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The Prophet Elisha in the Medieval Commentaries

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts  
in Hebrew Letters and Ordination.

Hebrew Union College -

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## THESIS DIGEST

This thesis is a study of the Rabbinic commentaries on the Biblical material dealing with the prophet Elisha, viz., I Kings 19:16-21, II Kings 2:1-8:15, 9:1, 13:14-21. The specific commentators selected are Rashi (1040-1105), Kimhi (1160-1235), Gersonides (1288-1344), and Abravanel (1437-1508) whose commentaries have been here rephrased in contemporary English and collated to present a composite medieval portrait of Elisha as man and prophet. Although each commentator has his unique style of Biblical interpretation, there is a shared basic adherence to the peshat or contextual understanding of Scriptures. Though they may offer a variety of interpretations on a given verse, they do so with the same goal in mind -- the reasoned and consistent exposition of the sacred text. Therefore, I have chosen to present the various commentaries as a literary unit in that together they best reflect a specific view of the Bible in general and of Elisha in particular.

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## INTRODUCTION

For a thousand years following the canonization of the Bible, the interpretation of the Biblical text became the primary intellectual activity of Jewish scholars. Until the Middle Ages this interpretive endeavor was reflected most significantly by midrashic exposition which attempted to penetrate beyond the mere literal sense of Scriptures. The Talmud (Sanh. 34b) compares midrash to a hammer which upon striking a rock causes sparks to fly out. In general, midrash is characterized by a flexible approach to Scriptural study and analysis. There exists on the one hand, the haggadic midrash, which tolerates the free reign of imagination in the search for practical and spiritual lessons, and on the other, the halachic midrash, which attempts to derive universal legal principles from the ancient laws.

The midrash in its earliest oral form grew out of the necessity for dynamic reinterpretation of Scriptures. Under the leadership of Ezra when the Torah became the cornerstone of all religious life, it became imperative to accommodate the sacred texts, whose laws and precepts better suited an earlier pre-exilic age, to the new conditions of the day. Yet this reformulation of legal and theological concepts, despite numerous innovations, tried whenever possible to remain consistent with the written Torah. The haggadic and halachic midrash was the medium by which this link between tradition and adaptation maintained itself.

The writer of the midrash was less concerned with elucidating the original or contextual meaning of a verse than with finding plausible and convincing precedent for accepted contemporary practices and ideas. The underlying purpose of the midrash thus was the creation of a bridge between the oral tradition and the written text. Typically the author of a midrashic statement begins with a problem dealing with a contemporary legal or theological issue. He then scrutinizes the Biblical text for a solution. The "problem" therefore is prior to the textual inquiry and the Biblical verses are utilized as prooftexts for conceptions which in the first place are extraneous to the text. If the midrash is structurally and stylistically successful it will connect the extraneous to the text so that in the end the reader is convinced that they are one. This process of interpreting the text from an exterior starting point and reading into the text the raw material from which it will eventually yield an explanation is known as eisegesis. Since any verse (or word within a verse) can be employed for a variety of situations, the midrash does not need to restrict itself to the meaning of a given passage in its appropriate context. Within the midrashic framework the components of a passage -- the verses, words, and sometimes even letters -- are sufficiently loosened in order to be threaded into the explanation needed at the moment. The midrash is preeminently concerned not with the literal meaning of a verse but rather with the many possibilities of its application.

The Biblical exegetes of the Middle Ages on the surface represent themselves, to varying degrees, as perpetuators of this midrashic tradition. Rashi, Kimhi, Gersonides and Abravanel, for example, all maintain a respectful and solicitous regard for the explanations of the great sages of the past even when offering daring innovations concerning their understanding of Scriptures. Although the above mentioned commentators used the line-by-line method of the early midrashic expositors and although they quote midrashic statements extensively, they represent a totally new approach to Biblical interpretation. In contrast to the writers of the midrash who focused their attention on the "parts" of the Bible -- letters, words, and verses -- the medieval commentators attempted to interpret the Bible (or individual books therein) as a whole within the literal context. As they commented on a particular verse within the larger whole they were scrupulous to do so in such a way that the harmony of the whole would not be jeopardized. Gersonides, for example, after offering a line-by-line commentary in which he may even discuss grammatical observations of single words, nevertheless concludes with a summary of the whole chapter. The explicated parts are meant to convey to us a general understanding of the whole work. Even Rashi, who does not employ this format of concluding summaries, often cross-references his own comments to demonstrate the necessity of consistency and unity in Biblical interpretation. In trying to understand what the written text itself means, according to the sciences



and methods of their day, the medieval commentators much more significantly engaged in strict exegesis (as opposed to eisegesis) than did their midrashic predecessors.

This study is an attempt to present a unified portrait of the prophet Elisha as seen through the eyes of the major medieval commentators who dealt with the early prophetic writings -- Rashi, Kimhi, Gersonides and Abravanel. Although each commentator has a style uniquely his own, they all present a total and composite picture of the prophet and his career according to their understanding of the written text. In no earlier Jewish writings are integrated biographical portraits of Biblical figures found. Midrash and Talmud contain many statements on Elisha, but they are scattered comments with no apparent connection between them and never any attempt to bring together all of the traditions into a composite picture.

Elisha is admittedly a secondary figure even in terms of the importance attached to him by Scriptures itself. He treads his prophetic path under the shadow of his more spectacular mentor, Elijah. Modern scholars have recognized, moreover, that the Elisha cycle is a clear imitation of the Elijah material. The miracles performed by Elisha are on several occasions apparent duplicates of those performed by Elijah; for example, the miracle of supplying oil for the widow and reviving the Shunammite woman's son. In the eyes of the medieval commentators, however, Elisha was a unique prophetic personality not a mere reflection of his master, Elijah. He

emerges as a significant and influential force among the common people. On many occasions he unselfishly performed miracles on behalf of the hungry, the poor, and the bereaved citizens of the Israelite kingdom, establishing for himself a reputation as a miracle-working prophet par excellence. The commentators, as we shall see, point out that altogether Elisha performed at least sixteen miracles, or twice the number of Elijah, thereby earning for himself a lasting place in the annals of Israelite prophetic history alongside his more celebrated master.

CHAPTER ONE  
ELISHA'S INAUGURATION

Elijah, though a great prophet in Israel, earned the Lord's disfavor when he allowed frustration and despair to thwart his prophetic mission; while in hiding from the angry Jezebel, Elijah requested that his life be taken, saying: "It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am not better than my fathers" (I Kings 19:4).<sup>1</sup> Because Elijah despaired of his life, God instructed him to anoint Elisha, the son of Shaphat, to prophesy in his stead. The termination of Elijah's prophetic activity also became desirable as a result of his excessive and harsh censure of his people's iniquities.<sup>2</sup> The time had come for a change in prophetic style; Elijah's relentless and zealous defense of Yahweh was to yield to Elisha's humble manner of helping the weak and poor.

The first step in the transmission of the prophetic role from the elder prophet to his successor took place in Abel-meholah where Elijah, following God's command, found Elisha plowing in the field with a team of twelve oxen. The number twelve suggests, of course, the twelve tribes of Israel and signifies Elisha's forthcoming appointment as prophet of the twelve tribes.<sup>3</sup> That the team with which Elisha was plowing had as many as twelve oxen informs us that Elisha's father was wealthy.<sup>4</sup>

Without saying a word, Elijah first cast his mantle over Elisha then removed it, abruptly leaving but expecting Elisha

to understand the meaning of his symbolic act. The casting of the mantle augured Elisha's impending ordination for it was the practice in those days for prophets to wear mantles, as it says in Scripture: "neither shall they wear a hairy mantle to deceive" (Zech. 13:4).<sup>5</sup> By remaining silent Elijah tested Elisha, since if Elisha was indeed meant to be a prophet, God would certainly have put into his heart the appropriate understanding of the mantle as a sign of ordination to prophecy.<sup>6</sup> Not only did Elisha comprehend Elijah immediately, but his ready willingness to relinquish his life of abundance and ease in favor of a life of service underscored his sincere dedication.

With a fitting successor chosen, Elijah could close his earthly career in peace, without anxiety. Preparing to meet his end, Elijah traveled to Gilgal, Beth-el, and Jericho with Elisha at his side. In both Beth-el and Jericho the resident sons-of-the-prophets accosted Elisha saying, "knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master from thy head today?" (II Kings 2:3) We are informed that these sons-of-the-prophets were found in most of the cities of Israel and it was their task to rebuke and reprove their fellow Israelites. In as much as their prophecy was directed only at current iniquities, neither their names nor the content of their messages were recorded for future generations.<sup>7</sup> However, despite their anonymity, they were genuine prophets engaged in the divine service to the full extent of their limited abilities, working alongside the greater, universal prophetic figures like Elijah and Elisha.

