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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #18: Eliyahu on his way to appear before Achav (18:1-16) (continued-part 3)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

5. Monologue of the wronged victim

Everything that we have said thus far has not yet explained Ovadyahu's emotional outburst. What is the connection between Eliyahu's plan, as Ovadyahu estimates it, and Ovadyahu's own fate? Why will Eliyahu's mockery of Achav lead to the king slaying Ovadyahu?

Ovadyahu believes that Eliyahu is using him as a pawn in his mockery of Achav. On his way to provoke Achav and make him angry, Eliyahu is exploiting the agency of an innocent bystander who will fulfill his mission specifically because of his faithful obedience to the prophet. But it is this innocent messenger who will pay the price of this "game" between the prophet and the king. Achav's angry outburst at Eliyahu's provocation will come down on the head of Ovadyahu, the scapegoat.

We may imagine the sort of claims that Achav will make against Ovadyahu: why did he not capture Eliyahu before the latter disappeared; why did he not bring him before the king? Either he was negligent, or he intentionally refrained from doing so out of honor for the prophet. Achav is not unaware of the fact that Ovadyahu is a God-fearing man. This being the case, it will be apparent that Ovadyahu favors the prophet over the king. Either way, he is deserving of punishment, and Achav - in a rage - is quite likely to kill him.

Thus Ovadyahu ponders his expected fate, as a result of entering the battlefield between the prophet and the king. He objects to what he perceives as an injustice in the form of the prophet's request of him. It is this sense of injustice that gives rise to his agitated speech.

Why does Ovadyahu believe that Eliyahu would want to do an injustice to a righteous man? Obviously, we need not necessarily know the reason. Perhaps this is the meaning of Ovadyahu's cry, that the injustice is being done unintentionally, and he is

going to be obliterated in a battle of the mighty in which he has no part. But a close reading of the beginning of the dialogue between the two may reveal a different answer:

(7) "IS IT YOU, my master Eliyahu?!"

Ovadyahu is asking a rhetorical question. It is clear that it is rhetorical and nothing more, since before that we read, "HE RECOGNIZED HIM, and fell upon his face." What, then, is the meaning of Ovadyahu's question? What he means is: "Are my eyes seeing correctly, that you - the prophet who has kept himself hidden for so long - have finally decided to appear?" The question is admittedly formulated in respectful language - "Is it you, MY MASTER Eliyahu?," but it still contains a note of covert criticism. When Achav finally meets with Eliyahu, he addresses a similar rhetorical question, but there the criticism is overt and clear, and the style lacks any sign of respect or subjugation:

(17) "It was, when Achav saw Eliyahu, Achav said to him: IS IT YOU, O troubler of Israel?!"

The words "my master Eliyahu" are absent from Achav's question; in their place we find a reference to the prophet as the "troubler of Israel." But the intention of the question is the same: to express grievance over the prophet's prolonged absence, whose tangible results are being played out at that very moment, with the king and his ministers searching all over "to find grass to save the horses and mules."

Eliyahu ignores the critical tone hinted at in Ovadyahu's question (unlike his encounter with Achav, where there is no possibility of ignoring the furious criticism). He treats it as though it was an informative question, answering laconically, "It is I." But he attaches an order, clarifying the meaning of his surprising appearance: "Go tell your master, Eliyahu is here!"

Attention should be paid to the dual use of the word "master," as spoken by Ovadyahu and by Eliyahu. In both cases the word "master" means Ovadyahu's master, and the question is who this master - who the true bearer of this identity - is. Ovadyahu calls ELIYAHU "my master" (as he does once again, further on, in his speech, in verse 13; he also refers to himself twice as "your servant," in verses 9 and 12). Eliyahu, however, refers to ACHAV as Ovadyahu's master (and Ovadyahu refers to him the same way himself, in his speech, in verse 10). Thus Ovadyahu is the servant of two masters. This is, indeed, his objective situation. And from Ovadyahu's perspective, it is this situation that has led him into the tragic crisis in which he now finds himself.

