

Text Immersion: Healing Narratives in I Kings 17:17-24, II Kings 4:30-37 and

Psalm 30

Samantha Shabman

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Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

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Advisor: David S. Sperling, Rabbi, PH.D

Summary of Text Immersion:

This immersion serves a resource for those who are interested in a deep understanding and analysis of the way healing is represented in the *Tanakh*. These texts provide inspiration to those searching for solace in the wake of physical and emotional despair and crisis. The analysis of these texts explains why these texts are relevant, despite their magical and unrealistic outcomes. The goal of this immersion is to engage deeply with healing narratives in the *Tanakh* and to develop a deep connection and understanding of texts in the *Tanakh* that provide healing. The text immersion is divided into a comparison of I Kings 17:17-24, II Kings 4:30-37, and then an annotated translation of the biblical verses. The text immersion also provides a description of Psalm 30 and an annotated translation of the Psalm. The immersion concludes with a personal reflection and explanation of the modern day relevance of the texts.

This immersion was developed via an in-depth study and analysis with Rabbi Sperling. This work was influenced by his teachings, in addition to the commentaries listed in the bibliography. This in-depth study and annotated translation of I Kings 17:17-24, II Kings 4:30-37 and Psalm 30 serve as a powerful reminder of the timeless nature of biblical stories and psalms. Biblical stories repeatedly penetrate our hearts and provide us with much needed hope in times of despair. Through this text immersion, the reader enters the lives of Elijah, Elisha and King David. This text immersion portrays that although thousands of years have passed since the creation of the *Tanakh*, the words of our sacred scriptures are still relevant, meaningful, and alive.

Introduction

The world we live in is undoubtedly broken and in desperate need of repair and healing. Humans are constantly searching for healing and hope. When we are at a loss of where to go and who to turn to, the *Tanakh*'s timeless wisdom can be a source of hope and strength. In I Kings 17:17-24 and II Kings 4:30-37, Elijah and Elisha magically heal sick boys who are on their deathbeds. These stories remind us of the potential for healing, even when all hope seems lost. While in reality many stories do not have the same inspirational endings as the healing narratives in Kings and in David's tale in Psalm 30, these tales enable us to maintain a flicker of optimism by presenting relatable scenarios and allowing us to see ourselves in the characters. Personally, I have felt comforted by these texts and have looked to them in times of despair.

I hope that, through the skills acquired in this text immersion, I will be equipped to both engage others in the nuanced study of Bible and provide them with hope and meaning during life's darkest moments. My wish is that we may all find comfort in these texts and when we are in need, we turn to these texts. May the words of these stories, “הַעֲלִית מִן-שָׁׁ וְלִנְפֹשִׁי”¹, lift our souls from the netherworld, and instill within hope and gratitude.

¹ Psalm 30

Why these texts?

One night, a few years ago in Colorado, I went to Shabbat services. That day, the community had just lost a 1-year-old boy. The young boy had died from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. At the end of services, the Rabbi was passing around a signup sheet for people to perform the sacred ritual of *shmira*, to watch over Max's little body, until he would be buried on Monday. All the shifts were filled except for one, from 2am-7am, so I signed up.

I arrived at the desolate funeral home at 1:45am in a little mountain town, Glenwood Springs. I was utterly horrified as I walked into the funeral home and sat down next to the tiny little coffin draped in a child's blanket. With every creak of the floor and every rattle of the radiator, my heart skipped a beat. I felt broken for this poor family and I felt terrified of the unknown.

The only thing I could think of to do, was to read the Bible. I opened my Bible on my cell phone and began to study and pray. I had never felt so lonely. As I read the psalms over and over the prayers became medicine to me. This incident sparked a deep interest for me in healing in the Bible. Under the tutelage of Rabbi Sperling, I delved into healing narratives and gained a deep understanding of the history and etymology of these ancient texts. I hope to share these learnings with those I teach so that they too may gain an appreciation for the *Tanakh*, and its ability to heal. Below are annotated translations from 1 Kings 17:17-II4, II Kings 4:30-37 and Psalm 30.

Context of Verses I Kings 17:17-24:

In the beginning of I Kings 17, Elijah tells the people of King Ahab that there will be a famine. However, God swears that Elijah will be cared for, and indeed, God protects Elijah. God sends ravens to deliver food to Elijah and a *wadi* provides water for him, thus sparing him from the famine. Next, God instructs Elijah to move to Zarephath where a widow will care for him. However, when he arrives at Zarephath, the widow explains she does not have enough food to feed him, just a small cruse of oil and a tiny bit of flour. Elijah tells the widow, do not worry, feed me, and everything will be fine. And everything was fine, the very tiny amount of oil and flour she had lasted for many days, demonstrating Elijah's holiness. The annotated translation begins at verse 17:17 in I Kings. In this verse, the widow's son is inexplicably on his deathbed.

Summary of the Verses in the Annotated Translation

In the annotated verses below, the reader is presented with a very angry widow. She is petrified because her son is gravely ill. It appears as though the boy has been saved from starvation (in previous verses) only to die of an unknown illness in this tale. This illness is perplexing to Elijah, and he is unsure if he will be able to save the young boy. The widow blames her son's illness on the presence of Elijah. The widow believes that Elijah's presence brought to the forefront her previous sins and as a result she is now going to be punished for her past actions. Miraculously, Elijah is able to heal the young boy. When the widow's son is brought back to health, the widow praises Elijah and recognizes the power of God, prophecy and forgiveness.