When a great prophet arises he does not prophecy alone; his superfluity of prophetic spirit (Yḡl) ineluctably overflows on to those at his side. This emanation of prophetic spirit from the chosen prophet to others is a natural process analogous to the diffusion of the rays of the sun as they reflect off a mirror thereby multiplying light. When the divine prophetic spirit descends on a worthy prophet, it diffuses also to many disciples who may be of lesser merit. The acquisition of prophecy on the part of these disciples does not depend wholly on the degree to which they have achieved perfection of character; rather, it proceeds from the overflowing of prophetic spirit, according to the physical laws of nature. Elijah's disciples received prophecy from their master in the same way that Joshua and the seventy elders received prophecy from Moses, even though they themselves were not worthy to receive prophecy directly from God. Ancient Israel, though often an iniquitous nation, merited the continuing gift of prophecy as long as they possessed the ark and the tablets of stone upon which the Shekinah descended and then flowed outward.<sup>8</sup>

The sons-of-the-prophets realized that their gift of prophecy existed only by virtue of Elijah. Just as the source of water feeds its tributaries, so Elijah, the source of prophecy, fed the sons-of-the-prophets. They fully comprehended that the existence of their own prophecy depended on the presence of the greater prophet, Elijah. Although they possessed no direct knowledge of Elijah's imminent departure, they inferred the fact from the weakening of their prophetic power. With this

sense of privation, they confronted Elisha and announced the loss of his master. Elisha, who had experienced a similar diminution of prophetic spirit which could only mean that his master was soon to be taken, had already reached the same conclusion concerning Elijah's fate. He therefore responded to the sons-of-the-prophets, "Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace" (II Kings 2:3).<sup>9</sup>

The ascension of Elijah was a pivotal point in the history of prophecy in Israel for all time. Before his ascension, prophecy and prophets abounded in Israel; afterwards, prophecy began to ebb.<sup>10</sup> In fact, as noted, the diminution already started with the sensation on the part of the disciples that Elijah was going to be taken. The sons-of-the-prophets further demonstrated this diminution through their subsequent words and actions. The day before Elijah's ascension they said to Elisha, "knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master?" (II Kings 2:3) The reference to Elijah as "thy master" instead of "our master" indicates that the spirit of prophecy had already left them and that they no longer qualified as prophets.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, we find that immediately after the ascension they implored Elisha to organize a search party to determine if perhaps Elijah had only been carried off a small distance by the wind. One day they possessed the prophetic insight that God would take Elijah; and yet the very next day, they were ignorant of his whereabouts. This proves the loss of their prophetic spirit.<sup>12</sup>

On his journey to the Jordan where his ascension takes place Elijah purposefully stopped at Gilgal, Beth-el, and

Jericho. He wished to prepare Elisha for the prophetic life which would shortly be his. In each city he tested Elisha with the words, "tarry here, I pray thee" (II Kings 2:4); at each successive place Elisha showed his mettle; for when he insisted on following his master, he came away with the uniquely holy qualities found in each of these cities and thereby prepared himself by stages for the pursuance of his prophetic activities in the years ahead.<sup>13</sup>

Master and disciple first stopped at Gilgal, where Joshua had placed twelve stones taken from the Jordan as a memorial to the miracle that had enabled the Israelites to make the initial crossing into the land of Israel.<sup>14</sup> Elijah stopped at Gilgal to make a symbolic departure from his people. The twelve stones erected by Joshua were meant to signify the twelve tribes of Israel and hence represented a fitting place from which to take leave.<sup>15</sup> Gilgal was moreover the scene where important mitzvot had first been observed -- the circumcision of the people by Joshua, the preparation of the paschal sacrifice, and the setting to rest of the Tabernacle of Testimony and the Ark of the Covenant.<sup>16</sup> When Elijah asked Elisha to remain in Gilgal, a place sanctified by mitzvot, he, in fact, was inquiring whether Elisha would be content to remain a hasid, a diligent performer of mitzvot and not become a full prophet. But Elisha understood, as if to say, "I am not satisfied with this degree of virtue (i.e., hasidut) nor will I be content until I reach your level."<sup>17</sup>

They next stopped at Beth-el, a city distinguished as

the site of Jacob's prophetic vision of the angels ascending and descending the ladder to heaven. It was there that Jacob proclaimed, "How full of awe is this place! this is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (Gen. 28:17). And later, addressing his household, Jacob also said, "let us arise and go up to Beth-el; and I will make there an altar unto God who answered me in the day of my distress" (Gen. 35:3). Just as Beth-el was a place of prophecy for Jacob, so it was for Elisha. When once again Elijah tested Elisha by asking him to remain, Elisha insisted on accompanying Elijah wherever he went. Content neither with hasidut nor even with the combination of hasidut and prophecy, Elisha yearned to reach a higher stage of perfection -- the very level of his master, if possible.<sup>18</sup>

Master and disciple then proceeded to Jericho, their last stop before crossing the Jordan. Opposite Jericho, Moses had viewed the holy land before his death. Thereafter, under the leadership of Joshua, the city became the site of repeated miracles and wonders. An angel appeared there to Joshua saying, "put off thy shoe from off thy foot; for the place whereon thou standest is holy" (Joshua 5:15). Jericho was then captured by means of the great miracle. For the third and last time, Elijah tested Elisha asking him to remain in Jericho and be content with the hasidut of Gilgal, the prophecy of Beth-el, and the miracle-making powers of Jericho. Elisha, still dissatisfied, rejected Elijah's offer of these in favor of attaining the quintessent level.<sup>19</sup>



After crossing the Jordan "Elijah said unto Elisha, 'ask what I shall do for thee before I am taken from thee.' And Elisha said, 'I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me.' And he said: 'Thou hast asked a hard thing; nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so'" (II Kings 2:9-10). In asking for a double portion Elisha was requesting twice the portion allotted to other prophets of his day, or perhaps, even as his words seem to indicate, double the prophetic power of Elijah. Elisha wished to receive that which is due to the first born, in accordance with Scripture where it says, "he shall acknowledge the first-born... by giving him a double portion of all that he hath" (Deut. 21:17).<sup>20</sup>

Elisha's subsequent career furnishes several proofs that he did in fact receive a double portion of miracle-making power. In all, Elisha performed sixteen miracles whereas Elijah only performed eight.<sup>21</sup> Or, it could alternatively be argued that the double portion referred not to the total number of miracles performed but to the one miracle of reviving the dead. Elijah revived only one dead person, the son of the Zarapheth woman, while Elisha revived two dead people: the son of the Shunammite woman and Naaman, the Syrian captain.<sup>22</sup> Though Naaman, being a leper, did not actually die, a leper is considered like a dead person.<sup>23</sup> When Elisha cured Naaman, he, in effect, brought a dead person back to life.

Elijah's response, "You have asked a hard thing," was to indicate that the matter of acquiring a double portion lay

not in his hands but in God's.<sup>24</sup> Elijah's stipulation, that Elisha must witness his ascension, implies that since Elijah will no longer be present to fulfill the request, only God will be able to do so. Elijah may also have been rebuking Elisha for making such an impertinent request. Elisha ought to content himself with even half a portion! However, if, despite this impertinence, God still will find him worthy,<sup>25</sup> his request will be granted. How will Elisha's worth be determined? If he could see Elijah ascending amidst miraculous occurrences, he would surely be worthy, for a lesser person would undoubtedly be too terrified to open his eyes. This act of seeing, however, may, on the other hand, have referred to more than simply being present to witness the event. By "seeing" Elisha would have become imbued with Elijah's prophetic spirit. Through this act of seeing a mystical transfer of prophetic spirit would take place.<sup>26</sup>

No miracle of such magnitude, though, could properly transpire without the aid of some physical device. This was the purpose of Elijah's cloak which fell to the ground after his departure. Like the staff of Elisha later used to revive the Shunammite's son, the cloak of Elijah served as the physical instrument (  $\int \circ$  ) through which the miracle was wrought.<sup>27</sup> Through this instrument, the miracle crossed over from the spiritual realm to the physical realm, wherein it operated in the sight of men.

But it may further be argued that Elisha's request for a double portion alluded neither to the prophetic spirit nor

to the miracles,<sup>28</sup> for in fact, his exact words were not "double portion" but rather, literally, "two mouths" -- which can only refer to the mouths of Elijah and Elisha. As was customary in the case of master and disciple, the two spent many hours in serious conversation, touching on all matters of wisdom and law. Aware of the imminent departure of his master, Elisha became distraught that this scholarly dialogue would come to an end. Therefore, he requested that even after Elijah's physical departure their dialogue should continue in some form. Perhaps Elijah could appear to him in visions and dreams to fulfill that end. In responding, "thou hast asked a hard thing," Elijah expressed his astonishment that a spirit separated from the body should be able to speak to a physical being. If such a thing were possible, then Elisha must make it so. Elijah thus drew the conclusion, "if thou see me when I am taken, etc.," meaning, "if in the days to come, Elisha, you so purify your soul as to see me in prophecy after my departure, then your request will be granted."<sup>29</sup>

CHAPTER TWO  
ELIJAH'S ASCENSION

Accompanied by the splitting of the Jordan waters, the whirlwind, and the fiery chariot, Elijah departed. Appropriately, his ascension took place at the Jordan, thereby emphasizing the major miraculous accomplishments of his prophetic career. The splitting of the waters corresponds to the halting of the rains in the days of Ahab; the fiery chariot to the fire called down from heaven to consume the offering at Mount Carmel; the horses of fire (in the plural) to the fire that consumed the captain of fifty with his fifty.<sup>30</sup>

Many questions have been asked concerning the nature of the actual ascension and the fate of Elijah. What are we to understand when we are told that Elijah was "taken," or that he "went up"? Some say that an invisible whirlwind lifted Elijah. (Elisha could only see the fiery chariot.) By the will of God Elijah was then carried up as high as the fiery sphere, at which point all his clothes were burned except for the mantle that fell to earth, there to be retrieved by Elisha. The fiery sphere also disintegrated his flesh and bones leaving his spirit unencumbered and free to return to the God who gave it.<sup>31</sup> According to this opinion, Elijah actually died; his physical body ceased to exist, thereby releasing his soul for continued existence after death. Also, then, it is folly to accept the opinion of the masses that, like Adam before he sinned, Elijah entered the Garden of Eden alive, that is, in bodily form. We therefore need not accept tradition which

relates that ten men so entered the Garden of Eden in the hereafter, Elijah being one of them.<sup>32</sup>

However, if one accepts the idea that Elijah's body and soul separated from each other, this must mean that he died. But it is not written explicitly that Elijah "died," only that he was "taken." Furthermore, it is impossible for any mortal to ascend as far as the fiery sphere; it is said only that Elijah was carried up to "heaven," which may not refer to the upper heavens of the spheres but merely to a very high altitude, as it is written, "the cities are great and fortified up to heaven" (Deut. 1:28).<sup>33</sup> Earlier, the sons-of-the-prophets said to Elisha, "knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master from thy head?" This shows that Elijah was not taken in a final way (like a dead person), but that he merely departed from before the presence of Elisha.<sup>34</sup> For although we know that after the chariot and horses of fire separated the two of them and Elisha could no longer see his master, we do not know that Elijah departed in an absolute sense. He may simply have been taken by the whirlwind and carried high in the air out of Elisha's sight. The whirlwind finally led him to the Garden of Eden on earth, not in heaven, where Elijah remained alive, with body and soul intact.<sup>35</sup> This understanding of events verifies the reports that since his ascension Elijah has been seen on various occasions in the Houses of Study; it also fits in with his future return in the time of the Messiah, as it is written, "Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of

the Lord" (Malachi 3:24).<sup>36</sup>

Lest one think that Elijah's miraculous ascent marked him a superior prophet to Moses who died a natural death, three facts should be noted.<sup>37</sup> First, Moses, throughout his life, clung so tenaciously to God and his ways that he was rewarded with a righteous man's death, releasing him from all manner of physical existence. After his "natural" death, his soul was free to unite with God. He left the world of the body for the far greater world of the separate intelligences.<sup>38</sup> That Elijah remained in the world of the body and achieved some sort of extended mortality redounds not to his favor but to his discredit. Elijah's soul, not as great as that of Moses, was not entitled to disembodiment.

