

## The Power of Women's Emunah

*Haftorat Parashat Vayera*

*2 Melachim, Chapter 4:1-37*

*I'm excited about this week's haftorah which is all about how the power of women's emunah brings about Hashem's miracles in the world. When Sarah was told that she would bear a son in this week's parashah, she laughed within herself. Most commentaries explain this laughter as indicating a slight lack of emunah. The steadfast emunah of the women in our corresponding haftorah rectifies her minor lack of emunah. Ovadia's wife went deep into debt, in order to save and sustain the prophets of Hashem. With the help of the prophet Elisha, the light of her emunah became miraculously transformed into oil, with which Ovadia's widow could pay off her debt and sustain her family. Through the unfaltering emunah of the Shunamite women, she was able to cause her beloved son to be revived. Today, we too, can link ourselves to their chain of emunah, to revive the spirit of our people and continue to plant and rebuild our Land!*

### The Miracle of the Perpetual Oil – Emanating from Our Inner Light

This week's *Haftorah* includes two stories about two different righteous women who turned to the prophet Elisha. The first woman, described in the beginning of our *Haftorah*, is identified by Rashi as the wife of Ovadia. She is called "One woman" (2 *Melachim* 4:1), to indicate that she is special and important. This woman had become impoverished, because together with her husband Ovadia, they had sustained one hundred prophets. They had kept these prophets hidden in two caves, out of sight from the wicked Queen Izevel, who desired to kill them (1 *Melachim* 18:13). When the creditor came to take her two sons as slaves, Ovadia's widow cried out to Elisha for help (2 *Melachim* 4:1). Elisha then instructed the woman to use a pot of oil – the only thing she had inside her home – as the medium upon which Hashem's blessing would fall. The oil miraculously increased, according to the capacity of the many empty vessels, the woman was told to borrow from all her neighbors. By selling the oil, the woman was able to pay back her debt and sustain herself and her sons. The oil symbolizes light and teaches us that we can draw down Hashem's perpetual blessing, by getting in touch with our inner light and essence.

### Worthy of Receiving Hashem's Blessing Through Our Own Efforts

Hashem is Almighty and can create anything from nothing; why did He not create a new source of sustenance for Ovadia's widow? Why was it important that she find something that already belonged to her, in order to receive Hashem's blessing of increase? Rather than spoon-feeding us, Hashem desires to work together with us as a team. In order to receive Hashem's blessing, the initial beginning must come from us. When we open ourselves towards Hashem as much as the eye of a needle, He opens for us the opening of the world (*Song of Song Rabah, Parashah 5, Piska 3*). This principle ties together this week's *parashah* with the two parts of its *Haftorah*. Hashem blessed Sarah with the conception and birth of Yitzchak, because she had perfected herself by her modesty, hospitality, and self-sacrificing initiative to ensure that Avraham would have offspring. Likewise, the woman from Shunem, described in the remainder of our *Haftorah*, deserved the blessing of a child and his miraculous revival because of her greatness, generous hospitality, and righteousness.

## The Bread of the Shunamite Woman

“It happened one day, that Elisha passed to Shunem, where there was a great woman, and she pressed him to eat bread. And so it was, that whenever he passed by, he turned aside there to eat bread” (2 *Melachim* 4:8). Rashi explains that the expression “great” refers to the importance of the woman, who was the sister of Avishag the Shunamite, King David’s last wife. Radak adds that she was wealthy and famous. According to Malbim, her greatness was expressed through her good deeds and great desire to feed the holy prophet Elisha. He would only eat in the home of the righteous, stipulating that they truly desired to give with their full heart. From the first time Elisha ate in the home of this righteous woman, he was aware that she offered her bread with the highest intention. Thereafter, he chose to pass by her home in order to give her the merit of this great mitzvah.

## Sustaining Torah Scholars Makes the Shechinah Dwell

“Whoever hosts a Torah scholar in his home is considered as if he offered a sacrifice” (*Berachot* 10b). We learn this principle from the righteous woman in our *Haftorah* who told her husband, “I perceive that this is a holy man of G-d who passes by us continually” (2 *Melachim* 4:9). According to Malbim, she understood that just like sacrificing causes the Shechinah to dwell on Israel, so too does sustaining a Torah scholar, who is like the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies, where the *Shechinah* dwells. Therefore, the food which the woman offered with a pure heart to sustain the prophet, together with his holy intention while eating for the sake of Heaven, brought down the Divine Presence. Today, we women also have the ability to infuse our homes with the *Shechinah* by inviting and sustaining Torah scholars. When Rabbis visit from Israel, it’s an amazing opportunity to merit this great mitzvah, by taking care of their needs. In addition to providing food, the woman from Shunem arranged to make a separate chamber for the prophet, because she desired to make a dwelling place – Tabernacle – for the *Shechinah*, which dwelled on the prophet.

## As the Time is Alive

As a reward for her hospitality, the woman in our *Haftorah* like Sarah in this week’s Parashah is promised to embrace a son, “About this time in the coming year” (*Ibid.* 16). The Hebrew expression *Ka’Et Chayah* – literally: “As the time is alive” is used in both places, since there is no time more alive than the time of giving birth. For just as Hashem is the life of the world, bringing a new soul into this world, brings down the life of the Divine Presence infused in the baby’s *neshamah*. The wisdom and foresight of the woman from Shunem is evident from her pleading, “No, my lord, you man of G-d do not disappoint your handmaid” (*ibid.*). With these words the woman implored Elisha, “Even if I will give birth to a son, if he would, G-d forbid, die afterwards, then what do I gain from your promise?”

## The Power of Trust

“And the woman conceived and bore a son...” (*ibid.*17). However, after the child had grown, he became sick and died in his mother’s arms. Malbim notices how the Shunamite woman did not undertake any medical procedure because of her *bitachon* (trust) in the promise of the prophet. Even after the death of her son, she didn’t cry out or even tell her husband. She only laid him on the bed of the man of G-d, and requested a donkey so that she could “run to the man of G-d and then come back” (*Ibid.* 22). When her husband unknowingly asked, “Why do you go to him today? It is neither

New Moon nor Shabbat?" (ibid. 23), she only answered a firm "Shalom." *Sefer Chassidim* learns from this verse that it is a mitzvah for women to learn Torah, just like the Shunamite woman who would go to hear Elisha teach every *Rosh Chodesh* and Shabbat. When Elisha saw that she had come at an unusual time, he immediately understood that something was seriously wrong. The Shunamite woman went to Elisha and held on to his feet, to hint that she wouldn't let him go until he agreed to walk with her. Malbim explains that usually when Hashem punishes someone, He first reveals the matter to the prophet, in order that he request mercy. From the fact that Hashem had hid the matter from him, Elisha recognized that the death of the child was not a punishment for any sin on the Shunamite's part. He then followed her home, prayed to Hashem who revived the child through the acts of the prophet. Elisha "placed his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands..." (Ibid. 34), in order to allow for the three parts of his soul: *nefesh*, *ruach* and *neshama*, to return to his body. Which *zechut* (merit) caused this miraculous revival of the dead? I believe that it was the Shunamite's remarkable trust in the goodness of Hashem's blessing through the prophet that had the power to revive her son. We can learn about the power of belief from the trusting perseverance of this righteous woman. Miracles continue even today. Through persistent *emunah* we can move mountains. May we tap into this power of steadfast belief to bring about goodness in our lives and revive our people on the Land!