, to assign various responsibilities to assistants and students. An organizational bureaucracy, with its inevitable corollary – the distancing of the prophet from the common people – has the potential to destroy the prophet and his work. The people seek to interact with the man of God! In this story, as the Shunammite woman approaches Elisha in a panicked state, she is greeted courteously by Geichazi the assistant. But she doesn't need the "Office of the Prophet," she needs Elisha! When Elisha delegates the revival of the boy to Geichazi, the staff fails to revive the boy in the same manner that Geichazi's greeting of the distraught woman cannot succeed. The key here is that Elisha must have direct contact with the people. He cannot be the master prophet surrounded by advisors and aides. The people want access to the prophet himself. That is why God hid the information about the dead child from Elisha. Were he to have discovered it by prophecy, he would have passed on the job to a subordinate. But there is no replacement for a genuine "holy man of God." The people want: "*va-tachazek bo*" – direct contact, no Hassidic courts or hierarchical offices. The prophet must be able to engage with people, looking them in the eyes, sharing their pain.

This chapter highlights the danger of religious leaders becoming religious institutions raising an issue of critical concern for Elisha: the charismatic prophet must interact directly with his followers. This reading contends that Elisha is being prompted to reassess his mode of leadership, but here the message is different from that proposed by Rav Sabato. The figure of Geichazi is indeed central to the story. Repeatedly, Geichazi falters and fails. Why? It is not because Geichazi is a flawed personality; the problem lies with Elisha. Geichazi cannot succeed because he is not the prophet! If Elisha's role is to inspire and to support, he must deliver the word of God in person. .

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<sup>11</sup> I heard this idea from Rav Yaakov Medan.