

SEFER MELAKHIM BET: THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS
By Rav Alex Israel

Shiur #05: Chapter 4 Part 1: Elisha – Prophet of Miracles

Our chapter narrates four separate episodes, each of which depict Elisha as assisting individuals or groups by miraculous means:

- 4:1-8 – The Widow and the Oil
- 4:9-37 – The Shunammite Woman and Her Son
- 4:38-41 – Poison in the Pot
- 4:42-43 – Providing Bread

As we study the Elisha stories, we observe that he is constantly performing miracles. The four stories in this chapter may be added to the events of previous chapters: Elisha's splitting of the Jordan River, his healing of the spring of Yericho, the bears that burst out of the woods, and the miraculous waters that saved the Israelite army. This miracle-making is a mode of operation unlike anything we have witnessed previously in *Tanakh*. Although Eliyahu, and other prophets before him like Moshe or Yehoshua, performed miracles and wonders, they were generally employed to further the national agenda or to display God's power. Moreover, these supernatural acts were sporadic and designed to create an impact; they are typically announced employing God's name. They are certainly not perceived as routine, and not taken for granted.

In contrast, Elisha seems to utilize miracles automatically and almost nonchalantly as a means of resolving everyday human problems, whether he is healing a polluted spring or rendering a poisonous soup edible, assisting in a search for a lost axe head or even striking an Aramean battalion with blindness. The miracles lack dramatic impact, and Elisha employs them in an almost routine, prosaic fashion, frequently failing even to invoke God's name as he alters the natural order. There are those¹ who have likened the Elisha stories to Hassidic legends, given the casual nature with which he dispenses miracles.

We can divide the Elisha narratives into different categories. There are stories which are longer – the Shunammite woman (4:8-37), Na'aman (ch.5), the siege on Shomron (6:24-7:20) – which allow for rich character development and a textured, sophisticated message; on the other hand, there are shorter, more concise episodes. An alternative classification sees one genre of stories concerning practical assistance to individuals or small groups, such as the *benei ha-nevi'im* (the apprenticing prophets) with a second group depicting Elisha as operating at the national level, alongside kings and armies, whether in conflict with Moav or Aram (ch.3, 6:8-23), Na'aman (ch.5), Chaza'el (8:7-15) or the king

¹ Yael Shemesh, Bar Ilan Parasha Sheet - <http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/vayera/she.html>

of Yisrael (5:8, 7:32-33, 9:1-3, 13:14-19). And yet, the common thread throughout is Elisha's miracle-making. We shall return to this point later in this *shiur*.

THE BENEI HA-NEVI'IM

A second contextual point relates to the social backdrop of these stories. All four stories include Elisha interacting with his students and supporters. In one case, it is the Shunammite woman, who seems to attend prophetic gatherings on Rosh Chodesh and Shabbat² (4:23); the other miracles transpire in the company of a group identified as the *benei ha-nevi'im*. Elisha has already interacted with this group in chapter two, but in the subsequent stories, he resides among them and serves as the address for their problems. He solves the financial distress of a desperate widow affiliated with the group (4:1-8), he assists in their nutritional needs (4:38-43), and the *benei ha-nevi'im* even pressure him to accompany them when they go to chop timber. Interestingly, Elisha adopts the role of social worker more than the role of spiritual leader, as we never hear his teachings or witness him training the group in prophecy.³ He engages the prophets and cares for them, and, under his influence, this group grows in popularity, undergoing a period of expansion: "See the place where we live **under your direction** is too cramped for us. Let us... build quarters for ourselves to live in" (6:1-2). Furthermore, Elisha seems to move from town to town, and is surrounded by followers and supporters in each place: Shunem (4:8), Carmel (4:22-25), Gilgal (4:38), Shomron (5:3, 6:32), and by the Jordan River (6:2).⁴ Elisha appears to be spreading God's word throughout the land,⁵ but he is of a more social nature than his predecessor, Eliyahu, and is constantly found in a group. Perhaps the burgeoning ranks of the *benei ha-nevi'im* in Elisha's period are due to his congenial and proactive approach.

4:1-8 THE WIDOW AND THE OIL

The story begins with a disturbing glimpse of the cruel socio-economic reality of ancient Israel. A husband – one of Elisha's disciples – has died, leaving a wife and children, and the family has accrued debts. Now, with nothing to their name and no easy means of income, the widow cannot repay the loan, and the lender threatens to take her children, selling them as slaves to repay the loan.

The term "*nosheh*" used here for the lender is indicative of a loan with interest.⁶ The Torah prohibits issuing a loan with interest, calling it "*neshekh*"⁷ because it bites – "*noshekh*" – leaving the poor absolutely destitute. Evidently, these laws were ignored; the result is child slavery! A similarly horrific situation is addressed centuries later by Yirmiyahu, who urges the people of Jerusalem to release their Jewish slaves (ch. 34). Nechemia too, when children and wives are

² *Tanakh* portrays Rosh Chodesh alongside Shabbat and the festivals as a public holiday, a family sacrificial feast. See *I Shmuel* 20:18, 27-29; *Yishayahu* 1:13, 66:23; *Amos* 8:4.

³ One exception (9:1) is where Elisha dispatches one of the *benei ha-nevi'im* to anoint Yei'hu as king.

⁴ One further location is Dotan (6:13), but there he is accompanied only by his assistant. However, the very fact that his location was known, even by the Arameans, is indicative of a public performance or appearance.

⁵ In this manner he follows the successful prophet, Shmuel. See *I Shmuel* ch.7:15-17; 9:9,15-25.

⁶ *Shemot* 22:24

⁷ *Shemot* 22:24; *Vayikra* 25:36-7; *Devarim* 23:20.

being seized to repay loans, campaigns to end human trafficking. Nechemia makes two claims. First, he preaches:

We have done our best to buy back our Jewish brothers who were sold to the nations; will you now sell your brothers so that they must be sold [back] to us? (*Nechemia* 5:8)

The Jewish community in Bavel set itself to the task of freeing enslaved Jews. He challenges them: in our own country will we be our own oppressors? Second, he sets a personal example and forgoes the repayment of the loans that he himself had issued to others. By setting that personal example, others followed and eventually all the enslaved Jews were returned to freedom.⁸

However, Elisha cannot change society; he can merely alleviate this woman's crisis by resorting to alternative means. Elisha instructs her to:

"...borrow vessels outside, from all your neighbors, empty vessels, as many as you can. Then go in and shut the door behind you and your children, and pour into all those vessels." (4:3-4)

HIDDEN MIRACLE

Elisha commands the woman to "close the door," and she is to continue to pour without stopping – that is why her son is passing her pots the entire time. One wonders why she had to close the door and why she must pour continuously. Moreover, Elisha begins by saying "What do you have in your home?" To which she replies "nothing except a tiny amount of oil, enough to anoint myself with." Elisha utilizes the meagre possession that she does own as the core of the miracle. Why is this the chosen method? If she had no oil whatsoever, could Elisha have performed the miracle?

The honor of a miracle is that it happens in a hidden manner. (Rashi 4:4)

Because it is the practice of prophets to enact a miracle based on an existent thing, so that there should not be a miracle *ex nihilo* (something from nothing). (Abarbanel)

And this is the manner of all miracles in Torah and *Nevi'im*, that man does that which he can perform, and the rest is left to God... (Ramban, *Bereishit* 6:19)

There is a fascinating dichotomy here. On the one hand, an incredible miracle will happen, whereby a small volume of oil multiplies exponentially. On the other hand, it takes place "in private, in secret" where the public cannot watch as the oil multiplies – the pot continuing to pour in a steady flow so that even the participants in the room do not directly witness the creation of something from nothing. It "looks" natural. Man needs to pour; the pots and jars need to be

⁸ For the dissonance between these sources which eschew slavery and the Torah in which slavery seems acceptable, see Yuval Sherlo, *Looketh on the Heart* (2007) [Hebrew] pps 154-157.

borrowed, and had they borrowed more pots, there would have been even more oil. God does perform the miracle, undoubtedly, but it is partially hidden.

This is a classic example of how man must do his part, but God can also create blessing in the places that are hidden from the eye. Similarly, in the next episode, Elisha closes the door to revive the child with nobody else watching (4:33).

THE WIFE OF OVADIA AND THE HIDDEN PROPHETS

The *Midrash* inquires as to the identity of this widow and her "God fearing" husband. It suggests⁹ that this is the family of Ovadia, Ach'av's minister, a man who had endangered his life to save prophets of God:

When Izevel was killing the prophets of God, Ovadia had taken one hundred prophets ... and provided them with food and drink. (*I Melakhim* 18:4)

But how does the *Midrash* draw this association? What is its textual basis? First, we should note that the *Midrash* frequently identifies anonymous biblical characters with familiar ones.¹⁰ However, there generally is a textual or contextual basis for its identification. One linkage is that this male character is "God fearing" just as Ovadia is depicted as "exceedingly God fearing" (*I Melakhim* 18:3). But we might wonder: why would a God fearing man leave his family in such severe debt? The answer is that he had to finance one hundred prophets whom he had sheltered during Izevel's violent regime. To procure the funds, he took a loan! In this way the *Midrash* ties up all the loose ends.

Possibly though, *Chazal* are making a deeper point, as they were sensitive to the style of the miracle in which food is produced behind closed doors, which mirrors Ovadia's secret feeding one hundred prophets. When Elisha tells the woman that she should sell the oil and live off that which is extra, in a reversal of fate, this is God repaying her husband's loyalty and kindness by providing food for his family!

We may add that in contrast to Ovadia's altruism, we are surprised that this woman's community failed to support a widow and children in dire straits. Here we turn to Elisha's insistence on borrowing empty vessels from the neighbors. Was this symbolic of their empty-handed treatment of the widow? Or conversely, perhaps the provision of empty vessels which soon filled up was a wake-up-call to her neighbors that had they extended her some assistance, she may not have been forced to resort to a miracle.

⁹ *Shemot Rabba* 31:4. This is clearly an early Midrashic identification as it is mentioned in Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book IX, Chapter 4, Section 2.

¹⁰ Yitzchak Heineman, *Darkhei Aggada*, pgs. 27-35. Other examples include Avraham's unnamed servant (*Bereishit* ch.24) who is identified as Eliezer (ch. 14); Noah's wife, midrashically identified as Na'ama (*Bereishit* 4:22), or the two Hebrews who fought in Egypt (*Shemot* 2:13) identified as Datan and Aviram. Of course there are hundreds of other instances of this technique in the aggadic literature.

TWO PROPHETS, TWO MIRACLES. THE CONTRAST BETWEEN ELIJAHU AND ELISHA

Elisha's miracle is highly reminiscent of Eliyahu's miracle with the widow of Tzarafat: "The pitcher of flour shall not end nor will the flask of oil be diminished until the day the Lord gives rain upon the land." In both stories, the prophet's miracle provides sustenance for a widow and her progeny by taking a basic foodstuff and having it multiply itself. And yet the two episodes illustrate the stark differences between Eliyahu and Elisha:

Eliyahu confronted the destitute widow, on God's instruction, as she was foraging for some wood to cook her last meal. She responds to Eliyahu:

"I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die."

Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son" (*I Melakhim* 17:14-16).

For Eliyahu, the widow is there to assist him, to sustain him as he hides in his battle against King Ach'av. When the widow eats, it is not out of concern for her welfare, but rather to ensure his survival: "She **and he** [Eliyahu] and her household had food for a long time" (*I Melakhim* 17:15). Moreover, the prophet challenges her, asking for her to provide him with food before she eats herself or feeds her son.

