

Tell a story
Haftara of Vayaira
by Julie Zhuk on 2022-11-12

Comments

This Haftara will show us how the prophet Elisha performed many miracles. This Haftara has information coming from the book of Kings in 4:1-4:37. In this particular book The Weekly Haftaras, this Haftara is split into two readings. One is for the Ashkenazim and the other is for the Sephardim. The one for Sephardim ends in Kings 4:26. This story is focused on the prophet Elisha running into a woman who was once a widow. The story starts out with her not having enough money to pay off her debt and that is when Elisha comes in. He causes the small amount of oil she has left over in her pitcher to fill many pitchers. By selling the oil, the woman is able to repay her debt and she still has money to live on.

Elisha lives with her in a town called Shunam and he makes a promise to her, and he is able to fulfill that promise. Unfortunately, the child does die. The Shunamite woman travels to Elisha and tells him what happened. Elisha had a student named Gaichazi and he attempted in performing a miracle of bringing back the Shunamite woman's son. He was not successful. Elisha on the other hand was able to revive that same child. There is a link between this week's Parsha and the Haftara and it will be explained at the start of this Haftara. The Haftara starts out describing how the miracle of the widow's oil pitcher. This is the same Shunamite woman that was mentioned before. There was an idolatrous king named Achav and he married Izevel, she was the daughter of the neighboring king of Tzidon.

Izevel who was a wicked queen encouraged people to worship Baal in Israel. Without hesitation and having no mercy she persecuted G-d's prophets. It says in the Haftara, "woe to the prophet who fell into her hands, for he was doomed to certain death!". At the time there was an administrator of the royal household. He was a pious and G-d fearing man, named Ovadya and he saved a hundred prophets from the queen's clutches by hiding them in two caves. He had assumed personal responsibility for them. He managed to sustain them even though those years were really hard. It was a period of famine, bread was scarce, and the hardest thing for anyone to get was water. If any water was available at the time, it was very expensive.

Ovadya was a wealthy man and he was willing to use his entire fortune to keep the prophets alive. It wasn't just bread and water that he supplied them with, but oil for lighting lamps. He wanted them to be able to study the Torah and he eventually spent all of his money on this great mitzva and became a poor man. He started asking himself how he could continue supporting the prophets by hiding them. After giving the matter a lot of thought, he decided to sell everything of value in his home. Even his pots and jars, finally when he had nothing left of value in his home, he had no choice but to borrow money. The royal family was very rich and so they turned to King Achav's son, Yehoram, and begged him for a loan.

It's important to know that Yehoram was an evil person, he cared for nothing and didn't care about the mitzva of pikuach nefesh, meaning the saving of human lives. He agreed to grant the loan, but it was on the condition that Ovadya pays interest, an action that is forbidden by the Torah. At the end of Yehoram's life, G-d punished him measure for measure.

Yehoram died because he was struck in his heart and his arms were struck by his enemy. The enemies used arrows because he hardened his heart and stretched out his arms to take illegal interest. Ovadya agreed to Yehoram's terms because for him it was a matter of life and death. Yehoram demanded repayment of the loan, Ovadya wasn't able to pay that part. He became very ill and it wasn't long before he lay on his deathbed. His wife was a great tzaddekes and she had heroically sacrificed all her worldly possessions.

She did this to save the prophets in the two caves, that were seized with fear. When she saw her husband on his deathbed she cried out, "My husband, the debt will not be repaid! How will I manage without you?" Before he actually died, Ovadya turned to his wife and stated these words, "He who is called the Father of orphans and Judge of widows will provide for you and our children." This quote is found in the book of Tehillim.

Ovadya passed away, leaving his wife very impoverished there wasn't a single crumb of food left in her house. The final blow came when Yehoram knocked on the door and demanded payment. He realized the widow had no money, so he did what he thought was the next best thing, search the house for valuables. Unfortunately for his sake, he found none. He found the children and turned to the widow saying if she didn't repay what she owed he would take two of the children as his slaves. Immediately she ran over to the cemetery and called out to G-d, saying You G-d, fearing one listen to me. She was hoping that the merit of her husband's fear of G-d was going to help her in the crisis she was now facing.

There was a Heavenly voice that answered her asking, which fearing G-d was she talking about? There were four people in Jewish history that were called G-d fearing, these were Avraham, Yosef, Iyov, and Ovadya. The woman claimed to be wanting to see Ovadya and she scattered ashes on her head and approached her husband's grave calling him her master and that G-d promised to take care of her orphans. That wasn't fulfilled since Yeravam wanted to take them away for himself.

