

THE ELIJAHU NARRATIVES

Shiur #1: Introduction
By Rav Elchanan Samet
Translated by Kaeren Fish

a. The uniqueness of the stories of Eliyahu and Elisha

From the moment of Eliyahu's appearance in *Sefer Melakhim* (I 17:1), the text devotes several chapters to a description of the personality and actions of this great prophet and, later on, to the personality and actions of his disciple and successor – Elisha. This extended focus on the activities of the two prophets – even when they do not directly affect the history of the Kingdom of Israel within which they operate – is a phenomenon unparalleled in *Tanakh*. (Moshe and Shmuel are also at the center of the respective Books describing their activities, but both of them are – in addition to being prophets – also leaders of the nation, while Eliyahu and Elisha serve only as prophets.)

The stories of Eliyahu and Elisha have a number of other special characteristics:

- a. A great multiplicity of miracles which these prophets perform. This is particularly noticeable in comparison with the paucity of miracles described in the Books of *Shemuel* and *Melakhim* up until the appearance of Eliyahu, and their rare appearance in the continuation of *Sefer Melakhim*, after Elisha leaves the scene. In general these miracles seem to have been performed on the initiative of Eliyahu and/or Elisha alone; only very rarely do they perform a miracle based on an explicit Divine command. (There are even miracles when no mention whatsoever is made of God's Name.) Some of the miracles are performed for the prophets' own benefit or for the benefit of a single individual, not for any national need.
- b. Continuity between the two prophets: Elisha, the disciple and attendant of Eliyahu, is also his inheritor and successor as a prophet of Israel. This phenomenon has no equivalent in all the history of prophecy. We are reminded, admittedly, of the relationship between Moshe and Yehoshua, but Yehoshua serves as Moshe's successor in the sphere of national

leadership, not as a prophet in Moshe's place. This unique relationship between Eliyahu and Elisha demands that we pay close attention to the link between the two sets of narratives – i.e., to those stories in which the two prophets are described together.

- c. A literary framework comprised of individual narratives, at the center of all of which stands the prophet, with these narratives together forming a collection. From the collection as a whole we glean some understanding of the prophet's character and of his special approach as a prophet.

The unique nature of the stories of Eliyahu and Elisha gives rise to several questions, which we shall address later on.

b. Eliyahu's appearance in the generation of Ahav

Few prophets are mentioned in *Sefer Melakhim* prior to the arrival of Eliyahu. What is it, then, that causes Eliyahu to appear in the Kingdom of Israel at this specific time, leading to intensified prophetic activity from this time forward?

From the founding of the Kingdom of Israel as an independent entity under the rulership of Yeravam ben Nevat, it has deteriorated steadily. No great prophetic effort is required in order to point out how the religious sins that have accompanied the Kingdom of Israel since its establishment go hand in hand with the internal political disintegration of the kingdom and its outwardly apparent decline. Rapid atrophy and degeneration have characterized the kingdom, especially during the period prior to the rise of Omri, as described in chapter 16 of *Sefer Melakhim I*.

A significant change occurs with the rise of the House of Omri to power. With the stabilization of the kingdom, the political assassinations that had been frequent occurrences until then ceased, and the internal regime in Israel became secure. Omri and his son, Ahav, also made efforts to strengthen their kingdom and fortify it by means of vast construction, reinforcement of the army, and a foreign policy based upon treaties with neighboring countries. The relations between the Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of Yehuda changed completely; they became allies - to the extent that bonds of marriage were forged between the two royal houses. The treaty with the Kingdom of Tzor and Tzidon was renewed, and here too, marriage bonds were formed between the two royal houses, with Ahav marrying Izevel, the daughter of Etba'al, king of Tzidon. The picture that emerges from this period is one of great political ascendancy for the Kingdom of Israel. These processes did not happen spontaneously; it was the vision and efforts of Omri and of his son Ahav that brought

about this progress, and this merit is attributed to them explicitly both in the biblical text and by Chazal.

