

# GEHAZI AND THE MIRACLE STAFF OF ELISHA

REUVEN CHAIM (RUDOLPH) KLEIN

The story of Elisha and the Shunammite woman reaches its dramatic climax when the woman's son dies and her impassioned plea to Elisha is heard. Elisha responds by dispatching Gehazi, his faithful acolyte, to perform a miracle and resurrect the child. As the Bible relates:

*He [Elisha] said to Gehazi: 'Gird up thy loins, and take my staff in thy hand, and go thy way; if thou meet any man, salute him not; and if any salute thee, answer him not; and lay my staff upon the face of the child.' And the mother of the child said: 'As the LORD liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee.' And he arose, and followed her. And Gehazi passed on before them, and laid the staff upon the face of the child; but there was neither voice, nor hearing. Wherefore he returned to meet him, and told him, saying: 'The child is not awaked.'* (II Kgs. 4:29–31)

Even though he possessed his master's staff, Gehazi was unable to resurrect the child, and instead appealed to Elisha directly to do so. Elisha himself entered the room where the child lay dead and brought him back to life.

The Bible does not explain why Gehazi was unable to fulfill his master's assignment of reviving the dead child, leaving Elisha himself to realize that undertaking.<sup>1</sup> The fact that Elisha would ultimately have to assume responsibility for that which he had originally delegated to his student might imply that Elisha had erred in delegating the task instead of doing it himself. This would explain why Gehazi was unable to use his master's staff to revive the child. Because God wanted Elisha to do it himself, He did not allow Gehazi to perform the miracle of resurrection, but left it to Elisha. Alternatively, Elisha may have given too much importance to his staff by making it a necessary component of the miracle. Therefore, God decided to withhold the miracle in order to teach Elisha the ever-important lesson that miracles are done by God alone, not by physical objects.<sup>2</sup> These explanations follow the as-

sumption that Elisha was at fault for Gehazi being unable to resurrect the child.

We might also place the blame on the Shunammite woman herself who, instead of appealing to God directly, appealed to His human emissary. Perhaps God prevented Gehazi's efforts from working in order to teach the woman that she should not beseech mortals to solve her problems, but should appeal to God Himself.

However, many traditional sources assume that Elisha remains blameless in this episode. Instead, they place the blame squarely upon Gehazi. We must first examine the traditional attitude taken up by the Bible and its commentators towards Gehazi as a person. Then we can analyze the various explanations of why it was Gehazi's fault that he was unable to resurrect the child.

#### GEHAZI AS A WICKED PERSON

In the Bible's story of Elisha and the Shunammite woman, Gehazi's character appears neutral, if not positive. However, he is later depicted as a greedy opportunist willing to sacrifice his master's scruples in order to make a profit. After Elisha miraculously healed the Aramean general Naaman of his leprosy, the latter offered Elisha a tribute, which he graciously declined. Later, Gehazi, against the will of his master, returned to Naaman and asked for silver and changes of clothing, which Naaman happily granted him. When Gehazi returned to Elisha his master (who knew prophetically what Gehazi had done), Elisha severely reprimanded him and even cursed him for diminishing the sanctification of God's name that had resulted from Elisha selflessly aiding Naaman (II Kgs. Ch. 5).

This episode sets a precedent for viewing Gehazi as an unscrupulous character who disregards his master's wishes, and informs tradition as to how to view Gehazi in the earlier episode as well.

Rabbinic literature consistently views Gehazi as a negative character. The Mishnah (*Sanhedrin* 10:2) lists Gehazi as one of four commoners who forfeited his portion in the World to Come through his evil actions. Similarly, TB *Sotah* 9b counts Gehazi among ten Biblical characters who set their eyes upon that which was not fitting for them. They not only lost that which they desired, but also lost that which they had already legitimately held. JT *Sanhedrin* 10:2 notes that although Gehazi was a great Torah scholar, he pos-

essed three fatal character flaws: envy, unabashed sexual immorality, and denial of the Resurrection of the Dead.<sup>3</sup>

#### GEHAZI PUSHES AWAY THE SHUNAMMITE WOMAN

Even before the story of Naaman, the Talmud finds an indication of the negative character of Gehazi earlier in the story of Elisha and the Shunammite woman. When the bereaved mother first came before Elisha to tell of her son's death, *she caught hold of his feet. And Gehazi came near to thrust her away; but the man of God said: 'Let her alone; for her soul is bitter within her...'* (II Kgs. 4:27). In this instance, Gehazi is seemingly portrayed as his master's loyal gatekeeper, protecting Elisha. However, in line with the assumption that Gehazi was overall a negative figure, TB *Berakhot* 10b attributes to Gehazi an ulterior motive in thrusting away the Shunammite woman: he wished to molest her. The Talmud exegetically explains that the word *to thrust her away (le-hadfah)* means that he grabbed her at "the glory of her beauty" (*hod yafyah*), i.e. he placed his hands upon her breasts.<sup>4</sup> In this, the Talmud goes the extra mile to paint Gehazi in a decidedly negative light, finding a flaw in his character not explicit in the text of the Bible, in order to maintain consistency in the negative characterization of Gehazi.

