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Haftarat Metzora: *The Salvation of Shomron: An Unorthodox Redemption*

The selection of *Navi* chosen as the *haftarah* for *Parashat Metzora* (*Melakhim Bet* 7:3–20) is a powerful and exciting story filled with poignant and timely messages.

The incident described in the *haftarah* takes place in *Shomron*, the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, during the reign of King Yehoram. The Kingdom finds itself under constant attack from the people of Aram, and the chapters leading up to our story detail several attempts by Aram to wreak havoc on the Kingdom.

On the surface, the Northern Kingdom of Israel seems like easy prey for the Arameans. But Divine protection, seemingly controlled by the prophet Elisha, has rebuffed the enemy, often embarrassing the Arameans in the process. In chapter 6 of *Melakhim Bet*, the Arameans lay an ambush for the Israelites, only to have Elisha advise Yehoram of the danger. When the King of Aram sends an army to kill Elisha, the army is made to look like fools in the face of Elisha's miraculous abilities.

However, as chapter 6 comes to a close, the Arameans seem to be on the road to victory. They have laid siege to the capital city, and the siege, along with a severe extended drought, has brought the city to the point of desperation. As the king walks the city walls to survey the military situation, he is accosted by two women starving to the point of having to devour their children. The king is broken, and publically rends his garments, revealing that his body is covered in sackcloth for the fate of his people. He is, at the same time, repentant and defiant. He understands that the suffering of *Shomron* is a Divine punishment, but blames Elisha, the prophet, for its pain. Yehoram insists that were God, so to speak, left to His own devices, He might show mercy to His people. Certainly, the people were not free of sin, but the king's sackcloth attested to at least a personal attempt at change. God alone, felt Yehoram, would be willing to accept the peoples' meager repentance. So what was holding the Almighty back? It must be that it was the wicked and judgmental pleas of the prophet, Elisha. Just as Elisha's mentor, Eliyahu, stood firm with his demands that the people earn their protection and bounty from God, so too, Eliyahu's student Elisha was most certainly serving as a prosecuting attorney against *Shomron*. Yehoram, therefore, in an act that expresses profound concern for his people, and profound faith in God, yet an inability to truly accept responsibility for the situation, swears by the name of God that Elisha will pay for the people's suffering and must die that day.

The messenger whom the king sent to kill Elisha, however, is met by several surprises when he reaches the prophet's home, as Elisha had taken precautions against the threat to his life. When the messenger (or the king, himself, for the king walks behind his messenger and might be the speaker) cries out that the people have lost all faith in God's help, Elisha makes a startling prediction: the famine will end in a day's time. More precisely, food prices will drop dramatically because of a surplus of food.

The messenger, representing a king and a people so desperate for help, is unwilling to believe such an absurd prediction. And with seemingly good reason! "Even if God were to open up the heavens," he exclaims, "could this truly occur" by tomorrow? For the siege to end alone would be simply unbelievable! But a surplus of food? Where would that come from?

Elisha assures him that it will, in fact, occur. However, he informs the messenger that because he doubted the power of God, he would but witness God's salvation; he would not merit to benefit from it.

The commentators struggle to understand this change of heart. What had the people done to earn this salvation? If they were unworthy a day before, what tilted the Divine hand to mercy?

Could the king's cry have aroused the *middat ha-rachamim*? Although the king had cried out against God's prophet, in doing so he had shown his sincere dedication to the people, and possibly thereby aroused God's mercy.¹ On the other hand, perhaps Yehoram's assassination attempt against Elisha had marked his nadir. Maybe there was no longer a purpose in punishing *Shomron*, for it had already reached its low point, and that is why *Hashem* had to act. A final possibility is that perhaps the time had not truly come for redemption, but the messenger's brazen denial of God's power required a miraculous rebuttal.

The passage selected for the *haftarah* opens not inside, but outside the besieged city. The scene shifts as evening sets in. Four lepers stand just outside the city walls looking back to the city that has expelled them,² and forward to the Aramean camp besieging the city. The lepers deem their situation to be hopeless, and choose to put their fate in the hands of the foreign enemy. "And now," they proclaim, "let us fall into the hands of the camp of Aram! If they let us live – we will live, and if they kill us – we will die."

What they find in the Aramean camp is hard to comprehend. The camp is fully stocked. There are horses and tents and weapons and provisions. But there are no soldiers. The camp has been abandoned. It seems impossible, too good to be true.

The narrator explains to us what happened to the army. God performed a miracle, causing the besieging army to hear "the sound of chariots, the sound of horses, the sound of a large army" approaching. The Arameans assumed the worst: Yehoram had hired an army to free the city. They were so alarmed that they ran from *Shomron*, leaving all of their belongings behind.

All of this had occurred before the lepers arrived at the Aramean camp. That fact should not be lost in the narrative. It means that the salvation had been provided just a few hours after Elisha's prediction. It means that as the lepers stood bemoaning their fate and their limited options, that God had *already* saved them. As we are promised in *Yeshayahu* 65:24 "ve-haya terem yikre'u va-ani e'eneh" – "and it will be, [even] before they call me, I will answer." Moreover, the residents of *Shomron* continued to starve and cry out in desperation – not knowing that the crisis has already been averted. A most intriguing situation...but we must get back to our story.

The lepers are caught in a bind. They find themselves surrounded by more wealth and more food than they can handle! In a moment – a *heref ayin* – they go from desperation to ecstatic joy. They eat, they drink, and they devise a plan for pocketing their massive, newfound wealth. All the while the people continue to die in the city behind them.

A rabbinic tradition identifies these four men with Gechazi and his three sons.³ Gechazi was once the faithful student of Elisha the prophet, but allowed an opportunity for personal gain to come before his dedication to the prophet and his mission. It is certainly reasonable to assume, therefore, that these four lepers were Gechazi and his family. After all, this group was acting well within their character – choosing to line their pockets at the expense of others.

But this time, their guilt – and their fear of reprisals – gets the better of them. They return to the city to share the wonderful news – and the spoils and the food – with the city that had recently expelled them. They cannot get inside the city, but they relate the facts to the gatekeeper who takes

¹. See *Ta'anit* 14b and *Midrash Ha-Gadol, Parashat Vayakhel*.

². It is not clear why the lepers needed to leave the city of *Shomron*, as the laws of expelling lepers applied only to cities that were walled at the time of Yehoshua ben Nun. *Shomron* does not seem to fit that definition. See Woolf, R. Zvi Binyamin, *Sefer Melakhim Al Pi Ha-Mesorah*, Bnei Brak, Israel, 1990.

³. *Sotah* 47a.

word to the king. The king, however, is convinced that the Arameans had merely set up a trap and that they were lying in wait for the Israelites to leave their city.

The king's fears, however, seem rather misplaced given Elisha's prediction! Hadn't the prophet just alerted him the day before that something miraculous would occur? Hadn't this massive "find" of provisions been foretold? As a reader of the tale, it is easy to make this assumption; however, that may not be fair to do. After all, Elisha had spoken of food prices dropping – not armies dropping! And yet, there is a lesson to be learned here. We have already pointed out the irony of a people losing hope, unaware that their redemption had already arrived. King Yehoram now takes this disbelief to a new level. The salvation, predicted by a prophet, has come. He has even been told so. And yet he still will not believe! Is he so suspicious of the Arameans? Has the report come from an unreliable source? Does he refuse to believe the prophet? Or, perhaps, is Yehoram hoping for a miracle, even praying for one, but incapable of recognizing one when it comes? Perhaps Elisha *had* raised his hopes, maybe there would be food on the morrow...but what does that have to do with a military surprise?

King Yehoram is therefore convinced to send out a small search party to verify the report. The two horsemen confirm that Aram has fled, and the people run quickly from the city to collect the spoils and gather some much-needed food. The market is soon flooded and Elisha's prophecy is fulfilled. But there was one more thing that had to happen.

Yehoram, perhaps trying to assert some control over the situation, and perhaps trying to take some credit for what happened, asks his trusted messenger to stand by the gate to manage the crowds. This messenger, the same one who had been sent to kill Elisha, witnesses the wondrous turn of fortune and certainly imagines what he will bring home for himself. And then, he is promptly trampled to death. As Elisha had promised, the king's messenger does indeed see the salvation, but because of his blasphemous words, he is not able to partake in it.