Annotated Translation: 1 Kings 17:17-24

The Revival of The Widow's Son

1 יז וַיְהִי, אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה, חָלָה, בֶּן-הָאִשָּׁה בַּעֲלַת הַבַּיִת; וַיְהִי חָלֹו חֲזָק מְאֹד, עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא-וַתֵּרֶה-ו' נִשְׁמָה.	17 And it came to pass after these things, that the son of the woman, the owner of the house, fell very, very sick; that there was no breath left in him.
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Breath: The way the word נִשְׁמָה is translated, influences one's understanding of this story. Did Elijah bring the boy back to life, from death? Or did Elijah heal the boy from his sickness? What does it mean that there was no breath left in the boy? A similar expression is used in the book of Daniel 10:17, וַיִּשְׁאַרְה־בִּי. In Daniel, the expression does not mean death, rather very weak, because he is overwhelmed by the vision. I believe that if the boy had truly died the writer would use the root מ-ו-ת. Commentator Leo Lazarus Honor contends that since the word וַיְהִי, is later used in Verse IIII, the boy either “came back to life or recovered from his fainting.” Therefore, we cannot ascertain whether the boy died or if he was profoundly ill.²In addition, the same

² Leo Lazarus Honor. *Book of Kings I; a Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1955. Print, 25.

language is used in Genesis 45:II5-II7 when Jacob learns that Joseph is alive: וַתִּחַי, יוֹסֵף.
יַעֲקֹב אֲבִיהֶם.

<p>יח ותאמר, אל-אלי יו, מה-לי ולך, איש האלהים: באת אלי להזכיר את-עוֹנִי, ולהמית את-בְּנִי.</p>	<p>18 And she said unto Elijah: 'What have I to do with you, Man of God? Did you come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to kill my son?</p>
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What have I to do with you: The widow's inquisitive tone implies that she was uncomfortable with Elijah's presence in her home. Elijah is reminding her of her past sins, something she cannot cope with during this crisis. In II Samuel 16:10, similar language is used when the King is aggravated by the sons of Zeruiah. The text states: וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ, מַה-לִּי וְלָכֶם. Soncino writes that: "The widow bitterly protests against Elijah's coming to her house which, in her opinion, it was the cause of her son's death."³ In addition, the widow and Elijah were part of different socioeconomic classes. The widow was a "poor sinful woman and Elijah was a man of God." Without the prophet's presence, her negative actions were unrecognized and unpunished. However, in comparison to Elijah's perfect existence, the widow's flaws were highlighted and remembered, which she believes causes her son's critical condition. Since Elijah was not in the same class as the widow, he had no business being in her house other than to "bring her sin to remembrance."

³ A Cohen, PHD, ed. *The Soncino Books of The Bible: Hebrew Text and English Translation*. Kings ed. New York: Soncino, n.d. Print,126.

Man of God: This wording is connected to an earlier story: 1 Kings 17:19. 1 In 1 Kings 17:19, the widow did not have enough food for her or her family, owing to the drought. However, Elijah, through the word of God was able to make the small amount of bread and oil she had, last until the drought ended. The text reads: כַּדְבַר יְהוָה, אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר בְּיַד אֱלֹהֵיוֹ- . As a result of this story, the widow perceives Elijah as a “Man of God.”

<p>יט וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֵיָּה, תְּנֵי-לִי אֶת-בְּנִי; וַיִּקַּח יוֹ מִחִיקָה, וַיֵּצֵא יוֹ אֶל-הַעֲלִיָּה אֲשֶׁר- . וְאֵלֵּךְ שָׁמָּה, וַיִּשְׁכַּב יוֹ, עַל-מֹטֵי יוֹ.</p>	<p>19 And he said unto her: Give me your son. And he took him out of her bosom, and carried him up into the upper chamber, where he sat, and laid him upon his bed.</p>
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Up: In my perspective, the use of the root ע-ל-ה “to go up”, implies survival. If Elijah carried the boy down, it would imply death and finality, like going down to Sheol. The commentator John Gray explains, “the removal of the invalid to the airy upper chamber, clean of household debris, was a matter of simple hygiene⁴.” Also, since the widow had an upper chamber we can infer that she was not in the absolute lowest socioeconomic classes especially in comparison to poorer classes in the Bible who do not have an upper room in their homes. For example, II Kings 4:8-11 the Shunamite woman wants to create

⁴ John, Gray. *I & II Kings; a Commentary* (London: SCM, 1964)342.

a chamber for Elisha, since she did not already have one. The text reads, נַעֲשֶׂה-נָא עֲלִית-קִיר, קַטְנָה.

<p>כ וַיִּקְרָא אֶל-יְהוָה, וַיֹּאמֶר: יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי--הַגִּם עַל-הָאֵלְמָנָה אֲשֶׁר-אֲנִי מֵת וְיָרֵר עֲמָהּ הָרֶ' וְתֵ, לְהַמִּית אֶת-בְּנָהּ.</p>	<p>20 And he cried unto the LORD, and said: Oh Lord my God, hast you also brought evil upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son?</p>
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Also: The use of the word *also*, suggests that Elijah is frustrated by the continued evil that God has brought upon the widow, and upon the world. It is enough of a punishment that God punished Israel by way of a drought earlier in the book. Abarbanel comments: “Is it not sufficient that you caused the Bethelite children to die because of his sin? Will you also cause the son of this widow to die? If so you are treating the righteous like the wicked.”⁵

⁵Rueven Hochberg, Avraham Y. Rosenberg, and Rashi. *Kings: A New English Translation*.(New York: Judaica, 1980) Print, 182.

Slaying: This indicates a moment of uncertainty for Elijah, a moment where he loses hope and is unsure if the boy will survive. He is asking God, will you slay or kill the boy? Elijah is unsure of the outcome.

<p>כא וַיִּתְמַד עַל-הַיֵּלֶד שְׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים, וַיִּקְרָא אֵל-יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר: יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי, תֵּשֶׁב נָא נֶפֶשׁ-הַיֵּלֶד הַזֶּה עַל-קִרְיָו.</p>	<p>21 And he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried unto the LORD, and said: 'O LORD my God, I pray thee, let this child's life/breath come back into him.'</p>
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And he stretched himself upon the child: This same tactic is used in II Kings 4:34 when Elisha lays upon a boy to revive him. Commentator John Gray describes this type of healing as “contactual magic.” In this type of magic the “sickness was thus transferred into the corresponding parts of an animal...here per contra the health of Elijah is conveyed to the corresponding organs of the invalid.”⁶ Elijah passes his strength and health to the boy. Rashi translates the root מ-ד-ג as to prostrate himself. Radak expounds on Rashi’s teachings and writes “Elijah prostrated himself over the body of the youth according to its measure. I.e. he placed his eyes on the youth's eyes and his mouth on his mouth and his hands on his hands...he did this to intensify his concentration of his subject when he would pray for resurrection.”⁷ Radak also explains that it is possible that Elijah “resorted to this tactic to breathe on the youth and to warm him with his own warmth

⁶ John Gray, *I & II Kings; A Commentary*, 342.

⁷ Rueven Hochberg, and Avraham Y. Rosenberg, 182.

(perhaps this was an attempt at artificial respiration). Many miracles are performed only after something is done to achieve the same result in a natural way. This gives human beings power when it comes to healing. In the past, artificial respiration was known as the “Elijah Method.”⁸

<p>כב וישמע יהוה, ב' ול אלי'ו; ותשב נפש-הילד על-קרו, ויחי.</p>	<p>22 And the LORD hearkened unto the voice of Elijah; and the life/breath of the child came back into him, and he lived.</p>
<p>כג ויקח אלי'ו את-הילד, וירדו מן-העליה הביתה, ויתנו לו, לא'ו; ויאמר, אלי'ו, ראי, הרי בניך.</p>	<p>23 And Elijah took the child, and brought him down out of the upper chamber into the house, and delivered him unto his mother; and Elijah said: 'See, your son lives.'</p>
<p>כד ותאמר האשה, אל-אלי'ו, עתה זה ידעתי, כי איש אלהים אתה; ודבר-יהוה בפיך, אמת.</p>	<p>24 And the woman said to Elijah: 'Now I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in thy mouth is truth.</p>

⁸ Rabbi David Sperling.

Now I know that thou art a man of God: Owing to the illness of her son, the widow began to doubt Elijah as a “Man of God.” However, now that her son is revived, she has a restored faith in Elijah and fully trusts him. Radak explains that previously the widow knew that the word of God was in Elijah’s mouth, however, the miracle of the flour and the oil might have been a blessing from God in Elijah’s merit....the saving of the widow's son, however, could be nothing but a miracle performed by a man of God.⁹ Mezudat David states: “when you predicted the miracle of the flour and the oil, I thought that perhaps you had heard this prophecy from another prophet. Now, however, after you have revived my son, I am convinced that you are a man of God.”¹⁰ In addition, Rabbi Sperling teaches that in Israel the power to intercede with God was considered a prophetic gift, as noted in Genesis 20:7; וְהָיָה, וְיִתְפַּלֵּל בְּעֶדְךָ, וְהָיָה; עֲתָה, הֵשֵׁב, אִשְׁתְּ-הָאִישׁ כִּי-נָבִיא וְאֵל, וְיִתְפַּלֵּל בְּעֶדְךָ, וְהָיָה; וְהָיָה, וְיִתְפַּלֵּל בְּעֶדְךָ, וְהָיָה. This verse emphasizes the prophet’s superhuman powers.

Context of Verses II Kings 4:30-37

Prior to II Kings 4:30- 37, Elisha had gone Shunam. In Shunam there was a woman he often broke bread with. The woman and her husband invited Elisha to stay in her home, because she knew him to be a man of God. The woman said to her husband; let us make a place for him to stay so that whenever he visits, he has somewhere to sleep.

⁹ I Kings a New English Translation, 183

¹⁰ I Kings a New Translation, 183

And so they made him a room and Elisha stayed. Elisha was very thankful for the hospitality of the Shunammite woman, and asked the woman what he could do for her in return. She did not have any good suggestions, so Elisha asked his servant Ghazi what he thought he should do for the woman. Gehazi stated, she has no son. Therefore, they gifted her with a son. However one day, the son complained of head pains and he became very ill. They brought the boy to his mother, but after a few hours he died. The woman called for Elisha, and Elisha sent his servant **Gehazi**, to help her.

Summary of the Verses in the Annotated Translation

In the following verses, Elisha is able to bring another dying boy back to life through prayer and physical contact. The physical contact proves that Elisha's energy is transmitted to the dead boy. However, the additional use of prayer implies that only God can truly restore life. The boy's revival is graphically described by the detail that he sneezed seven times. These particular verses end with the ill boy reuniting with his mother. Faith and trust in Elisha and in God enables healing to occur. The Shunammite woman is profoundly grateful for the acts of healing, and prostrates herself before Elisha and God as a sign of her gratitude.

Annotated Translation II Kings 4:30-37

Another Revival in the Book of Kings

וַתֹּאמֶר אִם הַנֶּעֱר, חַי-יְהוָה וְחַי- נַפְשִׁי אִם-אֶעֱזָבְךָ; וַיָּקָם, וַיֵּלֶךְ אַחֲרֶיהָ.	30 And the mother of the child said: 'Just as sure as the Lord lives, and by your life I will not leave you. ' And he arose, and followed her.
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I will not leave you: The mother of the ill boy wants to know that Elisha will be by her side. She thinks that Elisha is the only one who can help in this extreme situation and she vows to follow him wherever he goes. Rabbi Sperling explains that “as the Lord lives and by your life” is something like the expression “cross your heart and hope to die.” It is a very solemn oath.

וַיַּחֲזִי עָבֵר לְפָנֵיהֶם, וַיִּשֶׁם אֶת- לֹא הַמְשָׁעָנָה עַל-פְּנֵי הַנֶּעֱר, וְאִין קוֹל, וְאִין קוֹשֵׁב; וַיֵּשֶׁב לְקֶרֶב תּוֹ וַיִּגְדֹּ- וַיֹּאמֶר, לֹא הִקְיָץ הַנֶּעֱר.	31 And Gehazi passed on before them, and laid the staff upon the face of the child; but there was neither voice, nor anything heard. Wherefore he returned to meet him, and told him, saying: 'The child has not awakened.'
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Gehazi: Gehazi is Elisha’s servant. He is first mentioned in Kings for his relationship with the woman from Shunam. Later in the story, the Shunamite woman goes to Elisha at Carmel looking for help in behalf of the child that has died. However, in this scenario,

Gehazi paid no attention to her. Despite this, Elisha requests that Gehazi go to Shunam to try and save the child through the use of Elisha's staff. Gehazi fails at this task.

But there was neither voice, nor hearing: Gehazi was unable to bring the boy back to life. The boy could not speak or hear. According to Pirke de R. Eliezer, Gehazi was unable to bring the boy back to life because he did not have faith in Elisha's healing powers. This lack of faith and negativity prevented Gehazi from healing the boy. Similar language is used in I Kings 18:26 to describe the silence of Baal in response to the attempt of his prophets to elicit fire from heaven. The text states: וַאֲזַיִן וְלֹא אֲזַיִן עֲנָה.

וַיָּבֹא אֶלְיָשָׁע, הַבִּיתָה; וְהָנָה לֹב הַנֶּעֱרָר מֵת, מְשָׁכָב עַל-מִטָּתוֹ	32 And when Elisha was come into the house, behold, the child was dead, and laid upon his bed.
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His Bed: This refers to the bed of Elisha.

וַיָּבֹא, וַיִּסְגֹּר הַדֶּלֶת בְּעַד שְׁנֵיהֶם; לֹג וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל, אֶל-יְהוָה.	33 He went in, and shut the door behind the two of them, and prayed unto the LORD.
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Shut the door: Similar language is used in II Kings 30:4. The text says, סגרת הדלתו .

Soncino explains that Elisha did this for privacy. Rabbi Sperling teaches that this is

Elisha's way of convey to Elisha and to Gehazi, "stay out of here!"¹¹

Prayed unto the Lord: Like Elijah in I Kings 17:110 (ויקרא אל-יהוה), Elisha calls unto God. This highlights that the prophets look to God for help, and cannot succeed without divine intervention.

ויצעל וישכב על-הילד, לד וישם פיו על-פיו ועיניו על- עיניו וכפיו על-כפו, ויגהר, עליו; ויחם, בשר הילד	34 And he went up, and lay upon the child , and put his mouth upon his mouth and his eyes upon his eyes and his hands upon his hands; and he stretched himself upon him; and the flesh of the child waxed warm.
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Stretched himself: This is similar to I Kings 17:21, in which Elijah also stretched himself upon the sick boy. In I Kings 17 the language used is ויתמך על-הילד. In this verse, the wording used is: ויגהר, עליו. This verb is only found one other time the Book of Kings. In I Kings 18:42. The verb is used to describe Elijah's position as he waited on top of Mount Carmel after his confrontation with the Prophets of Baal. In addition, in this verse it is contested whether Elisha implemented the "kiss of life revival technique." Robinson concludes that it is unlikely, he writes, "Elisha was a Hebrew prophet, not a modern doctor. His actions were intended to symbolize the transference of strength from

¹¹ Rabbi Sperling

every part of his body to the boy's body. The most that can be said is that Elisha's actions may have had the same result as the 'kiss of life' technique."¹²

<p>וַיָּשָׁב וַיֵּלֶךְ בְּבֵית, אֶחָת הָנָה לָהּ וְאֶחָת הָנָה, וַיַּעַל, וַיִּגָּהֶר עָלָיו; וַיֵּרָר הַנֶּעֱרָר עַד-שִׁבְעַ פְּעָמִים, וַיִּפְקַח הַנֶּעֱרָר אֶת-עֵינָיו.</p>	<p>35 Then he returned, and walked in the house once to and once fro; and went up, and stretched himself upon him; and the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes.</p>
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And walked in the house once to and fro: Why did Elisha pace back and forth? Was he nervous? Gray explains that the pacing back and forth was probably a way for Elisha to release nervous tension after the difficult experience. The spiritual concentration Elisha had to employ tested his limits.¹³

And stretched himself upon him: Elisha repeated his previous act of putting his body on the body of the child's and warming it. It is clear that the revival does not work the first time, so Elisha has to repeat his actions a second time.

<p>וַיִּקְרָא אֶל-גִּיְחִזִּי, וַיֹּאמֶר קְרָא אֵל- לוֹ הַשְּׁנַמִּית הַזֹּאת, וַיִּקְרָאָהּ, וַתָּבֹא אֵלָיו; וַיֹּאמֶר, שְׂאֵי בְנִיךָ.</p>	<p>36 And he called Gehazi, and said: 'Call this Shunammite.' So he called her. And when she was come in unto him, he said: 'Take up thy son.'</p>
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¹² J. Robinson, 45.

¹³ John Gray, 447.

And he called Gehazi, and said: 'call this Shunammite: Despite Ghazi's failure to bring the boy back to life, Elisha calls upon Gehazi to present the good news to the Shunammite woman. Rabbi Sperling comments on the disrespectful tone used by Elisha in relation to the Shunammite Woman. It is almost like Elisha said "Get this woman over here."¹⁴

Fell at his feet: This is a sign of worship and gratitude for Elisha. The act of prostration implies that the woman knew that God was working through Elisha.

