HAFTORAH OF SIDRA VA-YAY-ROH : וירא

This week's Haftorah is taken from the Second Book of Kings, Chapter 4 verses 1 — 24 for Sefaradim; Ashkenazim continue till verse 37.

1 . These chapters tell of the various miracles that Elisha wrought when he became the Torah leader of Israel and the Head of the Sanhedrin after his master, the prophet Eliyahu. HaShem granted Elisha this special ability to work miracles in response to his request for Divine help in being leader. The ten miracles reported in these chapters vary from almost personal miracles to miracles of national importance and in which a great number of people were involved, showing, incidentally, how a great Torah leader is involved not only with national issues but concerns himself with the welfare of any person, however humble, who needs his help. And so it is that Elisha, the devoted pupil of Eliyahu, continuing the tradition started by the prophet Shmuel, travels around Eretz Yisroel, teaching Torah and judging cases brought to him and generally helping and guiding the people in their everyday lives. (This is almost three thousand years before this idea of "circuit judges" was copied by others.)

2. The connexion between the Sidra and the Haftorah is quite evident. In the Sidra is the report of how HaShem's promise that Avrohom and his wife Soroh, despite their great old age, would have a child, came true with the birth of Yitzchok. In this week's Haftorah, similarly, is the report of how another righteous couple, likewise with no children and likewise advanced in years, are promised by the prophet Elisha that "at this time next year" a child would be born to them and how that promise came true.

3. Elisha is on his travels when he is approached by the widow of Ovadya who implores Elisha to help her to save her sons. She tells him that in his lifetime, her husband had impoverished himself in his self-imposed task of hiding away a great number of Torah students and sustaining them with food and drink. These Torah students were in grave danger because the king at that time, Achov, together with his wife, the Phoenician princess Izevvel, had mounted a crusade against the Torah and they were determined to kill Jews loyal to Torah. When all his own money was all gone, Ovadya had been forced to take a loan, at interest, from Yehorom, the son of Achov. With this money, he had been able to support these one hundred hidden Torah scholars. But the strain had killed him. Now, Ovadya's widow begs Elisha to help her save her sons whom Yehorom has threatened to take as his slaves for the non-payment of the debt.

4. Elisha asks the woman what she has in her house. "Nothing but a tiny cruse of olive oil," she answers. Elisha tells her to borrow from her neighbours and friends many empty vessels — "don't skimp, get as many vessels as you can!" he tells her — and to then lock herself in her house together with her two sons. She should then pour from the small jug into the empty vessels without interrupting the miraculous flow, the boys passing vessel after vessel. She should then sell the oil, pay the debt and support herself and her children.

5. The Haftorah continues with another episode in Elisha's travels through the country, teaching and guiding and, where necessary, judging. Whenever he visited the town of Shunem, he stayed there with a certain couple who extended courteous hospitality to the

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Man of G-d. One day, the wife said to her husband that they should build a small attic room for the exclusive use of their special guest. On his next visit, Elisha told his servant Gaychazi to call the woman and thank her for her efforts on their behalf and to ask her if they can do anything for her in return. In reply, the woman politely tells Elisha that they are privileged to host Elisha and that, no, she has no need for anything. But after she has gone, Elisha is not happy. How can they show their appreciation? Gaychazi then tells Elisha that the couple have no children. "Call her back!" says Elisha. She stands respectfully at the door and Elisha tells her: "This time next year, you will be cradling a baby son!" Only too aware of the impossibility of this happening (she and her husband are advanced in years) she thanks Elisha for his kind blessing but asks him not to make rash promises. But one year later, a baby boy is born to the couple.

6. One fine summer's day a couple of years later, his father took him to the harvest. But then the toddler complains of a headache and his father, thinking that perhaps it is heatstroke, tells one of the reapers to carry the child back to town to his mother. She tenderly cradles him in her lap, ignoring her own grief at his obvious pain, to comfort him, till he dies in her arms. She then carries the little body upstairs and places it upon the bed of the Man of G-d and goes out, locking the door behind her. She sends a message to her husband that he should send a donkey and a youngster to accompany her, telling her husband that she is going to see Elisha. As to his question, "Why?" she makes no reply save to call to him, "Shalom!" *(Sefaradim end the Haftorah at this point.)*

7. They arrive at Mount Carmel. When Elisha sees her from a distance, he is surprised and asks Gaychazi to find out that everything is well. Brushing Gaychazi's questions aside, she pushes forward and falls to the ground and grabs hold of Elisha's feet. Gaychazi makes to push her away but Elisha says to him, "Leave her alone! She is a broken-hearted woman, but HaShem has not told me the reason!" The woman says to Elisha: "Did I then ask for a child, that he should be taken from me? Didn't I beg you not to make rash promises?"

8. Elisha understands straightaway. "Take my staff," he says to Gaychazi, "and go quickly. Don't tarry. Don't even greet anyone that you meet on the way. Don't tell anything to anybody and when you get there, place my staff upon the boy." But the child's mother insists that Elisha come back with her and Elisha follows her back. Gaychazi goes ahead of them and, once there, places the staff upon the boy. But it is to no avail. There is no sound and no response. When they arrive, Gaychazi greets them with the news that "the boy has not awoken."

9. Elisha comes into the house and the little boy is lying on his bed, quite dead. He locks himself in the room with the dead child and he fervently prays to HaShem. Then he climbs up and lies himself on top of the child's body, to warm it somewhat. (Elisha is aware that he is beseeching HaShem to defy the natural order of things and make a cold, dead body come alive again. Warming the lifeless body is an attempt to make the miracle somewhat less in flagrant breach of the natural.) He places his mouth over the mouth of the boy, his eyes over the eyes of the boy and the palms of his hands over the palms of the boy and he warms the little body. Elisha prays again and again he lies himself upon the body. Then the boy sneezes seven times and opens his eyes.

10. Elisha then tells Gaychazi to summon the mother. When she comes, Elisha says to her: "Pick up your son!" She comes into the room and falls at Elisha's feet in thanks and she bows down in gratitude to HaShem. Then she picks up her son and she leaves.