

**Tell a story**  
**Haftara Tazria**  
**by Julie Zhuk on 2023-04-24**

**Comments**

This will cover the story of the prophet Elisha curing Na'aman's Tzaras. It's found in the book of Kings 2 4:42-44 and 5:1-19. During certain years the parshiyos Tzaria and Metzora are read together on one Shabbat. This particular haftara is when these parshas are read separately. If the two parshiyos are read together, the haftara is that of Metzora. In summary, Elisha has students who are miraculously satiated with tiny portions of food. It's in verse Kings 5:1-2. There is a Jewish maid servant who advises Na'aman to consult the prophet Elisha for a cure for his tzara'as. Na'aman prepares to travel to the Jewish king in Israel.

Elisha advises Na'aman to immerse herself in the Jordan River. After initially refusing, Na'aman follows Elisha's advice and is cured. He accepts G-d's authority upon himself and wishes to reward Elisha. Elisha refuses Na'aman's gift. Na'aman requests earth from Israel so that he may build an altar for G-d in Aram. This haftara consists of two parts. The second part tells how the prophet Elisha cured Na'aman. Na'aman was an Aramian general of tzara'as. That is a skin disease that resembles leprosy.

It obviously relates to parsha Tazria, wherein are enumerated the laws concerning a Jew who has tzara'as and how the kohen helps him. It should be clear, however, that whereas the kohen's duty was to inspect the symptoms of the affected person, declare the metzora meaning either "pure" or "impure", and later supervise the purification process (If the symptoms of impurity had disappeared). Healing was not part of his job. Elisha the prophet, on the other hand, did heal Na'aman in the Haftara. There is nevertheless a common denominator between the two, for the kohen would also admonish the person who is not pure to do teshuva. As we will read, in order to cure Na'aman, the prophet, Elisha likewise chose a method that would inspire him to mend his ways. More difficult to discern is the relevance of the first part of the haftara to the parsha. The haftara tells of a man who brought Elisha a gift of bread during the years of famine.

Elisha served this bread to his students. Miraculously, a small quantity sufficed to satiate them all. Maybe this episode was included in the haftara in order to contrast it with the other, more major, part. It illustrates that it was customary to bring gifts to a prophet. As a rule, Elisha accepted them. This was different with his firm refusal to accept a gift from Na'aman. Later in the haftara we will learn Elisha's reasons for not accepting Na'aman's gift. The first part of the haftara also underscores Elisha's generosity. Right away he ordered that his personal gift be distributed among his students. His character is the antithesis of Na'aman's. Na'aman was an egotistical general of Aram, as well as of Gaichazi, who was a greedy servant of Elisha's. The prophet Elisha brings blessing upon the food. In the time of the evil king Yehoram ben Achav who ruled over Israel there were seven years of famine. At the time Israel was the kingdom of the Ten Tribes to the north.

The prophet Elisha had two thousand and two hundred students. He assumed the responsibility of providing for them all. The generosity of this magnitude was quite common back then. The Gemara tells us that in Rav's yeshiva, at the conclusion of lectures, a meal would be served to two thousand and four hundred students. Rav Hunna lectured to eighteen thousand students. Thirteen of those were interpreters and they were required to explain his words to the student body, and Rav Hunna fed them all. Rava and Rabbi Yosef supported four hundred homeless students. During the years of the famine, Elisha miraculously managed to provide for his students. The haftara starts out with an example of this. Due to the famine, there was no new crop of wheat in Israel during the month of Nisan. It was at this time that wheat usually ripened.

Only in the fertile region of Ba'al Shalisha, which belonged to the tribe of Ephraim, did some grain ripen. It was merely barley and it was a very small amount. There was a righteous individual from that area. He decided to present to the prophet the first bread that was baked with flour. It was from the new harvest. He traveled to Shomron with twenty-one loaves of barley bread. He also had some unhulled, tender kernels of grain. This verse describes his gifts as the first fruits. It was to teach that supporting Torah-scholars and their students ranked equally with bringing first fruits to the Bais Hamikdash. The donor had intended the gift to be for Elisha personally. Elisha immediately commanded his servant, Gaichazi, to serve this food to the students!

Gaichazi was an outstanding Torah-student, but he was deficient in fear of Heaven and positive character traits. He asked if he should serve one loaf of bread for each hundred students?! He asked this in a sarcastic tone. Elisha had two thousand and two hundred students. The man had brought the equivalent of twenty-two loaves. There were twenty-one loaves plus enough grain to bake another loaf, so the ratio of bread to the students was one to a hundred. Elisha told Gaichazi to not worry and just give the students the bread. They would eat and have leftovers! Gaichazi did as he was told. Each student got a tiny piece of bread, just a little bit more than a kezayis. As Elisha had foretold, there was a blessing in the food. After eating a kezayis, every student felt so satisfied that he even left some over. Shortly, thereafter, Elisha performed another miracle. This is related in the remainder of the haftara. There is a Jewish girl that advises Na'aman. The king of Aram which was contemporary Syria accorded great honor to his great General Na'aman.

Not only did the king respect Na'aman's military skills, but he was also appreciative of the general's instrumental role in a victory over the Jewish people in the battle at Ramoth Gilead. Na'aman had mortally shot his arrow at an unidentified Jewish nobleman, who turned out to be Achav. He was the king of Yisrael, father of Yehoram during whose rule this episode took place. It was later that Na'aman commanded bands of marauders that invaded Israel. One of their captives happened to be a young Jewish girl. Na'aman took her home to be his wife's maid. Suddenly Na'aman's brilliant military career as well as his life were in jeopardy. This was because he was stricken with a dreadful disease called tzara'as. It was known as a kind of leprosy. Na'aman deserved to get leprosy for two reasons. Tzara'as is a punishment for people who have a lot of pride. Na'aman was extremely humiliated to be stricken with leprosy.

The second reason was his punishment for having captured a Jewish girl. Na'aman was haughty, he deserved to suffer from leprosy. It was at this time, the kingdom of Israel was ruled by an idol-worshipping king. His name was Yehoram ben Achav. Many Jews lived in ignorance and neglected of a Torah lifestyle. The family of that particular girl was Torah observant. Even the young girl was acquainted with the complicated laws of leprosy. When her master was stricken with this condition, she told her mistress, "No one knows more about leprosy than us Jews. This is not a natural physical disease: rather, it is caused by Divine providence. A Jewish leper is isolated outside the city and examined by the kohen. If the white lesions disappear, he must undergo a special purification process. The leper must immerse his body and his clothes in a mikvah. Then he will start counting seven clean days and he immersed himself once again on the seventh day. On the eighth day, he also offers sacrifices according to his financial means and immerses again.. I assure you that not a single doctor in Aram will be able to cure Na'aman, because this is not a medical problem. Na'aman has only one hope: let him visit G-d's messenger in Shomron and humbly entreat him to cure him, and the prophet will certainly do so."

The Jewish girl understood that Na'aman's arrogance was a possible cause of him having leprosy. She hinted that humility would be required for the cure. He would have to travel personally to the prophet and act humbly in his presence. The Jewish girl's advice was given in honor of G-d. She wanted to prove to the heathens among whom she now lived that their beliefs were false. She wanted to prove that it was only G-d who was the One True G-d. Na'aman does take the Jewish girl's advice. Na'amana's wife promptly informed her husband of the Jewish girl's counsel and he repeated it to the king. The king of Aram said it wouldn't be a problem and they would arrange for the Jewish prophet to heal him. The king of Aram told Na'aman to not go directly; he may refuse to treat you. I will give you a letter of recommendation to the king of Israel, so that he can command the prophet to heal you. The king of Aram assumed that Yehoram, king of Israel was on good terms with the prophet Elisha. How was he to know that Yehoram refused to hear the prophet's continued reproof and had severed all contact with him? The king's antipathy to Elisha was so violent that he denied Elisha's Divine power to perform miracles, even though it was common knowledge. Na'aman rode out to Israel in style. His entourage consisted of numerous servants, horses, and chariots. The chariots were loaded with chests containing a vast fortune.

There were ten kikal of silver and six thousand gold pieces. He also packed ten changes of clothing. Maybe he intended all this to be a gift for the prophet. It is also possible that he misunderstood the Jewish girl's description of the purification process and thought that in his capacity as a rich man, he would be required to buy expensive sacrifices. Since a rich man offers a more expensive sacrifice than a pauper. Then there was the need to change his garments more than once, because a leper's garments become impure. Upon his arrival in Israel, Na'aman immediately proceeded to the royal palace, where he presented to Yehoram, king of Israel, the letter from the king of Aram. Yehoram read the request: "I have sent you my servant Na'aman, so that you may cure him of his leprosy."

It was below the dignity of the king of Aram to appeal directly to King Yehoram to approach the prophet - who in the non-Jewish king's eyes was but an ordinary Jew - for help. This was why he kept the contents of the letter vague. He was confident that Yehoram would understand that

he was supposed to consult the prophet. King Yehoram's thought process, however, was entirely different. He regarded the letter as a ruse on the part of Aheram - a convenient pretext to begin a war against the kingdom of Israel. He was tearing his garments in grief and fright, Yehoram was lamenting about. He was saying, "What does the king of Aram want from me?! Am I G-d Who kills and revives that he sends me a message to heal a man from leprosy?! One who has leprosy is considered to be like "dead." This is why healing him from this dreadful disease is considered like resurrecting him from the dead. It is clear that he wants to begin a fight! Maybe King Yehoram's fear was aggravated by the repulsive sight of Na'aman, his father's murderer. Elisha heard about the commotion in the royal palace. He sent a message to King Yehoram, "Why do you tear your garments?!"

Let the general come to me and discover that there is, indeed, a prophet among the Jewish people! Elisha did intend to heal Na'aman in order to cause a kiddush to G-d. He wanted to proclaim to all of Aram that the Shechina rested upon the Jewish people. The prophet Elisha gives counsel. Na'aman received Elisha's message. He left the palace, escorted by his servants. As they approached the prophet's neighborhood, he ordered for them to stay behind and wait for him. He rode unaccompanied to the entrance of the prophet's house. He remained the saddle; in his arrogance, he did not consider it befitting to walk to the prophet. Instead, he waited on horseback for the prophet to come out to him. Elisha knew that Na'aman would have to learn to be humble before he could be cured. That was why he did not go out personally to Na'aman. Instead he sent out a messenger to relay his word. Elisha's non-direct involvement would also prove to Na'aman that his cure was a Divine miracle and had no connection whatsoever with either natural or "magical processes." The prophet's messenger informed Na'aman, "Go and immerse yourself seven times in the Jordan River. This will heal your flesh and you will become purified from leprosy."

Na'aman was deeply offended with the style, as well as the content, of the message. He had expected for the prophet to come out and greet him. As to the cure - it sounded too ordinary, for he had anticipated something more complex, possibly even exotic. Na'aman turned away in disgust from Elisha's home. "I thought Elisha would have the courtesy to treat me with respect, as befits my status," he thundered. As for the cure, why doesn't he use the same method as all medicine men who call the name of their god and wave their hand back and forth over the lesions?! Then I would be confident of being healed." "The rivers of Damascus, Amanah, and Parpar, are by far superior to those of Israel. How often have I bathed even in their waters without results! How can the Jordan River succeed where they have failed?" Na'aman hoped that his ranting and raving would force the prophet Elisha to step outside and talk to him. Since Elisha, however, stayed adamantly indoors, Na'aman spurred his horse into a furious gallop and rode off in a rage.

The Midrash shares reasons behind the prophet's advice. Elisha proposed this particular cure. The simple reason was Elisha was planning to entreat G-d to perform a miracle and cure Na'aman. Since tzaddikim don't challenge G-d to perform open miracles, Elisha gave the miracle a semblance of a natural cure. There are certain waters that do, in fact, heal various diseases. That is why Elisha thought it was best to advise Na'aman to immerse himself in the Jordan River. Even though this would not in itself bring about his cure. On a deeper level, Elisha was

trying to hint to Na'aman that his only hope lay in "washing himself spiritually, cleansing himself of his personal pride and his belief in idols. Water generally symbolizes humility, for it always flows downwards. The trait of humility is particularly implicit in the name of the River Jordan, which in Hebrew is derived from the word Yarden. The numerical value was 264. This is also the numerical value of Jordan and this is why he concluded that the purification process was to take place in the waters of the Jordan River.

His theory was corroborated by a brilliant inference from three different verses, all of which begin and end with the letter Nun. In Vayikra verse 13:9 it talks about the laws of having leprosy. In Bamidbar verse 32:32 it says "Nachnu na'avur chalutzim me'aver layardain." In the book of Devarim verse 18:15 it says: "Navi Mikirbecha... ailav tishme'un." This translates to G-d will bring forth from you a prophet... listen to him." Elisha integrated these disparate verses to reach a novel interpretation which is, a man whose name begins and ends with the letter Nun (Na'aman), will one day suffer from leprosy. He will consult the prophet for a cure. He will be accompanied by many horses and wagons. He will be equipped with an entourage and he will be healed through immersion in the Jordan River. The Jordan River will be mentioned and also the breadth of the River Jordan is fifty amos. It is matching the numerical value of the letter Nun.

Elisha deduced that Na'aman had to immerse himself in the Jordan River seven times from two facts. Firstly, the kohen purifies the person who is impure by sprinkling oil seven times towards the klodesh kodashim. This is in the book of Vayikra 14:16. Secondly, the word "water" is mentioned seven times in the parsha of tzara'as in Vayikra 14:5-52. This was why Elisha based the purification process of Na'aman on verses of Torah and utilized an original method of interpreting those verses. Na'aman does teshuva. His servants thought their master was wrong to squander this golden opportunity to be healed. "Even if the prophet had told you to do something really hard in order to get rid of your sickness, it would be worth your while to listen to him." This is what his servants told Na'aman. "Now that he has advised you of such an easy procedure of immersing yourself in the Jordan in order to become pure, what harm can there be in trying?" Na'aman now began to do his teshuva process in earnest. Na'aman had never in his life listened to the opinion of any lower-ranking person. He decided to humble himself and accept his servants' advice. The heavenly decree of his suffering from leprosy was abolished, because G-d saw his change of heart.

He immersed his body in the Jordan seven times, after which his leprosy miraculously disappeared. Na'aman was overjoyed when he saw that his skin was clear. He felt reborn and immediately he believed in the power of G-d and accepted upon himself the Seven Noachide Laws. He became a Gair Toshav, it means a gentile who neither serves idols nor violates any of the other mitzvos required of him. Na'aman returned to Elisha, his conduct contrasted sharply with that of his first visit. He no longer stayed seated on his horse. Instead he stood respectfully before the prophet, who received him personally. Na'aman proclaimed, "Now I know that there is no god on earth other than the Jewish G-d. I was wrong in not honoring you before. Please allow me to make up for it now and accept a gift from your servant!" Elisha replied, "I swear by

G-d, Whom I serve, that I will not accept it.” Elisha was afraid that Na’aman’s money had been obtained by dealing in objects related to idol worship, and was therefore forbidden to be used. If Elisha had accepted his gift it would lessen the kiddush G-d in the eyes of Na’aman’s servants. They would consider Elisha to be a kind of “medicine man” who receives remuneration for his services.

Elisha was anxious to demonstrate to everyone that Na’aman had been healed by a Divine miracle and not by some natural or magical power that he possessed. Na’aman continued to pressure the prophet, but Elisha remained steadfast. He even took an oath against accepting the money for the purpose of ensuring that his resolve did not weaken. Na’aman saw how adamant Elisha was in accepting his gift. Na’aman came up with a different request. He said, please allow your servant to take some of the holy earth of Israel back with me. I need the amount that the mules can carry. With it, I wish to build an altar for G-d in Aram, for I will no longer serve gods I used to worship. It is not clear why permission was needed to remove some earth from a public space. Maybe Na’aman specifically wanted earth from Elisha’s private property, feeling it had been imbued with special sanctity, since it belonged to a tzaddik. Na’aman had just accepted the seven mitzvos of the People of Noach.

Na’aman didn’t want to transgress the prohibition against theft by taking earth without permission. Na’aman added, “Please entreat G-d to forgive your servant for the following sin: When my master, the king of Aram, visits the temple of the god Rimon, he leans on my arm. When he bows to the god, I am compelled to bow together with him. This will merely be an external motion; in my heart I believe only in G-d. Maybe G-d pardon your servant for this offense.” To this Elisha responded, “Go in peace.” He didn’t forbid Na’aman to act outwardly like an idol worshiper, since Na’aman was a gentile and he was not obligated to fulfill the mitzva of kiddush Hashem. A Jew under such circumstances would have had to sacrifice his life rather than pretend to serve idols. The story of Na’aman is not finished here, it will be found in the next haftara called, Metzora. In conclusion of the haftara of Tazria, Elisha has great miracles. Before Eliyahu died, his disciple Elisha requested of him, “Please let double your spirit rest upon me!” G-d fulfilled Elisha’s request literally. He allowed him to perform twice as many miracles as Eliyahu once had. There are eight well-known miracles that Jews associate with Eliyahu. We know of sixteen that Elisha performed, two of each type. There is a list of these in the haftara of Tazria.

These are Elisha’s miracles from the start of his career up to our haftara. The first miracle was Elisha splitting the waters of the Jordan by striking them with his master’s coat. The second was he sweetened the undrinkable waters of Jericho by throwing salt into them. The third was Elisha caused bears to appear and according to some opinions, he even caused a forest to appear. This was to punish wicked evil Jews who ridiculed him. The fourth was Elisha who provided water for the Jewish army of the kings Yehoram and Yehoshafat that were stationed in the desert. The fifth miracle was when Elisha miraculously supplied Ovadya’s wife with oil. This is in the haftara of Vayaira. The sixth miracle was when Elisha decreed that the Shunamite woman should have a son. The seventh miracle was when Elisha revived the Shunamite woman’s son. The eighth miracle was when Elisha was able to neutralize poisonous food by mixing flour into it. The ninth miracle was when Elisha brought blessing upon food so that by eating a small quantity one became satiated. This was mentioned in the beginning of the Tazria haftara.

The prophet Eliyahu had performed the miracle of reviving the dead when the son of his hostess, the widow from Tzorfas, fell ill and died. Eliyahu later miraculously restored him to life. This is found in Kings 1 verse 17:17 through 22. At the same time, his student Elisha revived the son of the Shunamite woman. Where do we find that Elisha performed the miracle of reviving the dead a second time, in fulfillment of the promise that he would be granted "double of Eliyahu's spirit"? That answer is in the haftara of Tazria. One who is stricken with leprosy is considered as if they are dead. By curing Na'aman, Elisha once again had performed the miracle of "reviving the dead." This was the tenth of Elisha's miracles. The Midrash asks why did G-d give the prophets Eliyahu and Elisha the ability to perform so many striking miracles? Both of them served as prophets in the kingdom of the Ten Tribes. Unlike Yeshayahu and Yirmiyahu who prophesied for the inhabitants of the kingdom of the Ten Tribes who had to contend with numerous spiritual perils.

Their kings were often fanatical idol worshipers. They would encourage their subjects to follow in their sinful ways. In order to counteract their influence and spur the Jews to do teshuva, G-d allowed them to witness extraordinary miracles through the hands of Eliyahu and Elisha. Both prophets exerted a substantial influence on the Jews. As we read in the Haftara, Elisha had two thousand and two hundred students. They certainly admonished the people not to serve idols and guided them in the way of G-d. The footnotes for this haftara tell us that tzara'as is not identical with leprosy. Tzara'as was a unique skin disease whose purpose was to encourage the Jewish people to do teshuva. The Midrash mentions that occasionally G-d also caused non-Jews to get tzara'as. In the case of Na'aman, the source Rif explains that he had a potential for teshuva, as is evident from the fact that he later became a Gair Toshav. G-d knew that through this affliction he would find the right path in life. In the footnotes for this haftara, Our Sages teach "That there is no subject in the universe which is not found in the Torah." Besides their literal context, the verses of the Torah can be interpreted to predict past and future events. There is a source called Kol Tzofayich that asks a question about Na'aman.

If Na'aman personally experienced such a tremendous miracle, why did he not become a gair tzeddek? This means to ask why he didn't become a full-fledged Jew. One of several answers for this suggests although it is a characteristic of non-Jews to be more easily influenced than Jews, nevertheless, the effect is more superficial. Na'aman was certainly aroused to do teshuva, but he didn't have the stamina to carry it through till the end. Another possible explanation is that he was negatively influenced by observing Elisha's servant, Gaichazi's greed. There is more about this topic in the haftara called Metzora. Immersing seven times would remind Na'aman of the seven days during which a leper purifies himself, a reflection that would also be conducive to acquiring the trait of humility.

The third reason had to do with the opinion of, Elisha came up with this particular cure from a prophecy, which he understood more fully by expounding certain Torah verses. There was a divine message consisting of just two words: "Laich tahair." This translates to Go, Purify. It is from this that Elisha deduced the details of Na'aman's purification process. Elisha calculated the numerical value of the two words of Go, Purify.