

# The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Themes and Ideas in the Haftara

Yeshivat Har Etzion

This haftara series is dedicated in memory  
of our beloved Chaya Leah bat Efrayim Yitzchak  
(Mrs. Claire Reinitz), *zichronah livracha*,  
by her family.

TAZRIA – METZORA

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The combination of *Parashiyot Tazria-Metzora* that we read this week constitutes a single unit that deals with the various types of ritual impurity connected to the human body, at the center of which lies *tzara'at*. It should not surprise us then that the *haftara* for each *parasha* (in years when they are read separately: *Tazria* – II *Melakhim* 4:42-5:19; *Metzora* – II *Melakhim* 7:3-20) deals with the phenomenon of *tzara'at* among the prophets.

All together, the prophets describe four<sup>1</sup>[1] cases of *tzara'at* (Na'aman, Gehazi, the four men afflicted with *tzara'at* and Uziyahu), two of which were set aside as the *haftarot* for these two *parashiyot*. Despite the paucity of incidents of *tzara'at* during the period of the prophets, three of the four cases occurred in close proximity, all of them during the period of Elisha and in connection with his work. That is to say, all cases of *tzara'at* in the books of the Prophets – to the exclusion of the story of the *tzara'at* of Uziyahu – are connected to the work of Elisha. It is obvious then that we must inquire into the meaning of this phenomenon and carefully examine the connection between Elisha and *tzara'at*. What is unique in his prophecy and work that he should be the only prophet to confront *tzara'at* and meet up with various people afflicted with it, whereas the other prophets do not deal with the matter at all, and have no contact whatsoever with the phenomenon?<sup>2</sup>[2]

For this purpose, let us turn to the context of the discussion of *tzara'at* in our two *parashiyot* and to the words of the Ramban on the matter. In the framework of the book of *Vayikra*, *tzara'at* is included in the broader unit of ritual impurities connected to the human body. These include the ritual impurities connected to childbirth, emission of semen, menstruation, other discharges from the body, and *tzara'at*. *Tzara'at* is not described as a unique phenomenon, nor is it presented as an exceptional or extraordinary event, but rather it is one member of a set of ritual impurities connected to the human body. The reader could almost understand that we are dealing with a natural phenomenon, like those found in the neighboring passages, and that *tzara'at* as well is a physical illness that leads to ritual impurity.

This notwithstanding, it is easy to discern allusions pointing to the fact that this is not the situation. First and foremost, the fact that *tzara'at* applies also to garments and houses removes it from the category of physical illnesses and puts it into a unique class. However, its removal from the category of ritual

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<sup>1</sup>[1] According to *Chazal*, the four men afflicted with *tzara'at* were Gehazi and his sons, and thus the list becomes reduced to three.

<sup>2</sup>[2] In the case of Uziyahu, there is no prophetic interference whatsoever, so that Elisha was the only prophet mentioned in Scripture to meet with people afflicted with *tzara'at*.

impurities connected to the reproductive system, and its inclusion in one class together with afflictions affecting inanimate objects does not suffice to determine the nature of *tzara'at* and necessarily establish it as a supernatural phenomenon. But the moment that it leaves the category of ritual impurities connected to the body, the path is paved for a renewed examination of the meaning of *tzara'at*.

*Tzara'at* may be seen as being different from the rest of the ritual impurities described in *Tazria-Metzora* in that it focuses on man's external appearance (tractate *Nega'im* opens with the expression *mar'ot nega'im* – "appearances of afflictions"), whereas the other ritual impurities relate to physiological processes experienced by the body. Alternatively, it is possible to distinguish between ritual impurity that depends on the body in its entirety as a single unit and ritual impurities connected in a focused manner to the reproductive system. Either way, such an approach relates to *tzara'at* as a natural process that is regarded by Halakha as conferring ritual impurity, similar to the emission of semen or menstruation.