Comparison of I Kings 17: 17-24 and II Kings 4:30- 37

The stories in the Book of Kings were developed during a time in which the "the Israelites believed and none more fervently than the Deuteronomists, that God rewarded righteousness and punished sin in a quite mechanical manner." The narratives in the Book of Kings modify this belief. J. Robinson writes that the Book of Kings, "points to an insight into the nature of God as one who is loving and compassionate to his people. Robinson asks the question, can it be that the editors included this story as pointing to Elijah's vocation as God's Man to breathe new life into God's Child, Israel, who was fast becoming spiritually lifeless?"¹⁵

Throughout the narratives of I Kings 17:17-24 and II Kings 4:30-37 the Prophets Elijah and Elisha reveal themselves as healers of the sick. Through these narratives God

¹⁴ Rabbi Sperling

¹⁵ J. Robinson,. *The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible*. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1972 ,203.

proves to be loving and compassionate. Another obvious similarity between these two narratives is the presence of a very sick and potentially incurably ill child. Miraculously, Elijah and Elisha are both able to heal these critically ill children. Volkmar Fritz explains that “both miracle stories follow the same structural pattern, although in Elijah’s case there is a stronger focus on prayer.”¹⁶ Fritz also explains that it is likely that the story of Elisha was the first story, and it was then “transposed to Elijah.” Despite these glaring similarities there are nuances in each story that make each tale distinct.

A primary difference between the two tales is the language used to describe the boys’ sickness. In The Elijah Story, I Kings 17:17, it is written “His illness was so severe, there was no breath left in him”, חָלָו חֹזֶק מָאֵד, עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא-וְתָרָה-וּ וְנָשְׁמָה. This language is ambiguous, what does it mean? לֹא-וְתָרָה-וּ וְנָשְׁמָה. Does it mean that he was dead? If you have no breath you are dead. However, very similar language is used in the Book of Daniel 10:17, וְנָשְׁמָה לֹא נִשְׁאַרָה-בִּי. This is translated as “there remained no strength in me, neither was there breath left in me.” However, in the next verse in the Book of Daniel וַיִּחַסֵּף וַיִּגַּע-בִּי כְּמֵרְאָה אָדָם, וַיִּחַזְקֵנִי, and he then there touched me again, one like the appearance of a man, and he strengthened me. If we use the language in Daniel as a reference point we can translate “no breath left” to mean very weak and ill, but not dead.

The Elisha story is different because we are told that the boy actually died. In the Elisha story, the boy is described as having no voice or hearing; the boy could not be awakened. As it is written in II Kings 4:31 וְלֹא-וּלְאָמַר, לֹא-וּלְשׁוֹן קִשְׁבָּ; וַיֵּשֶׁב לְקֶרֶב תּוֹ וַיִּגְדֹּל-וּ וַיִּנְגֵּד-וּ לְאִמּוֹ, לֹא-וּלְאָמַר, לֹא-וּלְשׁוֹן קִשְׁבָּ.

¹⁶ Volkmar, Fritz, and Anselm C. Hagedorn. 1 & II Kings: A Continental Commentary. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003. Print, 252.

הקייץ הנער. However, as we continue reading the Elisa story we learn that the boy has truly died as stated in II Kings 4:32, הנער מת.

Another focal point in each of the narratives is interplay between the mother of the sick boy and the prophet. The mother in the Elijah story feels that she is being punished for something that she had previously done wrong. In Me Kings 17:18 she cries: באת אלי להזכיר את-עוני. And while she cries about her punishment for her past sin. In the Elisha story, there is no mention of the mother feeling as though she is being punished for her actions.

Another contrast is that in the Elijah story, Elijah takes matters into his own hands, he says “give me your son” אל-העליה ויעל ויחקה ויחקה ויחקה; ויחקה ויחקה ויחקה and he took her son and proactively brought him to the upper chamber אל-העליה ויעל. In this tale, the mother is passive and Elijah is very proactive. In contrast, Elisha is more passive in his narrative. Elisha did not take the child up to his own upper chamber, because the child was already lying on his own bed. Elisha just had to enter the house and find the boy. Later on in this narrative, Elijah continues to take a more proactive role. When Elijah revives the child, he takes the child and brings him down back to the chamber and delivered him to his mother. Verse I Kings 17: 23 explains, וירד ויחקה ויחקה ויחקה. However, when Elisha revives the boy in II Kings 4:37 he uses Gehazi as a messenger and says: ויאמר קרא אל-השנמית הזאת ויקרא, ותבא אליו; ויקרא אל-גיהזי, ויאמר קרא אל-השנמית הזאת ויקרא, ותבא אליו; ויאמר קרא אל-השנמית הזאת ויקרא, ותבא אליו. ויאמר, שאי בגוף.

Another notable similarity in the two tales is the first thing that both Elisha and Elijah do when they are alone with the sick children is to reach out to God. In I Kings

17:20 the text reads וַיִּקְרָא אֶל-יְהוָה, and II Kings 4:33 the text states אֶל-יְהוָה. These words and actions represent the connection that both Elijah and Elisha have to God.

In the Elijah tale, after calling to God, Elijah stretches himself upon the boy 3 times and calls to God again: וַיִּתְמַדְד עַל-הַיֶּלֶד שְׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים, וַיִּקְרָא אֶל-יְהוָה. In the Elisha story, Elisha lay (“laid” means he put something on the child) upon the child, וַיַּעַל וַיִּשְׁכַּב עַל-הַיֶּלֶד, וַיִּשָּׁם פִּי עַל-פִּי וְעֵינָיו עַל-עֵינָיו וְכַפָּיו עַל-כַּפּוֹ, but he did not call to God a second time as Elijah did. Instead, Elisha put his mouth upon his mouth and his eyes upon his eyes and his hands upon his hands. The child’s skin got warm, but the child was not fully revived until he sneezed seven times and his eyes were opened. It is intriguing that the healing of the sick took place in the sleeping quarters of the prophet and that stretching upon the child is a core element of the healing process.