However, alongside this process of political revival – and not disconnected from it – the kingdom of Israel underwent an opposite process of religious decline. The contradiction between these two developments is described already during the reign of Omri, founder of the dynasty:

(*Melakhim* I 16:24) (24) "He bought the Shomron mountain from Shemer for two talents of silver, and he built up the mountain and called the name of the city which he built after Shemer, the owner of the Shomron mountain.

(25) But Omri did evil in the eyes of God, and he did worse than all those who had preceded him.

(26) He walked in all the ways of Yeravam... to anger God, the Lord of Israel...

(27) The rest of the things that Omri did, and the valor that he performed, are they not written...."

On the one hand, Omri builds up a new capital city, thereby symbolizing – like David before him – his intention to introduce a new national era. But on the other hand he "does evil in the eyes of God... worse than all those who had preceded him." On the one hand he angers God, on the other hand he performs mighty acts of valor in Israel's wars against their enemies.

This contradiction is only heightened in the days of Ahav, his son. Here we discover that there is a connection between the two processes:

(*Melakhim* I 16:30) "Ahav, the son of Omri, did worse in God's eyes than all those who preceded him.

(31) It was an easy thing for him to walk in the sins of Yeravam ben Nevat: HE TOOK AS A WIFE IZEVEL THE DAUGHTER OF ETBA'AL, KING OF THE TZIDONIM, AND HE WENT AND SERVED BA'AL AND BOWED DOWN TO HIM.

(32) He established an altar to Ba'al in the house of Ba'al which he had built in the Shomron.

(33) And Ahav made an *asherah*, and Ahav did more to anger God, the Lord of Israel, than all the kings of Israel who had preceded him."

Within the framework of the political covenant with the Kingdom of Tzidon (a covenant dating back to the days of David and Shelomo), Omri marries his son to Izevel, daughter of the king of Tzidon. Thus, for the first time, the stage is set for institutionalized, "state" idolatry in Israel, supported by the royal family (Yeravam's calves were not considered idolatry).

From the following chapters describing the house of Ahav, it becomes apparent that Izevel was a forceful woman – both in relation to Ahav, her husband, and in relation to the kingdom which she had entered. She did not suffice with what the wives of Shelomo had done – exploiting his old age in order to build altars to their gods, apparently for the purposes of personal worship. Izevel tried to import idolatrous worship into Israel on a grand scale: she brought with her, from her birthplace, hundreds of prophets of Ba'al, and it seems that it was on her initiative that the altar to Ba'al was established in the city of Shomron. These steps aroused the opposition of the prophets of God, and therefore Izevel instituted a campaign of suppression in order to eliminate them from the kingdom; it is possible that this campaign even included destruction of God's altars. Such deeds had not been witnessed in Israel before.

Izevel also interferes in other aspects of the administration of the kingdom; the story of the vineyard of Navot illustrates the corrupt norms that she introduced to the regime.

Despite all of this, Ahav was a great king promoting the beof his nation as he understood it, 's wars selflessly when necessary, doing much to build up the kingdom and its army, and implementing a foreign policy of great scope and vision.

Such a generation and such a king require a prophet of great stature, who will not fear persecution and not hesitate to make his voice heard, to berate and rebuke the nation and its king and even to punish when necessary. The success of the House of Omri in those public spheres in which he was active contrasts starkly with the very grave actions of the kings of this royal house in the religious sphere. This contradiction demands the appearance of a prophet who is able to warn about the results of these sins. This is the background to the appearance of Eliyahu as a prophet who confronts Ahav, the greatest king of Israel. The moment of his appearance was not only a time of emergency, a time of severe religious decline, endangering the continued existence of the covenant between God and His people, but also a time of national ascendancy, expansion, and strengthening. In these historical circumstances, there was a need for a prophet with sufficient personality to draw both king and nation after him.

c. "How did these prophets [Eliyahu and Elisha] merit to perform the miracles without Divine command?"

It is clear that miracles are the principle "work tools" that Eliyahu and Elisha employ, and by means of which they fulfill their prophetic mission. A miraculous act as performed by them may be compared to a prophetic monologue as delivered by prophets of later generations (Hoshea, etc.). But while the speeches of the prophets generally emphasize that they are conveying God's word (and even when this is not stated explicitly, it is implicit in what they say), the miracles performed by Eliyahu and Elisha are not, for the most part, commanded by God; in most cases the prophet does not even offer a prayer to God. It appears, therefore, that these prophets operated on their own initiative and according to their own discretion, while God answers them and fulfills their wishes. Indeed, this is the situation as Rambam describes it in his Introduction to the Mishna (R. Shilat edition, p. 29):

"All that Eliyahu and Elisha and the other prophets did in the realm of wonders was done not in order to establish their prophecy – since their prophecy had already been confirmed previously. Rather, they performed these wonders because they needed them, and because of their closeness to God He fulfilled their wishes, as it is written concerning the righteous (*Iyov*22:28), 'You shall speak a decree and it shall be fulfilled for you'."

R. Yosef Albo, in the fourth article of his *Sefer ha-Ikarim*, condenses this idea into a principle of faith:

"A great principle of the Torah, and a root of faith... that the blessed God bends nature under the feet of the believers... and certainly by the word of the prophets, who could perform whatever miracle they chose to utter. Eliyahu said (*Melakhim* I 17:1), "As God lives... if there will be dew and rain for these years, except by my word"; he also said (*Melakhim* II 1:10), "If I am a man of God, let fire descend from heaven and consume you and your fifty men" – and it was so. Likewise, Elisha said (*Melakhim* II 7:1), "At this time tomorrow, a *se'a* of fine flour will be sold for a shekel...", and it was so; also (*ibid.* 6:6), "the iron floated," and the rest of the miracles that he performed without any preceding prophecy or Divine command."

But not all the commentators agree. Some assume the existence of a Divine command or a prayer offered by the prophet concerning each individual miracle. R. Yitzchak Arama, for instance, differs sharply with R. Albo; in the eighth chapter of his book he writes:

"I guarantee, concerning all of the prophets and righteous men that [R. Albo] mentions, that if there was no Divine command concerning each instance, they would not have performed [the wonders] on their own accord."

Other commentators deliberate on this question in other places in their commentaries (see, for example, below – "Drought II").

The literal text would seem to support the view of Rambam and R. Albo. If we examine the exceptional cases in which there IS a Divine command or a prayer offered by the prophet to God prior to the performance of the miracle, we see that these instances show themselves to be exceptional, implying that where no command or prayer is mentioned, the miracle took place without them, on the initiative and by decree of the prophet alone.

One of the commentators who adopts the opinion of Rambam and R. Albo is Abarbanel, and he raises the following question (in his commentary on *Melakhim II* 8:1-6):

"As to the stature of [Elisha] as a prophet, there is no doubt that the text attests to it, and to that of Eliyahu... It appears from their actions that most of what they performed in wondrous ways was done on their own initiative: they made decrees concerning natural phenomena, and their word was fulfilled. We must then ask: HOW DID THESE PROPHETS MERIT... TO PERFORM THE MIRACLES WITHOUT A DIVINE COMMAND?"

The answer that we propose to this question represents, in our view, the necessary background for an understanding of the status of Eliyahu and Elisha in *Tanakh* and for an understanding of their activity in general. It is also the key to the exegetical study of their actions, as the end of this Introduction will show.

d. The prophet's part in the Divine mission

Is the prophet merely a vehicle to convey God's word to his listeners (a sort of recording and broadcasting device which receives a frequency that is inaudible and "translates" it into audible speech), or is he an active partner in the effort to achieve the aims of his prophetic mission? It would seem that the second option is more accurate: the prophet is required to place all his talents and ability, his very personality, and even his personal lifestyle at the disposal of his mission.

In *Massekhet Sanhedrin* (89a) we read: "No two prophets prophesy in the same style." God's word, then, appears in a verbal garb suited to the "style" – the personality and traits – of the prophet who will declare it. The prophet must couch God's word in the most suitable terms and concepts he can find in his vocabulary, using the literary and rhetorical devices that will best succeed in conveying the content of the message to the listener. The prophet's unique style is what creates the literary form in which the prophetic substance manifests itself. This substance is like a soul that gives life to the body, but it is also dependent on it. A change in style, a change in the form in which God's word appears, will necessarily affect the image of the inner substance. With different garb, it looks like an unfamiliar face. This intimate relationship between substance and form makes the prophet a partner, in the full sense of the word, in the prophetic mission.

This is true of prophetic SPEECH. But the early prophets, who preceded the oratory prophets, are characterized by the ACTS that they perform in the various spheres of their prophetic activity. What is the nature of the partnership between the prophet and his Sender in these acts? Does any such partnership exist here?

Sometimes the prophet is commanded by God, "Go and do such-and-such." Even then, the fulfillment of God's command within the conditions of a dynamic and changing reality requires that the prophet perform his mission in a way that is conducive to the conditions in which he is operating. For this purpose, he must contribute his own initiative and originality to the mission; he must act in accordance with the prevailing conditions as he perceives them.

But sometimes the Divine command indicates to the prophet only the final, distant aim of his mission. Then the prophet must bridge the chasm between the present situation and the situation in which the purpose of his mission will have been achieved. He must create all the intermediate stages himself, with no explicit instructions. How is he to do this? Obviously, by enlisting all of his human resources: by placing all of his abilities at the disposal of his mission and by exerting maximal physical and spiritual effort. Clearly, the strategy to achieve the aim of his mission is left to the prophet's discretion. This discretion, and the way in which his chosen strategy is implemented, will depend on his personality, on his personal "style." This individual style of operating corresponds to the verbal style of the oratory prophet. We may paraphrase the Gemara and add that "No two prophets OPERATE in the same style."

All of the above is equally applicable to an agent representing a human dispatcher: to the extent that the agent is true to the person who appoints him, so he will exert more effort to ensure that the mission entrusted to him will be fulfilled successfully, even when he lacks precise instructions for every stage of the mission and every possible

situation that may arise. There are some situations that may help him and he should take advantage of them, while others are likely to harm his mission and he should overcome them. We learn what is expected of a loyal emissary from "the conversations of the servants of our forefathers:" from the detailed and repeated description in the Torah of the way in which Avraham's servant went about fulfilling the mission entrusted to him by his master in very few words (*Bereishit* 24). In *Sefer Mishlei*, too, we find some insightful adages concerning loyal agents (see, for example, 13:17 and 25:13). If all of this is true concerning a mission on behalf of a mortal, how much more so concerning a mission that God entrusts to His prophets.

e. The prophet's actions are performed by God's word even when there is no explicit command

What is the prophet's part in the actions that he performs as a prophet, within that partnership with God in the prophetic mission? We have already stated that his part changes in accordance with the nature of his mission and the command that he is given. We may add that the greater the prophet the greater his part – the human part – in the fulfillment of his mission as a prophet. To clarify this point, let us return to our metaphor of a mortal dispatcher.

A person who sends his emissary on a complex and very responsible mission will formulate his instructions in accordance with the agent's personality and level. If the agent is inexperienced and his loyalty has not yet been proven, or if he is not very intelligent, the dispatcher will take care to make his instructions as detailed as possible. He will enumerate several possible situations that the agent may encounter, and will guide him as to how to respond in each instance. If possible, he will ask that the agent maintain continuous contact with him, in order to receive ongoing guidance as he progresses. In this scenario, where the dispatcher has little confidence in his agent, the latter is left with little room for independent action. He is certainly a loyal emissary – he does nothing of his own accord – but ultimately, he is not a very effective one.

The picture is quite different if the agent is experienced, he is a wise and intelligent person, and completely loyal to his master. In such a case, the master can entrust him with the mission with just the briefest mention of the final aim, and he will be quite confident that the agent will achieve the aim in the best possible way, using his own initiative and drawing on his rich experience, altogether focused on the wishes of his dispatcher to whom he is so close and whom he understands so well.

Let us now return to the prophet participating in the fulfillment of his mission, and ask: how are we to relate to and evaluate those actions which he performs on his own initiative? Are they actions that are performed "by God's word," to be considered as though they had been explicitly commanded? On one hand, it is difficult to adopt this position, since God did not in fact command them; these actions are based on the prophet's own discretion, on his "style," and hence their source is mortal. On the other hand, the prophet is apparently required to perform these acts: they are required by virtue of the Divine command that indicated only the final aim. These acts express the partnership discussed above, between God and His prophet. For this reason we frequently find clear expressions – either by the prophet or in the text – indicating that these actions are performed "by God's word." The prophet's actions bear the sign of the Divine sign of approval, for his intention is directed towards his dispatcher; he aims to fulfill his wishes and achieve his aims.

f. The prophetic mission of Eliyahu and Elisha

Let us now return to agents of mortal dispatchers. In days gone by, it was quite common for wealthy landowners to leave the administration and operation of their estate in the hands of a representative whom they would appoint. This steward would be left alone to operate as he pleased, the general aim being to run the estate in the best possible way for the benefit of its owner. Only once in a long while would the steward present himself before the landowner at his distant dwelling place and report on his actions and his plans.

It was rare for a landowner to find a steward so loyal, so close to him, and so capable in his job that it was possible to leave the running of the estate in his hands such that he would operate in place of the owner, with almost total freedom.

A superficial observation would mislead one into identifying the steward – the agent (who would usually reside in the landowner's castle) as the landowner himself. Only someone who knew the steward as being less well-to-do than his surroundings would suggest, or who saw him performing all kinds of labors on the estate that were not appropriate to someone of the owner's apparent means, would realize that he was operating as the agent of the wealthy landowner.

The same relationship can exist in the realm of prophecy. To the extent that the prophet appears to act independently within the framework of his prophetic mission, not requiring explicit commands from God telling him what to do, we may conclude that he is a great and responsible prophet, loyal to God. A proper perception of his

actions shows them to be undertaken with their Despatcher's approval and with the intention of fulfilling His will; thus these, too, are performed "by God's word."

This is the key to understanding most of the acts performed by Eliyahu and Elisha of their own accord and at their own discretion, as part of their mission to serve as prophets for their generation. They are entrusted with the general task of guiding Israel – God's inheritance. They are loyal stewards to the "Landowner;" God hands them the keys, as it were, and relies on their judgment to do all that is necessary, in order that God's "estate" will flourish and produce worthy fruit.

We can now understand the multiplicity of miracles that we find among the acts of these two prophets. They performed them, in general, at their own discretion and without any command, in order to negate the mistaken impression that all that they do is simply human action not inspired by God's word. The miracle is proof that their actions are performed by God's word, for no mortal could generate such wonders without God acceding to the prophet's will in initiating them. The miracle, then, serves as a frequently renewed Divine stamp of approval, certifying that the "Landowner" approves of what His prophet-agent is doing.

g. Three levels in the story of the prophet's actions

We have mentioned that the prophet, within the framework of his prophetic mission, may act based on his own judgment and his human understanding as part of his partnership in the prophetic mission. We must then ask, is it possible that the prophet may be mistaken in his judgment and desire to perform some act that is not suited to or will not have any value in terms of the aim of his mission, to the extent that his actions will be undesirable in God's eyes?

When God gives the prophet explicit instructions as to what he must do, it would seem that there is no room for the prophet to make mistakes. Our quesconcerns those actions performed by the prophet without any explicit Divine command, although they are performed as part of his mission.

Our answer that it is indeed possible for mistakes to happen, for the source of the prophet's action is within himself. Since he is mortal, he is not exempt from making mistakes and from other human weaknesses. Therefore, when it comes to actions that are undertaken based on human judgment, it is possible for the prophet to be mistaken, or for there to be some deviation from the Divine will.

