

Ode To Jewish Mothers

The Haftora¹ for parshas Vayeira tells us of two stories of miracles, from our prophet Elisha.

The obvious connection to our parsha is that in our parsha, Sarah, who was in her nineties was blessed to have a son and gave birth to Yitzchak. In the Haftora, the Shunamis (Shunamite woman), who was also at an advanced age, was blessed to have a son and gave birth to a son.

However, reading the Haftora, it is clear, that most of it has nothing to do with the blessing and birth of the boy. How does the rest of the Haftora connect to the parsha? What deeper lessons are found in these stories.

The first story in the Haftora, tells of one woman, the widow of a prophet, who cried out to Elisha. According to tradition² the prophet was Ovadia (Obadiah), who saved a hundred prophets from king Achav and his evil wife Ezevel (Ahab and Jezebel) by hiding them in caves and borrowing money to sustain them. Now the creditor was coming for the money, and being that she didn't have it, he wanted to take her two sons as slaves. What was she to do?

Elisha ask her, "Tell me, what do you have in the house?"³ She responded, "there is nothing... But a jug of oil."⁴ He told her to borrow vessels from all of her neighbors, "empty vessels, not a few."⁵ Then she should close the door, start pouring the oil and fill all the vessels. And so she did.

Even though there was little oil in the jug, it continued pouring until the last vessel was full, and when there were no more, it stopped.

She then went to Elisha and told him what happened. He told her to sell the oil and pay the

debt, and "you and your two sons will live off the rest."⁶

A beautiful and well deserved miracle.

Please allow me to take you to a deeper place.

There is a teaching from the Alter Rebbe (Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the first Rebbe of Chabad), that this story is a metaphor for someone who feels empty and apathetic towards Judaism, and wants that to change.

The "one woman" in the story, is the neshama, which is always one with Hashem. "The wife of a prophet"⁷ who received G-d's word and was filled with meaning. "Cried" with bitterness to "Elisha," symbolizing Hashem (if you divide the name Elisha, you get Eli, which means my G-d, and sha, which means turn or pay attention). "My husband (in Hebrew ishi) died!"⁸ Ishi can be divided into aish, which means fire, and the letter yud, which symbolizes Hashem, meaning, that she doesn't feel the G-dly fire burning inside, she feels that her Judaism is hollow and void of meaning. "The creditor," is the animal soul, which yearns for physical pleasure and makes us forget about Hashem. He "is coming to take my two sons," the animal soul wants to take our love and fear of Hashem and use them for selfish desires and pleasures.

What is one to do in this situation, when he feels so distant from Hashem?

To this Elisha asked, "Tell me, what do you have in the house?" Is there anything left of your connection with Hashem?" She responded " There is nothing... but a jug of oil," oil symbolizes the essence of a Jew, the Pintaleh Yid, that cannot be affected, and is always one with Hashem. He said, "Go borrow vessels... Empty vessels," Torah and mitzvas are vessels for G-dliness, but now they are empty, lacking meaning, love and fear of Hashem.

¹ Chabad and Ashkenazic communities read II Kings 4:1-37. Sefardic communities read II Kings 4:1-23.

² Rashi, Radak and Metzudas David to II Kings 4:1.

³ II Kings 4:2.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ II Kings 4:3.

⁶ II Kings 4:7.

⁷ II Kings 4:1.

⁸ Ibid.

"Not a few," meaning, do a lot of Torah and mitzvas, even though they seem empty, because they are vessels for G-dliness. "Pour on them oil," tap into your essence and allow it to flow and fill all of your vessels.

How does one tap into his essence?

When you have a log that won't catch fire, you break it into pieces, then it catches on fire. Same is with us, when we don't feel it, we need to break ourselves. How? When you ponder on your empty state, being so distant from Hashem, you will become bitter and broken. This is when the "oil," your essence, will begin to pour and fill all of the empty vessels you created.

After you pay the creditor, "you and your children will live with the extra." Meaning, not only will you regain the connection you lost, but you will have extra. When you break the dark state that you were in, you bring out a light that is beyond anything that you experienced before. This is the great light that comes out of the darkness.⁹

The Haftora now tells us a second story. Once when Elisha was in Shuneim, a prominent woman, the Shunamis, insisted that he eat at her home. From then on, whenever he passed through Shuneim, he would eat by her home. According to Rashi,¹⁰ she was the sister of Avishag The Shunamis, who kept King David warm in his old age.

Realizing how holy he was, she asked her husband to build a loft, with a chair, a table, a bed and a candelabra for his use.

When Elisha saw all the trouble she went through for him he wanted to reciprocate in some way. She didn't have children, so he blessed her to have a baby, and a year later she gave birth to a son.

⁹ Maamarim Haketzarim Admur Hazaken, maamar Keshaim Shetzoakim p. 137, and maamar V'Isha Achas p. 136. See Lekutei Sichos volume 5 pp. 334-335. See also maamar V'Isha Achas 5746, Torahs Menachem Sefer Hamaamarim Meluket volume 1 pp. 262.

¹⁰ Rashi and Radak to II Kings 4:8.

The boy grew up. One day his head started hurting, and he later died in his mother's lap. She brought him up to the loft laid him on Elisha's bed and locked the door.

She traveled quickly to Elisha, and he came back to Shuneim, to the loft, and saw that the boy was dead. The Haftora then tells us the miracle, how he brought the boy back to life. According to our tradition, the boy was our prophet Chavakuk.¹¹

Most of the Haftora tells about these two mothers and the lengths they went to secure the welfare of their children. This is what I think is the connection between the rest of the Haftora and the parsha. In the parsha we read how Sarah sent away Yishmael, so that he wouldn't be a bad influence on her son Yitzchak. And being that our great sages chose to include these parts about mothers who cared for their children, which is most of the Haftora, means that they felt that this was an important theme of the parsha, if not the most important.¹²

This is an ode to Jewish mothers, who give so much, and are strong for their children. That our parsha speaks of the Akeida, the binding of Yitzchak on the altar, yet the Haftora doesn't even hint to this monumental event. Instead, it speaks of the love and care of Jewish mothers to their children.

May Hashem show us the same love, send Moshiach and save us from the clutches of this dark exile. The time has come.

¹¹ There are other opinions as to when Chavakuk lived and who he was. Some say that we don't know when he lived or which family he was from. Others say that he lived in the time of Menashe son of Chizkiya. Yet others maintain that he lived at the end of the Babylonian exile, together with Daniel. See the information about the prophets at the beginning of the Mikraos Gedolos Nach, Trei Assar. And see Mahari Kra, Even Ezra, and Radak to Habakkuk 1:1.

¹² This idea came to me as I was preparing the article. I don't know if it is brought down anywhere, perhaps one of the readers can enlighten me.