



PROBING THE PROPHETS

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But Why So Long?

The G'mara in Masechet Megillah (23a) teaches us that the weekly haftarah reading should not contain less than twenty-one verses, with Rashi explaining that the count corresponds to the minimum amount of three-versed aliya for each of the seven Shabbat aliyot. This same minhag is repeated in the writings of the Ge'onim (in *Shaarei Ephraim* and *Otzar Ha'Geonim*) and echoed in the works of the Rambam, the Abudraham and the Shulachan Aruch.

Nonetheless, as many of you know, most of our haftarot are not limited to, or even as long as, twenty-one p'sukim. And, although there are numerous reasons why it was not simple to follow the tradition handed down through the generations, I am especially fascinated by the fact that this week's haftarah, from the fourth perek of M'lachim B, has only one half of the chapter read by Sepharadic minhag

(the first 32 p'sukim), while Ashkenazic tradition reads 37 verses of the perek. In effect, the story as read according to Sephardic tradition, ends in the middle of the story while Ashkenazic minhag completed the entire saga.

To be fair, the Sephradim have a strong basis for their minhag of reading only the first part of the perek: Firstly, it is more consistent with the halacha found in the G'mara, the Ge'onim and the Rishonim, to limit the haftarah to 21 p'sukim and, secondly, the first part of the saga better reflects the primary theme of the parasha itself. Consider: the parasha tells of a barren woman (Sarah) who, together with her husband (Avraham), open their home to wayfarers; they were then miraculously gifted with a son, as G-d had promised them, who faced sure death in his youth. These same events are reflected in the lives of the Shunamite, her husband and their son – hence, the reason why Sepharadic minhag concludes the haftarah after conveying these events.

Although I always found it rather “frustrating” to have the story “cut short” with no resolution regarding the fate of the young son of the Shunamite, it is more difficult to understand why Ashkenazim found it essential to add fourteen more verses, p'sukim that, at first glance, seem to be ‘unnecessary’. Would they do so simply to bring the saga to a satisfying conclusion? Certainly, a doubtful possibility! And, considering that there was a clear halachic directive to limit the length



of the haftarah and, additionally, the fact that there was little in the added section that connected to the parasha, we are right to wonder WHY SO LONG??

In considering the possible reasons for the extension of the haftarah, I submit to you that it might be based upon the behavior of the righteous Shunamite, from which we might learn an important lesson.

Avraham's great trial was one placed upon him by Hashem Himself: it is He who promised to grant Avraham (and Sarah, who doubted the promise) a son and who told him to sacrifice Yitzchak. Avraham's courageous and faithful response to Hashem's is deservedly praised and properly acclaimed. But it was G-d Who promised him that son and Who commanded Avraham to bound Yitzchak at the akeida, directives that came DIRECTLY from Hashem.

The trial of the Shunamite was different – and, therefore, even more challenging. The text never tells us that she pleaded G-d for a son and, when Elisha's promises her of an heir, she responds in disbelief by saying: "Don't lie to me." Yet, when her son does die, the skepticism in the navi's words she had shown previously had now become a complete faith in Elisha, a confidence that his promises were echoes of Hashem's words. The story found in the final section of the haftarah underscores the remarkable act of **emunah** from one who heard divine promises from G-d's prophet – but NOT from G-d Himself. It was her strong belief in the prophet that inspired her to run to Elisha, to remain with him and to demand that the navi himself return to resuscitate her deceased son.

For this reason, I believe that the

"addendum" to the haftarah inserted by Ashkenazic scholars was meant to highlight the remarkable commitment of this woman, one that reflected the sacrifice of Avraham Avinu – or even surpassed his actions. A person who can believe in a G-d she never heard or spoke to, one who was willing to sacrifice based upon faith, is, indeed, quite outstanding

And what say we, who have received the b'racha of seeing that same overwhelming belief in Hashem's promises in the actions and the faith of our soldiers, heroes, mothers and fathers!!!

Truly, Avraham's - and the Shumanite's - **emunah** lives on in their descendants! ■

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