On the other hand, it is possible to view *tzara'at* as a unique supernatural phenomenon, one that belongs to the metaphysical realm, bearing no connection – not even a contrastive connection – to the other types of ritual impurity. It is found in the domain of the *kohen*, rather than that of the doctor; it comes in response to sin,<sup>3[3]</sup> and not as a result of natural weakness. The common denominator between it and the *tzara'at* affecting garments and houses is the shared metaphysical expression reflected through these three phenomena. The Ramban follows this approach in his commentary to the Torah, as he emphasizes the miraculous nature of *tzara'at*:

"The garment also in which is the plague of *tzara'at*" (*Vayikra* 13:46) – This is not at all natural or this-worldly. And so too the plagues afflicting houses. When Israel is whole in [its relationship with] God, the spirit of God is upon them at all times to maintain their bodies, their garments, and their houses in good appearance. And when one of them commits a sin or transgression, an ugliness develops on his flesh, or in his garment, or in his house, to demonstrate that God has departed from him. Therefore the verse states: "And I put the plague of *tzara'at* in a house of the land of your possession" (*ibid.* 14:34), for it is a Divine plague on that house, and it only applies in the land [of Israel] which is God's inheritance. As it is stated: "When you come into the land of Canaan, which I give to you for a possession" (*ibid.*). This is not because of an obligation of the land, but because it will only happen in the chosen land in which God dwells. And in *Torat Kohanim (Metzora* 5, 3) they expounded further that a house only contracts ritual impurity after the conquest and division [of the land], when each and every individual knows what is his. The reason is that [only] then were their minds settled to know God, so that the *Shekhina* could rest among them. And so I believe regarding plagues affecting garments that they apply only in the land [of Israel]. It was unnecessary to exclude them from outside the land [of Israel], because they would never occur there. For this reason, they only apply to white, and not colored garments, for perhaps the color caused the ugliness in that place in a natural manner, and it is not the finger of God. And therefore, naturally colored garments contract ritual impurity, in accordance with the words of Rabbi Shimon (*Nega'im* 11:3). According to the simple understanding, each and every verse repeats "in the garment or the skin, either in the warp or in the woof," because it is a miracle.<sup>4[4]</sup>

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<sup>3[3]</sup> "Rav Shemuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: The affliction [of *tzara'at*] comes for seven things: evil speech, bloodshed, false oaths, incest, arrogance, robbery and miserliness" (*Arakhin* 16a).

<sup>4[4]</sup> A presentation of the various positions regarding *tzara'at*, both the natural and the miraculous approaches, together with the adoption of the position of the Ramban, can be found in Prof. Nechama Leibowitz's "*Iyyunim Chadashim be-Sefer Vayikra*," pp. 149-154.

Let us now return to the *tzara'at* in the *haftara* and its connection to Elisha. But before we proceed, another point should first be noted, namely, the connection in our *haftara* between *tzara'at* and war. It is those who are afflicted with *tzara'at* who bring the tidings of the salvation of Israel and the fall of Aram. How is this significant for our understanding of *tzara'at* and what do their tidings teach us about Israel's victory in the war? It should also be added that the connection between *tzara'at* and war stands in the background of the other *haftara* dealing with *tzara'at*, and there too the connection between salvation and *tzara'at* is significant. For the *haftara* of *Tazria* deals with Na'aman's *tzara'at* and speaks of his military victories: "Now, Na'aman, captain of the host of the king of Aram, was a man of great note with his master and highly esteemed, because by him the Lord had given deliverance to Aram; he was also a mighty warrior, but stricken with *tzara'at*" (II *Melakhim* 5:1). It may be asked whether it is merely by chance that the two places where the prophet deals with people afflicted with *tzara'at*, there is mention of a military context, or perhaps the prophet makes a conscious and intentional connection between these two realms?

Now, if we consider the war between Israel and Aram, there is a common element to the respective leaderships of the camps of Aram and Israel, namely, their understanding of the course of the war. The king of Aram and the king of Israel are bitter enemies; their respective interests are mutually exclusive, there is national rivalry between their two nations, and religious opposition between their two cultures. Nevertheless, they are united in the idea that the course of events should be viewed exclusively through the eyes of human governance and tactics, and that there is no room in their world for Divine intervention that changes and influences the course of fighting. Nature – yes; miracle – no! This motto and this understanding is common to the two leaderships and their respective reactions, and therefore the unexpected and miraculous Divine intervention causes great confusion.

Aram does not react to what God is doing to them by recognizing the miracle, but rather by trying to provide the events with a natural explanation:

For the Lord had made the camp of Aram to hear a noise of chariots, and a noise of horses, the noise of a great host: and they said to one another. Lo, the king of Israel has hired against us the kings of the Hittites, and the kings of Egypt, to come upon us. So they arose and fled in the twilight, and left their tents, and their horses, and their asses, even the camp as it was, and fled for their life. (II *Melakhim* 7:6-7)

Aram reacts by positing a series of human causal connections; they do not even consider an explanation that recognizes Divine intervention.

Now, besides the fact that the very noise was a miraculous noise, we must remember the state of the kingdom of Israel at the time, as it follows from the beginning of the *haftara* and from the previous chapter in the book of *Melakhim*. The beginning of the *haftara* describes the deep despair that had taken hold of the people of Israel, which finds expression in the words of the men afflicted with *tzara'at* that the situation is so bad that they have nothing more to lose – "If we say, We will enter the city, then the famine is in the city, and we shall die there: and if we sit still here, we will also die" (II *Melakhim* 7:4) – and thus they have no choice but to go and fall into the hands of the enemy. It is easy to imagine the fate awaiting them had they fallen into the hands of the Aramaens, who would surely have enslaved or killed healthy Jewish paupers, and all the more so people afflicted with *tzara'at*, the fear of being infected by them serving as an additional incentive to be rid of them.<sup>5[5]</sup> This description fits in well with the difficult picture of

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<sup>5[5]</sup> In order to better understand this, it might be helpful to imagine a famine in our times so severe that it could bring a Jew to leave Ashkelon and enter Gibalya or Beit Chanun wearing *tzitzit* and a *kipa* and waving

hunger in the city provided us in the previous chapter (which is not part of the *haftara*), and of the king of Israel who feels the pressure of the people for food. The king's response in the previous chapter presents us with a broken leader, strangled by famine and the people's fury, and full of bitterness toward the prophet. To this may be added the lack of faith and the denial of providence on the part of his assistant ("the officer" [*shalish*] at the end of the *haftara*), who gives expression to the atmosphere prevailing in the royal circle.<sup>6[6]</sup>

We do not get the impression that we are dealing with a resolute and active king, one who radiates self-confidence and leadership to his people and trust in God and His prophet, but rather with a king who has succumbed to circumstances and whom it would be very difficult to see hiring the armies of Egypt and the Hittites to come and fight against Aram.<sup>7[7]</sup>

In any event, whether the Aramean conjecture about the arrival of Egyptian mercenaries is totally unreasonable or whether it is conceivable, Scripture makes it very clear that Aram was mistaken about the miracle, and tried to provide the Divine involvement in the war with an explanation based on human causality, wholly unable to conceive of any other interpretation.

This mistake repeats itself in precise fashion in the king of Israel's reaction to the flight of Aram. He too does not consider the possibility of Divine involvement in what happened, and he too assumes as self-evident that the reality before him could only be the result of human tactics. He is, therefore, forced to assume that he is dealing with an Aramaean trick, and he is entirely incapable of imagining the truth regarding the matter, i.e., Divine intervention.

This story repeats itself again in the sub-plot regarding the officer. As may be remembered, the prophet prophesied that the famine would suddenly disappear, and that the state of difficult famine<sup>8[8]</sup> would change within twenty-four hours; and the officer raised doubts about the matter. Indeed, from the perspective of human causality, famine is not a phenomenon that can suddenly disappear. Unlike war that can be immediately decided at a particular point in time, ending a state of famine is a gradual and drawn-out process. The officer sees not only the present situation of the siege that has led to the famine, but also the long period of time that will be required to reestablish agriculture and the economy in the aftermath of the war. Therefore, the termination of the famine requires not only military victory, which does not

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an Israeli flag, in order to search for food, or to imagine the residents of Jerusalem in 1948 approaching the Arab gangs to ask for food and water.

<sup>6[6]</sup> See II *Melakhim* 6:24-7:2.

<sup>7[7]</sup> From the perspective of the geopolitical considerations of the time, it is possible to raise arguments in both directions concerning the likelihood that Egypt would want to come to help a weak country oppose a stronger regional power, or that it would prefer not to get involved in what was going on in Canaan. In any event, a thick historical cloud hovers over the period, and it is doubtful whether we will ever be able to reach an unequivocal answer regarding this matter.

<sup>8[8]</sup> "And there was a great famine in Shomeron: and, behold, they besieged it, until an ass's head was sold for eighty pieces of silver, and the fourth part of a *kav* of dove's dung for five pieces of silver. And as the king of Israel was passing by upon the wall, a woman cried to him, saying, Help, my lord, O king. And he said, If the Lord does not help you, whence shall I help you? Out of the barn floor, or out of the winepress? And the king said to her, What ails you? And she answered, This woman said to me, Give your son, that we may eat him today, and we will eat my son tomorrow. So we boiled my son and did eat him: and I said to her on the next day, Give your son, that we may eat him: and she has hid her son" (II *Melakhim* 6:25-29).

appear to be on the horizon, but also a long period of time, and therefore he scoffs at the prophecy that the famine will come to an end in a period of twenty-four hours.

Indeed, from the perspective of human causality, his words are absolutely correct and very convincing. However, this is all because he fails to take into account the ability and readiness of the God of Israel to overturn natural forces and break through the chains of natural causality. In this, he continues the line of thought of the king of Israel whom he serves - a single mistake, with many expressions, being common to the two of them.

We can now return to the question regarding the connection between *tzara'at* and war. In both realms, something happens that causes us to ask whether we are dealing with a natural phenomenon, which despite its strangeness, can only be regarded as natural, or must we recognize that this is a metaphysical phenomenon, the fruit of providence that breaches the limits of the known world and ravishes its usual order. The prophet's position is absolutely clear, and he exploits *tzara'at* for this purpose as a symbol of metaphysical phenomena whose miraculous nature we must recognize. It is, therefore, the four men afflicted with *tzara'at* who reveal the flight of Aram. The salvation was a Divine miracle which cannot be understood in natural terms, as the Aramaeans and the king of Israel had tried to do, and the men afflicted with *tzara'at*, who pointed to the flight of Aram, testified with their own bodies about the effect of miracles in the natural world. Just as it is a *kohen*, and not a doctor, who declares the *tzara'at* ritually clean or unclean, so too it is the prophet, and not the king or his officer, who understands what is happening on the battlefield.

The trampling of the officer – who serves as a foil to the men afflicted with *tzara'at* – at the end of the *haftara* is a trampling of the notion of natural causality and the denial of the possibility of miracles, and therefore it constitutes a fitting end to the *haftara*.

We see then that the *tzara'at* in the *haftara* comes to teach us about the nature of the war and the meaning of the salvation. Similarly, it illuminates the very phenomenon of *tzara'at* in a miraculous metaphysical light – as argued by the Ramban above – something that is not stated unequivocally in the verses of the *parasha* itself.

We must now return to the question concerning the connection between Elisha and *tzara'at*. Anyone examining the work of Elisha will see that it is characterized by the quality of miracles. Whenever he is faced with a problem that must be solved, he orders a miracle and changes the laws of nature. This is not the forum in which to discuss the need for this or the question whether or not governance resting on the force of miracles is a desirable phenomenon, but without a doubt this is Elisha's calling card.

His pre-occupation with *tzara'at* is, therefore, understandable. He is the only prophet who has the power to operate in the human world by using miraculous measures, and therefore he is the prophet who struggles with the affliction of *tzara'at*. In the *haftara* of *Parashat Tazria*, which deals with the *tzara'at* of Na'aman, Elisha succeeds in healing the *tzara'at* through the power of performing miracles invested in him, this despite the fact that it was regarded as impossible by Na'aman and his entourage, and so too by the aforementioned king of Israel. The reason for this is simple, this being the point that we have emphasized throughout this *shiur*. They only considered natural factors, disregarding spiritual factors, and therefore they saw *tzara'at* as incurable. Elisha, on the other hand, acted upon the *tzara'at* in way that went beyond nature, and in this way he succeeded in healing it.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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