

Parshas Vayeira 5763

This week's haftorah begins with the story of the אשה אחת מבני הנביאים, the widow of an unnamed נביא, who comes to אלישע to complain that her husband has died leaving her destitute and in debt, and the creditor is coming to take her children as slaves in default of the loan. And so אלישע asks her what goods she has left in at home, and she tells him - nothing but a flask of oil. And so אלישע has her collect utensils, pots and pans and whatever she can get her hands on, and begin pouring oil from that small flask, and she pours, and the oil keeps coming, until it fills all those pots and she has a houseful of oil that she can sell and pay her debts and live on the remainder.

Who was this אשה אחת מבני הנביאים? Who was her husband? What was the background to this deceptively simple story? For this we need to turn to חז"ל, and we need to step back to a generation before.

At the beginning of בי מלכים we read how after the death of מלך ישראל, when his son the equally wicked יהורם came to the throne. And מישע מלך מואב rebels.

So יהורם makes alliance with מלך יהודה. Fight for a week, goes badly. Army thirsty, no water.

Go to אלישע, tells them to dig canals, which will miraculously fill with water. And revived, they begin to beat back מואב.

מישע sees miracle, asks astrologers. They tells him: Their forefather was willing to sacrifice his only son. So מישע says - I can go one better. ויקח את בנו הבכור אשר ימלוך. תחתיו ויעלהו עולה על החומה, ויהי קצף גדול על ישראל.

רבשיע - he's willing to sacrifice for קטרוג

And then comes the story of the אשה אחת מבני הנביאים. Says the ילקוט של אלמלא זכותה של: אותה אשה אחת מנשי בני הנביאים כבר היו ישראל אבודין באותה שעה. It was her merit, at that dark hour, that saved them.

Who was she? And what was so tremendous about what she did?

חז"ל says she was the widow of עובדיה. Who was עובדיה? Wrote a book in תנ"ך. Also - גר - אדומי. And - as we read in ספר מלכים, a courtier in the palace of אחאב. What a story his biography would make.

It's really amazing - אחאב was busy killing all the בני הנביאים - how could he have עובדיה working for him? Maybe he didn't mind so much because he was a גר אדומי - אחאב figured it's OK for a non-Jew (by birth) to be so religious.

Anyway, we read in מלכים that while אחאב was busy hunting the נביאים, עובדיה hid them

away in a cave, and supported them through the terrible famine that raged then.

From where did he have the money? חז"ל answer: He borrowed it from אחאב at interest. What courage! What intrepidity! What kind of stories must he have fed אחאב to explain why he needed the money!

Eventually, עובדיה dies, leaving a widow and children, and אחאב dies, and his son - the equally wicked יהורם - comes to the throne. And so יהורם comes to collect the money עובדיה owed his father. And his widow has nothing, so he demands her children. Let them be brought to his palace, and serve him as their father served his father.

And so אשת עובדיה comes to אלישע. And at first he says there's nothing he can do. The king's word is law - to fight it would be death. And there are worse fates than to grow up in the king's palace; at least they will grow up in comfort, in luxury.

But אשת עובדיה won't make peace with that. Her children - עובדיה's children - עובדיה who had dared so much in the רבשיע's cause - should be brought up in the idolatrous palace of יהורם? Never!

And so, the מדרש continues, she goes to the cemetery where עובדיה is buried, and calls out: ירא השם! And a voice answers: Which ירא השם do you mean? We have several יראי השם here. And she says: The man who is described by as ירא את השם מאד - my husband, עובדיה. And עובדיה tells her to go back to אלישע and tell him that there's some oil left from the stores with which I fed those נביאים with such dedication. And with that oil he can perform a miracle. And he did.

Perhaps now that we know something about אשת עובדיה and her story, we can understand better that מדרש, that it was the merit of אשת עובדיה that saved the Jewish people. At that time, when מישע מלך מואב had seemed to show that he could show more dedication, more religious zeal, then the Jews - she showed what real Jewish heroism is. The heroism of a woman alone, impoverished, destitute, facing up to the king who wants to take her children away from אידישקייט, and to stand up to his threats, to stand up to the blandishment of the life of luxury and comfort he offers them, to stand up even to the apparent resignation of the נביא השם, and to say - No! Come what may, my children will be raised as their father the נביא השם would have wanted them to be raised.

This is the kind of heroism, of real Jewish heroism, that many of us remember seeing in our parents and grandparents, who came to this country and stood up to the threat of unemployment if they would not work on Shabbos, to the blandishment of assimilation into the enticing American culture, who stood up even to the resignation of many who, while impeccably firm themselves, had made peace with the prospect that the next generation would no longer maintain that heritage. And it took great courage and dedication to stand up to all of that, and to say, like אשת עובדיה - no! We will not give in to threats, and to temptations, and to discouragement. And we are the fruits of their victory.

And today, too, when we face the מלך מואב's of our generation, enemies who are willing to sacrifice their children in the cause of their hatred, we have to show that same kind of Jewish dedication that was epitomized by אשת עובדיה. It still requires dedication to be a good Jew. שמירת שבת is easier today than once upon a time, and כשרות is easier, but success comes with its own נסיונות. Certainly the temptations of גזל and עריות, of dishonesty and immorality, are very strong today. The moral fabric of society has frayed badly, and young people today face temptations and נסיונות that we never knew as children. But we and they can continue to draw inspiration from those who have gone before us, who like אשת עובדיה were quiet heroes of the spirit, and with the רבש"ע's help we will go on to raise future generations who will be, in their turn, ירא את השם מאד, עד ביאת גואל צדק בב"א.