Second, Elijah, having a lesser love for the land of Israel and its inhabitants, engaged in frequent acts of revengeful punishment against these.<sup>39</sup> Moses, on the other hand, so loved the land of Israel that he was rewarded with a burial site from which he could see the land. Elijah was not so rewarded even though it was a custom to bury leaders within the territory that they captured by the sword.

Third, the "destiny" (נִסְדָּן) of Moses required that he be joined to the upper world, to become connected with the separate intelligences that behold the countenance of the King of Kings. Moses, thus, had no need of a physical, bodily existence. Elijah, however, is to reappear in future times as a guide to the prophets, righteous men, and sages of Israel in the Houses of Study. He is further to reappear in the time

of the Messiah. Since he has this earthly mission to fulfill, Elijah's body and soul had to remain together, that is, he had to remain physically intact. But how can a man of flesh and bones be preserved to reappear in instantaneous fashion at various times throughout history? When Elijah ascended with the fiery chariot and horses of fire, his body dissolved and his bones dried out, thereby transforming him into a substance of the heavenly bodies. In this state he was not without body altogether, but he did assume a form other than the human one. This process enabled Elijah to appear in any place without restriction; furthermore, he would no longer need food, drink, or any other bodily necessity.

CHAPTER THREE  
TWO WATER MIRACLES

Having just witnessed the miraculous ascent of his master, Elisha, in a moment of doubt, wondered if the God of Elijah had been faithful, i.e., if indeed he was to be blessed with a double portion of Elijah's spirit. To satisfy his doubt he readied himself for the performance of his first miracle, "And he took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him and smote the waters and said: where is the Lord of Elijah?" (II Kings 2:14) God answered Elisha by enabling him to succeed in this, his first miracle-making venture: "And when he also had smitten the waters, they were divided hither and thither" (II Kings 2:14). Elijah, only minutes earlier, had performed the same miracle, but he did not do it alone. Elisha was with him. That former splitting was accomplished for the sake of both men; the latter splitting, for the sake of Elisha alone.<sup>40</sup> Herein lies the proof that Elisha's prophetic power in the realm of the miraculous was double that of Elijah's.

Not all will agree that Elisha so soon eclipsed his master, for Elisha's precise words in performing his first miracle were: "where is the God of Elijah, even he." "He" apparently refers to Elijah. If immediately following his saying "even he," he smote the waters, it must mean that Elijah was responsible even this second time for the splitting of the waters. According to this opinion, Elijah, the old master, remained superior, Elisha's "double portion" notwithstanding!<sup>41</sup>

The disciples, though, were duly impressed with what appeared to them as Elisha's duplication of Elijah's miracle. During



the ascension the sons-of-the-prophets stood far off and were afraid to approach the Jordan. But after witnessing Elisha's first miracle, they came forward in Jericho to acknowledge him as worthy of succeeding Elijah; "they came to meet him and bowed down to the ground before him" (II Kings 2:15). But not having been privileged to see the actual ascension with the fiery chariot and horses of fire, they were still not convinced of Elijah's permanent departure. In the past, Elijah often seemed to disappear only to reappear at some opportune moment.<sup>42</sup> Obadiah once said to Elijah, "And it will come to pass, as soon as I am gone from thee, that the spirit of the Lord will carry thee whither I know not..." (I Kings 18:12). The sons-of-the-prophets had good reason to believe that the whirlwind merely carried Elijah off a short distance, depositing him in one of the nearby mountains or valleys. They, therefore, suggested that Elisha send fifty men to search for the parapatetic Elijah.

Certain in his knowledge that his master was irretrievable, Elisha stubbornly refused, "And when they urged him till he was ashamed he finally said: send!" (II Kings 2:17) Why did he become ashamed? Because he felt that his obstinacy would be misinterpreted as his reluctance to have Elijah return should he be alive.<sup>43</sup> Or perhaps, he was ashamed to continue this senseless argument with them. Confident that they would return frustrated and wiser, he told them, with obvious sarcasm, to send a search party.<sup>44</sup> When the men returned, he stressed his displeasure by rebuking them for their lack of trust, "Did I

not say unto you: go not?" (II Kings 2: 18) At this point, there could be no doubt but that Elisha was the true successor to Elijah.

Afterwards in Jericho, the men of the city approached Elisha requesting that he cure the "bad" water of the city: "Behold we pray thee, the situation of this city is pleasant, as my Lord seeth; but the water is bad, and the land miscarrieth" (II Kings 2:19). The water alone was the source of the city's trouble. Other aspects of the city were positive, making it possible to state that even in the midst of such a calamity, "the situation of this city is pleasant." Water does not determine the worth of a city. Rather, its ultimate value depends on its inhabitants for "The beauty of a place stems from its inhabitants."<sup>45</sup>

After the battle of Jericho, Joshua had put a herem on the city prohibiting anyone from rebuilding it.<sup>46</sup> But at this time the city was again fully populated and prospering, except for the problem of bad water. Now this scourge, which caused women to miscarry, cattle to cast their young prematurely, and trees to shed their fruits before they were ripe, was a recent problem. Otherwise, the builders of the city would not have been led to transgress the herem; they would have chosen a more desirable spot.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, had the bad water been endemic to Jericho for many years, Elijah would already have been called upon earlier to cure it.<sup>48</sup> Thus, we may conclude that with respect to Joshua's herem, only the rebuilding of Jericho was a priori forbidden; its settlement once rebuilt

was not. Consequently, men of piety, including the sons-of-the-prophets, could subsequently live in Jericho in good faith.<sup>49</sup>

Elisha performed his first miracle, the splitting of the Jordan waters, in order to prove to himself that he possessed the necessary prophetic powers. He cured the waters of Jericho to demonstrate the same to the sons-of-the-prophets, some of whom evidently remained skeptical. In choosing to cure the waters by sweetening them with salt, a substance which mormally embitters, Elisha effectuated a double miracle (  $\circ$  )  $\uparrow$   $\downarrow$   $\circ$  ) .<sup>50</sup> In the performance of the miracle Elisha carefully impressed everyone with the fact that his miracle was not aided by any natural influence.<sup>51</sup> He asked specifically for a "new" cruse to remove the possible suspicion that some substance already in the cruse might contribute to the success of the cure. For the same reason he used salt, never an ingredient to sweeten water.<sup>52</sup>

We have a precedent for curing by purposely inverting the laws of nature, in this case the laws of chemistry, in the deeds of Moses.<sup>53</sup> "And the people murmured against Moses saying: what shall we drink? And he cried unto the Lord; and the Lord showed him a tree, and he cast it into the waters, and the waters were made sweet" (Ex. 15:24ff.). Know that the tree itself was en embittering substance! This too was a double miracle.

CHAPTER FOUR  
TWO MORE MIRACLES:  
ONE OF ANGER, ONE OF KINDNESS

Elisha then proceeded to Beth-el. "As he was going up by the way, there came forth little children ( *בנים קטנים* ) out of the city, and mocked him, and said unto him: go up, thou baldhead; go up, thou baldhead" (II Kings 2:23). Some claim that these children were angry at Elisha because he spoiled their business of supplying the inhabitants of Jericho with good water from Beth-el;<sup>54</sup> when Elisha cured the Jericho waters and made them drinkable, they no longer had a means of livelihood and were angry. But others portray the children as totally lacking in any redeeming features. They were devoid ( *חלולים* ) of mitzvot and heretics in their faith ( *גוים וזרעם* ).<sup>55</sup> Since their mothers conceived them on the Day of Atonement, they began life in transgression and were hence destined to continue a life of iniquity inevitably deserving premature death as punishment.<sup>56</sup> When Elisha "looked behind and saw them," he gained the prophetic insight that neither these children nor their seed would ever contain the smallest amount of goodness.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, he cursed them in the name of the Lord and had them killed: "And there came forth two she-bears out of the wood, and tore forty and two children of them" (II Kings 2:24).

It is said that the severity of Elisha's response to the mocking remarks of the children was warranted for a variety of reasons. First, he saw that they had their locks trimmed like the pagans.<sup>58</sup> In other words, they were well versed in

the idolatrous practices of their times. Second, he recognized their jeers as saying, "you who are not hairy like Elijah but bald, ascend now to heaven like he did!" Elisha understood that they mocked his master as well as himself.<sup>59</sup> This disrespect against God's anointed prophets surely merits death. Two bears therefore emerged from the forest to inflict the necessary punishment, one bear to revenge the honor of Elijah, the other to revenge the honor of Elisha.<sup>60</sup>

Yet many cannot agree that Elisha was justified in killing these forty-two children for a few disrespectful remarks. They say that Elisha was punished for this excessive retaliation, for in relating the death of Elisha it is told, "Now Elisha was fallen sick of his sickness whereof he was to die" (II Kings 13:14). Properly understood, this account teaches us that three illnesses befell the prophet, the first two of which served as punishment for his two sins, namely, sicking the bears on the children, and his total rejection of Gehazi. The third and last illness caused his death.<sup>61</sup>

Once, a woman of the wives of the sons-of-the-prophets, whom some say was the wife of Obadiah,<sup>62</sup> Ahab's servant, beseeched Elisha to rescue her from financial straits. She had no money to pay her creditor<sup>63</sup> who had threatened to take her children as bondmen. Elisha advised her to collect from her neighbors as many vessels as possible. He promised that by means of a miracle she would be able to fill all the vessels with the one jar of oil which she owned. He instructed the widow to carefully close the door when pouring the oil so that the

miracle would take place in secrecy without fanfare or public attention.<sup>64</sup> A locked door, furthermore, deters the "evil" eye.<sup>65</sup> Once inside, he told her to remain in one place while continually moving aside the newly filled vessels. It was of great importance to remain stationary in the execution of the miracle, for it is the nature of miracles that they cannot continue except in the place where they begin.<sup>66</sup> The miracle wrought in behalf of the widow did not involve any creation ex nihilo, as might appear from the observation that the borrowed vessels were empty.<sup>67</sup> Actually, the air inside the vessels transformed itself into oil in much the way that Moses' staff turned into a snake before Pharoah.<sup>68</sup>

CHAPTER FIVE  
THE SHUNAMMITE WOMAN

Two miracles were wrought in behalf of the Shunammite woman whom tradition identifies as the sister of Abishag.<sup>69</sup> First, although barren, she was rewarded with the birth of a son for the hospitality she extended to Elisha. Second, her son was later miraculously revived after having succumbed to some fatal illness.

Whenever Elisha passed by Shunem, this woman showed him great kindness, even though at first she was unaware of his prophetic status. Having given him bread to eat on several occasions, she began to perceive that he was no ordinary man. When he ate, no fly came to the table, and his garments were always clean, showing no signs of nocturnal pollution.<sup>70</sup> She remarked to her aging husband, "behold now, I perceive that this is a holy man of God, that passeth by us continually" (II Kings 4:9). Is it likely that she did not immediately recognize Elisha the prophet? Had he not already established his reputation by the performance of numerous miracles? Evidently the episode of the Shunammite woman belongs to the earlier career of Elisha.<sup>71</sup> For if this story is told after the tales of five miracles -- the incidents of the splitting of the Jordan waters, the curing of the Jericho waters, the killing of the forty-two children, the filling of the trenches with water, and the supplying of oil to the widow -- he would have been well known to all the inhabitants of the land, and the Shunammite woman would have identified him instantaneously as the great prophet of his day.

According to another tradition, the woman did in fact know Elisha from the start,<sup>72</sup> but only after he began making a habit of passing through Shunem did she deem it necessary to honor him with lodging privileges, "Let us make, I pray thee, a little chamber in the roof; and let us set for him there a bed, and a table, and a stool, and a candlestick; and it shall be, when he cometh to us, that he shall turn in hither" (II Kings 4:10). She provided Elisha with private facilities, for a man of God requires a place conducive to contemplation. Also, a man of his stature should not have to use the profane vessels of others, nor should others share his.<sup>73</sup>

Appreciative of her solicitude, Elisha sought to reward her. He offered to use his influence in the royal court to her advantage but she demurred. After she withdrew, Elisha persisted by asking Gehazi, "what then is to be done for her? And Gehazi answered: verily she hath no son, and her husband is old" (II Kings 4:14). She was barren and her husband too old to sire, a situation identical to that of Abraham and Sara.<sup>74</sup> When Elisha heard this, a prophetic word came to him and commanded him to call the woman a second time in order to impart to her the divine message. Due to her modesty she did not enter the prophet's chamber but remained at the entrance.<sup>75</sup>

This time Elisha spoke to her directly predicting that within a year she would give birth to a son. The first time Elisha called her he spoke to her through Gehazi, even though she was standing in front of him.<sup>76</sup> She learned from this that the prophet did not want an woman to draw near him. Therefore,



when called this second time, in order to respect his holiness she was careful not to proceed any further than the entrance to his chamber. Elisha, from his part, satisfied that she had observed the proper decorum, deigned to speak to her face to face.<sup>77</sup>

The Shunammite woman responded to Elisha's prediction with trepidation, "And she said: nay, my Lord, thou man of God, do not lie unto thy handmaid" (II Kings 4:16). Actually, Elisha had assured her that she would give birth, but he did not promise that her son would survive his infancy.<sup>78</sup> Elisha said only, "At this season, when the time cometh round, thou shalt embrace a son" (II Kings 4:16). The woman said to herself, "what good will this embrace be for me if in the end I have to bury him?"<sup>79</sup> Her remonstrations were intended to dissuade the prophet from raising any false hopes and were motivated because he had made this prediction in his own name, not God's.<sup>80</sup> What validity is there in the prophet's assurance if it proceeds solely from his own initiative? But God does not fail to support the utterances of his prophets for it is said, "Thou shalt also decree a thing, and it shall be established unto thee," (Job 22:28) and "Samuel grew, and the Lord was with him, and did let none of his words fall to the ground," (I Sam. 3:19) and "He will fulfill the desire of them that fear Him" (Ps. 145:19). Elisha initiated the pronouncement, God upheld it, and the woman gave birth, as it is told, "And the woman conceived, and bore a son at that season, when the time came round, as Elisha had said unto her" (II Kings 4:17).

The child grew into a young lad. True to the Shunammite woman's premonition he was not to mature to manhood without obstacles. One day, while working in the field with his father he was overcome with severe head pains crying out, "my head, my head," before collapsing. His father had a servant carry the boy to the house where he sat on his mother's knees until noon when he died. His mother then lay him on the prophet's bed, shut the door on him, and proceeded to make preparations for her journey to Mount Carmel where she intended personally to confront Elisha and implore his help. She put her son on the bed specially reserved for Elisha on his passing through Shunem because she felt that there, due to the prophet's merit, the boy would be best preserved.<sup>81</sup> When she declared her intention to seek Elisha, her husband questioned her, "wherefore wilt thou go to him today? it is neither new moon nor Sabbath" (II Kings 4:23). His statement teaches us that it was the custom in those days for people to visit the prophets on these occasions.<sup>82</sup> Therefore, even today one is obligated to visit his master to hear his words on the Sabbath and festivals. The woman responded merely with the word "shalom" and left her husband's puzzlement unresolved; until she presented her case to Elisha, she did not care to reveal her purpose to anyone.<sup>83</sup>

At Mount Carmel she anxiously approached the man of God only to be repulsed for her forwardness by Elisha's servant, Gehazi: "when she came to the man of God to the hill, she caught hold of his feet. And Gehazi came near to thrust her

her away" (II Kings 4:27). Gehazi's behavior was motivated by his concern for either the woman or the prophet.<sup>84</sup> In the case of the former he felt embarrassed that the Shunammite woman should humble herself so abjectly; in the case of the latter he was protecting his master from unnecessary and undesirable physical contact with a woman.<sup>85</sup> Elisha, however, rebuked Gehazi and justified the woman's behavior, "Let her alone; for her soul is bitter within her; and the Lord hath hid it from me, and hath not told me" (II Kings 4:27). Elisha, thus, showed compassion for her emotional state as well as a burning curiosity to know her business, since God apparently had not yet revealed it to him. After she kissed his feet, though, her purpose at once became known to him through prophecy.<sup>86</sup>

Favorably received in the presence of the prophet, the Shunammite woman bitterly reminded him of her previous suspicions, "Then she said: did I desire a son of my Lord? Did I not say: do not deceive me?" (II Kings 4:28) Having never asked for a son in the first place, she finds it a cruel favor to be given a son destined to die in his youth.<sup>87</sup> Elisha straightaway gave his staff to his servant with instructions to lay it on the child's face.<sup>88</sup> He cautioned Gehazi to proceed with due haste and not to greet or to respond to the greeting of any man along the way. Elisha was wary that his servant might be delayed, but his major fear was that Gehazi would announce his mission to passers-by giving the impression that he, Gehazi, was capable of performing miracles.<sup>89</sup> This fear, however, proved unfounded for some tell us that Gehazi

stated clearly that his master had sent him and that he was only an agent through which Elisha himself performed the miracle.

Others tell us that Gehazi did disobey his master. Whenever he met someone on the road he said in ridicule, "do you believe that this staff can revive a dead person?"<sup>90</sup> Since he defied the prophet's command, he consequently failed to revive the boy when he placed the staff on him. Still others contend that the staff was never intended to revive but only to preserve the boy's body from the natural decay and putrefication of the dead until Elisha could arrive to effectuate the actual revival by means of prayer and resuscitation.<sup>91</sup> Gehazi mistakenly thought that the staff did in fact possess reviving powers and so announced this to those whom he met along the way.<sup>92</sup> Gehazi was guilty of dispensing false information concerning the nature of the total mission of which he was a part. Consequently, he was frustrated in his attempt to preserve the boy's body by means of the staff.

Scripture unmistakably states that the boy did in fact die.<sup>93</sup> No hyperbole is intended, nor is the word "die" a euphemism for "unconsciousness" or the like. First his illness is mentioned as it is written, "My head, my head" (II Kings 4:19), then his consequent death as it is written, "He sat on her knees till noon, and then died" (II Kings 4:20). We are to understand from this that he died "completely," (גמול), his soul separating from his body.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, a coma does not ensue from head pains, nor is it a common affliction of

children.<sup>95</sup> Scripture later, however, says, "the child is not awaked" (II Kings 4:31). Could it be that he had not actually been dead but only in some sort of dormant condition and that accordingly the attempt to revive him was merely a medical procedure of curing a very ill child? No! The use of a word connoting sleep as a synonym for death is found elsewhere, as it is written, "Awake and sing, ye that dwell in the dust" (Is. 26:19).<sup>96</sup> If one were still to insist that the son of the Shunammite woman, like the son of the Zarephath woman, whom Elisha revived,<sup>97</sup> did not die completely, a better case could be made arguing as follows: if the boy had really died, the dead body would have defiled Elisha with whom it came into contact, but nowhere are we told that the prophet became defiled; therefore, we must conclude that since only the dead can defile, the boy must have been alive throughout.<sup>98</sup>

In the revival of the boy,<sup>99</sup> Elisha demonstrates that although miracles have a divine origin, their execution is dependent on the prophet's proper technique.<sup>100</sup> Detailed note is therefore taken in describing the procedure that Elisha employed. First, he entered the room where the child lay and closed the door behind him so that no one would witness his activity. A miracle of this nature must be performed in private.<sup>101</sup> In addition, seclusion is conducive to effective prayer.<sup>102</sup> The basic elements of the revival comprised prayer and stretching out lengthwise on top of the boy. Each of these was alternately repeated seven times. By placing his own body on the boy Elisha was augmenting the power of

his prayer.<sup>103</sup> When one physically faces the object of his prayer and directs his thoughts to it, he enhances his chances of success. We read that when Isaac entreated God to enable his wife, Rebekah, to give birth, he did so by facing her directly, as it is written, "and Isaac entreated the Lord opposite his wife because she was barren; and the Lord let himself be entreated of him, and Rebekah his wife conceived" (Gen. 25:21).<sup>104</sup> Seven times did Elisha put his mouth on the mouth of the lad, and his eyes on his eyes in order to transfer to him the breath of life. Elisha's body warmth was thus instrumental in restoring the boy's life processes.<sup>105</sup> When the child finally sneezed Elisha knew that his efforts had succeeded. Sneezing is a sure sign of life,<sup>106</sup> for "the child sneezed seven times... and opened his eyes" (II Kings 4:35). Elisha now asked Gehazi to call the mother so that she could take up her child. "Then she went in, and fell at his feet, and bowed down to the ground; and she took up her son, and went out" (II Kings 4:37).

CHAPTER SIX  
THE MIRACLES OF POTTAGE AND BREAD

Fully established now as a prophet of extraordinary healing powers, Elisha made his way to Gilgal, one of the places where he had accompanied Elijah before his departure. Elisha, we observe, retraced the route he had trodden with his master, stopping in each of these places to perform a miracle in order to become increasingly fortified in his prophecy.<sup>107</sup> Gilgal was the sight of two miracles,<sup>108</sup> both of which were performed in order to alliviate the famine then rampant in the land. Upon seeing the sons-of-the-prophets at Gilgal suffering from hunger, Elisha ordered his servant to set a pot on the fire for the preparation of pottage. Herbs and vines of all kinds were gathered and put into the pot but unknown to the prophets one of the ingredients, a wild vine, possessed a poisonous quality. The bitterness of taste quickly alerted them to the brew's danger<sup>109</sup> and they cried out, "O man of God, there is death in the pot" (II Kings 4:40). Elisha then ordered his servant to add flour to the mixture to cure it. Although this act was not as impressive as the "double" miracle of the Jericho waters, it still counted as a miracle.<sup>110</sup>

There are those who detract from this miracle by saying that the curative property of flour is not in the category of "miraculous." It is rather, they argue, a natural phenomenon.<sup>111</sup> Anyone, prophet or not, could have cured the pottage had he simply known about the properties of flour. These detractors, if present at the time, would have challenged Elisha to cure

the pottage without any agent at all, simply by prophetic word: let this pottage be cured!<sup>112</sup> Their skepticism on the surface appears to have some validity, but the truth of the matter is that even though the flour had some measure of natural curative power, God himself put into the flour an added strength to nullify the harmful effects of the wild vine and make the pottage fit for human consumption.<sup>113</sup> Through God's intervention the episode rightly deserves the appellation "miracle."

Miracle followed upon miracle. No sooner had Elisha made the pottage edible than he assumed the task of providing food for a hundred men from only twenty loaves of bread. We are told that "there came a man from Baal-shalishah, and brought the man of God bread of the first fruits, twenty loaves of barley" (II Kings 4:42). That this man brought a gift of first fruits might suggest that Elisha was a priest. But no, the words "first fruits" tell us only that the man from Baal-shalishah had made the bread out of barley which had been reaped from the first harvest.<sup>114</sup> With these loaves Elisha directed his servant to feed the people, "And his servant said: how should I set this before a hundred men?" (II Kings 4:43) Elisha assured him that this directive stemmed from God, thereby implying that God himself would see to it that all one hundred men would be fed from the twenty loaves. Nor is the miracle of food lasting beyond measure a rare occurrence in Scripture. In a manner similar to the bread miracle which we read about here, Elijah had been fed by the ravens and the



Zarephath woman had been provided with flour and oil.<sup>115</sup>

CHAPTER SEVEN  
NAAMAN THE LEPER

A captain of the host of the King of Aram named Naaman was a leper of whom it is curiously said that he was a man "held in esteem because by him the Lord had given victory unto Aram" (II Kings 5:1). Although Naaman was an enemy of Israel, he had been used as an instrument of the Lord when earlier in battle he pulled the bow that killed the wicked Ahab.<sup>116</sup> The people of Aram had also been kind to Israel on another occasion, as it is written: "And Laban gathered together all the men of the place and made a feast" (Gen. 29:22).<sup>117</sup> Because of this kindness, the Holy One Blessed Be He said to the Arameans: "because you have done righteously with the people of Jacob I will give your reward to your children, so that no reward shall remain to be given to the otherwise wicked Arameans in the world to come."<sup>118</sup> Therefore, the Lord had given victory to Aram through Naaman, that is, now but not in the world to come!

The servant girl of Naaman's wife was an Israelite who had been taken captive during one of Aram's sorties into Israel. Scripture puzzlingly describes her as a na'arah k'tanah (נַעֲרָה קְטָנָה). Is this not a contradiction in terms? According to Rabbinic law a na'arah is defined as a girl between the age of twelve and twelve and one half, whereas a k'tanah is clearly a minor under the age of twelve. How then can a girl be described as a na'arah k'tanah? One can resolve this difficulty by suggesting that this Israelite

servant girl was a minor (a *נַעֲרָה*) who came from the town of Naaron (*נָאֲרוֹן*):<sup>119</sup>

She advised her mistress who in turn advised Naaman, to seek a cure from his leprosy from Elisha, the renowned prophet of Israel, "She said unto her mistress: would that my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! then would he be 'gathered' from his leprosy" (II Kings 5:3).<sup>120</sup> Here as elsewhere, the cure from leprosy is described as being "gathered." This is an apt description because a leper was required by Biblical law to remain outside the city gate for the duration of his affliction.<sup>121</sup> Upon his recovery he would be returned to his city, that is, "gathered" once again among his townsfolk.

Soon after, Naaman appeared before the King of Israel with a letter from the King of Aram stating, "Behold I have sent Naaman my servant to thee that thou mayest recover him of his leprosy" (II Kings 5:6). The King of Aram meant to request that the King of Israel facilitate the cure of Naaman by calling in the services of Elisha. As this was not clearly stated, the King of Israel mistakenly thought that he, rather than Elisha, was being asked to cure the leper. Fully aware of his inability to perform such acts, the King of Israel responded angrily, "Am I God to kill and make alive, that this man (the King of Aram) doth send unto me to recover a man of his leprosy?... see how he seeks a quarrel with me" (II Kings 5:7). Even had the King of Israel properly understood the letter from the King of Aram that was delivered to him through Naaman, he would in any case have been reluctant to direct

Naaman to Elisha. Knowing in his heart that he had often disobeyed the prophet's divine charges by failing to ban idolatrous practices in his kingdom, the King of Israel was too ashamed to confront Elisha.<sup>122</sup> The King's disturbance over the letter merely camouflaged his resentment of Elisha's righteous stand against idolatry. He thus rent his clothes to demonstrate his repudiation of Elisha.

When the prophet heard of the King's mourning antics, "he sent to the king saying: wherefore hast thou rent thy clothes? let him (Naaman) come now to me, and he (the King of Israel) shall know that there is a prophet in Israel" (II Kings 5:8). Because the King did not accord Elisha the respect due him as prophet, Elisha planned to cure Naaman and thereby establish the validity of his prophetic status as well as the legitimacy of the God of Israel.<sup>123</sup> This latter was Elisha's true motive. His eagerness to cure Naaman stemmed neither from a desire to honor the King of Aram nor from a mind to do any favor for the King of Israel, but rather to publicize the greatness of God.

When Naaman presented himself at the door of Elisha's house, the prophet declined to speak to the suppliant directly. He sent a messenger to Naaman with instructions that he wash in the Jordan seven times. Naaman, insulted at Elisha's failure to appear personally, went away in anger saying, "behold, I thought: he will surely come to me, and stand, and call on the name of the Lord, his God, and wave his hand over the place, and cure the leprosy" (II Kings 5:11). To be cured by

incantation would undoubtedly be a miracle, but to bathe in the Jordan, if successful in relieving his condition, would merely constitute a natural cure that could easily be duplicated in rivers of his own country.<sup>124</sup> He did not seek the prophet to be given instructions in natural medicine; he came to be cured by a divine miracle! Only after his servants convinced him by reasoned arguments did Naaman agree to bathe himself in the Jordan: "And his servants came near, and spoke unto him, and said: 'my father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, wouldst thou not have done it? how much rather then when he saith to thee: wash and be clean?' Then he went down and dipped himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God; and his flesh came back like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean" (II Kings 3:13-14).

This miracle transformed Naaman into a true believer in the God of Israel. He returned to Elisha to announce his new faith and present him with an assortment of expensive gifts. Elisha refused these. Some say that though these gifts were sincerely offered, they were tainted with the blood of idolatry.<sup>125</sup> Others claim that Elisha declined to accept money in order to demonstrate that a true prophet, in contrast to the idolatrous priests, does not practice his profession for hire.<sup>126</sup> As God's instrument the prophet ought not to seek material benefit for himself. The only "gift" asked is that of loyalty to God in return for his mighty deeds. In refusing to accept Naaman's generous offer, Elisha made an oath which tradition has explained

in two ways. According to the common understanding, he said, "As the Lord liveth, before whom I stand, I will receive none" (II Kings 5:16). According to a more novel interpretation, he said, "As the Lord liveth, (and) as I served him (i.e., Elijah), I will receive none." In this explanation we see Elisha recalling his loyalty to Elijah in order to underscore the firmness of his oath.<sup>127</sup>

As a result of his conversion, Naaman requested two mules' burden of earth upon which to build an altar in Aram for the worship of the Lord.<sup>128</sup> He gained Elisha's sympathetic ear when he explained that upon resuming his post in Aram he must take pains to conceal his conversion. On occasion he will even have to participate in idolatrous worship, but in so doing, he insisted, his heart will still be with the Lord. He depicted his dilemma to Elisha saying, "in this thing may the Lord pardon thy servant: when my master goeth into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leaneth on my hand... and I prostrate myself... may the Lord pardon thy servant in this thing" (II Kings 5:18). It is generally agreed that Naaman's request for pardon was granted, yet some say that because he was not circumcised, Elisha advised him not to proceed with his conversion.<sup>129</sup> As Naaman departed Elisha added, "go in peace" (II Kings 5:19), as if to warn him of the dangers of conversion in his situation.<sup>130</sup>

