

Haftarah Helper 5781: Tazria-Metzora

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In memory of HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein, zt"l, on the occasion of his sixth yahrtzeit

2 Kings 7:3-20

The Northern Kingdom of Israel fought a long, unresolved war of attrition against its northwestern neighbor, the kingdom of Aram (in modern Syria). The events of the Haftarah occur during an Aramean siege of Israel's capital, Samaria, and its resulting famine and mass starvation. Desperate mothers squabble about the terms of their agreement to slaughter and share the flesh of their own children - a Divine punishment foretold in Deut. 28:53. Helpless, Israel's king grieves, lashing out at the failure of God and His prophet, Elisha, to bring salvation. Disregarding the king's threat against his life, Elisha tells a servant of the king that God will alleviate the siege, and that food supply and prices will return to normal within one day. In response to his mocking reply, Elisha further predicts that the servant will witness the abundant food - but not eat it. The Haftarah opens outside Samaria's gate. Four leprous¹ men, excluded from the city as commanded in the Parashah (Lev.13:46), make a momentous decision that ultimately portends the siege's end and the fulfillment of Elisha's prophecies.

Haftarah Breakdown

Verses 3-4: Facing death by famine, the four lepers decide to leave Samaria's gate to join the Aramean camp.

II Kings 7:4	מלכים ב ז:ד
If we say, "We will enter the city" - the famine is in the city, and we shall die there; if we dwell here, we will [also] die. Therefore, let us go and submit to Aram's camp: if they let us live, we shall live; and if they kill us, we shall die.	אִם-אָמַרְנוּ נָבוֹא הָעִיר וְהָרַעַב בְּעִיר וּמָתְנוּ שָׁם וְאִם-יֵשְׁבֻנוּ פֹה וּמָתְנוּ וְעַתָּה לָכוּ וּנְפֹלֶה אֶל-מַחֲנֵה אֲרָם אִם-יִתְּנוּ נַחֲמָה וְאִם-יִמָּוְנוּ וּמָתְנוּ:

Verses 5-8: They discover that the camp had been hurriedly abandoned, and plunder it for personal gain. The narrator explains that God scattered the camp overnight.

II Kings 7:6	מלכים ב ז:ו
The Lord made Aram's camp hear a sound of chariots, a sound of horses, a sound of a great army. The [Arameans] said to one another, "Israel's king hired the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Egypt to attack us!"	וַאֲדַקֵּי הַשָּׁמַיעַ אֶת-מַחֲנֵה אֲרָם קוֹל רֶכֶב קוֹל סוּס קוֹל תַּיִל גָּדוֹל וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-אָחִיו הִנֵּה שָׁכַר-עַלֵּינוּ מְלֹךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-מַלְכֵי הַחִתִּים וְאֶת-מַלְכֵי מִצְרַיִם לָבוֹא עָלֵינוּ:

Verses 9-11: The lepers realize the impropriety of their selfish reaction, and inform the king that the Arameans abandoned their camp.

II Kings 7:9	מלכים ב ז:ט
They said to one another, "We do not behave correctly. Today is a day of good tidings [yet] we are silent. [If] we tarry till the morning light, punishment will come upon us. Therefore, let us go, enter [the city area], and tell the king's household."	וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-רֵעֵהוּ לֹא-כֵן אָנַחְנוּ עֲשִׂים הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יוֹם-בְּשִׂרָה הוּא וְאָנַחְנוּ מִחֲשִׁים וְחִכְיֵנוּ עַד-אֹר הַבֶּקֶר וּמִצָּאָנוּ עֲגוּן וְעַתָּה לָכוּ וּנְבַאֵה וּנְגִידָה בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ:

¹ "Tzara'at" is commonly, yet mistakenly, identified as leprosy. For simplicity, we use the conventional translation.

Verses 12-15: Fearing the report is an Aramean ruse to flush them from the city, the king dispatches a small party to investigate. The report is found to be true.

II Kings 7:15	מלכים ב ז:ט"ו
[The king's men] followed [the Arameans] as far as the Jordan. Lo, the entire path was full of garments and vessels which Aram had cast away in their haste. The messengers returned and told the king.	וילכו אחריהם עד הירדן והנה כלי החרף מלאה בגדים וכלים אשר השליכו ארם בהחפזם [בְּחַפְזָם] וישבו המלאכים ויגדו למלך:

Verses 16-20: The claim of the lepers, and by extension, the prophecy of Elisha are proven true.

II Kings 7:18	מלכים ב ז:י"ח
It came to pass as the man of God had said to the king, saying, "Two measures of barley for a shekel, and a measure of fine flour for a shekel, shall be tomorrow at this time in Samaria's gate."	והי כדבר איש האלקים אליהם לאמר סאתים שערים בשקל וסאה סלת בשקל יהיה כעת מתוך בשער שַׁמְרוֹן:

Connections

The Talmud tells of another leprous savior at a city gate who brings redemption - **the Messiah**.

Sanhedrin 98a	סנהדרין צ"ח א
[R. Yehoshua ben Levi] said to [Elijah]: "When will the Messiah come?" [Elijah] responded, "Go ask him." He asked, "Where does he dwell?" [Elijah responded,] "At the entrance of the city." [He asked] "What is his identifying sign?" [Elijah responded,] "He sits among the poor who suffer from illnesses [Rashi: afflicted with tzara'at; cf. Lev. 13:2]. They all loosen and tie their bandages all at once. [But] he [the Messiah] loosens one bandage and ties each one [separately], reasoning, 'Perhaps I will be needed [for the redemption], so I must not be delayed.'"	אמר ליה אימת אתי משיח אמר ליה זיל שייליה לדידיה והיכא יתיב אפיתחא דקרתא ומאי סימניה יתיב ביני עניי סובלי חלאים [רש"י: מנוגעים] וכולן שרו ואסירי בחד זימנא איהו שרי חד ואסיר חד אמר דילמא מבעינא דלא איעכב

By contrast, famed **Israeli poet**, "Rachel" (Bluwstein; 1890-1931), objects to the Haftarah's mode of redemption in her poem, "יום בשורה / Day of Tidings" (see verse 9, above.)²

For a long while the dreadful enemy / Brought Shomron to siege; Four lepers to her brought tidings. / To her brought the tidings of freedom. A Shomron under siege - the entire land, / The famine is unbearable. But I do not want to receive news of redemption / From the lips of a leper. The pure will bring news and the pure will redeem / And if his hand won't be there to redeem - Then I will choose to die from the suffering of the siege / On the eve of the day of the great tidings.	בשפּבּר הַיָּמִים הָאוֹיֵב הַנוֹרָא / אֶת שַׁמְרוֹן הֵבִיא בְּמִצּוֹר; אַרְבַּעַה מִצַּרְעִים לָהּ בְּשׂוֹרָה. / לָהּ בְּשׂוֹרָה בְּשׂוֹרַת הַדְּרוֹר. בְּשַׁמְרוֹן בְּמִצּוֹר – כָּל הָאָרֶץ בְּלָהּ, / וְכַבֵּד הָרָעַב מִנְשֵׂא. אֲדָ אֲנִי לֹא אֶבֶה בְּשׂוֹרַת גְּאֻלָּהּ, / אִם מִפִּי מִצַּרְעִי הִיא תְּבוֹא. הַטְּהוֹר יְבַשֵּׂר וְגֹאֵל הַטְּהוֹר, / וְאִם יָדוֹ לֹא תִמְצָא לְגֹאֵל – אֲז נִבְחַר לִי לְנַפְל מִמִּצּוֹקַת הַמִּצּוֹר/אוֹר לְיוֹם בְּשׂוֹרָה הַגְּדוֹל.
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With emendations, all translations are from Sefaria.org. To dedicate, comment, or subscribe, email haftarahhelper@gmail.com.

² Rabbi Alex Israel cites and translates this poem in his article on this story, hatanakh.com/sites/herzog/files/herzog/38_1.pdf.