

Introduction

Connection of sidra and haftarah:

In the sidra, Sarah is promised a son, although, she says, her husband is old; in the haftarah, a Shunammite woman, whose husband is also advanced in years, is promised by the prophet Elisha that she will embrace a son.

The setting:

Elisha was the chief disciple of his illustrious mentor, Elijah, and was active for about fifty years (850-800 B.C.E.). While Elijah was an outsider, engaged in confrontation with corrupt power and religion, Elisha was a man whose counsel the rulers of Israel tended to seek. He had been a farmer before becoming a follower of Elijah, and his concern for ordinary folk never left him. He became the subject of folktales, and many miracles were ascribed to him (about this, see the essay below).

For more on the books of Kings, see our *General Introduction*.

The stories:

1. The tale of the oil jars that were miraculously refilled. (1-7)
2. The tale of the Shunammite woman: the birth and death of her son, and his revival through the intercession of the Prophet. (8-37)

HAFTARAH FOR VAYEIRA

Second Kings, chapter 4, verses 1 to 37

4:1. The wife of one of the prophetic disciples cried out to Elisha, saying: Your servant my husband has died. You know how your servant always revered the Eternal. Now a creditor is coming to take away my two sons to be his slaves.

2. Elisha said to her: What can I do for you? Tell me what you have in the house. She replied: Your maidservant has nothing at home but a small oil jar.

3. Go outside to your neighbors, said Elisha, and borrow as many empty jars as you can.

4. Then you and your sons shut yourselves in and pour oil into all these jars; when one is full, set it aside.

5. She went away and did this, shutting herself and her sons in. They kept bringing jars and she kept pouring.

6. When these jars were full, she said to one of her sons: Bring me another jar. But he answered: There aren't any more. And the oil stopped [flowing].

4:1 ואִשָּׁה אַחַת מִבְּנֵי הַנְּבִיאִים צָעָקָה אֶל־אֵלִישָׁע לֵאמֹר עֲבָדְךָ אִישִׁי מָתָה וְאַתָּה יָדַעְתָּ כִּי עֲבָדְךָ הִגִּיהָ וְרָא אֶת־יְהוָה וְהַנְּשִׂיָה בָּאָה לְקַחַת אֶת־שְׁנֵי יְלָדָי לָהּ לְעֲבָדִים:

2 וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ אֵלִישָׁע מָה אַעֲשֶׂה־לְּךָ הַיְגִידִי לִי מַה־יְשַׁלְּכִי [לְךָ] בַּבַּיִת וְהֵאמַר אֵין לְשִׁפְחָתְךָ כָּל בַּבַּיִת כִּי אִם־אֶסְוֶךָ שֶׁמֶן:

3 וַיֹּאמֶר לָכִי שְׂאֵלֶי־לְךָ כָּלִים מִן־הַחוּץ מֵאֵת כָּל־שֹׁכְנֵי [שְׂכֵנֶיךָ] כָּלִים רַקִּים אֶל־תִּמְעָשִׂי:

4 וּבָאת וְסָגַרְתָּ הַדְּלָת בַּעֲרֹךְ וּבַעַד־בְּנֵיךָ וַיִּצְקֶתָ עַל כָּל־הַכֵּלִים הָאֵלֶּה וְהִמְלֵא תִסִּיעִי:

5 וַתֵּלֶךְ כַּאֲחֻז וַתִּסְגֵר הַדְּלָת בַּעֲרֹךְ וּבַעַד בְּנֵיהָ הֵם מִגִּישִׁים אֵלֶיהָ וְהִיא מִיִּצְקָת [מִיִּצְקָת]:

6 וַיְהִי כַּמְלֵאת הַכֵּלִים וְהֵאמַר אֶל־בְּנָהּ הַגִּישָׁה אֵלַי עוֹד כָּלִי וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ אֵין עוֹד כָּלִי [יַעֲמֹד הַשֶּׁמֶן]:

Commentary

1. *The wife.* Her name is not given, but Jewish tradition identified her as the wife of Obadiah, himself a prophet and a servant of King Ahab of the Northern Kingdom.¹

Prophetic disciples. בְּנֵי נְבִיאִים (*b'nei nevi'im*), literally "sons of the prophets," denoting men given to prophesying, but having minor status.²

Take away my two sons to be his slaves. Exodus 21:7 deals with a woman whose father had sold her for some reason.