CHAPTER EIGHT  
GEHAZI

Naaman began his journey back to Aram with all the goods that he had brought as gifts for Elisha. The prophet had demonstrated his integrity by refusing the gifts, but his servant Gehazi, who lacked such moral perfection, was overcome by cupidity. He said to himself, "Behold my master hath spared this Naaman the Aramean in not receiving at his hands that which he brought; as the Lord liveth, I will surely run after him and take something from him" (II Kings 5:20). Gehazi succeeded in acquiring goods from Naaman on the pretext that Elisha had changed his mind, now desiring to have the gifts that he had earlier turned down. Gehazi asked for only one talent of silver with two changes of raiment, but received two talents of silver and two changes of raiment.<sup>131</sup> Naaman, convinced that these gifts would find their way to Elisha through his servant, continued on his journey to Aram. Gehazi, meanwhile, transported the goods to his own house. Soon after we find Elisha rebuking Gehazi for receiving "money, garments, oliveyards and vineyards, sheep and oxen, men servants and maid servants" (II Kings 5:26). But from the hands of Naaman Gehazi had received only silver and garments! How then did Gehazi come to possess these other items? We must realize that when it said, va'yifkod ba'bayit (II Kings 5:24), it does not mean that Gehazi "deposited" the original silver and garments in his house, but rather that he "appointed in his house" agents from among his friends to acquire more goods



with a portion of the silver.<sup>132</sup>

Gehazi, much to his chagrin, soon discovered that he could keep none of his activities hidden from the eyes of his master. Elisha approached him saying, "'whence comest thou, Gehazi?" And he said: 'thy servant went whither.' And he said unto him: 'went not my heart with thee when the man turned back from his chariot to meet thee?'" (II Kings 5:26). Although Elisha had not been present he knew through prophetic insight exactly what had transpired.<sup>133</sup> For Gehazi's greed in pursuing Naaman and for his attempt to deceive his master, Elisha pronounced a horrible curse upon him: "'The leprosy of Naaman shall cleave unto thee and unto thy seed forever.' And he went out from his presence a leper, white as snow" (II Kings 5:27).

Why should Gehazi's sons suffer from his sins? Some have said that they evidently must have known of their fathers activities and did not restrain him. Still, it seems unjust that his seed should have been cursed "forever." Some say that Elisha's curse was conditional: each generation of Gehazi's descendents will have the free choice to pursue a life of righteousness; if they succeed, God will annul the curse.<sup>135</sup> Others maintain that the curse will remain valid only for the duration of the Jubilee.<sup>136</sup> The term "forever" is used in connection with the Jubilee elsewhere, as it is written, "and he (the Hebrew servant) shall serve him forever" (Ex. 21:6).<sup>137</sup>

Chastised and cursed by his master, Gehazi, who had always been weak-kneed in his faith, now decided to leave the



religion of Israel. He departed from Elisha's sight and abandoned his country to seek haven with the enemy, Aram. It is even said that he went directly to Naaman, a former leper, whom he imagined to be sympathetic to his physical affliction.<sup>138</sup> At a later date Elisha traveled to Damascus<sup>139</sup> to seek Gehazi's repentance, but the apostate, comfortable in his evil ways, refused. It is told that Gehazi was not only reproachable for his personal habits but was also guilty of leading others to sin and the worship of idols. It was Gehazi who suspended a lodestone between heaven and earth upon which was engraved the ineffable name of God. This stone, which attracted the heathens to idolatrous worship, blasphemously contained the first two commandments of the decalogue: "I am the Lord," and "thou shalt have no other Gods before me."<sup>140</sup>

CHAPTER NINE  
THE AXE-HEAD INCIDENT

As long as Gehazi was Elisha's servant none of the sons-of-the-prophets dared approach Elisha.<sup>141</sup> After Gehazi had been cursed and banished, they multiplied and swarmed around Elisha to such an extent, that there was a lack of sufficient living space for all of them. They therefore said to Elisha, their master, "Behold now, the place where we dwell before thee is too cramped for us. Let us go, we pray thee, unto the Jordan, and take thence every man a beam, and let us make a place there, where we may dwell" (II Kings 6:2). Elisha understood by this that they wanted to build a house of study, so he accompanied them to guard them against any danger that might arise.<sup>142</sup> When the group of prophets, lead by Elisha, arrived at the Jordan, they began to cut wood for the building, "But as one was felling a beam, the axe-head fell into the water; and he cried and said: 'alas, my master! for it was borrowed!'" (II Kings 6:5). When the exact location in the river where the axe-head fell was pointed out to Elisha, he proceeded once more to exhibit his power to perform the miraculous: "And he cut down a stick, and cast it in thither, and made the iron to swim" (II Kings 6:6).

This incredible event, described in only one sentence, begs for interpretation. Why did Elisha have to cut down a new stick? Could he not have used the stick off of which the axe-head had flown? Behold, we have been taught earlier in the story of the cure of the Jericho waters<sup>143</sup> that miracles

require something new to bring them to fruition.<sup>144</sup> As a new jar was added then, so here a new piece of wood was used. Having secured the "new" wood, Elisha fashioned it into a precisely measured handle which could fit perfectly into the sunken axe-head. When he threw the handle into the water it descended to the bottom where it joined with the axe-head. Then the two objects, now a complete axe, rose to the surface.<sup>145</sup>

The remarkable recovery of the axe-head was miraculous in two respects. First, the newly fashioned handle made of wood, a substance which normally floats, descended to the bottom where it joined the axe-head. Second, the axe-head made of iron, a substance which does not float, rose to the surface. All agree that the latter aspect was indeed miraculous, though some maintain that the former can be accounted for by the laws of nature.<sup>146</sup> After all, had Elisha taken a heavy piece of wood and thrown it with all his strength it would have descended quite naturally. But even here it is admitted that only a prophet could have had such perfect aim as to have made the handle join the iron!

An altogether different interpretation of this miracle has been handed down to us by those who maintain that the handle never joined the iron axe-head at all and that the two objects never rose as a complete axe.<sup>147</sup> Tradition plainly tells us that the handle made the iron to float, but nowhere are we told that the handle too re-surfaced. Therefore, we may conclude that the piece of wood thrown by Elisha served as his messenger, so to speak, calling to the iron and conveying

to it the prophet's command that it rise to the surface.<sup>148</sup>

CHAPTER TEN  
WAR WITH ARAM

The King of Aram, Ben-hadad, sent marauding bands into the territory of Israel on numerous occasions in order to capture the King of Israel. But each time Aram planned an ambush, the army of Israel seemed prepared. The King of Aram suspected treason within his own camp and his "heart was sore troubled by this thing; and he called his servants and said unto them: 'will ye not tell me which among us is on the side of the King of Israel?' And one of his servants said: 'nay my lord, O King; but Elisha, the prophet that is in Israel, telleth the King of Israel the words that thou speakest in thy bedchamber'" (II Kings 6:11-12). Elisha, as prophet, was able to know the thoughts of the enemy king's mind and thereby revealed his military secrets.

Ben-hadad's only hope for victory therefore lay in capturing the prescient prophet. He thereupon sent a full army with horses and chariots to Dothan where he was told Elisha could be found. Soon the entire city was encompassed by the Aramean host. Although Elisha remained confident that no harm would come to anyone, his servant became nonplused and fearful for his life and the lives of the other townsfolk.<sup>149</sup> He said to his master, "'Alas... what shall we do?' And Elisha answered: 'fear not: for they that are with us are more than they that are with them'" (II Kings 6:16). The servant was incredulous. Surely his master was mistaken! Aram had an immense army encircling the city whereas Israel had not a

single soldier at that moment with which to defend itself.

To assuage his servant's fear Elisha had to make him see what did not in reality exist:<sup>150</sup> "And Elisha prayed and said: 'Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes that he may see.' And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha" (II Kings 6:17). One might ask: how can these troops be in the mountain which is outside the city and at the same time around Elisha who is inside the city? They cannot! But God made the servant see them in his imagination so that he would not be afraid and cry out, thereby revealing Elisha's whereabouts to the enemy.<sup>151</sup>

When the enemy descended from the hills to capture the prophet, he smote them with blindness and led them to the capital city of Samaria. There, he restored their sight and restrained the King from taking any vengeful action. Elisha actually demanded that the King show the captured Arameans kindness and compassion, "Thou shalt not smite them; hast thou taken captive with thy sword and with thy bow those whom thou wouldst smite? set bread and water before them that they may eat and drink?" (II Kings 6:22) Although Elisha was responsible for both blinding the Arameans and subsequently restoring their sight, only the latter act was performed with full prophetic enthusiasm, for when he smote them with blindness he did not invoke God's name,<sup>153</sup> but when he restored their vision he triumphantly cried, "Lord, open the eyes of these men that they may see" (II Kings 6:20).

It soon came to pass that Aram once again resumed her militancy toward Israel: "Ben-hadad king of Aram gathered all his host and went up and besieged Samaria" (II Kings 6:24). On account of the siege, food became scarce and famine ensued. War conditions increased in severity and reduced the Israelites to abject poverty and degradation. We are told that Elisha, who called for the famine as a punishment for Israel's sins, did not call it off after three years as the compassionate Elijah had done but allowed it to persist for seven long and terrible years.<sup>154</sup> In the first year of the famine the people of Israel ate what they had in their homes;<sup>155</sup> in the second year they ate whatever they could find in the fields; in the third year they ate the meat of clean animals; in the fourth year they ate the meat of unclean animals; in the fifth year they ate insects and reptiles; in the sixth year they ate their sons and daughters; and in the seventh year they ate their own arms. All these horrors of the seven year famine fulfilled the prophecy of Moses<sup>156</sup> as it is written: "And thou shalt eat the fruit of thine own body, the flesh of thy sons and daughters whom the Lord thy God hath given thee; in the siege and in the straitness wherewith thine enemies shall straiten thee" (Deut. 28:53), and the prophecy of Isaiah<sup>157</sup> as it is written: "every man will eat the flesh of his own arm" (Is. 9:19).

