

Naaman's Discovery of God (2 Kings chapter 5)
Parashat Tazri'a
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Traditional Jewish practice is to read a prescribed selection of the Pentateuch each Shabbat morning in such a manner that the entire cycle from the Creation story at the beginning of Genesis to the death of Moses at the end of Deuteronomy will be covered in the course of one year in the Jewish calendar. It is also traditional to use the Torah reading as the basis for the Shabbat morning sermon.

Now no one ever has a problem finding something to speak about in any of the lessons from Genesis or the first two thirds of Exodus. But when we come to today's lesson, *Tazri'a*, composed of Leviticus chapters 12 and 13, it gets considerably more challenging. Chapter 12 deals with childbirth, not with the wonders of bringing new life into the world, but with rules regarding the unclean status of the woman after childbirth and the need for her to bring a sin offering to the priest to make expiation on her behalf. And chapter 13 begins a long discussion of scaly afflictions on the skin, traditionally translated "leprosy" (though it is unclear that the Bible was actually speaking about that specific disease), specifying the diagnostic responsibilities of the priests in excruciating detail.

I have therefore decided to base my message today not on the Torah lesson but rather on the additional reading from the Prophetic literature that accompanies it, known in Hebrew as the Haftarah.

Let me quickly review the narrative that we heard in the Hebrew original. The context is the northern Kingdom of Israel, and the career of an early prophet named Elisha, the protégé and successor of the more famous Elijah. Bordering on Israel was the kingdom of Aram, situated in the location of contemporary Syria. There were occasional military hostilities between the two countries, this was an interlude without actual warfare, only periodic raids. Now Naaman, the commander of the Aramean Armed Forces, highly valued by the king of Aram, suffered from leprosy—thus the connection with the Torah lesson. The best doctors at the best hospitals in Damascus were apparently incapable of curing him. Naaman hears about a holy man in Israelite Samaria who has unusual powers of healing. He turns to his king, who sends him to the king of Israel with a letter asking him to see to a cure.

The Israelite king thinks that this is just an excuse to wage war again and rends his clothes in despair. But the prophet Elisha volunteers to help, and instructs Naaman to bathe seven times in the Jordan River. Naaman is sceptical that a cure could be effected so easily; after all, there are more impressive rivers in Damascus. But his servants urge him to try it anyway, and to his utter astonishment, his skin is healed and becomes like that of a child!

Now I am not going to venture an explanation about how this happened. I don't think we should learn from this story about the efficacy of faith healers, people who claim that they are given by God extraordinary powers to heal by the laying on of their hands. Despite a long tradition underlying this belief in stories about

the biblical prophets, Jesus of Nazareth, the Baal Shem Tov, and others, we have seen too many of cases of fraudulent deception to endorse it.

What I find most interesting and intriguing about this story is not the cure itself but Naaman's behaviour following his astounding cure.

First, there is Naaman's assumption that the benefit he received was worth a substantial payment. He came to Israel, we are told, with ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten changes of designer clothing, and he offers to give it to Elisha in return for his cure. Even without knowing the details of currency exchange, this was obviously a considerable amount. But Elisha refuses to take a penny: not one talent of silver, not one shekel of gold, not one designer outfit. Later on, when Elisha's servant Gehazi secretly extorts some of the payment from Naaman, Elisha finds out and is furious with his servant, cursing him by placing the leprosy of Naaman on Gehazi and his descendants forever. (That obviously raises a different set of problems that I will not pursue further this morning). The idea that healing comes from God and that human beings must therefore not profit by it lies at the core of the narrative. Not an idea that the medical profession is likely to endorse, but one from which we can draw more broadly positive values.

The other themes pertain to Naaman's discovery of God. When Naaman is cured, he proclaims, *Hinei na yadati ki ein elohim be-khol ha-aretz ki im be-Yisra'el*, "Now I know that there is no god in the entire world except in Israel" (5:15). He does *not* say, as we might expect, "Now I know that there is one true God in the world." The point he is making is about geography. Naaman concludes that a God with this power can be found only in the territory of his neighbouring country. Indeed his closing request of Elisha is: "Let me take two mule-loads of soil from the land of Israel, for I will never again offer up sacrifice to any god except the Lord" (5:17). Naaman obviously assumes that such offerings will be impossible once he returns to his native land, unless he can stand on soil from the land where the God of Elisha is accessible. For Naaman, it is soil, not faith, that provides access to the God he has discovered.

Second, while Naaman's experience seems to bring about a conversion, he cannot make a public break from his past. When he returns to Aram, he will return to his familiar responsibilities, one of which is to accompany his king into the Temple of the Aramean god Rimmon, where he will need to prostrate himself alongside his sovereign in apparent worship of that god. And so he asks in advance that the God of Elisha and Israel will forgive him for these future acts of disloyalty. Naaman returns to his home country to live a life of duplicity and dissimulation, *taqiyya*, familiar to groups of *converso* Jews, to Shi'i and Bektashi Sufi Muslims and even to some post-Reformation Catholics and Protestants, all of whom at times felt compelled to pretend they were something other than what they truly believed. Naaman, perhaps alongside the later figure of Queen Esther, would appear to be the prototype of this religious mode.

In short, Naaman's discovery of God is deeply compromised in this narrative. He accepts a God who is accessible only on soil from a foreign country, a God he

cannot worship in public. He returns to his native land healed in body, but deeply conflicted in soul.

We have, I assume, moved beyond the religious mind-set expressed in this biblical narrative. While we sense that certain geographical sites have special holiness—in Jerusalem, in Mecca, in Rome and elsewhere—few if any of us believe that God is inaccessible unless we are in those sites or standing on soil transported from them. Secondly, the idea of dissimulation—pretending to profess something outwardly while inwardly believing something radically different—strikes us as repugnant when there is choice, and tragic when there is no other way to protect one's life.

The story of Naaman is fascinating to me in that it reflects a mind-set on the road to a full monotheistic belief, but clearly not yet there. Like our Torah portion, it shows us that not every chapter in the Bible reflects the highest level of religious understanding. I hope it will not be considered heresy to say that in some realms, though certainly not in all, we have made progress in our religious understanding and our religious lives.