In our scrutiny of the dialogue between Eliyahu and Ovadyahu, we may perhaps guess that Ovadyahu hears a hint of counter-criticism in Eliyahu's response, as if to say: "You call me 'MY MASTER,' but you are actually a servant of Achav, a man of his trust; it is not I who am your master but rather Achav, with whom you cooperate. THEREFORE I tell you: Go tell YOUR MASTER, Eliyahu is here." Ovadyahu guesses that it is perhaps no coincidence that Eliyahu turns him into a messenger to Achav; it is meant as a punishment for being Achav's servant and a man of his trust. This being the case, Ovadyahu's cry of unfairness and injustice becomes more focused. It concerns the presumed accusation that Eliyahu is directing at him. He answers this accusation specifically:

(9) "How have I sinned..."

If you mean that I have sinned by being Achav's servant, the minister who is "the governor of the house" in the kingdom - does this say anything about me?

(12) "Your servant fears God since my youth!"

If that is precisely your point - if you mean that a God-fearing person should not cooperate with Achav -

(13) "Has my master not been told of what I did when Izevel killed God's prophets, and I hid a hundred of God's prophets, fifty to a cave, and I fed them bread and water?"

In other words - this cooperation brings blessing and salvation to God's prophets; it is maintained for the sake of heaven! Is Ovadyahu deserving of punishment for having risked his life, by using his respected status in Achav's house for the purpose of saving the prophets?

Perhaps there is another element in Ovadyahu's cry of injustice. His fearful hesitation to fulfill Eliyahu's command (expressed in the three-fold repetition of his fear of being killed by Achav) may make him appear cowardly to Eliyahu. Therefore he tries to defend his refusal. It is not out of fear that Ovadyahu is refusing to fulfill Eliyahu's demand; after all, "Has my master not been told of what I did..."? Ovadyahu, then, is a man of courage who is prepared to risk his status and even his life to save a hundred prophets from Izevel. But this is a case of risk to his life where there is great, tangible benefit: saving a great many prophets who would certainly have died had it not been for Ovadyahu's assistance. But why should he forfeit his life for the prophet's wish to provoke and anger Achav, his master, with no real benefit? Should he endanger himself for this purpose?

6. Structure of Ovadyahu's speech

On the basis of the above discussion, in which we attempted to reconstruct Ovadyahu's line of thinking, let us now analyze the structure of his speech. A monologue delivered by a character during the course of a biblical story is usually a polished literary gem - and Ovadyahu's speech here is no exception. The thought and careful composition behind his words explain the many repetitions that characterize this speech - as noted previously.

Ovadyahu's speech begins with a surprising introduction, formulated as a biting rhetorical question, as a harsh moral complaint against Eliyahu who - by commanding Ovadyahu - is actually going to cause him to be killed by Achav:

(9) "How have I sinned, that you are giving your servant into the hand of Achav, to put me to death?!"

The reader finds it difficult to understand what Ovadyahu means. There is no apparent logical connection between Eliyahu's preceding command and this claim. Ovadyahu's next words, therefore, are meant to clarify this opening statement so as to justify it and make it intelligible. This clarification happens in two stages: in the first, including verses 10-11 and most of verse 12, Ovadyahu explains the SECOND part of his introductory statement - "You are giving your servant into the hand of Achav, to put me to death." Why is this so, and how will Eliyahu's instruction bring about such far-reaching results - the execution of Ovadyahu by Achav? This claim must be explained, it must be substantiated in terms of realistic probability, before the first part of the initial claim - the moral argument, "how have I sinned" - can be addressed. The moral argument rests upon the probability of the scenario that Ovadyahu predicts. If the scenario is not convincing, there is no further point to the moral clarification.

On the other hand, there is reason to start the introductory statement with the sharp rhetorical question, "How have I sinned," in order to give the question its due moral weight and dramatic significance, right at the start. Thus the relationship between the opening statement and its dual clarification is chiasmic in form. Let us attempt to analyze the speech according to the structure that we have described:

Argument - part I: "How have I sinned?"->

Argument - part II: "That you give your servant into the hand of Achav, to put me to death" ->

Clarification of part II:

PAST - "As the Lord your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom to which my master has not sent to seek you, and they [all] said, 'He is not here,' and he made the kingdom and the nation swear that they had not found you." ->

PRESENT - AND NOW YOU SAY, 'GO TELL YOUR MASTER, ELIJAHU IS HERE' ->

FUTURE - And it shall be that I will go from you, and God's spirit will bear you I know not where, and I will come to tell Achav but he will not find you, AND HE WILL KILL ME."->

Clarification of part I:

PAST - "Your servant fears God from my youth. Was it not told to my master what I did when Izevel killed the prophets of God, and I hid a hundred of the prophets of God, fifty to a cave, and I fed them bread and water?

PRESENT - AND NOW YOU SAY: GO TELL YOUR MASTER, ELIJAHU IS HERE

FUTURE - AND HE WILL KILL ME."

As we can see from the above, each of the two clarifications that is given for the two parts of the opening statement comprises three stages. Stage 1 relates to the past, with a review of the facts and actions that substantiate the claim made in the opening statement. Stage 2 relates to the present (indeed, it is introduced with the expression, 'and now'), which will lead to the expected outcome in stage 3: the future. Stage 2 is of necessity identical in both clarifications: this is the stage of Eliyahu's command to Ovadyahu. Stage 3 is likewise identical in both clarifications, but its purpose differs. In the first clarification of the speech (clarification of the SECOND part of the introductory statement), it means to explain the expected PRACTICAL outcome of Eliyahu's command. Therefore there is a detailed description of the process that will lead to that result. In the second clarification (relating to the FIRST part of the opening statement), the "future" stage consists entirely of one word - "*ve-haragani*" (he will kill me). Here there is no need for elaboration: not only because the practical breakdown of the process that will lead to this result has already been presented, but also for another reason. The function of the description of the future here is to present a stark moral contrast to the lengthy description in stage 1 of the clarification, which presents as a background a description of Ovadyahu's righteousness in SAVING THE LIVES of a hundred prophets. It is specifically the terrible brevity of the single word, '*ve-haragani*,' that has the effect of creating this dramatic contrast.

We can now understand the repetitions that previously presented a problem: they arise from the dual clarification. The same phrases appear twice because they play a different role in each of the two parts of the speech. The quotation of Eliyahu's command and its result, "He will kill me," in the first part of the speech (clarification of part II of the opening statement) is meant to explain HOW this will happen, while in the other part of the clarification (part I of the opening statement) they function as a moral contrast to the description of Ovadyahu's God-fearing stance and good deeds, thereby substantiating the claim, "How have I sinned?"

The repetition of the description of his act of saving the prophets can now also be explained. The function of this description in Ovadyahu's speech is entirely clear. Its omission from the speech would detract greatly from the power of his moral argument and thereby nullify the contrast between his act of SAVING LIVES and his expectation of being PUT TO DEATH by Achav. But in the narration itself it is also important that this heroic episode be recorded, as an illustration of the preceding assertion - "Ovadyahu had great fear of God." This develops within us, the readers, the appropriate attitude towards this man, and a proper appreciation of his personality. This helps us to understand the conflict that faces him. We also understand much better Eliyahu's decision to appear first before Ovadyahu and to turn him into a go-between between himself and Achav.

Finally, two comments concerning the first part of the speech:

- i. What is the purpose of the lifelike, dramatic description of Achav's searches for Eliyahu? It serves a dual purpose. Firstly, Eliyahu's total disappearance during these years is the background to Ovadyahu's fear, expressed later on, that "God's spirit will take you [again] I know not where." Secondly, the description of Achav's desperate searches serves as the psychological background to the expected furious response: "he will kill me." Achav is frustrated by his continued failure to locate Eliyahu, and aggravating this failure by yet another disappearance will cause an outburst directed against Ovadyahu.
- ii. Ovadyahu introduces his first clarification (clarification of part I of the opening statement) with an oath: "As the Lord your God lives...." Why does he make this oath before describing Achav's search missions? Does he fear that Eliyahu may not believe his (completely credible) story? It seems that his oath is meant to apply to the entire clarification. In other words, he swears that the situation is so grave that when Eliyahu disappears (as Ovadyahu is certain that he intends to do), Achav will immediately have him executed. In fact, the oath may even be meant to apply to the description of his righteous act, as well, in the second part of the speech.

Eliyahu responds to Ovadyahu's oath at the beginning of his clarifications - "As the Lord your God lives..." - with an oath of his own, nullifying the speculative stage of Ovadyahu's words in which he predicts a repeated "disappearing act" by Eliyahu, which he fears so greatly:

(15) "As the Lord of Hosts, before Whom I stand, lives - today I shall appear before him."

And once this stage is removed from Ovadyahu's "scenario," the entire edifice collapses, and his fear of being put to death by Achav turns out to be baseless. At that point he fulfills the prophet's command without further argument:

(16) "Ovadyahu went to meet Achav, and he told him."

(to be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish