

Haftarot Unrolled: VaYeira

This Time Next Year

In the Haftarah, Elisha wishes to show his appreciation to the Lady of Shunam for her outstanding hospitality. When he finds out that she is childless, he promises her a son. In the Parsha, the angels come to Avraham and Sarah and promise her a son:

Haftarah - Melachim II 4 14-17	Parshat VaYeira - Breishit 18 10-14, 21:2
<p>וַיֹּאמֶר וְמָה לַעֲשׂוֹת לָהּ? וַיֹּאמֶר גֵּיחֲזִי אֲבָל בֶּן אִין לָהּ וַאֲיִשָּׁה זָקֵן: וַיֹּאמֶר קְרָא לָהּ - וַיִּקְרָא לָהּ וַתַּעֲמֵד בַּפֶּתַח: וַיֹּאמֶר לְמוֹעֵד הַזֶּה כָּעֵת חַיָּיה אֶתְּ חֲבִיקֶת בֶּן! וַתֹּאמֶר אֵל אֲדֹנָי אֵישׁ הַאֱלֹהִים, אֵל תִּכְבֹּב בְּשִׁפְחָתְךָ: וַתֵּהֵר הָאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֵד בֶּן לְמוֹעֵד הַזֶּה כָּעֵת חַיָּיה אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֲלֶיהָ אֱלֹהִים</p>	<p>וַיֹּאמֶר שׁוּב אֲשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ כָּעֵת חַיָּיה וְהָנָה בֶּן לְשָׂרָה אֲשֶׁתְּךָ. וְשָׂרָה שָׁמְעַת פֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל וְהוּא אַחֲרָיו: וְאַבְרָהָם וְשָׂרָה זָקֵנִים בְּאִים בְּיָמִים חֲדָל לְהִיּוֹת לְשָׂרָה אַרְחַ כְּנָשִׁים: וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ לֵאמֹר אַחֲרַי בְּלִתי הִיטָה לִי עֲדָנָה וַאֲדֹנָי זָקֵן: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵל אַבְרָהָם לָמָּה זֶה צָחַקָה שָׂרָה לֵאמֹר הֲאִף אֲמַנֵּם אֵלֶּךָ וְאֲנִי זָקֵנָתִי: הֲיִפְלֵא מִה' דִּבֶּר לְמוֹעֵד אֲשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ כָּעֵת חַיָּיה וְלִשְׂרָה בֶּן... וַתֵּהֵר וַתֵּלֵד שָׂרָה לְאַבְרָהָם בֶּן לְזָקְנֵיו לְמוֹעֵד אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהִים</p>
<p>14) He said, "But what should be done for her?" Gehazi said, "But she doesn't have a son, and her husband is old." 15) He said, "Call her". He called her, and she stood by the entrance. 16) He said, "At this season at the time of births, you will be hugging a son." She said, "Don't, my lord, Man of G-d! Don't disillusion your servant." 17) The woman became pregnant, and gave birth to a son, at this season at the time of births, about which Elisha had spoken to her.</p>	<p>10) He said, "I will come back to you at the time of births and your wife Sarah will have a son. Sarah was listening through the entrance of the tent, which was behind him. 11) Avraham and Sarah were old, getting on in years; the way of women had stopped for Sarah. 12) Sarah laughed inside, saying, "After all this time that I didn't have joy, and my lord is old." 13) Hashem said to Avraham, "Why did Sarah laugh saying, how could I give birth, when I have gotten old?" 14) Can anything be too difficult for Hashem? I will come back at this season at the time of births, and Sarah will have a son. 21:2) She became pregnant; Sarah gave birth to Avraham's son, in his old age, at the season about which G-d had spoken.</p>

The two stories share so many phrases, it looks almost like the prophet writing the Haftarah copied them verbatim from the Parsha. The parallels are numerous: an act of hospitality resulting in the blessing of childbirth, the husband accused of being too old, the scepticism of the mother, and the happy event coming about as foretold. So that we don't miss the thematic similarities, the Haftarah re-uses the memorable phrase, "at this season at the time of births",

which is not found anywhere else in all of Tanach. It is clear that the prophet is trying to draw our attention to the parallels between the two stories. Once we focus on the similarities, the information flows both ways: not only can we apply what we know of the Parsha to the Haftarah, but we can also apply what we are told in the Haftarah to the Parsha.

To begin with, the way that the Lady of Shunam phrases her reaction to the happy news can help us understand Sarah's reaction as well. When told that she will have a child "this time next year" - not sometime in the future, but this very year - Sarah laughs, prompting us to ask, along with the angel, "Why did Sarah laugh?" Did she doubt G-d's abilities? Did she lose faith in the promise given to Avraham decades earlier?

The Lady of Shunam is more explicit. Her reply is, "Do not disillusion me." She voices her fear of being toyed with, of raising her hopes in vain. It is not that she doesn't believe the prophet or doesn't believe that G-d can accomplish what he promised. She simply cannot afford to be disappointed yet again.

If we assume that the two women share similar feelings, then Sarah's laughter is not derisive, it is defensive. How many years has she waited to see the prophecy to Avraham fulfilled? The Torah gives us the numbers: Avraham was 75 when G-d told them they would have children; he is now 99. 24 years, 12 months a year, 288 months of disappointment, until finally, as the Torah tells us, there are no more months. Now some random stranger comes and says, "this time next year." To hope again is unbearable. Sarah does not laugh at G-d or at G-d's promise. Sarah laughs to protect herself.

But this time, the blessing is not for "some day," this time, it comes with a timestamp: "in this season at the time of births." This time, it does come to pass, right on time, just as promised. What has changed for Sarah? What was it that made it possible for this very concrete promise to be made? The same promise is made to the Lady of Shunam, and that too, comes to pass. What made it possible for Elisha to make her that promise?

The two identical promises of childbirth are preceded by similar acts of outstanding hospitality.

As the Parsha begins, Avraham sits and waits for passersby. For Avraham and Sarah, hospitality is not a response to circumstance, but rather something to be pursued proactively. It is an opportunity for kindness that they do not allow to pass them by.

Avraham says modestly, "Let me bring you some water, and a bit of bread while you rest up". Then he, together with Sarah, make them a gourmet meal.

The Lady of Shunam is truly a child of Avraham and Sarah. It is obvious to her that when the prophet comes to town and needs a place to stay, she will not allow the opportunity to pass her by. And just like Avraham, when she takes her hospitality to the next level, she does not advertise her intention. She just does it, quietly and simply, making sure that all of the prophet's needs are met, providing a bed, a table, and a lamp. The Haftarah describes how touched and impressed Elisha was at her thoughtfulness.

We see also in both stories that hospitality is a joint effort. Both the Parsha and the Torah go out of their way to point out how both spouses were involved in the preparations. Avraham is seen calling out to Sarah to bake bread, and the Lady of Shunam is heard telling her husband of her plans for their attic.

In both cases, the reward is a child “at this season, at the time of births.”

If this story only happened once, in the case of Avraham and Sarah, we might not draw the connection between hospitality and childbirth. Avraham and Sarah have many other achievements to their credit. Moreover, G-d had already promised them a child. There would be no reason to assume that it was their act of hospitality that tipped the scales and made it possible for this promise to come to pass now. But when it happens again in the Haftarah, that a promise to have a child is fulfilled in the context of hospitality, then we need to look at it as not just a correlation but a cause.

We know that G-d judges “middah k'negged middah” (measure for measure). The reward that He chooses is not independent of the action; rather, the deed and the reward are two sides of the same coin. If the reward for hospitality is a raising a child, then they are also two sides of the same coin.

Is not raising a child a form of hospitality itself? A helpless stranger, he is a guest first in his mother's own body. All his needs anticipated and provided for, with the cooperation of both parents. until he ultimately goes his own way. Are not children passersby who stop over in our house for a limited time?

So when the Lady of Shunam prepared a room in her home for the prophet's use, anticipating his needs and providing for them, Elisha felt that the best way to repay her is with a child whose needs she would have to anticipate and provide for.

When Sarah made food for three complete strangers on a moment's notice, the best way to repay her was with a child for her to nurse.

Thus it is specifically an act of hospitality that can transform a promise of "some day" to one of "this time next year."

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, z"l
לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל