

UNDervalUED ASSETS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

A woman, one of the wives of the apprentice prophets, cried out to Elisha...Your servant, my husband died. Your maidservant has nothing but a jar of oil...He said, go outside and borrow vessels from all your neighbors...Close the door on yourself and your sons and pour into all the vessels...Sell the oil and repay those who oppress you. Support your children with what is left over.^[2]

The last miracle [supporting her children] was greater than the first.^[3]

Chazal point out^[4] that *mikra* introduces people to us in two different way. Sometimes, it uses a formula in which a name is stated first, e.g. "Naval was his name," while at other times the formula is reversed, and the actual name that the person is called is put in the second position, e.g. "His name was Boaz." Chazal state that when speaking about the righteous, "their names come before them," while the opposite is true of *resha'im*. By "them" Chazal mean their self-interest, the concerns that they place before all others, the space they reserve for themselves with which others are not allowed to interfere. The "names" of *tzadikim*, however, precede their self-interest. Their more essential identity – their obligation to their Creator and their community – takes pride of place relative to the conventional self-interest of others.

According to Chazal^[5], Elisha's petitioner was Ovadiah's widow. This opens us up to new understanding of the poignancy of this episode. Ovadiah was one of the greatest heroes of his epoch. The wicked queen Izevel acted on her hatred of Torah, slaughtering most of the apprentice prophets. The leadership of the generation and the continuity of the *mesorah* could have been disrupted were it not for the intervention of one man – Ovadiah – who hid a group of survivors in a cave. He provided for them through his own resources, borrowing when necessary. Had he been discovered, he would have quickly been executed. His activities were against the known policy of the crown; his position in the service of the king compounded the seriousness of his disobedience. His activities endangered not only his own life, but the lives of those closest to him – his wife and children.

Such a giant should have been lionized in his lifetime. Genuine heroes, however, are often underappreciated by their peers. Some people resent the *mussar* that the *tzadik* often dishes out to his contemporaries – the admonitions and warnings. Others feel threatened by his very example, even when he does not directly challenge them for their shortcomings. They are embarrassed and

even angered by the appearance in the flesh of the person they subconsciously realize they should be as well. The *tzadik* can therefore become a lightning-rod of malicious gossip, seeking to reduce his stature to the mediocrity of his fellow citizens.

When he dies, the *tzadik* is no longer a threat. He ceases to chastise the wrong-doers, and he no longer acts as a living contradiction to their failings. Now, he can be more fully appreciated. In this way, the *tzadik* becomes greater in death than in life.

See how deep and tragic was the cry of Ovadiah's widow. Her husband was a titan. He had passed away, and in death should have been appreciated even by the cynics who would not accept his greatness in his lifetime. She and her children had lived in constant fear for their lives. Should they not now have the admiration, gratitude and respect of the community?

The opposite was true.

"Your servant, my husband, died." His priorities were not those of ordinary people, Elisha. He was your servant first, and only my husband second. He was one of those rare individuals who efface their own needs, and dedicate themselves entirely to a higher cause.

"I have nothing but a small amount of oil." No inheritance. I own no land. My house is not my own. My worldly possessions amount to no more than a small amount of oil. Moreover, my husband's creditors pursue me relentlessly. For what? For the monies he borrowed to be able to keep the prophets alive in the cave. Should this remain his obligation even in death? Furthermore, they are threatening to take my children in payment for what is due them! Is this right? Is this fair? The Heavens themselves should be crying out over the injustice!

Elisha agreed – and then some. He recognized the power of her claim, and saw the injustice as a blot on the entire generation. He knew what she likely did not. Elisha's treatment was no different from the fate of many who work for the community. Lesser people, incapable of consciously accepting real generosity and purity of spirit, look at them with a jaundiced eye. Whatever they do, they are accused of impropriety, of lining their pockets with public money, with acting in self-interest.

HKBH was prepared to work a miracle for this poor woman. Since He has infinite options, what would we have expected He would do?

The least expected option would be to give her oil. Ovadiah was known to deal with oil, which he provided to the prophets he hid, besides bread and water. If she would suddenly discover a cache of oil, too many people would smugly conclude that Ovadiah had been skimming charitable property and hoarding it for his family.

If He decreed that it had to be oil – as a reward for his supplying it to his charges – then at least the miracle should have been accomplished quietly. He could have supplied the vessels as easily as the oil. No need to get the neighbors involved, having them lend her the vessels. This would have

minimized the damage by gossip-mongers.

Perhaps Hashem's intention was to deliberately show off the miracle of the oil, publicizing the *midah-keneged* – *midah* in rewarding Ovadiah for feeding oil to the refugees. In that case, why insist as He did that the woman fill the empty vessels from her container behind closed doors, with none of her neighbors present to see the miracle! It seems as if Hashem designed the episode to maximize the likelihood of suspicion and mistrust. Ovadiah's wife would have her oil, but face even greater heartache from the community.

It didn't happen. The people understood that a miracle had occurred. They recognized that Ovadiah deserved it. They reacted with love and respect, not cynicism and condemnation.

Ovadiah's wife was able pay back her husband's indebtedness. Her children were no longer threatened with servitude. There was enough of a surplus for her to support her family without facing rejection by her neighbors.

The people understood. And this is what Chazal meant by the last miracle being greater than the first!

1. Based on HaMedrash V'HaMaaseh by R. Yechezkel Libshitz .
2. Haftorah of Vayera; Melachim2 4:1-7 .
3. Yalkut, Melachim2 228 .
4. Lekach Tov, Esther 2:5 .
5. Yalkut, ibid. .