

SEFER MELAKHIM BET: THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS
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Shiur #07: Chapter 5 - Curing Na'aman

In this chapter Elisha's fame extends beyond the borders of Israel, as Elisha cures Na'aman, the leprous captain of the Aramean army. At face value, this would appear to be merely yet another miraculous episode in the series of tales of Elisha. However, this story stands out in its themes of pride, humility, and faith; Na'aman's physical transfiguration will be effected only by a concomitant spiritual transformation.

SUMMARY

Let us begin with a short summary of the storyline. Na'aman, the chief of staff of Aram's army, is afflicted with leprosy. His maid, a young Israelite girl, captured on one of his raiding missions, suggests that he approach Elisha to be cured. He follows her advice and is sent by the king of Aram to Israel to see Elisha. The prophet instructs Na'aman to immerse seven times in the Jordan River. Na'aman initially hesitates, perceiving this as beneath his personal dignity and the dignity of his nation, but he eventually acquiesces and is completely healed. He returns to Elisha, filled with reverence for Elisha and for God. Prior to his return to Aram, he proclaims exclusive loyalty to the God of Israel. Elisha refuses any compensation or largesse; however, his assistant Geichazi follows Na'aman and requests – in the name of Elisha – a few gifts. In response to this opportunistic, duplicitous betrayal, Elisha afflicts Geichazi with Na'aman's leprosy.

THE OPENING PESUKIM (5:1-4)

To analyse this story, we shall engage in a process of close reading, starting with the opening verse. As with many stories in *Tanakh*, the key character, in this case Na'aman, is introduced at the outset. Note how this verse consists of four clauses:

1. Na'aman, the captain of the army of the king of Aram,
2. was a great man before his master,
3. and held in esteem, because the Lord had given victory unto Aram;
4. he was also a mighty man of valour, a leper.

Professor Yair Zakovitch¹ has noted the skillful composition here. Each of the four clauses is comprised of two phrases. The first phrase presents a positive description of Na'aman, whereas the second phrase modifies, and even minimizes, the first one. This pattern appears in each clause:

1. Na'aman is introduced as "the captain of the army," but it isn't his army, it is the army "of the king of Aram."
2. He "was a great man (*ish gadol*)," a man of fame and influence. However, his power is limited since he must be subservient. He stands "before his master," the king; his acclaim and societal standing draw their prestige from the man he serves. Moreover, his skills and achievements will not serve his personal interests; rather, they are channelled to "his master."
3. He is "held in esteem" ... Why? Is it because of his own accomplishments? No! His great military victories are only by virtue of God's intervention.
4. "He was a mighty man," but his leprosy is obviously a mitigating factor regarding his health, his ability to appear in public, and his future prospects in the military.

Thus, each glowing accolade is immediately qualified and tempered. Prof. Zakovitch therefore suggests that this opening line introduces the themes of the chapter: power and subservience, pride and humility, authority and submission. This suggestion is further supported by the key recurring words² of the chapter. First, we find the sevenfold repetition of the word "*lifnei*,"³ which may be translated as "before" or "in front of," and is indicative of subordination. Second, the word "*adon*"⁴ also appears seven times, which means "master" or "lord." These terms subtly connote themes of hierarchy and submission that will prove to be central elements of the story.

¹ Prof. Zakovitch wrote a 150 page volume on this chapter alone. Many of his observations have shaped my analysis in this *shiur*. See "*Every High Official Has a Higher One Set Over Him*"- A Literary Analysis of 2 Kings 5, (Am Oved, Tel Aviv, 1985) [Hebrew].

² The notion of a leading word, or "*leitwort*" in German, was proposed by Martin Buber. He defined it in the following manner: "By *Leitwort* we mean a word or a word-root that repeats meaningfully within a text, a sequence of texts, or a set of texts: to the one who pursues these repetitions, a meaning of the text is opened up or clarified, or at any rate will be revealed more insistently. As we have said, it need not be the same word, but rather may be the same word-root that recurs in such a way; actually, it is often through the very differences that the dynamic cumulative effect is conveyed. I call it "dynamic" because within the sounds that are related to each other thus, a movement occurs: the one to whom the whole is present feels the waves batter against one another all around. The measured repetition that corresponds to the inner rhythm of the text, or, better yet, pours out from it, is by all counts the most powerful of means for proclaiming meaning without stating it." Martin Buber, "Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative," in *Scripture and Translation*, ed. Lawrence Rosenwald and Everett Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

³ 5:1,2,3,15,16,23,27

⁴ 5:1,3,4,18,20,22,25

The subsequent *pesukim* exemplify this:

The Arameans had gone out in bands and took captive a little girl from the land of Israel; and she waited on (*lifnei*) Na'aman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my master (*adoni*) would see the prophet who is in Shomron! He would cure him of his leprosy." Na'aman went to his master (*adonav*) and told him what the girl from Israel had said. (5:2-4)

This little girl occupies the lowest rank, as she serves (*lifnei*) her mistress (*gevirta*). Na'aman's wife is superior to the little girl on the one hand, but her lack of name and designation in reference to her husband - her master (*adon*) - emphasize her subordination to him. Furthermore, even Na'aman needs to request permission to approach the prophet in Samaria from *his* master, the king. In this way, the hierarchy, the chain of command, is demarcated from the outset.

And yet, ironically it is from the character of the lowest rank, the Israelite maid, that Na'aman's salvation shall emerge. At the outset we are struck by the enormous contrast between the "young girl – *na'ara ketana*" and Na'aman, the "great man – *ish gadol*"; the simple powerless slave child shall save the powerful general. This inversion of the power structure, whereby the lowest figure provides the key to salvation for her superior, undercuts the aforementioned hierarchy. This is reinforced by the indication that after Na'aman is healed, his skin appears as that of a "young boy – *na'ar katan*," (5:14) a clear allusion to the "young girl – *na'ara ketana*" – who was so instrumental in his recovery. His healing is due to her, and he shall end the story by sharing in her veneration of Elisha.

A ROYAL LETTER (5:5-8)

The king of Aram said: "Go to the king of Israel, and I will send along a letter." He set out, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing. The letter was brought to the king of Israel: "Now, when this letter reaches you. Know that I have sent my servant Na'aman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy." When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God to deal death and give life, that this fellow writes to me to cure a man of his leprosy? See how he is seeking a pretext against me!" When Elisha, the Man of God, heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent him this message: "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel."

If the king of Aram is to send Na'aman to the prophet in Shomron, he must authorize the visit through the appropriate diplomatic channels. He sends a message to the king of Israel. The letter itself seems terse and concise: no polite introductions or reverent overtures, as one might expect in a communique from one head of state to another. The Radak suggests that the ceremonial flattery, although part of the original document, was eliminated, leaving only the king's central request:

"...the letter contained other things (praises, etc.) but the biblical text narrates only that which is essential."

However, this may not be the case. The phrase: "Now, when this letter reaches you," (5:6) returns a few chapters later, when King Yeihu sends instructions to his subordinates. There too the letter begins: "Now, when this letter reaches you" (10:2). This language and the format of a letter without the honorific preamble are typical of a directive from an authority figure to a subordinate.⁵ This language thus demonstrates that the king of Aram views the king of Israel as subservient to him. We now understand the panicked response of the king of Israel. His stronger neighbor is sending his army captain with a letter instructing him to cure the captain of his leprosy. This is an order that is impossible to fulfill, leaving the king with a simple conclusion – this is a call to war. In response, he tears his clothes. Again, the scene is a product of the power hierarchy.

In considering this scene, further questions need to be addressed: Why does the king of Aram send a letter to the king of Israel? Why does he not send Na'aman directly to the prophet? And why does Elisha need to inform the king to "send him to me?" Why would the king not have thought of that?

"The king of Aram sent the letter to the king of Israel ... for he thought that it was contingent upon him and that the prophet would not function unless under his instructions." (Malbim)

The king of Aram assumes that prophets function in Israel as in Syria, whereby they are underlings of the king and controlled by his directives. Israel, however, is an environment in which the prophet operates independently, answerable to no one but God, frequently critiquing royalty and certainly unwilling to bend to its authority. The king of Aram could not conceive of a situation in which the prophet would not be fundamentally in service of the king, and so he sought the prophet by means of the king. In contrast, the king of Israel couldn't imagine a scenario in which the prophet would be under his control, and so he failed even to entertain the prospect of appealing to Elisha!

Elisha hears that the king has torn his clothes. Is this something he heard via prophecy, or did the king's despair become public knowledge? Whichever is true, Elisha acts in his typical supportive role as he offers to assist Na'aman, thereby relieving the king of his misery. The king had asked: "Am I God to deal death and give life, that this fellow writes to me to cure a man of his leprosy?" But of course, as God's envoy, Elisha's role is indeed to

⁵ See Zakovitch pg. 38-9 who demonstrates from ancient letters discovered in Lakhish and Arad that whereas a letter will frequently start with "*ve-atta*," when a subordinate addresses a senior figure he introduces the letter with phrases of flattery and honor. However, these are absent where a superior addresses a subordinate.

mediate life and death.⁶ The leper is equivalent to the dead (as implied by *Bemidbar* 12:12), and in the very same manner that chapter four tells of Elisha resuscitating a dead boy, here he will be restoring life to Na'aman.

NA'AMAN'S TRANSFORMATION (5:9-19)

Na'aman arrives, with an entourage of horses and chariots, at Elisha's residence. Elisha remains inside, and, instead of personally greeting his high-profile visitor, sends a messenger to the captain with instructions to bathe seven times⁷ in the Jordan River. Na'aman is infuriated.⁸ He says:

"I thought
To me, he would come out (*yeitzei yatzo*)
He would stand and invoke the Lord his God by name,
and would wave his hand over the spot,
and cure the leper.
Are not Ammana and Parpar, the rivers of Damascus superior to all the
waters of Israel?" (5:11-12)

Na'aman's objections highlight the difference between a pagan religious conception and a Jewish way of thinking. Na'aman anticipated that the prophet's act of healing would be dignified, glorious, and impressive and that it would be undemanding of him. He articulates this point eloquently:

- "I thought to me he would come out." The phrase "to me" at the start of the sentence highlights how Na'aman considers himself to be the focus of this interaction; *he* is the center.
- "*Yatzo yeitzei*" ("he would come out") – indicative of a dignified procession by the prophet to welcome his important guest.
- Na'aman didn't anticipate that he would have to do anything significant, certainly not the indignity of bathing in the Jordan River! He remains seated in his chariot, stationary, expecting the prophet to perform his ritual. Na'aman expected to be acted upon, a passive recipient of the wondrous

⁶ Repeatedly, Elisha refers to life and death. 2:22 - "This is what the LORD says: 'I have **healed** this water. Never again will it cause **death**.'" 2:22-3 – the bears kill the young children. 4:7 – "...you and your sons can **live** on what is left over." The story of the Shunammite woman and her son clearly concerns the gift of life and its restoration. 4:40 – "O Man of God, there is **death** in the pot!" at which point Elisha heals the food. In chapter eight we shall see Elisha proclaiming the death of ben-Hadad.

⁷ This mode of purification is unique to this story. In the Torah, the leper is purified only after the leprosy has disappeared, and then a complicated process is undergone, which includes sacrifices and immersion in water on the first day, a wait of seven days, and then on the eighth day, more sacrifices and a second immersion in water; see *Va-yikra* ch.14. As for instances of seven-fold repetition, blood is sprinkled seven times on the first day and oil seven times on the eighth day of purification.

⁸ The speech is enclosed by expressions of Na'aman storming off incensed. It is preceded by: "And Na'aman became angry and he went (*va-yelach*)" (5:11) and it closes with "And he went (*va-yelech*) in fury" (5:12).

healing; he is surprised when Elisha demands that he become active in his own healing process.

- Na'aman is incensed by the suggestion that he bathe in the puny Jordan River rather than the great rivers of Syria. Possibly, the whole indignity of bathing, an act that he doesn't associate with religious ritual, may have struck him as discordant with the type of ceremony he envisaged.
- Na'aman's entire approach assumes that he controls the prophet. Even his flamboyant procession expresses this attitude:

“Na'aman came with his horses and chariot” – He brought with him a great entourage so that he would be seen as more important in the prophet's eyes and he would work harder to heal him. (Abarbanel)

As we see subsequently (5:15), Na'aman expects to pay for the prophet's services. Payment generally indicates that the purveyor is a service provider of whom one can make demands and exert control. Na'aman seeks to hire the prophet's skill of accessing the higher worlds that control life and death. When Elisha refuses payment, he is not merely ensuring his independence, but emphatically stating that he adheres exclusively to God's instructions, and that he places himself in God's service and in the service of no other. This is Judaism's unique perspective:

Judaism and paganism go in diametrically opposite directions. The pagan brings his offering in an attempt to make the god subservient to his wishes. The Jew, with his offering, wishes to place himself in the service of God; by his offering, he wishes to make himself subservient to the wishes of his God. (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Commentary to Torah, Va-yikra* 10:2)

As before, an unexpected figure intervenes to break the impasse and calm Na'aman's indignation. Na'aman's servants gently pose a question that succinctly expresses the point:

"My father, if the prophet had told you to do a great thing [*davar gadol*] would you not do it? How much more so, then, when he says wash and be clean?" (5:13)

Once again, it is the small and insignificant action of "wash and be clean" that will make the difference and not the "*davar gadol*" – great thing; no grandiose and pompous behavior is needed. It is only the lowly servants who can convince the "*ish gadol*" – great man – to adopt a humble, submissive stance. And when he does immerse himself, his skin appears as the flesh of a "*na'ar katan*" – young boy. The following *midrash* highlights Na'aman's sinful pride:

Leprosy comes for eleven sins Excessive pride: This refers to Na'aman, as it states, "Na'aman, the captain of the army of the king of Aram was a great man" (5:1). What is "great?" He was filled with pride

due to his military prowess, and this is the reason he was struck with leprosy. (*Bemidbar Rabba* 7:5)

Following his bathing, Na'aman returns to Elisha with a meek, self-effacing composure:

And he returned to the Man of God – he and all his entourage. He came and stood before him [*lefanav*]. He said: "Now I know that there is no God in the world except in Israel." (5:15)

Last time (5:9), Na'aman remained in his chariot at the "entrance to the house," unwilling to descend to Elisha's door. That is why Elisha sent a messenger to him. Now, the roles are reversed, as Na'aman himself approaches Elisha and stands before him [*lefanav*] "as a servant before his master" (*Metzudat David*). Indeed, Na'aman refers to himself as Elisha's servant four times in the subsequent *pesukim*, and he professes his allegiance to God.

Na'aman offers Elisha a gift. The offering of a gift often expresses subservience. (See the similar phrase employed in the story of Ya'akov and Eisav in *Bereishit* 33:11.) Why does Elisha reject the gift so adamantly? He refuses the gift for one simple reason:

"As God lives, before whom [*lefanav*] I have stood, I will not take." (5:16)

Elisha stands before God. His miracle is God's miracle. He will not take anything, because the honor belongs to God alone. There can be no confusion regarding this point.

Na'aman's subsequent request goes beyond acknowledgment of God's greatness and progresses to worship. Na'aman wishes to serve God. However, he has a geographic conception of the divine. For him, the Israelite God is inextricable from the land of Israel.⁹ In a reversal of Na'aman's earlier attitude, which denigrated the "waters of Israel" (5:12), Na'aman now seeks the very soil of the land, presumably to use for an altar, with which he can worship God.¹⁰ Why does Na'aman want soil? Most commentaries explain that this soil was meant to be the basis for a ritual altar. (See *Shemot* 20:20 "Make for me an earth altar...") It is interesting that Na'aman retains his pagan conceptions – that God is connected to a land – and yet affirms that the God of Israel is the supreme deity.

Despite these theological misconceptions, Na'aman is committed. He announces that his bowing in Beit Rimon – a pagan temple – is a sign of his dedication to the king, not to that deity. His ultimate allegiance is to God. Na'aman has been transformed, not just physically, but spiritually.

⁹ This is a familiar Aramean perspective in which God is identified as the "God of the hills" – / *Melakhim* 20:23,28.

¹⁰ Rashi, Radak. Recall *Shemot* 20:20 "Make for Me an earth altar..."

GEICHAZI'S BETRAYAL (5:20-27)

Geichazi, the attendant of Elisha, the Man of God, said: "Behold – my master has spared Na'aman that Aramean, by not receiving from his hands what he brought. As the Lord lives, I will run after him and take something from him."

The final segment of our story opens with Geichazi musing aloud to himself, or possibly to his two assistants (5:32), regarding the squandered opportunity of not benefiting from the enormous gift that Na'aman has transported from Syria (5:5).

Geichazi is sardonically introduced by the bombastic title of "attendant of Elisha, Man of God," and he twice refers to Elisha as "my master" (5:20,22). But of course, Geichazi is a fraudulent representative of his "master"; these references demonstrate the façade used by Geichazi to deceitfully contravene and undermine Elisha's work.

Geichazi pursued Na'aman; when Na'aman saw someone running after him, he alighted from his chariot to meet him...(5:20)

Geichazi's pursuit of Na'aman uses the root *rd''f*, which has strongly negative connotations of a chase or hunt. And yet Na'aman innocently sees a man running ("*ratz*") from Elisha's vicinity to catch up with him. Na'aman is unsuspecting prey, still inspired by the Man of God. As such, he eagerly alights from his chariot.

Geichazi's standing as Elisha's assistant coupled with Na'aman's newfound trust in God and His prophet only deepen the severity of Geichazi's duplicitous crime. Not only does Geichazi lie about the arrival of two men, to whom Elisha wants to give gifts, but he attributes the message to Elisha himself. Furthermore, Geichazi swears in God's name that he will take from Na'aman, but this is the inverse of Elisha's explicit statement: "As the Lord lives ... I will not accept anything" (5:16).¹¹ In a further inversion, whereas Na'aman had urged Elisha to take gifts ("*vayiftzar bo*"), only to be met by a principled refusal, now Na'aman urges Geichazi to take ("*vayifratz bo*") and, of course, he accepts. Geichazi is disdainful towards Na'aman, "that Aramean" (5:20), in contrast to Elisha who refers to him respectfully as "the man" (5:26).¹²

Geichazi, despite his closeness to his master Elisha, totally misses the point, evidently perceiving Elisha's miracles – God's wonders – as a source of personal gain. The power has gone to his head. For Geichazi, man does not stand before God; God stands at the service of man. The former arrogance of

¹¹ *Bemidbar Rabba* 7:5

¹² Throughout the chapter, the names used are instrumental. The king of Aram refers to him as "my servant" (5:6), the king of Israel talks about him as "the man" (5:7), and Na'aman refers to himself as "the leper" (5:11).

Na'aman is now visible in Geichazi. Not surprising then, he is afflicted with the illness of which Na'aman had just been cured.

When Elisha questions and accuses Geichazi, the latter stands next to him, "*va-ya'amod el adonav*," rather than "before him – *lefanav*." As Geichazi leaves Elisha, leprous as snow, the verse states "He [Geichazi] left his [Elisha's] presence" (5:27). The Hebrew reads "*vayeitze mi-lefanav*." As Geichazi has misappropriated God's powers for his personal greed, he has abandoned his subservience both to Elisha and to God. He no longer stands "before Elisha."

IN CONCLUSION

This riveting story expresses a poignant but simple meditation upon the values of society and religion. It is not the grand ceremonies and gestures, but the contrite heart that God sees; not opportunistic manipulation, but pure straightforward honesty and humility that stand before God. Our societies are built such that everyone is entangled in a web of authority and social standing. We imagine that our career, our appointments, our financial situation grant us authority or rights and privilege. But the truth may come from the mouth of the "little girl." Our titles and positions can become a mask that we hide behind. The recognition of God and ourselves comes when we stand humbly before Him.