4. *Shut yourselves in.* This was not to be a public miracle.

7. She went and told the man of God, who said: Go sell the oil and pay your debt; you and the children can live on what remains.

8. One day Elisha went to Shunem. A rich woman who lived there prevailed on him to have a meal, and from then on he would stop for a meal whenever he was passing through.

9. The woman said to her husband: I am sure that this man who comes here so often is a holy man of God.

10. Let's build a small room on the roof, put a bed, a table, a chair and a lamp in it, and he can stay there whenever he visits us.

11. One day he came there and went to the upper room to rest.

12. He told his servant Gehazi to call the Shunammite woman. He called to her and she presented herself [before Elisha],

7 ותבא ותגיד לאיש האלהים ויאמר לה כי
מכרי את השמן ושלמי את הנשיכי [ונשיר] ואת בניכי [ובניד] תחיי בנוהר:

8 ויהי היום ויעבר אלישע אל שונם ושם
אשה גדולה ותחנקו בו לאכל לחם ויהי
מדי עברו יסר שמה לאכל לחם:

9 ותאמר אל אישה הנה נא ידעתי כי איש
אלהים קדוש הוא עבר עלינו תמיד:

10 נעשה נא עלית קיר קטנה ונשים לו שם
מטה ושלחן וכסא ומנורה והנה בבואו אלינו
יסור שמה:

11 ויהי היום ויבא שמה ויסר אל העליה
וישכב שמה:

12 ויאמר אל גחזי נערו קרא לשונמית
הזאת ויקרא אליה [ותעמד לפניו]:

Commentary

7. *The man of God.* איש אלהים (*ish elohim*) is a term used more often of Elisha than of anyone else. It appears to reflect the popular belief that some persons possess inherent divine powers (David too is so spoken of).³

8. *Shunem.* Located in the valley of Jezreel.⁴

A rich woman. אשה גדולה (*ishah gedolah*). The adjective usually means "great," but occasionally indicates social esteem or wealth.⁵ She had enough money to build an addition to her house in order to honor the Prophet (verse 10).

9. *Holy man.* The only time a prophet is so spoken of in the Tanach. Usually the expression is reserved for specially consecrated groups, like Nazirites.⁶

10. *On the roof.* Houses usually had flat roofs. The use of the word קיר (*kir*, literally wall) may indicate that the room was walled off, or by the wall, to give Elisha privacy.⁷

12. *Gehazi.* The servant appears here and in chapter 8 as a faithful associate of the Prophet, but in chapter 5 we are told that he was cursed by Elisha and contracted leprosy. The name signifies "valley of vision."

13. who said to Gehazi: Ask her what we can do for her in return for all the trouble she has taken on our account. Can I speak on your behalf with the king or the army commander?

I live among my kin, she replied.

14. What can we do for her, then? said Elisha [to Gehazi], who answered: Well, she has no son, and her husband is an old man.

15. Call her back, he said. He called to her, and she stood in the door. When she had returned,

16. [Elisha] said: At this time next year, you will be holding a son in your arms. She said: My lord, [you are] a man of God; do not, do not delude your maidservant.

17. But, as Elisha had promised her, the woman gave birth to a son at that season the next year.

18. The boy grew up. One day, he went out to see his father, who was among the reapers.

13 וַיֹּאמֶר לּוֹ אֶמְרָנָא אֵלֶיהָ הֲנָה חֲרָדָתְךָ
אֵלַינִי אֶתְּכַלְּמִי הַחֲרָדָה הַזֹּאת מָה לַעֲשׂוֹת לָךְ
הֲנִישׁ לְדַבְרֵךְ אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ אוֹ אֶל־שַׂר הַצְּבָאָה
וַתֹּאמֶר בְּחַוְד עִמִּי אָנֹכִי יֹשֶׁבֶת:

14 וַיֹּאמֶר וּמָה לַעֲשׂוֹת לָהּ וַיֹּאמֶר גִּיחִזִּי אָבִל
בֶּן אִידָלָה וְאִשָּׁה זָקֵן:

15 וַיֹּאמֶר קְרָא־לָהּ וַיִּקְרָא־לָהּ וַתֵּעָמֵד
בַּפֶּתַח:

16 וַיֹּאמֶר לַמוֹעֵד הַזֶּה כָּעֵת חִזָּה אִתִּי [אֶתָּה]
חֹבֶקֶת בֶּן וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל־אֲדֹנָי אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים
אֶל־תְּכַזֵּב בְּשַׁפְּחָתְךָ:

17 וַתֵּהֵר הָאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֵד בֶּן לַמוֹעֵד הַזֶּה כָּעֵת
חִזָּה אֶשְׂרֵד־בֵּר אֵלֶיהָ אֱלִישָׁע:

18 וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וַיְהִי הַיּוֹם וַיֵּצֵא אֶל־אָבִיו
אֶל־הַקְּצָרִים:

Commentary

13. *Who said to Gehazi.* Gehazi must have opened the door, but she did not enter, and the Prophet conveyed his message through him (see also verse 15).⁸

Or the army commander. Perhaps your military tax is too high.⁹

I live among my kin. A modest refusal of the Prophet's offer. If she needed anything, her family would take care of it. After making her reply she leaves the two men.

14. *She has no son.* Gehazi displays great insight into the woman's real need.

16. *Holding a son in your arms.* חִבְקָת (choveket, literally embrace). The word resembles the name of the prophet Habakkuk (חִבְקִיק), and tradition deduced from this that the prophet was the Shunammite's child.¹⁰ (The sidra begins with a similar promise to Sarah, which is the reason the Rabbis chose this haftarah.)

19. [Suddenly] he cried out to his father:
My head! My head! He said to a servant:
Carry him to his mother.

20. The servant took the boy to his mother,
who held him on her lap until noon, when
he died.

21. She took him up and laid him on the
bed of the man of God, Elisha, and left,
closing the door behind her.

22. Then she called to her husband: Send
me one of the servants and a donkey. I
must hurry to the man of God, and come
back.

23. Why go to him today? he asked. It is
neither New Moon nor Sabbath.

Don't worry about it, she answered.

24. She saddled the donkey and said to her
servant: Drive (the donkey) and get going,
and don't slow down unless I tell you to.

19 וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-אָבִיו רֹאשִׁי רֹאשִׁי וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל-
הַנֶּעֱר שָׂאֵהוּ אֶל-אִמּוֹ:

20 וַיִּשְׂאֵהוּ וַיְבִיאוּהוּ אֶל-אִמּוֹ וַיֵּשֶׁב עַל-
בְּרֵכֶיהָ עַד-הַצֹּהֲרָיִם וַיָּמָת:

21 וַתֵּלַע וַתִּשְׁכַּבְתּוּ עַל-מִטַּת אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים
וַתִּסְגֵר בְּעֶדְוֹ וַתִּצֵא:

22 וַתִּקְרָא אֶל-אִישָׁהּ וַתֹּאמֶר שְׁלַח נָא לִי
אֶחָד מִן-הַנְּעָרִים וְאֶחַת הָאֲתֹנֹת וְאֶרְוֶצָה
עַד-אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים וְאָשׁוּבָה:

23 וַיֹּאמֶר מִדּוּעַ אֲתִי [אֵת] הַלֶּכְתִּי [הַלֶּכְתָּ]
אֵלָיו הַיּוֹם לֹא-חָדָשׁ וְלֹא שַׁבָּת וַתֹּאמֶר
שָׁלוֹם:

24 וַתַּחְבֵּשׁ הָאֲתוֹן וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל-נְעָרָה נִתְּנָה וְלֶךְ
אֶל-תַּעְצֵר-לִי לְדָבָר כִּי אִם-אָמַרְתִּי לְךָ:

Commentary

19. *My head! My head!* Possibly a sunstroke. The book of Judith (in the Apocrypha) tells that Manasseh, her husband, had died from a sunstroke at the time of the barley harvest.¹¹

21. *Bed of the man of God.* Which she had furnished for Elisha.

