

Haftarah

'At this time next year...'



Elisha said: At this time next year, you will be holding a son in your arms.

2 Kings 4:16

From the Midrash

The text presumes (without explicit mention) that it is God acting through Elisha. But the midrash makes it explicit:

God resurrects the dead, and Elisha resurrects the dead. God remembered childless women, and Elisha remembered childless women. God blessed the little, and Elisha blessed the little.

Genesis Rabbah 77:1

Connection

- In the Jewish calendar, this haftarah reading (2 Kings 4:1-37) accompanies the Torah portion *Vayera*: Genesis 18:1-22:24.
- In the Torah portion, following hospitality by Abraham, Sarah is promised a son. In the haftarah, a Shunammite woman offers hospitality to the prophet Elisha and is promised a son.
- The death of a son is a theme that appears in both readings: Isaac's near death in Gen. 22, and the revival of a dead son in the haftarah.
- Intercessory prayer, to prevent disaster (Gen. 18) and to remedy a disaster (2 Kings 4), also features in both readings.

Background

- The narrative of the Book of Kings (I and II) opens with the death of King David, tells how the Israelites split into a northern kingdom (Israel) and a southern kingdom (Judah), and ends with the destruction of the Temple by Babylon in 587 BCE. The perspective is that Jewish history is judged according to its adherence to the God of the Covenant.

Stories

Our haftarah centres on the prophet Elisha. Elisha was the disciple of Elijah. Before his prophetic career he had been a farmer and he maintained a concern for ordinary folk and their struggles. Many stories were told about him and his miraculous gifts, two of which appear in our haftarah:

- The miracle of empty oil jars being filled (4:1-7).
- The birth, death and revival of the son of a Shunammite woman (4:8-37).

Reflection

4:8-37 offers poignant insights into the person and predicament of the Shunammite woman:

- She is wealthy (v.8) but wealth does not save her from a family tragedy.
- *'You will be holding a son in your arms'* (v.16). She replies, *'Do not delude your maidservant'*. The gift is too precious to be the subject of a joke.
- The ill son is taken to his mother, who *'held him on her lap'* until he died.
- *'Did I not say, Don't deceive me?'* (v.28). Does it sometimes seem easier to expect little from life, rather than to hope and be disappointed?
- *'Her heart is bitter'* (v.27). The prophet understands the depths of her grief which until now had been known to the Lord but not to him.
- *'I will not leave you'* (v.30). Desperation or act of faith?
- *'Lift up your son'* (v.36). Before embracing her living son, she acknowledges the miracle.

Enter prayerfully and imaginatively into this story. In what way does God's Word speak to you of life and death, hope and disappointment, risk and joy, trust in God and God's servants?

Sources: Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (NY, 1996); *Midrash Rabbah* (NY: Soncino, 1983).