#### GEHAZI INTERRUPTS HIS MISSION

Following this rubric, the traditional commentators unanimously agree that Gehazi's inability to revive the Shunammite woman's dead son was through no fault of Elisha, but rather because of his own actions. *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* (ch. 33) notes that when Elisha sent Gehazi with his staff to resurrect the dead child, he offered very specific instructions that Gehazi not speak at all<sup>5</sup> until he had gone to the child, placed his staff upon him, and revived him. Elisha told this to Gehazi so that there would not be any unnecessary interruptions between him handing over the staff and Gehazi using the staff to revive the child.<sup>6</sup> However, instead of following these directives, Gehazi made sport of the serious situation and sarcastically asked each person whom he passed on his way, "Do you believe this staff can resurrect [the dead]?" This midrash explains that Gehazi's callous disregard for his master's direct instructions caused the anticipated miraculous endeavor to fail. Not only did

Gehazi fail to heed to his master's order to refrain from talking, he even made light of the grave matter.<sup>7</sup>

The Hassidei Ashkenaz scholars R. Yehuda ha-Hassid (1150–1217)<sup>8</sup> and his student R. Elazar Rokeah of Worms (1176–1238)<sup>9</sup> both explain why it was imperative that no interruption be made between Elisha handing Gehazi his staff and Gehazi attempting to revive the child. R. Yehuda ha-Hassid explains that speaking of other matters in middle of an important procedure shows that one has given up on the efficacy of that procedure. Elisha essentially warned Gehazi that if he spoke, he was showing that he did not believe the staff could revive the child, and that disbelief prevented the miracle from happening.

R. Elazar of Worms explains that if Gehazi would immediately use the staff to revive the child, without doing anything else in the interim, then it would be as if Elisha himself placed the staff upon the child because Elisha would send an angelic representation of himself along with Gehazi. However, should Gehazi interrupt this holy mission by engaging in some other pursuit (such as speaking to someone else), Elisha's angelic representative would be angered and leave, thus depriving Gehazi of the ability to resurrect the child. Both scholars compare the uselessness of Elisha's staff in this context to the prayers of a person who interrupts his supplications to God with other matters.

#### GEHAZI SPEAKS ABOUT HIS MISSION

Similarly, Rashi, based on *Midrash Tanhuma*, explains that Elisha instructed Gehazi to refrain from greeting anyone on his way to the child in order to avoid conversing with others and possibly divulging the purpose of his trip, because it is not appropriate that one should aggrandize himself by boasting that he will perform a miracle. Gehazi did not follow these guidelines and told every person whom he met "My master has sent me to resurrect the dead."<sup>10</sup> It was for this reason that the miracle did not occur.

Regarding a different miracle that Elisha performed on behalf of the Shunammite woman, Rashi (to II Kgs. 4:4) writes that miracles are supposed to be performed in private. If we apply this dictum to the situation under discussion, we can propose that Gehazi was unable to revive the child using Elisha's staff because he had already publicized that he intended to do so, pre-

venting the miracle from occurring privately. In this spirit, Nahmanides (in *ha-Emunah ve-ha-Bitahon* ch. 15) and Rabbenu Bahaya (to Gen. 30:38) write that the Evil Eye dominates that which is publicized and blocks divine miracles from affecting them in a positive way. In the end, because he told others of his plan to revive the child, the Evil Eye rested upon Gehazi's efforts and blocked the fulfillment of his mission.