23. *Why go to him today?* Apparently it was customary to visit a prophet on special occasions, and New Moon or Sabbath must have been days when this custom was observed.

Don't worry. An idiomatic rendering of her one-word response: שלום (*shalom*). She does not tell her husband what has happened and quickly reassures him.

24. *Don't slow down.* She rides the donkey while the boy drives it with his stick. The journey from Shunem to Mount Carmel was some 20 miles (32 kilometers).

25. She went to Mount Carmel and found the man of God. Seeing her while she was still some distance away, the man of God said to his servant Gehazi: There is that Shunammite woman.

26. Run to meet her and ask her whether she, her husband, and her son are all well. She told him they were well,

27. but when she reached the man of God on the mountain, she took hold of his feet. Gehazi was about to push her away, but the man of God said: Let her be; her heart is bitter, and the Eternal kept it from me.

28. She said: Did I ask for a son from my lord? Did I not say, *Don't deceive me?*

29. He said to Gehazi: Hurry up. Take my staff and go. Do not stop to greet anyone and do not reply to anyone's greeting. Go and put my staff on the boy's face.

30. And the boy's mother said: As the Eternal lives and as you live, I will not leave you. So he got up and followed her.

25 ותלך ותבוא אל-איש האלהים אל-הר הכרמל ויהי כראות איש האלהים אותה מנגד ויאמר אל-גחזי נערו הנגה השונמית הלז:

26 עתה רוצנא לקראתה ויאמר-לה השלום לך השלום לאישך השלום לילד ותאמר שלום:

27 ותבא אל-איש האלהים אל-ההר ותחזק ברגלי וניש גיחזי להרפה ויאמר איש האלהים הרפה-לה כי-נפשה מרה-לה ויהנה העלים ממני ולא הגיד לי:

28 ותאמר השאלתי בן מאת אדני הלא אמרתי לא תשלה אותי:

29 ויאמר לגיחזי חגר מתניך וקח משענתי בידך ולך כי-תמצא איש לא תברכנו וכי-יברכך איש לא תענונו ושמת משענתי על-פני הנער:

30 ותאמר אם הנער חי-יהנה וחי-נפשך אם-אעזבך ויקם וילך אחריה:

Commentary

25. *That Shunammite woman.* The Hebrew הלז (*hallaz*, that) is masculine, instead of the feminine הלזה. Such mixture of genders occurs a number of times in the Tanach.

26. *She told him they were well.* She wanted to bring her plight to Elisha personally.

27. *The Eternal kept it from me.* Said in puzzlement by the Prophet.

29. *He said to Gehazi.* The Shunammite's outburst told him everything he needed to know. The boy was dead, and she had come to ask for a miracle.

30. *I will not leave you.* She wants none but the master himself to ask God's help for the boy.

31. Gehazi went on ahead of them and laid the staff on the boy's face, but there was no sound and no sign of life. He turned back to meet Elisha and told him: The boy has not awakened.

32. Elisha went into the house, and there was the dead boy lying on his bed.

33. He went in, shut the door on the two of them, and prayed to the Eternal.

34. Then he stretched himself over the boy, placing his mouth, eyes, and hands on the boy's mouth, hands, and eyes. He crouched over him and the boy's body grew warm.

35. Elisha got up, walked to and fro about the house, and again crouched over the boy. The boy then sneezed seven times and opened his eyes.

36. Elisha called Gehazi and told him to call the Shunammite woman. When she came, he said: Lift up your son.

37. She threw herself down at his feet and bowed low to the ground. Then she lifted up her son and left.

Commentary

33. *Shut the door.* Elisha wanted, literally, to be alone with God. He did not know whether he too, like Gehazi, might not be answered.

