(When Tazri'a and M'tzora are combined, recite the haftarah for M'tzora.)

This haftarah comprises two episodes from a cycle of wonder-working tales about the activities of the northern prophet Elisha during the reign of King Jehoram (851–842 B.C.E.). They report the miraculous feeding of a multitude with only a small amount of bread (2 Kings 4:42–44) and the healing of an Aramean leper named Naaman (5:1–19). Earlier in chapter 4, before the start of the haftarah, these two episodes are preceded by accounts of the miracle of a jug of oil (4:1–7), the resurrection of a Shunammite boy (4:38–37), and making poisonous food in a pot edible (4:38–41). Passages after the haftarah present the miracle of a floating ox head (6:1–7) and the wondrous end to a famine caused by the Aramean siege of Samaria (7:1–20). The preservation of such an extensive collection of wonders proves the popularity of such tales among the people. Significantly, almost the entire anthology figures in haftarah readings: 2 Kings 4:1–37 is the selection for Va-yera, 4:42–5:19 is the portion for Tazri'a, and 7:3–20 is the text for M'tzora.

In the sparse narrative about the loaves of bread (4:42–44), the connecting thread is provided by the verb “to give” (natan). A man brings his rotary gift to Elisha, who instructs his steward Gehazi to “give” (ten) it to the people. When the steward doubts how he could “give” (etten) this small amount of loaves to so many, the prophet reissues his command to “give” (ten) the food to the people. When the steward complied and “gave” (va-etten) the food to the masses, there was more than enough to go around. The miracle is underscored as something promised and fulfilled by God. The text also indicates Elisha’s magnanimity, dispensing to the people gifts he refused to take for himself.

The account of Naaman’s miraculous cure is presented with greater detail and fuller dialogues. Indeed, the dialogues generate the stages of narrative action: The Israelite girl intervenes with her mistress, the Aramean commander begs leave of his king, the king of Israel misinterprets the letter of the king of Aram, and Elisha expresses readiness to perform the desired cure that Naaman might know the power of prophets in Israel. Finally, Elisha sends a message to Naaman with instructions for a cure, and Naaman presents Elisha with a theological statement recognizing the unique power of the God of Israel whom he now wants to worship exclusively.

When the Aramean commander expresses his gratitude for being cured by offering Elisha a gift (5:15), the man of God once again demonstrates his refusal to profit from his prophetic powers (v. 16). This leads to a poignant reversal, as Naaman then requests the gift of some loads of holy earth to build a shrine to God in Aram (v. 17).

Two features of popular piety may be singled out. First, people would seek out holy men for consultation on topics of health or wealth. On such occasions, they would provide gifts in payment and gratitude. Second, the story of an Aramean commander seeking out an Israelite wonder worker shows that in matters of health and healing, political and religious boundaries were of little concern. People wanted the best and most respected divine aid and would go to a recognized shrine or healer as necessary.

Elisha’s cure is simple and straightforward. Naaman is told to dip seven times in holy water. Naaman apparently had expected something more elaborate and ceremonious. The seven ablutions, however, were the key. They recall the prophet Balaam’s request for seven altars, seven rams, and seven bulls before delivering his oracles (Num. 23:1–6, 29). They also remind us of the
seven priests with seven rams’ horns which circumambulated Jericho seven times on the seventh day (Josh. 6:6–8, 15–16). In other cases, the requisite number was three. Thus Elijah prostrated himself over the child three times before he revived (1 Kings 17:21) and ceremoniously doused the altar and wood three times with pails of water before calling on God for rain (1 Kings 18:34). The prophet Jeremiah, cursing King Jehoiachin for his evil with an incantation, called on the “earth” three times to hear the word of God and banish the king to foreign soil (Jer. 22:28–29). Both three and seven are well-known magical numbers in the ancient Near East and beyond.

RELATION OF THE HAFTAarah TO THE PARASHAH

The miraculous healing of leprosy in the haftarah links thematically to the diagnoses of leprosy found in the second half of the parashah (Lev. 13). The haftarah dramatizes the conversion of a leprous polytheist to Israelite worship. Two phrases (with liturgical overtones) make this clear. The first is recited by Naaman after his cure: “Now I know (yaddati) that there is no God (ein elohim) in the whole world except (ki im) in Israel” (2 Kings 5:15). The second records Naaman’s determination to serve God alone and his vow that he “will never again (lo... od) offer up a burnt offering or a sacrifice to any god (literally, “other gods,” elohim aherim), except (ki im) the LORD” (v. 17). Significantly, when Moses’ father-in-law, Jethro, a pagan priest of Midian, converted upon hearing “everything that the LORD had done to Pharaoh and the Egyptians for Israel’s sake” he reportedly said, “Now I know (yaddati) that the LORD is greater than all gods (elohim)” and then “brought a burnt offering and sacrifice to God” (Exod. 18:8–12).

