

We usually focus on the week's Torah reading, often neglecting its Haftarah portion. This week we will remedy that. But first, a bit of history: There are many conjectures about why each parashah has a corresponding reading from the Prophets. Among the most plausible is the fact that in 158 BCE, during the reign of the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes, whom we know from the Chanukah story, Jews were forbidden to read from the Torah, so the sages selected passages from the Prophets with themes pertaining to the Torah readings or to certain times in our liturgical calendar, and the practice continued even after the ban had been lifted. We know that reading the haftarah was already well established in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE, because the Talmud Tractate Megillah discusses it, and the Christian Bible mentions it in Acts 13:27 and Luke 4:17. Some scholars even suggest that the practice was instituted by Ezra the Scribe around 350 BCE. The root of the word *haftarah* as well as the word *maftir* (the repetition of the last part of the week's Torah reading) is פָּטַר (to separate, divide, free). During Temple times, synagogues were places of study, while formal prayer took place in the Temple, so the Haftarah reading likely marked the end of the synagogue study sessions.

This week's Haftarah portion closely parallels the Torah reading. Sarah and the Shunamite woman, infertile and aging, miraculously bear sons. Both women seem skeptical when told they will become mothers, but while Sarah reacts by laughing, the Shunamite woman implores Elisha to not deceive her. The parashah and the Haftarah readings both end with stories about these sons, whose very existence is miraculous, miraculously surviving death (Haftarah) or near-death (Torah). But the overarching theme of both is hospitality vs. strict obedience to the law. In the Torah reading it is the stories of Abraham and Lot offering hospitality to strangers who turn out to be angels. The ancient practice of hospitality in the sparsely populated and barren desert was, and is, sacrosanct. A Bedouin proverb defines it perfectly: "Today's host is tomorrow's guest." After concluding his non-aggression treaty with Avimelech at the end of Chapter 18 in our Torah reading, Abraham settles in Be'er Sheva and plants an *eshel*, which Midrash Tehillim 106 teaches is an acronym for eating (אכילה), drinking (שתיה), and lodging (לינה). In other words, Abraham establishes the practice of hospitality for all who pass by, leading and teaching by example. In the Haftarah, it is the Shunamite woman and her husband, who are known for their hospitality and are obviously wealthy enough to build a special room for Elisha, whom they always host when he passes through Shunem on his journeys. While Abraham and the Shunamite woman (and their spouses) are the epitome of hospitality, Lot and the creditors of the poor widow, whose story we read at the beginning of the Haftarah, are its antithesis. Our sages teach that Sodom only tolerated wealthy guests, which is why Lot is able to live and thrive there, blithely accepting its unsavory laws, which mandate that the poor and those who dared to show kindness toward them be driven away or killed. Like his uncle Abraham, in whose home he was raised, Lot urges the strangers – unbeknown to him, the three angels who had first visited Abraham – to accept his hospitality, although we recoil at his willingness to protect them by offering his daughters to the mob. He obviously retains a vestige of Abraham's high ideals, because one of his descendants, through Ruth of Moab, is an ancestor of David. Unfortunately, these good qualities are offset by his materialism, desire to fit in, and tragic self-delusion. Midrash Tanchuma teaches that the widow's creditors are the Israelite King Ahab and his son by Queen Jezebel, and that the woman is the widow of the prophet Obadiah, who served King Ahab. Obadiah had spent all his money on oil for lamps to light the caves where the last 100 prophets were forced to hide from the king and queen. Elisha asks the widow if she has anything of value, and she shows him the tiny bit of oil that remains. Elisha causes it to miraculously generate enough oil for her to sell at a goodly profit, which provides enough money to pay her debts and ensure a comfortable life. Does this sound familiar? When the sages of the Talmud (Shabbat 21b) discussed Chanukah with the intention of suppressing the story of the military victory in the wake of the failed Bar Kokhba revolt, they likely recalled this episode, giving rise to the "oil miracle" that has become the overarching theme of Chanukah. (With Zionism and the founding of the State of Israel, the military victory has gained new prominence.) The stories in our Torah and Haftarah offer a wealth of teachings: The hospitality of Abraham and the Shunamite woman vs. the brutal laws of Sodom and the unbending creditor of the poor widow, and Abraham's willingness to take literally HaShem's command to sacrifice Isaac vs. the Shunamite woman's desperate plea to Elisha for her son's life. As I write this, we are remembering the dreadful, unprecedented excesses of the *Shoah*, which began in earnest with the November Pogrom of November 9-10, 1938. These were the product of what the Germans call *Kadavergehorsam*, literally cadaver obedience, i.e., the willingness to obey orders blindly and unequivocally, no matter the consequences. This mentality still exists today, and it is our duty to counter it with every means we have at our disposal. The lessons of our Torah and Haftarah readings as well as the resolve to learn from the past help us today to chart a good path for the future. As ever, *aleinu* – it's upon us.

Shabbat shalom!