The difference in the narratives that resonate with me most is that the Elijah story focuses on the *nefesh* when dealing with life and death, whereas the Elisha story focuses on overt, physical signs of life and death. In my perspective, this highlights two distinct ways of being ill: mentally and physically.

Psalm 30: Background and Summary

In Psalm 30, King David pleads with God for healing, and then David is in fact healed. The Psalm begins with a dedication to the ancient Temple, which is striking because the rest of the Psalm has nothing to do with the Temple. Rashi comments on Psalm 30:1 that the Levites will also sing a “song of dedication of the house”, at the dedication of the house in the days of Solomon. However, the connection between this

opening verse and the rest of the Psalm is unapparent and the focus of the psalm is David's emotions and David's connection to God.

Throughout this Psalm, David was in a state of despair. We are not entirely sure if it was physical despair or emotional despair, but despair nonetheless. Ibn Ezra posits that David sought a cure for his illness from God and not from a doctor. Therefore, David's misfortunates were spiritual and not physical in nature. What is clear and important in this Psalm is that God saved David from his despair and suffering. God pulls David out of the pit. For this, David is profoundly grateful and David extols the Lord for delivering him.

A striking verb used in Psalm 30:2 is *דָּלִיתָנִי*, which can be translated as God *lifted* David out of his place of suffering. Throughout this Psalm the theme of “highest highs” and “lowest lows” repeats throughout the text. For example, in Verse 6 the text states:

וְהָיָה כִּי רָגַעְתִּי בְּאַפִּי-- חַיִּים בְּךָ יְיָ highlighting the difference between the momentary anger and the life lasting favor. Also in Verse 11, mourning turns into dancing and sackcloth becomes joy. The use of language represents the full spectrum of human emotion and experience.

Throughout the psalm we are not sure what causes David's suffering. Rashi comments on Verse 3 and suggests that perhaps the cause of David's suffering, are the sins he committed. In addition Rashi proposes the healing that David experienced, was actually the forgiveness of David's sins. Rashi explains the phrase: *שׁוּעָתִי אֶלֶךְ, וְתַרְפָּאֵנִי* to

mean the forgiving of iniquity. This is similar to Isaiah 6:10 where the text states “and he repent and be healed.”

Like in Verse 2, Verse 4 highlights the juxtaposition between the lifting up out of Sheol and the going down into the pit, creating very powerful imagery. God keeps David’s neck lifted, so that he would not permanently be stuck and in the pit. Again we are provided with David’s lifting from the lowest place to a higher one. David does not take his transition from low to high lightly. He is profoundly grateful for this lifting out of despair and this movement to higher places. David asks everyone to join him in his praise of God: זָמְרוּ לַיהוָה חֲסִידָיו; וְהוֹדוּ, לְיֹצֵר קִדְשׁוֹ. David changes his praise from personal to communal. He says publicly: God you have saved me, and calls on everyone else to join him in an outward praising of David and in particular he calls on the *hasidim* to connect him to the eternal.

In Verse 7, David’s recovery from his illness and distress is set in stone. He says: נֶאֱמַר, אֲמַרְתִּי בְשִׁלְוִי-- בְּלֹא-אֵץ וְטֹלָל וְלֹא-מִסָּרִיס, meaning that his serenity will last forever. (You’ve misunderstood. The writer is confessing that he thought his serenity would last forever. Only when God His face did he realizes his error) throughout the rest of the Psalm, David reiterates his supplication, and he and promises to praise God forever. In my perspective, Verse 10 is the most interesting verse. In this verse David explains to God the reasons that God must heal David. David explains that if God did not heal David, then David would be dead, and therefore he could not praise God. And if David could not praise God, then he is essentially useless. This verse assumes that God needs and wants our praise. This Psalm is interesting because it is not just solely unadulterated piety, rather David praises God, because God did something good for David. Throughout the

remainder of the Psalm David renews his vow to praise God and be loyal to God forever. This is a powerful Psalm to recite when one is feeling helpless and lost and it provides us with an important reminder that we are able to survive, and heal from even the darkest, most horrific situations and circumstances. It's also a reminder not to become complacent.

Annotated Translation: Psalm 30

An Eternal Faith in God

א מִן הַיָּמִים שִׁיר-הַמִּנְחָה הַבֵּית לַדָּוִד.	1 A Psalm; a Song at the Dedication of the House; of David.
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Dedication of the House; of David: This is an unusual opening for a Psalm, especially since the rest of the Psalm is about God's greatness. Why does this Psalm open with these words? One reason could be that David wanted his house (or Temple as it is commonly translated)¹⁷ to be a place where God's great name is constantly extolled. Furthermore, there is the problem that David did not receive permission to build the Temple as illustrated in II Samuel 7. Some scholars suggest that due to the unusual syntax of the verse, perhaps this verse did not originally relate to this specific psalm.¹⁸

¹⁷ Rabbi David Sperling

¹⁸ Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007) 102.

ב אֶזְמַמְךָ יְהוָה, כִּי דָלִיתָנִי ; וְלֹא-שָׂמַחַת אֹיְבֵי לִי.	2 I will extol thee, O Lord, for you have lifted me up, and not suffered mine enemies to rejoice over me.
--	--

For you have lifted me up: Rabbi Sperling observes that this verb is the same word used to “draw water out of a well” as stated in Exodus 2:16 and 19. The metaphorical use of this verb emphasizes that David was in an incredibly low, dark place. However, God lifted David out of this low, dark place, as one would draw water out of a well.

Mine enemies to rejoice over me: If God did not lift up David, it would have given his enemies great satisfaction. A perfect example of schadenfreude!

ג יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי-- שׁוּעָתִי אֵלֶךְ, וְתִרְפְּאֵנִי.	3 O Lord my God, I cried out to You, and Thou didst heal me;
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I cried out to You: David actively asked God for help, and God came to David’s rescue.

Ibn Ezra explains that David cried only to God, and not to a doctor. A man as pious as David does not need doctors or physicians, only God.¹⁹ This is different from Psalm 6:3

¹⁹ Norman Strickman, and Ibn Ezra Abraham Ben Meïr. *Abraham Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the First Book of Psalms ; Abraham Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Second Book of Psalms*(Boston: Academic Studies) 2009.214.

where the metaphor of God as doctor is implemented. This is in stark contrast with II Chronicles 16:12, when Asa was gravely ill he looked directly to the physicians and not to God, וְגַם-בְּחַלּוֹ לֹא-דָרַשׁ אֶת-יְהוָה, כִּי בִרְפָאִים.

Thou didst heal me: Rashi explains that healing is a “metaphor for forgiveness of iniquity.” This same metaphor is used in Isaiah 6:10.²⁰ Other commentators translate “heal” as physical illness which could have potentially killed David.

ד' יהוה--הַעֲלִית מִן-שָׁוֶל נַפְשִׁי; חַיִּיתֵנִי, מִיֹּרְדֵי- (מִיֹּרְדֵי-)וֹר.	4 O LORD, Thou broughtest up my soul from the nether-world; Thou didst keep me alive, that I should not go down to the pit .
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Pit: The pit is a reference to Sheol. David was on his way down to Sheol. Righteous and wicked alike go to Sheol. In general, the righteous get there at a ripe, old age while the wicked get there early.

ה' זַמְּרוּ לַיהוָה חֲסִידָיו; וְיִדּוּ, לְזִכָּר קֹדֶשׁ.	5 Sing praise unto the LORD, His godly ones , and give thanks to His holy name.
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²⁰ Rashi, and Mayer I. Gruber. *Rashi's Commentary on Psalms* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1998). Print, 290.

His godly ones: Rabbi Sperling teaches that חֲסִידֵי י, are those who have a special connection, a special righteousness because of their relationship to God. These are people who are “bound to God.” In this verse David is encouraging people to praise God, because God will help them in times of need. If you are close to God, and you experience trauma (as David did), God will help you, since you praise God’s name.

וְכִי רָגַעַ, בְּאַפּוֹ-- חַיִּים בֹּרַ בַּעֲרֹב, יִלֵּין בְּכִי; וְלִבְקָר רְנָה.	6 For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for a life-time; weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes in the morning.
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For his anger is but for a moment: At times God does get angry, but it is not forever. God’s anger is fleeting, it may last through the night, but in the morning God’s joy will come forth. God’s joy is more powerful than God’s anger.

זֶוּ וָאֲנִי, אָמַרְתִּי בְּשִׁלְוִי-- בִּלְאֵ וּט ל' וְלֹם.	7 Now I had said in my security: 'I shall never be moved.'
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Now I had said: There was once time, in the past in which David was complacent. He assumed that God things in life would last forever. David now believes he cannot possibly live a life without God.

ח יְהוָה -- בְּרִיּוֹנְךָ, הַעֲמַדְתָּה לְהִרְרִי-עוֹ: הַסְתַּרְתָּ פָנֶיךָ; הֵייתִי נִבְהָל.	8 O Lord, in your favor, you made me stand mountain strong . When you hid your face- I was afraid.
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You made me stand mountain strong: The sequencing of the Hebrew words makes it difficult to understand this verse. Alter writes that literally it would be translated as: “You-made-stand-my-mountain-of strength.”²¹ Rashi translates this as when God was showing David favor, he enabled David to be strong like a mountain. Rabbi David Sperling suggests that we can read the verse as “you caused me to stand on mountain refuges where nobody could attack me.”²² The instant God hid his face, David became afraid and terrified. This verse is reiterating how powerful it is to be favored by God.²³

ט אֵלֶיךָ יְהוָה אֶקְרָא; וְאֶל-אֱדֹנָי, אֶתְחַנֵּן.	9 Unto Thee, O LORD, did I call, and unto the LORD I made supplication
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י מִה-בִּצָּע בְּדָמַי, בְּרִדְתִּי אֶל-שַׁחַת: הֲיִדְבָּר עֹפָר, הִנְגִיד אֱמֻנָתְךָ.	10 What profit is there in my blood? When I go down to the pit. Shall the dust praise Thee? Shall it declare Thy truth?
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²¹ Alter, Psalms, 103.

²² Rabbi David Sperling

²³ Rashi, 291

What profit is there in my blood? In this striking phrase, David is telling God, there is no point of killing me, since there would be no one to praise you. Hezekiah used this same reasoning in Isaiah 38:18, “כִּי לֹא שׁוֹל וְדָד, מִנַּת יְהוֹלֵל; לֹא-יִשְׁכַּח וְיִרְדֵּי-וֹ, אֶל-אֲמֻתָּהּ”

Personal Reflection on Healing in the Bible

The Biblical tales studied in this project, are Biblical success stories. They are stories in which God helps those in need and prayers are answered. According to the medieval Jewish scholar Ibn Ezra, the main point of human life is to “Observe God’s law; know and love God; and share one’s knowledge of God with other human beings. Ibn Ezra contends that the “secret of all psalms is contained in the statement, “*I will extol Thee, my God, Oh King (Ps. 145:1); Bless the Lord, ye angels of His (Ps. 103:110); O magnify the Lord with me*”²⁴ Ibn Ezra teaches us that through the Psalms we are able to know God. Through prayer and exaltation we encounter God’s greatness. When reading the narratives I studied, it is easy to connect and agree with Ibn Ezra’s statement because in these narratives, God is good. God heals. In Psalm 30, David prayed to God, and God healed him. Similarly, in the Book of Kings, the widow and the Shumanite women revere God because God helped them out, God worked in their favor.

