

# Haftarat Vayeira וַיֵּרָא

**Torah: Genesis 18:1–22:24**

**Haftarah: 2 Kings 4:1–37**

## **God's Timely Provision**

### **General Overview**

This haftarah consists of two seemingly separate episodes in the ongoing account of the adventures of Elisha, the prophet of Israel. In the first story there is a woman whose husband, another prophet, had died and left her with a debt to pay. She was very poor and could not find a way to repay it. Her creditors were threatening to take her sons away as indentured servants to pay off the debt.

The woman beseeches Elisha to help her. He does so by instructing her to collect as many empty jars as she could find, even from her neighbours. She was then told to fill the jars with oil. As she was pouring, God miraculously caused the oil to multiply so that she was able to fill all of the jars. Then Elisha instructed her to sell the abundance of oil. With the proceeds, she was not only able to payoff the debt, but also earned enough for her and her sons to live on.

In the second story, we find that it was the habit of Elisha to stop in frequently at the house of a certain Shunemite woman to eat a meal. The woman became convinced that he was a true prophet of God and asked her husband, an older man, if they could make more permanent accommodations in the upper level of their house for Elisha to stay whenever he needed. In gratitude for this courtesy, Elisha blessed the woman (apparently barren) with the announcement that she would bear a son. She took the blessing with mixed feelings. She did not want to be disappointed with such a prediction only to have her hopes dashed if it did not come to pass. Elisha's prophecy proved accurate and a son was, indeed, born.

After several years, the son became very ill and died. The woman went to Elisha to express her feelings of disappointment and grief. He, in turn, sent his servant Gehazi to resurrect the son. After failing to do so, Elisha himself went and, through God's hand, raised him to life.

### **Connection to the Parasha**

There are at least two parallels between this haftarah and Parashat Vayeira. The first is that, like Abraham, Elisha is seen as someone whose intent in life is to bless the people around him. This desire for blessing had long since vanished from many of Abraham's descendants in the Ten Tribe Kingdom. But Elisha was called by God to continue the tradition of his father Abraham.

Second, we see the miraculous and supernatural in these two stories of Elisha — just as we saw the supernatural play an important role in the life of Abraham. After all, who was that special visitor of Abraham who continued to Sodom to apply God's wrath there? Again, how else was Sarah able to have a baby, given her age? Moreover, how was it that just at the right time and in

the right place a ram happened to appear to serve as a substitute for Isaac whom Abraham was about to slay under the direction of the Almighty? So, also in the haftarah do we see the miraculous production of oil to help the poor widow and the supernatural raising of the dead in the story of the Shunamite woman. Rabbi Hertz summarizes this connection quite well when he remarks that, "The haftarah teaches that there is Divine control of human conditions, and that many humanly unaccountable things happen in life."<sup>1</sup>

### **1. God always takes care of His own, in His way.**

One impression we get from this story is that the Lord did not send Elisha to her immediately when her problems began to happen. It seems that it was not until things really started to get desperate that relief came. One reason that we say this is because it must have taken a while for the creditor to realize that she could not pay the debt and for her resources to run dry.

God is, indeed, much more patient than we sometimes are. There have been other times in Israel's history when, humanly speaking, it seems that God was completely silent and indifferent to the needs of His people. One instance was during the centuries of Egyptian slavery.

There came a time when things got from bad to worse for the children of Israel. Certainly, as their quotas were raised and their misery increased, many of them were thinking, "Where is God?" In response, Exodus 2:23–25 tells us:

A long time after that, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites were groaning under bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God. God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

We are sure that this poor woman felt like her forefathers. However, just like the ancient Israelites, God was there all along and acted in His own time to rescue her.

### **2. God Heals.**

Why was oil one of the main features of this story? After all, the woman could have had any number of valuables left in her house. But in her case the only asset was oil. Moreover, it was not cooking oil, but oil used primarily for medicine. (There were different presses of the olive that produced different grades of oil. This was apparently the press that produced medicinal oil.)

The Hebrew dictionaries call it anointing oil. Somehow, whenever some believers in Yeshua see that phrase "anointing" they immediately and exclusively think of the anointing for service to God, like when kings were anointed. But the word anointing also means to spread something over one's body, such as medicine. Indeed, in ancient times, olive oil was one of the primary substances used for healing purposes.

What could the woman have learned from the oil in this story? First, she would have learned that God intended to heal her. Her wounds were not physical; they were emotional, mental, and spiritual. The oil would have reminded her that God's "oil" — His Spirit — is there in abundance for her to apply to her hurts.

Moreover, it was the abundance of physical oil that resulted in her most serious problems on earth being "cured." Just as the abundance of physical oil brought relief to her physical situation, so too would God's healing hand minister to her deepest needs — in abundance.

### **3. Paying our debts takes top priority.**

On a very practical level, this woman was taught by God through His prophet Elisha what has since become, "an ethical rule of Jewish conduct: first pay the debts, afterwards minister to your own needs."<sup>2</sup>

### **4. Do not abuse the Torah.**

How could the woman have learned this particular lesson? After all, the text does not indicate that she broke the Torah in any way. Indeed, she did not. But, the creditor did. How can that be since we have already cited the fact that he had every right to take her sons as payment for her debts? That is the point! He had every *right* to do so, but he was never *commanded* to do so.

The Torah was designed to protect the entire Torah community. If someone is owed a debt, the Torah makes provision for that debt to be paid. However, in this case, the woman also needed protection. The Torah makes specific provision to protect the well being of widows. This creditor should have realized her dire straits and therefore not have pressed his rights to take her children, which would have just about broken her spirit — especially since she was in grief over the death of her husband and had no source of income.

Thus, in my opinion, this creditor, though according to the letter, had a right to her children, but broke the spirit of the intent of the Torah by demanding the payment of her sons.

That is an abuse of the Torah. This woman certainly learned a valuable lesson about the Torah. She learned that it should not be abused, because in doing so, it hurts others. Moreover, she also learned that the Torah is, indeed, her protector. God Himself intervened through another member of the Torah community — Elisha. In doing so, God was teaching that even if some people abuse the Torah and hurt others by it, He also has His remnant of faithful ones who understand the full intent of the Torah. This remnant realizes that the Torah was meant for the good of the whole community and not just there for some to press their rights and hurt others in the process. God, the giver of the Torah intervened and assured this woman that His teachings are holy, just, and good.

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<sup>1</sup> Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 76.

<sup>2</sup> Hertz, *op. cit.*, 77.