31 וַיֵּצֵא גֵחָזִי עִבְרָה לְפָנֵיהֶם וַיִּשֶׁם אֶת־הַמַּשְׁעוֹת
עַל־פְּנֵי הַנֶּעֱר וַאֲיֵן קוֹל וַאֲיֵן קִשְׁב וַיָּשָׁב
לִקְרֹאתוֹ וַיַּגִּד־לּוֹ לֵאמֹר לֹא הִקִּיץ הַנֶּעֱר:

32 וַיָּבֵא אֶל־יִשְׁע הַבַּיִתָּה וַהֲנִיחַ הַנֶּעֱר מֵת
מִשְׁכָּב עַל־מִטָּתוֹ:

33 וַיָּבֵא וַיִּסְגֵר הַדֶּלֶת בְּעַד שְׁנֵיהֶם וַיַּחְפְּלֵל
אֶל־יְהוָה:

34 וַיַּעַל וַיִּשְׁכַּב עַל־הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּשֶׁם פִּיו עַל־פִּיו
וְעֵינָיו עַל־עֵינָיו וְכַפָּיו עַל־כַּפָּיו [כַּפָּיו] וַיִּגְהַר
עָלָיו וַיִּחַם בֶּשֶׂר הַיֶּלֶד:

35 וַיָּשָׁב וַיֵּלֶךְ בַּבַּיִת אַחַת הַנְּהָ וְאַחַת הַנְּהָ
וַיַּעַל וַיִּגְהַר עָלָיו וַיִּזְוַרר הַנֶּעֱר עַד־שִׁבְעַ
פְּעָמִים וַיִּפְקַח הַנֶּעֱר אֶת־עֵינָיו:

36 וַיִּקְרָא אֶל־גֵּחָזִי וַיֹּאמֶר קְרֹא אֶל־
הַשְּׁנַמִּית הַזֹּאת וַיִּקְרָאָהָ וַתָּבוֹא אֵלָיו וַיֹּאמֶר
שָׂאִי בְנֶךְ:

37 וַתָּבֹא וַתִּפֹּל עַל־רַגְלָיו וַתִּשְׁתַּחוּ אַרְצָה
וַתִּשָּׂא אֶת־בְּנָהּ וַתֵּצֵא:

Essay

Elisha's miracles

While the prophet Elijah was credited with eight miracles, his disciple Elisha performed double that number¹²—two of them being recounted in our haftarah.

Miracles are generally understood to be divinely authored events that defy the laws of nature, and the Tanach is the repository of many such tales. The crossing of the Reed (Red) Sea by the Israelites and the ten plagues visited upon the Egyptians are famous examples. The ancients had no trouble believing extraordinary events of this kind, for God's power was seen as unlimited.¹³

But in modern days, miracles have fallen out of favor, because faith in an omnipotent God has greatly diminished. There is a tendency to say: what the ancients thought to have been miracles were really events whose nature was imperfectly understood. A confluence of unusual meteorological circumstances caused the Reed Sea to retreat, and the plagues were disasters experienced as supernatural but were in fact perfectly natural, though unusual.

Similarly with the story of the revived son in the haftarah. Perhaps, it might be argued, the boy had a severe sunstroke, which caused him to be comatose, with very shallow breathing, so that the mother thought he had died.¹⁴ When the Prophet arrived and tried CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation), he succeeded. No wonder that the attempt to revive the boy through placing the prophetic rod on his forehead brought no result.

There is of course no way of establishing what "really" happened. All history is an interpretation of events, and the events themselves are not "facts" but reports seen through the eyes of contemporaries. We know today that what television presents as the day's fare is based on selected images by telejournalists and the news value that the studio assigns to them. And just as today's media shape the news, so did oral transmissions in ancient days.

People wanted to believe that Elisha, like his master, had extraordinary gifts, and they lovingly embellished what they learned about him. The text brings us legendary exploits of a great and revered man, who had the ear of kings, and whose prophetic power was wedded to a pervasive concern for the downtrodden.

Whatever we wish to make of these tales, it is clear that Elisha's contemporaries experienced them as having happened as told. They believed in the capacity of a few chosen individuals to exercise some of God's power on occasion. Note that the accounts are as bare and matter-of-fact as they can be. The Prophet does what needs to be done, and the stories end almost abruptly, leaving out all encomia. The writer did not feel that the obvious needed to be stressed: that God, and not Elisha, was the motive force in these happenings. The storyteller belonged to a time that was used to "radical amazement"¹⁵—a constant wonder at the marvelous presence of the Divine in their lives and the life of the world.

This sense is preserved in our daily prayer, when we give thanks for God's "wondrous gifts at all times, morning, noon, and night."¹⁶