

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Metzora

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 5: Parshat Metsora, II Book of Kings 7:3-20

The Mission of *Metsoraim*

The *haftarah* tells of the discovery that God had dispersed the army of Aram, lifting the siege from the city of Samaria. The obvious connection to the Torah reading is that the protagonists are a group of people afflicted with tsaraat, but that raises the question of why we did not read it as the haftarah for Tazria. Especially since that reading was about healing tsaraat, a topic discussed in this week's Torah reading, they ought logically have been switched.

We also start two verses later than we might have expected, skipping where the text tells of one of the king's advisers mocking Elisha's prediction, at the height of the siege, that in two days barley and flour would be inexpensive. Elisha replied that the man would see it happen and yet not enjoy its benefits. Since the end of our *haftarah* reports the fulfillment of the prophecy—that officer was trampled to death after seeing the plenty in the camp of Aram—we wonder why we did not start with that.

One part of the answer lies in the *haftarah* wishing us to understand that our central characters are the four tsaraat-afflicted men, whom tradition identifies as Gehazi (Elisha's former disciple) and his sons. Following Torah law, they were sitting outside of Samaria, since lepers cannot enter a walled city.

If This Isn't Working, Do Something Else

Starving from the siege, the four decide to surrender to Aram, a move Baba Kama 60b sees as one source for the idea that famine requires those who are adversely affected to move to a place of greater plenty, at least temporarily. Naomi and Elimelech are disdained for moving to Moav at the beginning of the Book of Ruth, because they had the money to ride out the economic downturn, and were moving to avoid being besieged by those seeking assistance.

Times of hardship produce two necessary reactions, depending on where one is on the economic spectrum. Those in financial straits need to try something and perhaps someplace else—they cannot just demand assistance from others--and those blessed with resources need to work on sustaining the economy.

Starting Before Dark

The verse tells us the four woke *b'neshef*, in the dark, the same word used for when God produced the fright and flight in the Aramean camp. The introduction of the time of day seems deliberate, since the story would make sense without that detail.

I suggest we are being told, implicitly, that God impacts human relations in the dark (literally or figuratively). The sounds which scared the Arameans out of their wits, their flight and its

discovery, all happened when there was too little light to see.

In Egypt, too, the Exodus itself occurred in broad daylight, but the killing of the first-born happened in the dark, at a time when the Jews could not leave their houses. The enemy's defeat came in the night, but the Jews' were not freed of their siege and starvation until the daytime.

Perhaps this carries a broader message. God acts unobserved by His beneficiaries. The effects of that salvation, and its celebration, happen for all to see and hear. That might also explain why the prophet does not tell us of the miracle directly, but as an aside explaining what the tsaraat-sufferers were going to discover; we do not emphasize the miracles themselves, we emphasize when humans catch a glimpse of their effects.

Can't Believe in Miracles

Our heroes find the abandoned camp, celebrate, and hide gold, silver, and clothes from several tents before they have an apparent attack of conscience, and return to the city with their good news.

When they go back to the city, the king and people cannot believe it. To check, the king sends their last remaining horses with riders, and they track the Arameans all the way to the Jordan river, finding strewn possessions along the way.

Similar to tsaraat, this event is stressing the challenge of certain kinds of miracles. Believing in the splitting of the Sea and the rest of the Exodus is no great challenge, and therefore no demonstration of faith. Faith is about believing in and learning from God's less explicit messages, such as the death of the king's officer. While Elisha predicted it, skeptics could decide it was natural, the unfortunate outcome of a starved people rushing for the food they knew was theirs for the taking. The challenge of God's actions is to be able to recognize them and accept them as such.

Tsara`at brings the same challenge. It is so tempting to treat it as a physical ailment, a disease like leprosy, yet the Torah insists that its roots are spiritual as is its healing. In bringing our *tsara`at* to a priest and abiding by his decisions as to how to handle it, we are not only going to be successful at ridding ourselves of it, we will have shown our ability to recognize the hand of God in the world.

Gehazi was punished with tsaraat precisely because he had damaged Elisha's showing Naaman that lesson. When Elisha healed Naaman (in the haftarah for Tazria), he had refused any reward, to further prove that this had come from God. Gehazi then ran after Naaman to ask for some items, which Naaman had happily given.

By reading about him here, we are being shown that he was punished for more than having violated the no-payment order. Gehazi's *tsaraat* forces him to move beyond his greed, to become the bearer of news of God's unseen but miraculous salvation.

The Difference of House-Tsaraat

This view of the *haftarah* also connects it well to the Torah reading itself. Rashi on Leviticus

14;34 reports the tradition that the Emorites hid treasures in the walls of their houses; house-*tsaraat*, which requires removing the affected stones, would reveal those buried goods.

Nachmanides on Leviticus 13;47 says this was only true when the nation had fully conquered and divided the Land, each tribe in its proper place. He might be suggesting that house-*tsaraat* in particular is about rising to the challenge of seeing God's actions in the dark, which happens most fully when the nation is in its Land, in its proper places.

Shabbat Shalom