The disbelief of King Yehoram and his people stands in stark contrast to the calm, resolute faith of Elisha. Throughout the wars with Aram, Elisha seems in total control, confident that God's silence was not to be confused with His disinterest or impotence. The people, on the other hand, seem slow to believe, even in face of open miracles.

Perhaps the most interesting group in the story, however, is the group of lepers. Much of the narrative focuses on them. We are introduced to them, we follow their escapades, and we get their perspective more than any other on the events as they unfold.

Why do they play such a central role? Why does it matter who brings the news of the miracle and the redemption? And does the way the news is brought affect its basic message?

R. Chaim Dov Rabinowitz, in his commentary *Da'at Sofrim*, explains that attention needed to be diverted from the Israelite army. Had the army uncovered the miracle they might, in some way, have been able to take some of the credit. For some reason, God does not want the people to feel that they earned this gift. To make this clear, four people from *outside* the community are given the privilege of stumbling across the booty. The lepers are not important in and of themselves. In fact they are so unimportant that they make the perfect messengers.

R. Yigal Ariel develops this point further:⁴

It is specifically the impure, despised lepers who have been cast out of the community who open up the eyes of the people and bring the news of the redemption.

The Four Lepers, pushed away from the camp and the city, were downcast bitter and hopeless. Even when word comes of the redemption of the people, they know that they will truly have no part in it. At the end of the day, they will still be outcasts. The lepers were outside of the city not only in a geographical sense – but in a spiritual sense as well. They stood between the camp of the enemy and the city of *Shomron* and the war took place around them. They were willing to give themselves over to the Aramean side – anything to just stay alive. It is specifically

⁴. *Mikdash Melekh – Iyunim Be-Sefer Melakhim*, Hispin, Israel, 1994, pp. 277–278.

these lowly people who first merit to see the miracle and to recognize it...They are the ones who bring the tidings of the redemption to the people.

In a perfect scenario, the redemption is heralded by the righteous. It is heralded by those in the “center” of the city and the heart of the community. The redemption comes with the participation of the people in partnership with God. But this was not a “perfect” redemption. As R. Ariel explains:

The rescue of *Shomron* comes to a people who are not worthy of rescue and who don't believe that the rescue will come. This is not an ordinary redemption that is based on reward and punishment; instead it is built on a model that is *not* based in merit...

Redemption that comes to those who do not want it, those who push it away, will not be straight and simple; it will, perforce, be twisted and filled with obstacles. This is not a redemption fit for those of a fragile nature; it is wrapped up with much suffering and anguish. Those who are too delicate or too righteous will mock such redemption. What is the value of a partial redemption? Of a redemption that does not fulfill all of our dreams? Of a redemption that may not be permanent?

Not only is redemption preceded by much hardship; it unfolds in the most unexpected of ways. The average observer – and even the individual who has truly yearned for redemption – doesn't know what to make of the situation. After all this time could these be our messengers of redemption? And could a temporary reprieve from suffering be the redemption for which we hoped? R. Ariel concludes:

In truth, there is value in redemption even if it is not a complete or final redemption and even if it is just the rescue of a people. Jewish continuity in the present is what allows for the ultimate redemption in the future and a partial rescue and salvation is important even if it is bound up temporarily with religious defects and challenges. The rejection of the significance of this miracle, even if done for lofty reasons and with good intentions, represents a rejection of the will of God and the adoption of an overly close-minded approach to religion.

R. Yehuda Amital, *zt"l*, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion, would often quote this story to the same effect – especially around *Yom Ha-Atzma'ut*. Could there be Divine significance in a state conceived by, fought for, and governed by mostly irreligious representatives of our people? Could redemption in Israel be heralded by those “outside” the traditional camp? And could that group recognize the redemption even before some who are, in so many other ways, more aware of God?

Biblical leprosy challenges us to see the hand of God in the everyday – even within impurity. It reminds us that, even as miracles surround us, God may communicate with us in a muffled voice or a “*kol demamah dakah*.” It is up to us, mired in our imperfect world, to hear Him talking.