

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Tazria

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 4: Parshat Tazria, II Kings 4:42-5:19

## Why The Miracle of the Bread?

The story of Naaman, the Aramean general afflicted with *tzara'at* (the disease commonly mistranslated as leprosy), whom Elisha heals and thus convinces of God's power, tells a complete tale in nineteen verses, a comfortable length. We are left to wonder why we start three verses earlier, with the story of Elisha's miracle of making loaves of donated bread suffice for a large assemblage.

Rashi comments at the beginning of the Naaman story that the text is listing all of Elisha's miracles, heightening our problem. A connection between the stories would do us better in understanding why the one would be introduction to the other; if Rashi is all there is to this placement, our choice of readings remains a mystery.

We can ferret out such a connection, I believe, by turning our attention to the relatively simpler part of the story. Naaman is an Aramean general who is highly successful at war, but stricken with *tzara'at*. When he captures a Jewish slave girl, she suggests Elisha might cure him (it is interesting that she tries to help; the text does not tell us whether this was out of a hope of gain for herself, or because she had honest positive feelings for her master, a possibility Americans tend to reject in the slave relationship).

Naaman turns to his king to help him convince Elisha to help him; the king sends a large gift to the King of Israel, asking that he cure Naaman. The Israelite king tears his clothes in distress, sure this is a ploy to secure an excuse for invading and conquering Israel, but Elisha sends him a messenger, promising to heal Naaman. (Radak suggests the king was too embarrassed to go to Elisha himself, since he did not listen to him on other occasions. A conversation for another time).

## It's All About Expectations

The story becomes more interesting once Naaman arrives at Elisha's house. The prophet sends him a message (an act that stresses how offhandedly the prophet can perform this miracle, that it is not even worth his time to leave his house), to bathe in the Jordan seven times. Naaman is admirably transparent about how this has failed to meet his expectations. As he says it, he had anticipated that Elisha would come out to greet him, and then engage in a vigorous and public prayer. To bathe in a river, Naaman says, he could have done at home.

His servants' response seems so obvious it forces us to reconsider Naaman's position. They point out that Naaman was ready to perform great tasks to be healed, had the prophet required them, so why not at least give this river-bathing in the Jordan a try?

For Naaman, we realize, priests and prophets only wield their power in flamboyant gestures, in arm-waving and public miracle working. The idea that nature could be changed in such a quiet way was so foreign as to be ridiculous. His servants point out that this attitude closes off truths,

for little reason. His readiness to undertake taxing tasks should translate into an equal readiness for a simple one.

Naaman's skepticism is clear from the text, and yet the miracle works, and the Jordan heals him. We could have predicted he would be grateful, but he goes further, returning to Elisha and declaring his knowledge that God is the only deity. The text does not make clear how he reached this conclusion (the Mechilta to Yitro notes that Yitro himself only said that God was greater than all other gods; since we like Yitro, we tend to take that to mean that he also accepted monotheism, but Naaman's version is much stronger, closer to our own view).

### **Back to the Bread**

The oddities in the Naaman story can perhaps be answered by looking back at the first miracle. A man gives Elisha some bread as a gift, which the prophet decides to use to feed the assemblage before him. His attendant objects that the bread will not suffice, but Elisha is serene in repeating his order. Miraculously, the bread does not run out. This is similar to the other miracles we have seen from this prophet, such as where he had the widow of Obadiah assemble pots, and then have her jug of oil continue pouring until she had filled all her pots.

It is a different version of the miraculous than Elijah, such as when the latter brought fire down from the sky. Elisha's miracles, here, work much closer to Nature. He makes bread last, he has someone bathe (usually a cleaning act) in order to "clean" off the *tzara'at*. I suspect it is that minimalism that Naaman at first rejected, but then swayed him so greatly.

### *Varieties of Miracles and Their Persuasive Powers*

Polytheists are used to powerful gods; their only question is which god is more powerful in which situation, so they can know whom to worship when. But all those gods, in their view, are able to overcome Nature, to blast through the ordinary into the miraculous. Had Naaman been healed by Elisha coming out to him, praying to God, waving his hands, and then assigning a hard task, Naaman would have recognized God as powerful, perhaps even more powerful than his Aramean god, but not as the sole Power of the Universe.

The ability to extend Nature, to take a simple act like bathing in the river Jordan, and converting that into the source of the miraculous (an ability to which our haftarah draws our attention by preceding the story with the miracle of the bread), ran directly counter to the beliefs of the time. God does not need to overpower Nature, God is the God of Nature, and God makes the rules of how Nature itself works.

Connecting that to the Torah reading, I note my own care in not translating *tzara'at*. Leprosy is a natural disease, treated medically. Tsaraat is a disease with physical appearance, but it is declared and treated by a Kohen. Naaman's tsaraat, too, is treated by a prophet in a way that has some natural element to it, but is clearly a function of Nature that no one at the time could have understood.

For them, the highest proof of God's power was the ability to intervene in Nature in ways that did not disrupt it completely, but that moved it in directions they could not themselves have imagined it going.

Shabbat Shalom