The formal correspondence between the two passages is striking. Apparently, some pagan conversions in Israelite antiquity required merely a credal statement along with a commitment to sacrifice to the Lord. These avowals typically include reference to a new knowledge of the supremacy of the God of Israel, based on experience.

Naaman senses that it may prove difficult to maintain his exclusive allegiance to God in the complicated circumstances of his everyday life, when he must serve his king and help him bend in worship in pagan shrines (2 Kings 5:18). Elisha does not directly answer this concern, and simply says “Go in peace.”

42A man came from Baal-shalishah and he brought the man of God some bread of the first reaping—twenty loaves of barley bread, and some fresh grain in his sack. And [Elisha] said, “Give it to the people and let them eat.” 43His attendant replied, “How can I set this before a hundred men?” But he said, “Give it to the people and let them eat. For thus said the LORD: They shall eat and have some left over.” 44So he set it before them; and when they had eaten they had some left over, as the LORD had said.

2 Kings 4:42. A man came from Baal-shalishah. The land of Shalishah is mentioned as part of the tribal lands of Benjamin in the region of Mount Ephraim, along with the lands of Shaalim and Zuph.
Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was important to his lord and high in his favor, for through him the Lord had granted victory to Aram. But the man, though a great warrior, was a leper. Once, when the Arameans were out raiding, they carried off a young girl from the land of Israel, and she became an attendant to Naaman’s wife. She said to her mistress, “I wish Master could come before the prophet in Samaria; he would cure him of his leprosy.” [Naaman] went and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And 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 changes of clothing. He brought the letter to the king of Israel. It read: “Now, when this letter reaches you, know that I have sent my courtier Naaman to you, that you may cure him of his leprosy.” When the king of Israel read the letter, he rent his clothes and cried, “Am I God, to deal death or give life, that this fellow writes to me to cure a man of leprosy? Just see for yourselves that he is seeking a pretext against me!”

When Elisha, the man of God, heard that the king of Israel had rent his clothes, he sent a message to the king: “Why have you rent your clothes? Let him come to me, and he will learn that there is a prophet in Israel.”

So Naaman came with his horses and chariots and halted at the door of Elisha’s house. Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, “Go and bathe seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh

2 Kings 5:1. important to his lord and high in his favor  Naaman is identified with various titles and honorifics. The designation “high in favor” is a translation of *n'su fanim* (literally, “raised face”).

leper  Hebrew: *tzaara at,* refers to skin diseases on humans and to molds and fungi on clothes and buildings (Lev. 13-14).

10-14. The seven immersions that Elisha prescribes echo the Torah portion’s repeated mention of seven days of quarantine (Lev. 13). According to the next Torah portion, the priest should sprinkle a recovered leper seven times with a liquid solution of holy ingredients; and also that person must bathe (rakhatz) twice before being fully purified (14:7-9). This haftarah
shall be restored and you shall be pure." 11 But Naaman was angered and walked away. "I thought," he said, "he would surely come out to me, and would stand and invoke the Lord his God by name, and would wave his hand toward the spot, and cure the affected part. 12 Are not the Amanah and the Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? I could bathe in them and be pure!" And he stalked off in a rage.

13 But his servants came forward and spoke to him. "Sir," they said, "if the prophet told you to do something difficult, would you not do it? How much more when he has only said to you, 'Bathe and be pure.'" 14 So he went down and immersed himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had bidden; and his flesh became like a little boy's, and he was pure. 15 Returning with his entire retinue to the man of God, he stood before him and exclaimed, "Now I know that there is no God in the whole world except in Israel! So please accept a gift from your servant." 16 But he replied, "As the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will not accept anything." He pressed him to accept, but he refused. 17 And Naaman said, "Then at least let your servant be given two mule-loads of earth; for your servant will never again offer up burnt offering or sacrifice to any god, except the Lord. 18 But may the Lord pardon your servant for this: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow low in worship there, and he is leaning on my arm so that I must bow low in the temple of Rimmon—when I bow low in the temple of Rimmon, may the Lord pardon your servant in this." 19 And he said to him, "Go in peace."

So [Naaman] left him and went some distance away.

(w. 10,12,13) uses the same Hebrew verbs to indicate both bathing and ritual purification.

14. So he went down and immersed himself in the Jordan Naaman performed the rites "as the man of God had bidden." A 5th-century tradition, as inscribed at Hammat Gader (hot springs in the Yarmuk Valley), links Elijah (not Elisha) with healing the lepers who bathed there.