CHAPTER ELEVEN  
THE CLOSE OF A PROPHETIC CAREER

When the famine subsided, Elisha journeyed to Damascus to seek the repentance and return of his former servant Gehazi.<sup>158</sup> Since he was struck with leprosy and banished from his master's sight, Gehazi became enmeshed in a wicked life of idolatry. Despite Elisha's efforts he refused to return to the way of the Lord.

While in Damascus, Elisha's presence was revealed to Ben-hadad, the King of Aram, who on his sick bed said to Hazael, his servant: "take a present in thy hand and go meet the man of God, and inquire of the Lord by him, saying: 'Shall I recover of this sickness?'. . . So Hazael went to meet him. . . and said: 'thy son Ben-hadad king of Aram hath sent me to thee, saying: Shall I recover of this sickness?' And Elisha said unto him: 'Go, say unto him: Thou shalt shurely recover; howbeit the Lord hath shown me that he shall surely die'" (II Kings 8:8-10). Elisha's response, although seemingly contradictory, was meant to convey to Hazael, by hint, that the king would recover from his illness and survive if not unnaturally put to death.<sup>159</sup>

From this Hazael understood that he would be the one to fulfill the prophecy of Ben-hadad's death. Elisha had carefully couched his prophecy in equivocal terms, for had he stated explicitly that Ben-hadad would die, many would later have assumed that the king died from fear of the ominous prophecy rather than from the prophecy itself. Prophets apparently often adopted such a manner in order that their utterances would merit the



fullest faith of the people.<sup>160</sup>

Since the death of Ben-hadad unmistakably meant that Hazael would succeed to the throne, Elisha began to weep. "And Hazael said: 'Why weepeth my lord?' And he answered: 'because I know the evil that thou wilt do unto the children of Israel: their strongholds wilt thou set on fire, and their young men wilt thou slay with the sword, and wilt dash in pieces their little ones, and rip up their women with child'" (II Kings 8:12).

The following day the king became delirious with fever. Hazael, who was attending at his side, "took the coverlet (i.e. bath-cloth), and dipped it in water, and spread it on his face, and he died" (II Kings 8:15). Hazael had made the king believe that this was a medical procedure; actually, it was a means of hastening his death by too rapid cooling of the body.<sup>161</sup> Thus, the prophecy of Elisha was fulfilled and Hazael assumed the reign of Aram.

It was after these events had come to pass that Elisha fell sick and lay near death. Upon hearing that the prophet was about to die, Joash, the king of Israel, came to see him; Joash was afraid that the prophet's death would leave Israel unprotected and prey to the Aramean forces. Elisha thereupon instructed Joash to shoot an arrow, as a symbolic act, to insure victory even after his departure. When Joash shot the arrow Elisha said: "the Lord's arrow of victory, even the arrow of victory against Aram; for thou shalt smite the Arameans in Aphek, till thou have consumed them" (II Kings 13:17). Aphek

was the very place where previously Israel had battled against Aram in the days of Ahab.<sup>162</sup> Israel had previously been successful there and would be successful there now as well. However, the king's disobedience of Elisha's complete instructions diminished the success of his future battles with Aram, for Elisha advised Joash, "'Take the arrows'; and he took them. And he said unto the king of Israel: 'Smite upon the ground'; and he smote thrice, and stayed. And the man of God was wroth with him, and said: 'Thou shouldest have smitten five or six times; then hadst thou smitten Aram till thou hadst consumed it; whereas now thou shalt smite Aram but thrice'" (II Kings 13:18-19). Just as the miracle of manna continued after the death of Moses, so the miracle of military triumph, even in this diminished degree, prevailed after the death of Elisha.<sup>163</sup>

Victory over the Arameans, as predicted by Elisha, took place during the reign of Hazael's son, of whom it is said, "three times did Joash smite him (Hazael's son), and recovered the cities of Israel" (II Kings 13:25). Elisha, even in death, protected his nation against the Arameans. But not so with the Moabites: "And Elisha died and they buried him. Now the bands of the Moabites invaded the land..." (II Kings 13:20).

In the confusion caused by the Moabite invasion another man was thrown into Elisha's grave, "And it came to pass as they were burying a man, that, behold, they spied a band (of Moabites); and they cast the man into the sepulchre of Elisha; and as soon as the man touched the bones of Elisha, he revived, and stood up on his feet" (II Kings 13:21). Elisha's request

at the feet of Elijah that he be given a double portion of his master's prophecy was now granted. Elijah had revived but one child; Elisha revived the son of the Shunammite woman during his life and this other man during his death.<sup>164</sup> One tradition identifies the man as Shallum ben Tikvah,<sup>165</sup> the husband of Huldah the prophetess. For his righteousness the holy spirit rested on his wife too, who later gave birth to Hanamel.<sup>166</sup> And he, like his parents, was possessed of great piety and learning.<sup>167</sup> Another tradition tells us that the man thrown into Elisha's grave was not Shallum ben Tikvah at all but a wicked man of that generation.<sup>168</sup> Because the bones of the wicked man were allowed to come into contact with those of Elisha, God sent the troops of Moab into the land of Israel as punishment.<sup>169</sup> This man was revived only so that he might remove himself from Elisha. His revival was therefore partial; "He stood up on his feet," walked off a short distance, and died again.<sup>170</sup> This time he was properly buried and the honor of Elisha was duly preserved.

Even those who insist that this wicked man was not fully revived still admit that Elisha had been granted a double portion of his master's prophecy. Did Elisha not revive the son of the Shunammite woman as well as cure Naaman whose leprosy made him appear like a dead man!<sup>171</sup>

Elisha's prophetic career was a spectacular one, replete with miracles wrought both during his lifetime and afterwards. From the beginning, when his master Elijah acquiesced in granting him a double portion of prophecy, Elisha's future

held great promise. Those who saw this man of God pursue his prophetic mission were privileged to witness and marvel at the last great miracle-working prophet that has arisen in Israel.

FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Except as indicated, translations of all Biblical quotations are taken from The Holy Scriptures, Jewish Publication Society, 1917.

<sup>2</sup> Rashi and Kimhi on I Kings 19:16. All references to Rabbinic commentators (with the exception of Abravanel cf. note 8) may be found under the appropriate verse in any standard Rabbinic Bible.

<sup>3</sup> Kimhi on I Kings 19:19.

<sup>4</sup> Gersonides on I Kings 19:19.

<sup>5</sup> Gersonides on I Kings 19:15 suggests that false prophets often passed for true prophets by wearing the mantle which was the prophet's distinguishing garb.

<sup>6</sup> Kimhi on I Kings 19:19.

<sup>7</sup> Kimhi on II Kings 2:3.

<sup>8</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 2:12, p. 605. All page references to Abravanel are taken from:

הקדמות: רביאוימ האשונים  
באצאית ספרים תורה ודעת  
ירושלים תשנ"א (1955).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Rashi on II Kings 2:16.

<sup>11</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 2:12, p. 604.

<sup>12</sup> Rashi on II Kings 2:16.

<sup>13</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 2:12, p. 606.

<sup>14</sup> See Joshua 4:5 ff. for the incidents related here.

<sup>15</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 2:12 ff., p. 606. See Joshua 4:5 where it is written that Joshua instructed the Israelites to take up stones "according unto the number of the tribes of the children of Israel."

<sup>16</sup> See Joshua 4:15 ff., 5:2 ff.

<sup>17</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 2:12, p. 606.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Quoted by Kimhi and Gersonides on II Kings 2:9.

<sup>21</sup>Kimhi on II Kings 2:14. Abravanel, though, on II Kings ch. 8, p. 624, lists for Elisha the following eighteen miracles: 1. the splitting of the Jordan 2. curing of the Jericho waters 3. killing of the youths by the bears 4. providing water for the kings 5. providing oil for the widow 6. enabling the Shunammite woman to bear a child 7. reviving the Shunammite woman's son 8. curing the pottage 9. providing food for a hundred men 10. curing Naaman 11. cursing Gehazi with leprosy 12. recovering the axe-head 13. causing horses and fiery chariots to appear before his servant 14. blinding the Aramean troops 15. causing the Aramean troops to flee their camp 16. having the king's servant trampled by the people 17. calling a seven years famine 18. reviving the man thrown into his grave.

<sup>22</sup>Kimhi on II Kings 2:9.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Rashi on II Kings 2:10.

<sup>25</sup>Kimhi on II Kings 2:10.

<sup>26</sup>Gersonides on II Kings 2:10.

<sup>27</sup>Gersonides on II Kings 2:10.

<sup>28</sup>Abravanel on II Kings 2:12, pp. 607-608.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid. See Gersonides on II Kings 2:10 where this opinion is rejected. He claims that there would not have been sufficient time for master and student to have any serious discussions.

<sup>30</sup>Abravanel on II Kings 2:12, p. 607. For the incident concerning the captain of fifty see II Kings 1:9 ff.

<sup>31</sup>Kimhi on II Kings 2:1.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Gersonides on II Kings 2:1 and Abravanel on II Kings 2:12, p. 608.

<sup>34</sup>Gersonides on II Kings 2:3.

<sup>35</sup>Abravanel on II Kings 2:12, p. 608.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 608-610. The three paragraphs that follow are all taken from Abravanel.

<sup>38</sup> According to medieval cosmology, as expressed by Maimonides, the universe contains ten Intelligences and nine spheres. The spheres, as rational beings, seek to emulate God and the Intelligences. The intelligences are pure intellect whose essential activity is thought.

<sup>39</sup> Elijah's tendency toward drastic punishment is reflected in I Kings 18:39 where after his demonstration on Mount Carmel he had the Baal worshippers slaughtered: "And Elijah said unto them: 'Take the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape.' And they took them; and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there."

<sup>40</sup> Rashi and Kimhi on II Kings 2:14. Gersonides comments that in splitting the waters Elisha showed himself to be equal to Elijah. Only Rashi and Kimhi see in this verse an allusion to the requested double portion.

<sup>41</sup> Kimhi on II Kings 2:14 suggests only as one possibility that לח refers to Elijah. His first suggestion follows Rashi that the reference is to Elisha in the second clause of the verse.

