

## **Haftarat Tazria-Metzora תזריע – מצרע**

**Torah: Leviticus 12:1–15:33**

**Haftarah: 2 Kings 4:42–5:19; 7:3–20**

### **God Will Be Known through Through Affliction**

#### **General Overview**

We are making this week's haftarah into a double portion, as it sometimes is in the Hebrew calendar. Its contents are connected, consisting of two episodes from the ministry of Elisha.

In the first story, Na'aman, the general of the Aramean (Syrian) army had leprosy. He happened to have had a young Israelite slave girl who informed him that he could find healing from Elisha, “the prophet who is in Samaria” (2 Kings 5:3). The general went to Israel (Samaria) and found Elisha. Elisha instructed him to cleanse himself in the Jordan River, which would affect his cure. It worked! Na'aman immersed himself in the Jordan seven times and emerged cured. The story closes with a confession of faith on the part of Na'aman.

The second story relates a time, presumably a while later, when one of the frequently marauding Aramean bands encamped around Samaria, threatening to take the famine-stricken city. Naturally, the people and the king were afraid. However, Elisha exhorted all of them to cast aside their fears. Elisha said that God had given him a glimpse into the spiritual realm whereupon he beheld legions of angels complete with battle chariots defending the city.

In the meantime, four lepers decided to leave the city, rather hopeless about both their own condition as well as that of their starving city. They soon discovered that the Aramean marauding band had mysteriously left their position of siege upon the city. Apparently, God had caused them to see the heavenly hosts protecting the city.

After assessing their situation, the lepers soon concluded that the army had, indeed, gone but did not take with them all of the supplies. The lepers spread word about the loot to the city. After some difficulty convincing the king that it was not a trick, the whole city went out and seized the spoils of the departed army. In the end, there was such an abundance of food, that the prices were even lowered, in fulfillment of a prophecy that Elisha declared about decreased food prices because of God's supernatural protection of the city.

#### **Connection to the Parasha**

The double portion of Parashiyot Tazria/ Metzora instruct Israel concerning the subject of supernatural afflictions sent upon them for various reasons. Among a host of such afflictions, skin afflictions seem to be dominant. Most English translations of the Hebrew render such afflictions as “leprosy.” We have discussed, the nature of these afflictions in more detail in the parashiyot

commentary. Accordingly, the subject of “leprosy” plays a major role in both of the two stories that we will examine from the haftarah portions in 2 Kings chapters four through seven.

## **Exposition**

The outline for our study will consist of the titles for the two stories from the life and ministry of Elisha, which are written in our haftarah. In the first story, we will examine the healing of a leper who was not from among the children of Israel. In this, we will catch a rare glimpse of how the light (albeit almost smothered!) of Israel affected people from the nations around them, as we see the healing of Na'aman.

In the second story, we will see how the hopelessness of four men afflicted with leprosy was the catalyst to relieving the nation of some of the miseries of the severe famine from which it was suffering. Therefore, here is the outline for our study:

- I. Leprosy Brings One to God
  - A. The Nature of the Affliction
  - B. The Effect of the Affliction
  - C. The Result of the Affliction
- II. The Hopelessness of Some Lepers
  - A. The Plight of the Lepers
  - B. The Story of the Lepers
  - C. The King of the Gatekeepers
  - D. The Usefulness of the Lepers

### **I. Leprosy Brings One to God**

#### ***A. The Nature of the Affliction***

The first story centres on the general of the Aramean army, Na'aman. We are told that although he was highly respected and courageous, he was afflicted with leprosy.

Before attempting any analysis of the story, a more specific, determination of “leprosy” is required. Once that is ascertained, we will find that the information will have a bearing on the story and its application to our lives.

We are told that Na'aman was afflicted with a skin disease. In fact, the text indicates that Na'aman was a *metzora*, (see 2I Kings 5:1). Nearly all of the English translations with which we are familiar, render the word *metzora* as a “leper.” However, this is not a good translation. Most Modern English speakers think of a leper as a person who has what is commonly known today as Hansen's Disease.

This is a severe nerve disease that causes the nerves to malfunction so that one cannot feel things. As a result, those inflicted with Hansen's Disease can actually rub off portions of their skin and not even feel it. Consequently, these so-called "lepers" have often lost some of their limbs or have patches of rubbed away skin. In reality, there are no mysterious sores or deformities. When we compared this to the Torah description of a *metzora*, we found that there were major differences between this and someone afflicted with Hansen's Disease. Thus, we agree with Baruch Levine when he states,

The identification of biblical *tsara'at* with "leprosy" is unlikely, if by "leprosy" is meant Hansen's disease; for the symptomology provided in chapter 13 [of Leviticus] does not conform to the nature or course of that disease. Undoubtedly, a complex of various ailments was designated by the term *tsara'at*.<sup>1</sup>

We see a spiritual disciplinary system established by God for His people. At each stage, the person was given time by the Lord to examine himself and see if he was walking in an erroneous way.

### **B. The Effect of the Affliction**

Na'aman was troubled with this supernatural skin affliction. What effect did this have on him?

First, we notice that there is an apparent difference between how Israelites viewed leprosy and how other nations, specifically the Arameans regarded it. Whereas in Israel lepers were excluded from human society, in Syria a man afflicted with leprosy could hold a very high state-office in the closest association with the king.<sup>2</sup>

God was going to change that outlook in the life of Syria's top general, Na'aman. One of the ways He was doing it was through the witness of a lowly captive Israelite servant girl.

On one of Na'aman's many incursions into northern Israel from Syria, he captured a young Israelite girl who he put into service in his own home as his wife's helper. The text indicates that she was a "little girl" (2 Kings 5:2). In Hebrew this reads, *na'arah katannah*, נערה קטנה. The term *na'ara* (נערה) is usually applied to a girl who has just reached puberty. The adjective *katannah* (קטנה) would indicate that she was young, probably just reaching the age of eleven or twelve.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps the text informs us of her age in order to help us to realize that even the greatest generals or kings do not always have the ways of life figured out. God can reveal His wisdom even to children. Thus, it was this young Israelite girl who told her master exactly how to receive the cure for his ailment. In her own way, she gave a faithful testimony of her God by pointing Na'aman to God's prophet.

It was obvious to Na'aman that his own society's religious customs did not provide relief for his misery. Nor were the Aramean doctors able to cure him. One effect, therefore of this affliction, was to humble this powerful and respected man. Even though he demonstrated his military prowess by afflicting the Israelites and

thereby capturing this young Israelite girl, God made sure that eventually he would have to depend upon her knowledge for his cure. It would have been humiliating both in the eyes of his neighbours as well as in the eyes of his king.

### **C. The Results of the Affliction**

#### **1. Take Down the Pride**

Let us now look at the results of Na'aman's affliction. The first result was a further humbling of this general. 2 Kings 5: 11 tells us what Na'aman was expecting from Elisha. It says, "Behold, I thought, 'He will surely come out to me, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and wave his hand over the place, and cure the leper'."

Instead of doing that, however, Elisha merely sent him to the Jordan River whereupon he was to immerse himself seven times. Then he was to be cured. It seems that Elisha's apparent lack of respect for him and his position put him off. Rabbi Hertz summarizes our understanding quite well when he states,

Elisha did not come out to him, and Na'aman was enraged that the prophet was no respecter of persons in his case. He was especially annoyed at the simplicity of the remedy: he expected the Prophet to come out and play the wonder-worker.<sup>4</sup>

#### **2. No Other God!**

The second result is a product of the first. As God was chipping away at Na'aman's pride, He was also drawing him to Himself. Sure enough, the faith of the young Israelite servant girl proved correct. When Na'aman gave in and immersed himself in the Jordan River, we are told that ". . .his flesh was restored like the flesh of a little child, and he was clean. (5:14).

There are several important points here. First, we must realize that it was not the waters of the Jordan River that were the healing agent; there were other waters that were/are of much better quality than the waters of the Jordan. The Prophet's statement had a wider meaning to the ancient Syrian general.

Whenever people from the nations of the world seek to be cured of afflictions sent only from God, they need to come to the waters of the Torah, so to speak. It was because he submitted to the instructions given to him by God through God's spokesman that Na'aman was cured. Indeed, the Torah is like a stream of living water continually flowing from the throne of God and granting healing and restoration to all who partake of it.

Second, notice that Na'aman immersed himself seven times. Seven is one of the best-known symbolic numbers of the Scriptures. It represents completion and rest. God created for six days and on the seventh day His work of creation was complete and He ceased from His work of creation. The same principle applied to Na'aman. His six "days of labour," so to speak, was his life leading up to that point in time. It was a life just like anyone's else's was — filled with striving and turmoil. If he was seeking God, he was only seeking a god of his own imagination; one of the many gods of the polytheistic nation to which he

belonged. The sevenfold immersion therefore was commanded, “. . . to show that the healing was a work of God, for seven is the stamp of the works of God.”<sup>5</sup> God then put him in a state of spiritual rest.

Third, notice that God’s work of drawing His elect is complete. 2 Kings 5:15 tells us that Na’aman confessed his faith in the one true God. We read,

When he returned to the man of God with all his company, and came and stood before him, he said, “Behold now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel; so please take a present from your servant now.”

Not only was this a personal confession for Na’aman himself, but it was also a time of confession before others to hear. This truly was a sign that Na’aman put his trust in the Holy One.

There is a fourth observation. We can also tell that Na’aman’s faith was genuine because one of his immediate responses was a desire to give to the cause of God, by offering Elisha a substantial reward. Naturally, Elisha refused it. Elisha knew that this was totally a work of God. Hence, Elisha had cured Na’aman in order to sanctify God’s name, not for worldly gain. Thus, “he had done nothing to accomplish the feat. It was performed by the Almighty Himself.”<sup>6</sup>

Finally, one last result of this miracle was that, in Na’aman, we are afforded an opportunity to see God’s attitude toward people who are not native Israelites. He also loves them and desires their good just as much as He cares for Israel. Unfortunately, many reject God. But there are some, like Na’aman who respond favourably to God’s call.

We learn that whoever seeks out the true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God will never cast aside. If God called him to Himself, God would never reject that person.

All of these good things happened just because the Holy One afflicted one of His elect with a supernatural affliction. Indeed, God had this planned right from the beginning in order to lavish His love on Na’aman and to bring him to Himself.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Baruch A. Levine, *The JPS Torah Commentary, Leviticus*, 75.

<sup>2</sup> C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 3, 317.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (“BDB”), 882.

<sup>4</sup> J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 468.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 319.

<sup>6</sup> A. J. Rosenberg, *The Book of Kings 2*, 275.