Elijah was the extreme expression of the demand for an unequivocal breakaway from this domain of corruption [the Ba'al]. In his refusal to arbitrate either with kings or with the people, ... he doomed them to starvation and death, because he saw things only in terms of black and white. In his own words: 'If the Lord be God, follow Him, but if Ba'al, then follow him' (*I Melakhim* 18:21). Between these two extremes, there was no tolerance, no compromise. (R. Adin Steinsaltz, p.164) ¹¹

Elisha is entirely different from Eliyahu. In our story, it is not the prophet that approaches the woman, demanding food, but the woman who "cries out." She is in a state of desperation, and Elisha's response is one of human compassion, care and concern for **her** welfare: "What can I do for you?" (4:2) The miracle wrought by Elisha does not serve the prophet; it alleviates the widow's financial and personal crisis. Furthermore, rather than Eliyahu whose demands thrust the widow into a difficult and challenging situation, here it is Elisha who is on trial, needing to procure a solution for the widow and her children.

This story then, precisely because of its parallel episode with Eliyahu, brings us to return to our perception of Elisha. Here is a prophet who offers support rather than criticism, whose demeanor is that of *Middat Ha-Chesed*

¹¹ Adin Steinsaltz, *Biblical Images, Elisha* pps 161-167, Basic Books (1984)

rather than *Middat Ha-Din*, What is the origin of Elisha's compassionate, human-focused, socially based approach? We can suggest a few possibilities.

The first answer may lie with Elisha's personality. We have already discussed the scene in which Eliyahu first encounters an Elisha (I *Melakhim* 19:20) who withstands the call to the rank of prophecy until he has kissed his parents and bid a farewell to the entire village. Elisha's personality is congenial and friendly. The prophetic stance reflects the personal demeanour and character of the prophet.

Second, Elisha's may be an alternative tactical approach. If one wishes to draw the nation to Judaism, what is the more effective educational method: the stick or the carrot, confrontation or encouragement? Eliyahu's strategy sought to have the people affirm their religious commitment openly, and to forcefully demonstrate God's supremacy. In contrast, Elisha functions in a generous, supportive manner, practicing kindness, and generating miracles which allow the average Israelite to realize that "there is a prophet in Israel" (5:8). Elisha senses that an approach of love rather than fear will not merely be more constructive, but also effect a more successful result.

Thirdly, let us not forget that the two world of Eliyahu and Elisha are representative of two divergent theological worlds. Is God a zealous God, whose anger flares when Israel practise idolatry¹² and who is unforgiving,¹³ or is God filled with compassion, overlooking sinfulness and hearing Israel's distress,¹⁴ the pain of the orphan and the widow?¹⁵ Of course, both of these perspectives are well represented in our *Tanakh* and rabbinic sources, and yet it would seem that Eliyahu perceives God as bearing a strict, demanding disposition, whereas Elisha perceives God as forbearing, merciful, loving.

Lastly, the difference between Eliyahu and Elisha may be a function of the times in which they live and serve. Yisrael in Eliyahu's period, under the reign of Ach'av, enjoy economic prosperity, wielding international power. Elisha's era, in contrast, is characterized by Aram's devastating oppression of the Northern kingdom. Whereas Eliyahu may feel it necessary to rebuke Israel for its waywardness, confronting the leadership in fortunate times, Elisha may feel that in difficult times, such an approach is deeply unjustified. When the nation is under siege, what is required is support, inspiration and encouragement. At times, Eliyahu must play apart in the punishment of the kingdom,¹⁶ but if at all possible, he dedicates his role as prophet to offering hope and healing, demonstrating God's special connection with His people through the miracles that he performs.

¹² *Devarim* 6:15, 11:17, 29:25-27

¹³ *Devarim* 7:9-11

¹⁴ *Devarim* 4:31, 32:26-27, 43

¹⁵ *Shemot* 22:22

¹⁶ See the story of Hazael (8:7-15), and the anointing of Yehu (ch.9-10)