

**How We Respond to Other People's Troubles**

Parshat Vayera

Genesis 18:1 – 22:21 / 2 Kings 4:1 – 37



*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt  
in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf.  
"He was the perfect child."*

The prophet Elisha was a disciple of Elijah. He who assumed the mantle of leadership (literally) after his great teacher ascended to heaven in a fiery chariot. Like Abraham, Elisha performed acts of kindness for others throughout his life. In the first incident in this Haftorah he helps provides the poor widow with oil so that she can redeem her children and buy herself out of debt. In the second incident, Elisha is the recipient of kindness from a woman in the town of Shunam who provides him with food and housing. He in turn prays for the childless woman and she is blessed with a child. When the child falls ill and apparently goes into a coma, the woman goes in search of Elisha. The prophet then prays for the child and revives him.

The choice of this chapter as the Haftorah on the week when we read the story of the binding of Isaac is not accidental. According to an ancient rabbinic tradition, when Abraham bound his son on the altar he actually slaughtered him but Isaac was miraculously resurrected. Similarly Elisha is able to resurrect the child of the Shunamite woman after he apparently die s.

**2 Kings 4:25-28**

When the man of God saw her from afar he said to his servant Gehazi, "There is the Shunamite woman. Go hurry toward her and ask her, 'How are you? How is your husband? How is the child?'" "We are well," she replied. But when she came up to the man of God on the mountain, she clasped his feet. Gehazi stepped forward to push her away; but the man of God said, "Let her alone for she is in bitter distress; and the Lord has hidden it from me and has not told me." Then she said, "Did I ask my Lord for a son? Didn't I say, 'Don't mislead me'?"

**In Praise of Elisha: Dr. Yael Shemesh (Internet)**

The story opens with the child going out to the fields to see his father and the harvesters at work. Suddenly his head hurt, apparently due to sunstroke. At his father's command he was returned to his mother, where he died on her lap. The Shunamite understood that only through intervention by the man of G-d who was responsible for the birth of her son could he be restored to life, and so she hurried off to Elisha...Before setting out, however, she laid her dead son down on the bed of the man of G-d, as it turns out for two reasons: 1) She did not want anyone who comes to the house to discover the dead body of her son, feeling that as long as others thought the child alive there was a chance of restoring him to life, but the minute his dead body were to be discovered and her close friends and relations begin to mourn for him, then the fact of his death would be sealed; even worse, she feared they might bury him before she had time to return. 2) She believed that the holy spirit of the prophet, that also imbues the objects with which he comes into contact, would protect and safeguard her son, preventing the body from beginning to decay. The Shunamite did not tell Elisha explicitly that her son had died, but, through her reproachful question, "Did I ask my lord for a son? Didn't I say: 'Don't mislead me'?" (II Kings 4:28) intimated that the distress which caused her to come to him concerned her son.

**Radak, Rabbi David Kimchi (1160-1235)**

It was hidden from me: until that moment. At that moment when she fell at his feet the reason for her appearance came to him in a prophecy.

**Malbim: Rabbi Meir Loeb ben Yehiel Michael (1809 – 1879)**

It was hidden from me: That which God does as retribution for transgression he reveals first to his servants, the prophets, so that they can offer supplications on behalf of the one who is to be stricken. We see this in the case of Abraham about who it is written, “Shall I hide from Abraham that which I intend to do?” But that which happens by itself, for instance, as a result of illness, is hidden from the prophet. From this we may conclude that she did not sin, and this did not occur because of something that she did.

### **Pirke Avot 2:4**

Hillel said, “Do not judge others until you have been put in their position.

### **Questions to Ponder**

1. When Gehazi, Elisha’s servant, greets the Shunamite woman he asks about the welfare of her husband and her son. She responds “Shalom,” “Everything’s fine.” Why doesn’t she tell Gehazi why she is coming to see the prophet?
2. When people have troubles or worries, they usually respond to the question, “How are you, by saying “I’m fine” or, “I’m OK?” Why are most people not more forthcoming when it comes to sharing their problems with others? When and with whom are you willing to share your worries?
3. How does the Shunamite woman react when she finally arrives in the presence of Elisha? Why does she throw herself at Elisha’s feet?
4. Elisha is a prophet and one would presume that God would share with him events that are going to happen or at least those events that are taking place. What reasons do the commentators give to explain why Elisha does not know the reason for the Shunamite woman’s appearance in his presence?
5. I would like to offer a third possible explanation for Elisha’s ignorance. Elisha suggests that God purposely hid the information from him. Is it possible that God wanted Elisha to discover the reason for the Shunamite woman’s unhappiness on his own? How might this be helpful to her?
6. How do Elisha and Gehazi each deal with the Shunamite woman differently? Why?
7. When people are bitter or unhappy, what are the best strategies for helping them deal with their problems? What should one do and what should one avoid doing?

---

### **Torah Table Talk**

is a weekly e-publication of Rabbi Mark B Greenspan sponsored by the Oceanside Jewish Center on Long Island, New York. If you would like to subscribe to Torah Table Talk please send an e-mail to [Tabletalk@oceansidejc.org](mailto:Tabletalk@oceansidejc.org). To remove your address from this list, send a blank email to [tabletalk-unsubscribe@oceansidejc.org](mailto:tabletalk-unsubscribe@oceansidejc.org). To see an archive of sermons and TTT go to <http://www.oceansidejc.org/rebmark/RabbiGreenspan.html>

***“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind  
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”***

See other Torah Table Talks online at  
[www.oceansidejc.org](http://www.oceansidejc.org)