We may mention here three examples of prophets who tried to act in a certain way, as part of their prophetic mission, without any Divine command – and were mistaken:

- a. Shmuel is sent by God to anoint one of Yishai's sons as the future King of Israel in place of Shaul. Upon setting eyes on Eliav, the eldest, he is certain that this is the chosen son; he proclaims; "Surely God's anointed one is before Him!" (*Shmuel* I 16:6) But God rebukes him for his mistake: "Do not pay attention to his outward appearance... for it is not as man sees it: man sees [only] with his eyes, but God looks into the heart" (*ibid.* 7).
- b. David approaches Natan, the prophet, expressing a desire to build an edifice to house the Ark of the Covenant. Natan tells him, "All that is in your heart – go and do, for God is with you" (*Shmuel* II 7:3). But the same night Natan receives a prophetic message telling him that God does not want David to build the Temple.
- c. Elisha responds to the Shunamite woman whose son has died: he sends his attendant, Geichazi, armed with the prophet's staff and with instructions as to how to revive the boy. But the attempt at resuscitation fails (*Shmuel* II 4:29-31). It is only when Elisha himself comes to the home of the Shunamite woman and prays to God, and following a series of actions, that the boy opens his eyes.

Obviously, we must seek the reason for the prophet's mistake in every such instance. But whatever the reason may turn out to have been, it is clear that the prophet's word, based on his own judgment, does not become God's word except where God's view accords with his.

In the above examples God does not respond to the prophets' word, and He even reveals Himself to Shmuel and Natan, ordering them to correct their mistake. Here we must ask: is it possible that a prophet may act in a way that is not desirable in God's eyes, but that God will still allow his actions and fulfill his word? There may be different reasons for such a situation – perhaps because Divine opposition to what the prophet is doing is not absolute, or because the prophet is acting in public (unlike the three examples above), and a lack of response on God's part will harm the prophet's status in the eyes of the nation as well as the ideal of prophecy in general. In situations such as these, once again, it is difficult to say that the prophet's actions are performed "by God's word." God admittedly responds to him, even realizing the miracle that he wishes to perform, but this is no proof that God in fact agrees with the prophet's view.

It seems, then, that those actions of the prophets as part of their prophetic mission that are undertaken based upon their own human judgment may be divided into three levels: the lowest is when his action is defined as a mistake (either explicitly, in the

text, or by inference), and the prophet is required to cancel his act or to correct it. Such instances are extremely rare, but they are not difficult to identify, for the text attests to the mistake. We must explore the reason for the mistake and what we may learn from it.

The next level is where the prophet's action is not in accordance with God's will, but God nevertheless fulfills his word for some reason. Such instances are more complicated to recognize, since the prophet's action appears to be rewarded with success – why should we then think that God did not desire it? A very sensitive reading is required for this purpose, with attention paid to the WAY in which God fulfills his word, as well as to what transpires afterwards both in the actual situation and in the relationship between God and the prophet. All of this should expose the criticism of the act and lead the prophet himself to recognize it.

The highest level, fundamentally removed from the others, is when the prophet's action reflects the Divine will and achieves the objective of his mission. Such an act is performed "by God's word" even where there is no explicit command. There is no doubt that the great majority of the actions by all the prophets in *Tanakh* fall into this category.

The chapters concerning Eliyahu and Elisha in the Book of *Melakhim* tell us about two great prophets, most of whose actions as prophets were not performed by Divine command but rather on the basis of their own judgment. This fact alone speaks in praise of these prophets and teaches us something about their greatness and their loyalty to God. We need not necessarily conclude from this that every one of the stories about what they did is meant to praise the prophet. A reading of these chapters requires a degree of sensitivity with constant questioning as to whether the narrative before us includes criticism of the prophet or whether it describes his actions as bearing a resounding Divine stamp of approval.