<sup>42</sup> Gersonides on II Kings 2:16.

<sup>43</sup> Rashi on II Kings 2:17.

<sup>44</sup> Gersonides on II Kings 2:17.

<sup>45</sup> Rashi and Kimhi on II Kings 2:19.

<sup>46</sup> See Joshua 6:26.

<sup>47</sup> Gersonides on II Kings 2:19.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Kimhi on II Kings 2:20 and Rashi on II Kings 2:21.

<sup>51</sup> Gersonides on II Kings 2:22.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Kimhi on II Kings 2:20.

<sup>54</sup> Rashi and Kimhi on II Kings 2:23.



- <sup>55</sup> Rashi, Kimhi, and Abravanel (p. 612) on II Kings 2:23.
- <sup>56</sup> Kimhi on II Kings 2:24; Abravanel on II Kings 2:23, p. 612.
- <sup>57</sup> Rashi and Kimhi on II Kings 2:24; Abravanel on II Kings 2:23, p. 612.
- <sup>58</sup> Kimhi on II Kings 2:24.
- <sup>59</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 2:24, p. 612.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>61</sup> Kimhi on II Kings 2:24; Abravanel on II Kings 2:23, p. 612.
- <sup>62</sup> Rashi and Kimhi on II Kings 4:1 concur with the identification of the deceased husband as Obadaiah (see I Kings 18:3 ff.). The targum translates "my husband is dead" as follows:
- עָדַיָּהוּ בְּרֵךְ אֱלֹהֵינוּ
- <sup>63</sup> Kimhi and Abravanel (p. 615) on II Kings 4:1 identify the creditor as Jehoram, the son of Ahab.
- <sup>64</sup> Rashi on II Kings 4:4:
- כָּהֵן הָיָה הָאִישׁ הַזֶּה
- <sup>65</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 4:4, p. 615.
- <sup>66</sup> Kimhi on II Kings 4:4:
- כִּי הָיָה הָאִישׁ הַזֶּה יְהוֹרָם בֶּן אָחָב מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל
- <sup>67</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 4:4. p. 615.
- <sup>68</sup> For the incident concerning Moses' staff see Exodus 7:8 ff.; Gersonides on II Kings 4:2 comments on the superiority of Elisha's miracle. Whereas in the case of Moses the staff transformed only once into a snake, here in the case of Elisha a miracle of transformation was repeated many times over.
- <sup>69</sup> Rashi and Kimhi on II Kings 4:8 concur that the Shunammite woman was the sister of Avishag whom Adonijah wanted to take to wife from Solomon (see I Kings 1:3 ff., "Abishag the Shunammite...").
- <sup>70</sup> Rashi and Kimhi on II Kings 4:9.
- <sup>71</sup> Gersonides on II Kings 4:8.
- <sup>72</sup> Kimhi on II Kings 4:9.
- <sup>73</sup> Gersonides on II Kings 4:10.
- <sup>74</sup> For the reference to Sarah's infertility see Gen. 18:11 ff.



<sup>75</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 4:16, pp. 616-617 claims that Elisha maintained his prophetic purity by keeping his distance from women; also Gersonides on II Kings 4:12.

<sup>76</sup> See II Kings 4:13 where the Shunammite woman first appeared before Elisha. He spoke to her through Gehazi "And when he had called her, she stood before him. And he (Elisha) said unto him (Gehazi): 'Say now unto her...'".

<sup>77</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 4:16, p. 617.

<sup>78</sup> Gersonides on II Kings 4:16.

<sup>79</sup> Rashi on II Kings 4:16.

<sup>80</sup> Kimhi on II Kings 4:16.

<sup>81</sup> Gersonides on II Kings 4:21.

<sup>82</sup> Kimhi and Abravanel (p. 618) on II Kings 4:23.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Kimhi and Gersonides on II Kings 4:27 consider both the woman's honor and the prophet's honor as motivation for Gehazi's action whereas Abravanel (p. 618) considers only the former in his comment on the same verse.

<sup>85</sup> See note 75.

<sup>86</sup> Elisha admits that he does not know the reason for the woman's visit, as he says in II Kings 4:27: "the Lord hath hid it from me, and hath not told me." However, according to Kimhi and Abravanel (p. 618) on II Kings 4:27 before the woman relates her problem in the following verse, the prophet becomes aware of her situation through prophecy.

<sup>87</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 4:28, p. 618.

<sup>88</sup> See II Kings 4:29: "Then he said to Gehazi: 'Gird up thy loins, and take my staff in thy hand, and go thy way; if thou meet any man, salute him not; and if any salute thee, answer him not; and lay my staff upon the face of the child.'"

<sup>89</sup> Rashi on II Kings 4:29.

<sup>90</sup> Kimhi on II Kings 4:29.

<sup>91</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 4:29, p. 618.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> See II Kings 4:20: "And when he had taken him, and brought him to his mother, he sat on her knees till noon, and then died."

<sup>94</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 4:20, p. 617.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Kimhi on II Kings 4:31.

<sup>97</sup> See I Kings 17:7 ff.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> See II Kings 4:32-35.

<sup>100</sup> Kimhi on II Kings 4:34 notes that this revival miracle required a "little technique." Hebrew = *לעשות מעשה קטן*

<sup>101</sup> Gersonides on II Kings 4:33.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Kimhi on II Kings 4:34.

<sup>104</sup> This verse is quoted by Kimhi in support of his contention that the physical juxtaposition of the prayer and the intended recipient of his prayer facilitates the prayer's materialization. The translation "opposite his wife" for *לעומת אשתו* is my own. The Jewish Publication Society's translation "in the presence of his wife" does not convey Kimhi's understanding of the verse.

<sup>105</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 4:34, p. 618.

<sup>106</sup> Gersonides and Abravanel (p. 618) on II Kings 4:35.

<sup>107</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 4:38, p. 618.

<sup>108</sup> cf. II Kings 4:38-44.

<sup>109</sup> Kimhi and Abravanel (p. 618) on II Kings 4:40.

<sup>110</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 4:41, p. 618.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 4:42, p. 619.

<sup>115</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 4:43, p. 619.

<sup>116</sup> Rashi, Kimhi, Gersonides, and Abravanel (p. 619) on II Kings

5:1. See I Kings 22:34 where Ahab's death is described. The killer is not mentioned by name there. The targum to II Kings 5:1 which translates כִּי הָיָה נִתְּנָה לְיָדָא דְּנִשְׁכָּרָא (VICTORY) וְנִשְׁכָּרָא as: וְנִשְׁכָּרָא is used as support by Kimhi that Naaman was the unidentified killer.

<sup>117</sup> Kimhi on II Kings 5:1; see Gen 25:20 where Laban is identified as an Aramean.

<sup>118</sup> Kimhi on II Kings 5:1.

<sup>119</sup> Rashi and Kimhi on II Kings 5:2.

<sup>120</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 5:3, p. 619. The literal "gathered" for פִּזְּקָא instead of the J.P.S. translation "recover" is my own translation to make Abravanel's comment, which follows, intelligible.

<sup>121</sup> cf. Lev. 13:46.

<sup>122</sup> Kimhi on II Kings 5:7.

<sup>123</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 5:8, p. 619.

<sup>124</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 5:11, p. 619.

<sup>125</sup> Rashi on II Kings 5:16.

<sup>126</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 5:16, p. 620.

<sup>127</sup> Kimhi on II Kings 5:16.

<sup>128</sup> Rashi, Kimhi, Gersonides, and Abravanel on II Kings 5:17 agree that Naaman requested earth from the holy soil of Israel in order to build upon it an altar in Aram.

<sup>129</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 5:19, p. 620.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> cf. II Kings 5:23.

<sup>132</sup> Gersonides on II Kings 5:24.

<sup>133</sup> Kimhi, Gersonides, and Abravanel (p. 621) on II Kings 5:26 grant Elisha prophetic insight in this instance in accord with the plain meaning of the text: "went not my heart with thee."

<sup>134</sup> Kimhi on II Kings 5:27.

<sup>135</sup> Abravanel on II Kings 5:27.

- 136 Gersonides on II Kings 5:26.
- 137 According to Rabbinic law a Hebrew slave's period of service was cancelled by the Jubilee year.
- 138 Kimhi on II Kings 8:7.
- 139 Ibid.; cf. II Kings 8:7. As no reason is given in the text for Elisha's presence in Damascus, Kimhi suggests that he came to seek Gehazi's repentance.
- 140 Ibid.
- 141 Rashi and Abravanel (p. 621) on II Kings 6:1.
- 142 Abravanel on II Kings 6:1.
- 143 See note 52.
- 144 Kimhi on II Kings 6:6.
- 145 Kimhi and Gersonides on II Kings 6:6.
- 146 Gersonides on II Kings 6:6.
- 147 Abravanel on II Kings 6:6.
- 148 Ibid.
- 149 Gersonides and Abravanel (p. 622) on II Kings 6:17.
- 150 Kimhi, Gersonides, and Abravanel (p. 622) on II Kings 6:17.
- 151 Kimhi on II Kings 6:17.
- 152 Rashi on II Kings 6:18.
- 153 See II Kings 6:18: "Elisha prayed unto the Lord, and said: 'Smite this people...'"
- 154 Gersonides on II Kings 6:13.
- 155 The enumeration of the conditions during the seven year famine that follows is recounted by Kimhi on II Kings 8:1.
- 156 Rashi on II Kings 6:33.
- 157 Kimhi on II Kings 8:1.
- 158 See note 139.
- 159 Kimhi on II Kings 8:10.

160 Gersonides on II Kings 8:10.

161 Kimhi on II Kings 8:15.

162 Kimhi on II Kings 13:17; cf. I Kings 20:26.

163 Gersonides on II Kings 13:16.

164 Kimhi on II Kings 13:21.

165 Ibid.; cf. II Kings 22:14 ff.

166 Ibid.; cf. Jer. 32:7-12.

167 Ibid.

168 Kimhi on II Kings 13:21; Gersonides on II Kings 13:20.

169 Gersonides on II Kings 13:20.

170 Kimhi on II Kings 13:21; Gersonides on II Kings 13:20.

171 See note 22.

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