Ovadya answered her through a Heavenly voice that said, go to the prophet Elisha; there he will tell you what to do! So the woman came before Elisha and was crying bitter tears. She poured out her heart to him. Elisha asked her how he could help and said that Yeravam was never going to listen to him and give up his claim to the money. Elisha said he would have to think of something else to do, he asked the woman what she had in her home. Elisha wanted to bring a blessing to the woman's possessions, but he had to begin with something she already owned. She said she had nothing left value, her husband sold everything they had. The only thing she did have was a pitcher that contained a bit of oil.

Elisha said to her to bring the oil because it brings light and happiness to mankind. Elisha knew by tradition from his teacher, Eliyahu, that G-d would have a blessing on this oil. He told her to go to her neighbors and borrow many empty containers, then to take them home and shut the door behind you and your sons for the miracle that will not take place in public. Elisha told the widow to lift up the oil pitcher and start pouring from it. He didn't want her to ever stop, just keep placing empty containers under it to receive the flowing oil. The woman and her sons borrowed containers from the neighbors and lined them up on the floor. The woman picked up her oil pitcher and told her sons to keep moving the empty containers closer to her and as she poured, her sons would replace the empty containers in front of her.

One after the other, they were filled up and the boys replaced them with more empty containers so that the blessing in the oil flow would not be interrupted. Eventually, all the vessels were filled with oil, except for some broken ones. G-d Who commanded the empty containers to become filled can also mend the broken containers, the widow said these words. Her sons gathered the shards, they miraculously became whole containers again. When they, too, were filled, one of the sons said, that now there are none left. It was at that point the oil stopped flowing, and now the wonderful news reached the family. The price of oil had gone up and their oil now was going to be worth a fortune, the woman returned to Elisha and asked him if she was obligated to give a tenth of the oil to a Levi?

She wanted to know if she could sell the oil now or would have to wait until there was an even greater increase in the price. Elisha told her it wasn't necessary to separate a tenth of the oil since she got it due to a miracle. His advice to her was to sell it now, she would have more than enough money to repay her debt. He also told her that she would have enough money to live off and that even all of her descendants would have a career forever.

Ovadya and his wife's sacrifice was done to save the hidden prophets and because of this, they were rewarded. They were rewarded in this world, it was because of what they did that Ovadya received the gift of prophecy. He is the famous Ovadya, he is one of the thirteen "minor prophets." The Haftara does focus on Elisha reviving a child who had died. When Elisha traveled he passed the town of Shunam. It was there he lodged in the home of a woman who was famous for her kindness and hospitality. She always urged the prophet to stay in her home. There was a day that the woman remarked to her husband that she could tell their guest, Elisha was a holy man. She felt the glow of the presence of G-d radiating from Elisha's face.

The woman felt that was why she couldn't look Elisha in the face. She noticed that there was never a fly that approached his food and that his room always smelled like Gan Eden. She was also aware that Elisha's servant, Gaichazi, who went along with him was not holy. The woman asked her husband if he didn't think it would be fitting to set up permanent quarters for this pious man, Elisha?! She wanted to make him a small, private attic room and to furnish it with a bed, a table, a chair, and provide a lamp as well. She felt that having this talmid chacham as their guest was an honor for them. It was like bringing a tamid-offering to G-d.

Her husband agreed to what she was asking for and the attic chamber was prepared and furnished for Elisha. He used it whenever he stayed in Shunam. There was one Jewish new year, when Elisha commanded his servant Gaichazi, to call the Shunaimite woman over. She appeared and Gaichazi addressed her in the name of Elisha. Gaichazi said to her, since you went through so much trouble for us, we would like to repay you. Do you need anything from the king or from a minister?

Elisha and his servant were offering to get it for her. They reminded her that day was the Jewish New Year. They added how it is on this day, G-d judges the world. Maybe they could ask the King of the Universe to grant her a wish. She said she didn't have any requests to make from a human king and she didn't want to be singled out before the Heavenly court. She would

rather be judged together with the community, she didn't want to evoke the attribute of strict justice.

The woman left, but Elisha still didn't feel satisfied. He kept asking his servant if there was something they could do for her. The servant came up with something, the woman didn't have any children. Her husband was already pretty old, and that was when Elisha asked the servant to call the woman back. So the woman came back and as she stood by the entrance to Elisha's chamber he told her one year from that day she would have a child. She would have a son. Elisha didn't hear this kind of prophecy from G-d, he made the promise of his own accord. He was confident that G-d would honor it. The woman reminded Elisha and his servant that she and her husband weren't young anymore and couldn't bear children. Elisha assured her that within one year from that day a miracle would happen and she would have a child.

The woman wouldn't just accept the blessing as it was, she didn't believe Elisha wholeheartedly. She kept arguing with him saying that his promise was different from the one an angel gave to Sara. The angel told Sara that a year later he would return to her when Sara's baby was born. The woman asked Elisha if you're not here at the time to give his blessing, then she is afraid she won't be able to give birth to a child who will stay alive. Elisha heard the woman out and tried to console her saying, that the angel could make such a promise back then to Sara because he was a heavenly being who existed forever. Elisha was just one human; how does he know if he was going to be alive one year later than the time they were now speaking? The woman didn't have any choice, but to keep herself contented with that explanation. She sensed something which even Elisha wasn't aware of, she would indeed have a baby son, but the child wouldn't stay alive forever.

The Zohar explains the fate of this child was so preordained because Elisha had only promised him to the woman and not to her husband. It was a mystical concept. Elisha's promise came true, and the following year a son was born to that woman. Her heart was filled with happiness and as time passed, the child grew a little older. One day, he went to watch the harvesters at work in his father's field, there the tender child was exposed to the burning sun and he suffered a sun-stroke. He called out to his father about his head hurting, and the father ordered the servants to carry the boy over to the mother. The woman held her son on her lap, she waited for the boy's condition to improve, but to her intense grief, things didn't improve. It became only worse and by noon the child was dead.

At this time, the woman remained silent, she neither complained nor told anyone that her son died. She carried the body of the baby up to the attic chamber and put it on the prophet's bed. She was certain that in his honor the child's body would decompose. She then shut the door to the chamber and went out to her husband asking for a servant and a donkey. She was in a hurry to find the prophet and she said she would be right back. The husband reminded her how she only traveled to the prophet for Shabbat and Rosh Chodesh, he was protesting and had a surprised look on his face. He asked her if everything was okay with her. She reassured her husband that everything was okay and she thought it best to cover up that the baby was no longer alive. She thought it would be possible for a miracle to happen if she kept silent about the situation. The woman saddled up the donkey and ordered her servant to lead it. She didn't mount the animal; in her great agitation, she hurried alongside on foot. Elisha was not far off in his own affairs when he saw the woman riding the donkey.

Elisha called out to his servant, Gaichazi asking what she was doing there. Elisha asked for Gaichazi to run over to the woman and find out if everything was okay with her and the family. The woman didn't tell the whole truth about her family. She said that everything was fine. When she did reach Elisha, she grasped his feet in great distress. Gaichazi thought it was a very disrespectful thing for her to do. He tried to push her away, but Elisha stopped him saying to leave her alone. She is suffering a lot and G-d has covered the cause from him. The Shunamite woman poured out her troubles about the child she just lost. She said her son was dead now and it was worse for her than what she felt when giving birth. Elisha instantly gave orders to his servant to take his staff and go put it on the boy's face. Elisha told Gaichazi to be careful not to talk to anyone as he went about his way. To not even respond to anyone's greeting. Elisha was hoping that the boy would be revived by means of his staff on condition that the servant wouldn't share the secret with anyone and that he would proceed from Elisha directly to the boy.

Elisha's servant didn't believe in this miracle of reviving the boy. The servant didn't listen to Elisha's order and on the way, he met with people that had questions. People were asking where he was going and what he was going to do. He told them the truth, he was going to go revive someone from the dead. The servant didn't keep the secret, it was little wonder that when he placed Elisha's staff on the child's head, nothing happened. At the same time, the Shunamite woman remained at Elisha's side not knowing how to respond to Elisha's plan to revive her son. She was appealing to Elisha saying, you gave me the child, only can bring him back! She wouldn't move from where she stood until he came himself.

Elisha gave in to what she was asking and traveled to her home. The boy's lifeless body lay on Elisha's bed, Elisha shut the door behind him so he was alone in his room. He prayed to G-d to please just as He performed a miracle of reviving the dead for his master Eliyahu, to perform this miracle for him. Elisha stretched himself out upon the child, he warmed the child's body and put his mouth on the child's. The Haftara asks why this action was so important.

The reason this was so important was, G-d wanted a person to make some effort on their part before G-d brings about a miracle. In the previous story, we read how the widow had to begin with a pitcher of oil, and only then did G-d's blessing come upon it. The Zohar says Elisha's actions were mystical, by putting his mouth on the boy's, he linked him with a new source of life. This way he would be able to live. Elisha also impressed on the child's mouth the Almighty's Great Name of seventy-two letters. All of a sudden, everyone was in luck there was a miracle that happened. The lifeless child sneezed seven times and then opened his eyes. Elisha then told his servant to call the Shunamite woman over into the room. When she appeared, Elisha said here take your son!

The woman was so happy at this point, she fell at the feet of Elisha in gratitude. She bowed to him and then carried her child down. Why did this woman honor merit that the dead should be revived for her? She was always involved in acts of kindness toward others. The ending of the Haftara has an epilogue. Who was this child, he grew up to be the prophet known as Chavakuk. The name comes from the Tanach, meaning to embrace. It was Elisha who named him so because the child underwent a "double embrace". The first time was by his mother, who was told that next year she would embrace a son.

The second time the child was embraced was by Elisha who revived the child by embracing him himself. On a more profound level, we can say that the boy was assisted in his spiritual

growth by “two embraces”. The first one was his mother’s extraordinary personality, distinguished by her deeds of kindness and hospitality and her firm faith in Elisha. Her faith in Elisha never wavered even when she realized that Elisha was not aware of her child’s tragic death. The other thing that is important to note is she was under the influence of Elisha. He guided the child during his life. This child, Chavakuk, who was revived by a miracle, taught the principle of faith to all generations. That principle was, “The tzaddik shall live by his faith”. There are links between the Weekly Parsha and the Haftara. Avraham and Sara in the Parsha are compared to the Shunamite woman and her husband. They were old and childless just like Sara and Avraham.

In both cases, G-d miraculously allowed them to have a child. Why does the Haftara start with a different miracle is Elisha giving Ovadya’s widow a career through her oil pitcher? Does that miracle also relate to the weekly Parsha? We learn that certain people can merit miracles as a result of their self-sacrifice. All three women, Sara, Ovadya’s wife, and the Shunamite woman excelled in doing kindness toward others. To this day, people try to be like Sara, because she is a role model for every Jewish woman. Her life was an endless succession of receiving guests and teaching them the truth. Ovadya’s widow was also a heroine in doing kindness because she sacrificed everything she once owned in order to keep the hidden prophets. Our Sages declare that she was such a tzaddekes that if not for her deeds of kindness, G-d would have punished the entire Jewish people. The reason for that was, at the time He was angry at the Jews.

The Shunamite woman, too, was famous for her kindness. She inconvenienced herself in order for her guests to feel comfortable. She considered it a privilege to do this. Ovadya’s widow and the Shunamite woman also distinguished themselves in their trust in Elisha. All three of these women, Sara, Ovadya’s widow, and the Shunamite woman, set shining examples for Jewish daughters to follow. The Gemara in Ta’anis tells us that there were three “keys” that remained in G-d’s hands and are not given over to an angel. These keys are for career, childbirth, and to revive the dead. The prophet, Elisha was so great that G-d allowed for him to use all three of these “keys.” Elisha gave a career to Ovadya’s widow by causing the oil to keep flowing. Elisha promised the Shunamite woman a son.

Elisha was able to revive the dead child. These stories are mentioned in the Haftara to give us a complete picture of the prophet of Elisha’s greatness. G-d personally handles the three matters listed above, we learn from the Chofetz Chaim that if angels were to judge a person’s right to sustenance then they would die on a daily basis. The angels judges with strictness and G-d combines justice with mercy. That is why G-d gave a career even to those who are not deserving of it. G-d deals mercifully with childbirth, a very delicate procedure with the potential for numerous tragedies. Finally, if an angel were to choose who could arise at techiyas hamaisim, he would exclude anyone who was not a Torah scholar. G-d mercifully, takes the matter into His own hands. He will also resurrect those Jews who supported Torah-scholars. Some commentators ask why did Elisha tell the widow to borrow vessels instead of using her own?

Some text from Rabbi David Hanagid’s opinion states that the widow didn’t have vessels of her own. There is another explanation that Elisha wanted all of the neighbors to hear about the miracle. As a result, they wouldn’t suspect the woman of having become rich just because she borrowed money for herself. At the end of the Haftara there is a question of why G-d didn’t inform Elisha of the death of the child. R”dal in Pirkay D’R. Eliezer 33 says that Elisha was too

sure of himself when he promised the Shunammite woman she would have a son. Elisha never asked G-d for approval; he didn't even pray for the fulfillment of his promise.

Elisha simply assumed that G-d would fulfill the wish of those who fear Him. This slight excess of self-confidence was corrected when G-d withheld information about the child's death from Elisha. For years commentators have asked whether Elisha actually expected his servants to perform the miracle of reviving the dead by means of his own staff. Our text follows the opinion of our Sages that this would certainly have been possible if not for the servant's unworthiness and disobedience. Meshech Chochma suggests that "the staff" symbolized the Shunammite woman's support of Elisha in its zechus. Elisha believed, she deserved the miracle to happen. On the other hand, another source, Abarbanel and others hold that Elisha sent Gaichazi only for the purpose of preventing the child from decaying.

Our text follows the Zohar. A Jewish source named Yalkut Shimoni identifies the son of the Shunammite woman as the prophet, Iddo. R"dal in Pirkai D'R Eliezer 33 suggests that this should be amended to Oded. Oded was a prophet, who lived during the time of King Assa and chronologically belonged to this period.