#### GEHAZI RESURRECTS AN IMPURE ANIMAL

An early Ashkenazic tradition offers a different explanation as to what Gehazi did wrong, causing Elisha's staff to not revive the child. When Elisha commissioned his staff to revive the child, he only imbued in it the power to resurrect the dead once. Based on this assumption, the said tradition explains that when Elisha sent Gehazi with the staff to revive the boy, Gehazi first used the staff to resurrect a dead dog.<sup>11</sup> Once the staff's powers had already been used up,<sup>12</sup> Gehazi was no longer able to successfully use the staff to also resurrect the Shunammite's dead son.<sup>13</sup> R. Shmuel Kroizer-Yerushalmi (1921–1997) differs slightly from this explanation and instead writes that because the holy staff was desecrated by being used for an impure animal, it no longer held the ability to revive the dead.<sup>14</sup>

The 14<sup>th</sup> century scholar R. Shalom of Neustadt explains that Aaron—not Moses<sup>15</sup> – cast down his staff in front of Pharaoh in order to miraculously turn the staff into a snake (Ex. 7:9) because Moses had already performed this feat at the burning bush (Ex. 4:1–4) and one person cannot perform the same miracle twice. He then compares this to Gehazi who was unable to resurrect the Shunammite's son because he had already performed a miracle of resurrection when he resurrected a dog on the way.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, R. Efraim of Regensburg<sup>17</sup> and R. Shlomo ben Shmuel of Wurzburg<sup>18</sup> explain that because Gehazi already resurrected a dog with Elisha's staff, he could not also resurrect the Shunammite's child on the same day.

The Targumic Tosefta (to II Kgs. 4:31) records a slightly different version of this tradition. There Gehazi tested his master's staff by resurrecting a dead lion (as opposed to a dog).<sup>19</sup> His efforts to later revive the Shunammite's child using Elisha's staff did not work because he failed to follow his master's instructions.<sup>20</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

We began by noting that when Elisha sent Gehazi with his staff to resurrect the son of the Shunammite woman, Gehazi was unable to do so, but the Bible completely omits the reason. We noted that one could theoretically argue that for some reason it was Elisha's fault that Gehazi could not revive the child—or even the fault of the Shunammite woman herself. Nonetheless, we showed that traditional sources reject these ways of explaining the story and instead direct the criticism at Gehazi. The traditional sources understood that just as the Bible later shows Gehazi in a bad light, defying Elisha's wishes in his avaricious interaction with Naaman, the Bible also means to condemn Gehazi in the story of the Shunammite woman.

Assuming that Gehazi himself was culpable for his inability to revive the Shunammite's child, the commentators offer different explanations of what he did wrong. These explanations focus on Gehazi ignoring Elisha's instructions on his way to perform the miracle, delaying and interrupting his mission. In some explanations he stopped to talk on the way, in others, he stopped on the way to resurrect an animal. All in all, Gehazi is a character cast in a negative light by the Bible and its commentators, and the traditional ways of explaining why he could not revive the Shunammite woman's son follow and support that negative characterization of him.

#### NOTES:

1. Abarbanel explains that Elisha never intended for Gehazi to revive the child with his staff, rather Elisha sent Gehazi with his staff to miraculously preserve the child's corpse so that it would not rot until Elisha himself would arrive at the scene and personally execute the resurrection. However, R. Samuel Laniado of Aleppo (d. 1605) rejects this approach and affirms a literal reading of the text that Elisha originally intended for Gehazi to revive the child, and only after that did not work did he attempt to do so himself, see E. Batzri (ed.), *Kli Yakar Melachim II* (Jerusalem: Haktav Institute, 1994), pp. 91–93.

2. See R. Kasher, *Targumic Toseftot to the Prophets* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1996), pp. 142; 262. The Targumic Tosefta (to II Kgs. 4:31) explains that this staff had God's Holy Name engraved upon on it, and was given to Elisha by his master Elijah the prophet. R. Y. Y. Stahl in *Kovetz Moriah* vol. 367 (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 2011), pp. 157–167 brings many sources (ranging from Kabbalistic to poetic) who understood that God's name was engraved upon Elisha's staff.

3. See there for specific manifestations of these weaknesses.

4. *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* (ch. 33) explicitly identifies “the glory of her beauty” as her breasts and notes that Gehazi placed his hands upon her breasts. Rashi (to TB *Berakhot* 10b) also adopts this approach. Interestingly, R. Yosef Haim of Baghdad (1835–1909) ascribes this explanation to Maharsha and then disagrees arguing that “the glory of her beauty” refers to her forehead and

eyes. R. Yosef Haim possibly did not realize that Rashi had already explained that it refers to her breasts, instead ascribing that explanation to Maharsha, because this passage of Rashi does not appear in Rashi's commentary as published in *Ein Yaakov*, while it does appear in Maharsha's commentary there. R. Nissim Gaon (in his commentary to TB *Berakhot* 10b) follows the Jerusalem Talmud in explaining that Gehazi placed his hands *between* her breasts, not *on* them.

5. R. David Luria (1798–1855), in his commentary to *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, notes that a careful reading of Elisha's instructions reveals that he only told Gehazi to refrain from greeting others or answering a greeting, but not to refrain from speaking at all, for Elisha said to him *if thou meet any man, salute him not; and if any salute thee, answer him not* (II Kgs. 4:29). However, explains Luria, the midrash understood that Elisha told him not to speak at all—even to greet another or to answer another's salutations. He explains that this is based on the Mishnah (*Berakhot* 2:1) which forbids one from interrupting the Shema prayers with extra utterances, but allows for one to greet and return greetings in certain circumstances. In light of that rule, Elisha sought to clarify to Gehazi that in this case, even salutations and returning salutations are forbidden.

6. See R. Luria's commentary to *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* and R. Yosef Kara's commentary to II Kgs. 4:29. Similarly, Radak and Gersonides explain that Elisha commanded that Gehazi refrain from talking in order not to unnecessarily delay the miracle. According to this explanation, Elisha only forbade Gehazi from talking to others so that he would not engage in a conversation while travelling to the child, but according to the former explanation, any speaking (even if he theoretically spoke to himself) would be considered an interruption.

7. R. Shmuel Kroizer-Yerushalmi explains (*Yalkut me-Am Loez* to II Kgs. 4:31) that this midrash's critique of Gehazi is that he mistakenly thought that the staff itself could resurrect the dead, instead of attributing that power to his prayer to God.

8. Y. Y. Stahl (ed.), *Sefer Gematriyot* vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 2005), pg. 182.

9. *Hakmat ha-Nefesh* (Lemberg, 1876), pg. 15a.

10. *Midrash Tanhuma (be-Shalah* §26) serves as Rashi's source that Gehazi divulged this information to all whom he met. There, Gehazi tells everyone that he is going to resurrect the dead. When people asked him how he can resurrect the dead if only God can do so, Gehazi replied, "My master can also resurrect the dead".

11. R. Raphael Moshe Elbaz (1823–1896), a Moroccan sage and poet, records a legend from oral tradition which explains why this dog merited to be resurrected after its death. One time, two pious Jews were sent to fundraise overseas and ended up as guests at the house of a wicked Jewish thief. The thief saw that these two scholars raised a considerable sum of money, so he planned to poison their food and steal their earnings. When their crooked host served them their meal, the pious pair was in middle of praying. The host's dog sniffed the meal and realized that it contained poison, so, in order to warn the pious fundraisers, it ate the food. The death of the dog alerted the two pious men and they were thus saved from the poison through this dog. In gratitude to their host's dog for giving up its life to save them, the two pious men prayed that this dog should merit resurrection after its death, and that was the dog that Gehazi resurrected. See Elbaz's *Sefer Eden mi-Kedem* (Jerusalem: Machon Yismach Lev, 2011), pg. 66.

12. R. Chaim Yosef David Azulai compares this to the staff of Moses and discusses whether the latter could also "use up" its powers, see *Pnei David (Shemot* §20).

13. *Paneah Raza, Imrei Noam*, and R. Jacob of Vienna's *Pshatim u-Perushim* to Num. 22:29. Rokeah in *Hakhmat ha-Nefesh* pg. 14a also writes that Gehazi revived a dead dog, however, as mentioned before, he explains why Gehazi could not revive the child differently.
14. *Yalkut me-Am Loez* to II Kgs. 4:31.
15. See Rashi (to Ex. 7:19 and 8:12) who explains why Aaron—and not Moses—performed the actions that brought the first three plagues in Egypt. His underlying assumption is that if not for the reasons he cites, Moses himself should have brought all Ten Plagues, not Aaron.
16. S. Y. Spitzer (ed.), *Halachos u-Minhagei Rabbenu Shalom mi-Noystat* (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 1997), pp. 47–48. This explanation is also cited by R. Shalom's principle student, R. Jacob ha-Levi Moelin (1365–1427), known as Maharil; see S. Y. Spitzer (ed.), *Sefer Maharil* (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 1989), pp. 635–636.
17. J. Klugmann (ed.), *Perush Rabbeinu Efraim Al ha-Torah* vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1992), pg. 124.
18. In his hitherto unpublished work *Seder Taamim* (to Num 22:29). This unpublished passage is cited from manuscript by R. Y. Y. Stahl in *Kovetz Moriah* vol. 367 (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 2011), p. 158.
19. R. Shmuel Kroizer-Yerushalmi (in *Yalkut me-Am Loez* to II Kgs. 4:31) cites this version of the story in the name of the Yemenite scholar R. Avraham b. Shlomo whose commentary to II Kings has not yet been published (his commentaries on Joshua–I Kings were published in four volumes by J. Qafih and on Isaiah and the Twelve Prophets by E. Schlossberg).
20. R. Kasher, *Targumic Toseftot to the Prophets* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1996), pp. 142, 262.



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