However, God does not necessarily always help us in the ways that God helps the subjects of these tales. We are often left alone, without the touch of Elisha and Elijah to bring our loved ones back to life. In Psalm 30, we experience the horror that David felt

²⁴ Norman Strickman, *Abraham Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Second Book of Psalms*, 9.

when God hid God's face from David for a period of time. Psalm 30 describes how terrifying an experience this can be. While the stories are inspirational, many readers find them frustrating. The stories depict a God that many have not experienced in times of need. Many of us have called to God in our suffering. We witnessed as our mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, brothers and sisters prayed for healing, pleading with God to save them. However, we heard nothing in response to our collective cries. So if in our own life experience, we have asked God to heal us, and we have not been healed, why should we continue to study and engage with these narratives?

There is a blessing that we recite when studying the Book of Lamentations:
Blessed are you Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe who has made us captives of
hope.

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם אשר עשנו אסירי תקוה.

The Jewish people are captives of hope. We are in a constant state of hoping and praying for a better world. When we read these stories, we are reminded that sometimes, things do work out. By studying these stories, we can understand the ways in which our ancestors dealt with suffering. In addition, memory and remembrance are at the center of what it means to be Jewish. When we read these tales we are embracing every shred of our biblical past.

The healing narratives in the Bible are derived from a theology of an omnipotent, omniscient God who, as Rabbi Bernard Mehlman writes, “can make the ‘sun stand still,’ ‘heal the sick,’ and ‘divide the seas.’”²⁵ By engaging with these stories we gain an appreciation and understanding of how our ancestors dealt with tragedy and suffering.

²⁵ Rabbi Bernard Mehlman

These stories link us to our ancestors' psyche. And, these stories capture what we want to believe, think and feel when we are confronted with tragic circumstances. Rabbi Mehlman explains, "the healing Biblical narratives are either indications of how our people in their development believed, but we no longer believe or they are metaphoric, expressing our hope for strength and healing in the face of adversity."²⁶ After all, metaphors are essential to our understanding and ability to perceive God.

In addition, the study of the Hebrew language in these narratives can be a spiritual experience, linking us to our tradition in ways we never knew possible. Even if we do not believe the stories, we do believe in the holiness of the Hebrew language, the *lashon kodesh* that poetically transmits these stories. The study and understanding of the words are soothing. So, while we may not receive the healing touch of the prophets or God, through these narratives the magical words can distract us from our suffering and reveal to us new insights and understandings.

When I further ponder the question: "Why read healing narratives?" I then think, "well why say the *Misheberach*, the prayer for healing?" As Reform Jews, we recite the prayer for healing because it is a way for us to express our pain and our helplessness when confronted with tragic circumstances, and illness. We recite the prayers as a way of clinging on to hope, because we the Jewish people are captives of hope. God cannot change or heal, but words and stories can soothe us in unexpected ways. There is a beautiful meditation by Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman that is often recited by Reform Jews. The meditation explains the connection we can have to prayer, even if we do not believe in an omniscient, omnipotent God. The meditation reads:

²⁶ Rabbi Bernard Mehlman

Prayer cannot bring water to parched fields, or mend a broken bridge, or rebuild a ruined city; but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart and rebuild a weakened will."²⁷

As the meditation suggests, there are many things prayer is not able to accomplish. But we do know that prayer can alter the way we feel and think, if we give it a chance. If we let Psalm 30 and the stories of Elisha and Elijah into our hearts, perhaps we can mend our broken hearts or rebuild a weakened will. It is scientifically proven that the way people think and feel can influence one's health. Many have heard the story of one of Sigmund Freud's most famous patients, Anna O., who suffered from hysterical paralysis and numbness in her limbs. Freud observed this case, and realized that people could be cured of physical illnesses by talking. As a result Freud developed the concept of the "talking cure" which is widely seen as the basis for psychoanalysis. While of course talking cannot heal all illnesses, it can help stitch back together our hearts.²⁸ The study and reading of Biblical stories can have the same cathartic effect. Studying the healing narratives affords one with the realization that others before us have experienced suffering and we are not alone in our sorrow.

On another note, throughout my study of these texts, I was particularly struck by the intersection between the biblical tale of resurrection and modern medicine. The tale conveys to readers the healing powers of touch. There is a thrill one receives when realizing that biblical phenomena are still a part of our culture and our lives. Last year while interning at Mount Sinai Hospital, I worked with a dula whose gentle touch was

²⁷ Chaim Stern, *Gates of Prayer*, p.345

²⁸ John Launer, *Anna O and the Talking Cure*

able to relieve the pain of many suffering patients. In this small way, I watched the Elisha and Elijah healing narrative come alive. Recognizing this connection between the biblical narrative and the treatment of patients that I observed in the hospital is a powerful example of how we may see links to our tradition in modern day medicine.

At times it feels like our lives are filled with tragedy and do not contain much hope. But this text immersion has proven to me that our lives can be more peaceful if we weave liturgical and biblical words of hope throughout. By speaking in God's language we become a part of the divine universe and the Jewish story. Despite all evidence to the contrary, I maintain hope and try to cultivate a deep practice of gratitude to God for all that has been given to me. After all, there is no better model than that of the psalmist and his ability to maintain gratitude to God even when such bad things have happened. Though I ask God to answer my prayers and heal all those who are suffering, I know that will not happen. That certainty, however, does not stop me from beseeching God by using liturgical and immersing myself in biblical words. I appeal to God's self-declared truths, and even shame God into action. I still demand truth and justice from God, even when everything God sees is contrary to that.

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