

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Vayera

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 4: Parshat Vayera, II Book of Kings, 4:1—4:37

Why the Apparent Reason for Choosing This Piece Can't Be the Real One

The **הרטפה** tells a story of the prophet Elisha promising a son to a childless woman, who then gets sick, almost dies, and is revived by the prophet. The parallels of the story might lead us to assume this is why we read the selection on this Sabbath. However, Elijah also resuscitates a child, so we would need a reason for reading this story rather than that one. In addition, we start reading this **הרטפה** with a whole other story, about Elisha's helping a widow fend off her creditors. Both factors argue in favor of looking for some other connection.

Summary of the **הרטפה**

The haftarah opens with the story just mentioned, the widow of a prophet coming to Elisha to complain about the creditors' threat to take her sons as slaves. Elisha asks what she has in the house, and then tells her to take that cruse of oil, gather pots from all her neighbors, and pour into them. Miraculously, the oil does not stop flowing until she runs out of pots; when she returns to him for advice, he tells her to sell the oil, repay the creditors, and live off the rest.

The text then moves on to the woman of Shunem (also not named), who insists Elisha use their house as his inn whenever he passes through their town. When he asks her what reward she would like, she denies having any need, but Gehazi, his attendant, mentions that she is childless. Elisha promises a son, and it happens.

Some time after, the boy goes out to the fields with his father, takes ill, is sent home to his mother, and dies. She goes back to Elisha, insisting he help her. Elisha sends Gehazi with his staff to place on the boy and heal him, but the woman insists he come himself. When he gets there, after Gehazi and the staff failed to revive the child, Elisha succeeds.

How We Treat a Prophet Affects How We Get Treated

The Midrash identifies the widow as Obadiah's wife, and says that she saved her generation, but does not tell us how. Since it is commenting on the verse in which she turns to Elisha for assistance, we might suspect it was her turning to him which itself saved the generation.

That suggests that one challenge of Elisha's time was convincing people to treat the prophet of God different from other prophets. This makes sense in light of Elisha's being the student of Elijah. Elijah, too, struggled to unalterably convince the people that God is the only true deity, as we will see in a later **הרטפה**.

That Elisha lived in a time challenged to understand the exceptional nature of prophets also helps us understand the connection between the two stories, since the Shunemite woman sets herself apart by treating Elisha with special respect. She is not just a gracious hostess, she sets aside a permanent place for the prophet, so he will feel comfortable at any time that he comes.

Another parallel is in the open-endedness of the reward each gets, requiring them to consult further with the prophet as to how to benefit most fully. In the first story, Obadiah's wife comes to ask what she should do with the oil that came out of the container, and in the second, the Shunemite needs to save her son.

Seeing the haftarah as focused on the value and eventual reward for those who make efforts to recognize God's representatives offers insight into the stories of the Torah reading as well. There, we find Abraham welcoming guests (although without regard to their status), he is told of the coming of Isaac, and, finally, has his son threatened with death but finds a reprieve, like the Shunemite.

Two messages are being stressed: First, the road for those who take the side of God and good may be rocky, but their eventual reward is assured, and, second, doing for the prophets is functionally the same as Abraham doing for God.

Great, But No Abraham: A Brief Look at Elisha

Lost in the similarities might be some important differences. Elisha parallels Abraham, in that he is the one working on God-awareness in his generation, but a closer look reveals how extraordinary the Patriarch was. Abraham connects to people better than Elisha, himself running to welcome guests and defending Sodom despite his lack of personal connection to that city Lot was saved by the angels.

The verses cast Elisha more harshly. He does not help Obadiah's widow until she pleads with him that she is on the verge of losing her sons to slavery. He accepts the Shunemite's kindness, but knows nothing of her life circumstances. In both cases, his ignorance is surprising—Obadiah was a fellow-prophet, and the Shunemite had gone out of her way to treat him well, yet he does not know the simplest information about her and her husband. Even once he resurrects the child, we see no emotion from Elisha; he has her called in, gives her the child and says "here, take him."

The juxtaposition, intentional or not, shows the difficulties in standing alone for an ideal. Throughout his life, Abraham stood on one side, with the rest of the world against him and his monotheism. It is surprising that he yet managed to retain his affection for others, concern with their welfare (such as Sodom), and insistence that they get the best possible judgment from God.

Elisha suffered the same loneliness, but seems to have coped with it in his own way, building a wall between himself and those around him. He shows us how wearing and

lonely it can be to stand for truths rejected by the rest of the world, and increases our admiration for Abraham in handling it so well.

Two Famous Phrases: Strangers in God's Land

In verse 13, when Elisha asks what the Shunemite needs, she responds "תבשוּי יכנא ימע דותב", I have relatives and influence of my own." Hovot haLevavot cites that as opposite to the attitude we should have before God. In God's land, we should see ourselves as strangers, without influence or family connections.

Rosh haShanah 16b infers an obligation "לגרב ובר ינפ ליבקהל" to greet one's teacher," on holidays from the husband's asking why his wife was going to Elisha when the day is "אל- rehtien ,חודש ולא שבת, *Hodesh* nor Shabbat." The idea fits the theme of the הרטפה as a whole, that teachers and prophets show us God in the world, and we therefore need to maintain a continuing relationship with them, treating them differently than others.

In summary, then, the הרטפה offered a look at the reward that came to two women who treated prophets with the respect and reverence they deserved. It implied that much of what led to Abraham's exalted position was his firm attachment to representing God in the world, and to spreading knowledge of God to others.

Shabbat Shalom