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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #21: The Second Encounter Between Eliyahu and Achav (18:16-18)

(part 2)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

4. Effect of the Confrontation with Achav on Eliyahu's Approach

What effect do Achav's words and actions have on Eliyahu, who is making his way to Shomron by God's command but with distinctly mixed feelings? In order to answer this question, we must ask ourselves how Eliyahu imagines, in his own mind, the effects of the famine and drought on the nation of Israel. How does he gauge the success of the punishment with regard to Achav - the principal cause of this punishment? How does he imagine the reaction of those who fear God to this punishment that has been meted out to the entire nation in equal measure? Obviously, the answers to these questions are speculative; the text gives us no information as to Eliyahu's thoughts on these matters. But it seems that we may guess his thoughts on the basis of the very fact that Eliyahu initiated this punishment, as well as the fact that he has insisted on maintaining it for such a lengthy period. On this basis we may assume that Eliyahu expected that his initiative would be received with understanding and support by the God-fearing people (even though they, too, suffered as a result - both from the famine and from the decrees of Izevel, which may have been a vengeful reaction to Eliyahu's oath). Likewise, Eliyahu expected his approach to help break Achav's pride, and generate in him a readiness to change his path.

The encounter with Ovadyahu reveals to Eliyahu that his path is not acceptable to the God-fearing public, and they do not identify with his decision to bring a drought upon Israel; rather, they share in the national suffering and the sense of responsibility that Achav displays towards the people.

The meeting with Achav, although at first promising from Eliyahu's perspective, shows him that the king not only fails to justify the prophet's course of action or to regret his own actions, but - on the contrary - holds the prophet responsible for the suffering of the nation, and is full of anger towards him.

Thus, these two encounters prove to Eliyahu that the way he has chosen to lead the nation to *teshuva* has failed. He must therefore seek a new path to *teshuva* and to the restoration of rain. His statement, "except by my word" (17:1), in its simplest meaning - "unless he sees that they all, or at least some, of them, do *teshuva* and cease their idolatrous worship" (in the words of Radak, *ad loc*) - is no longer tenable.

Achav's rebuke of Eliyahu, then, serves as another important stage in the process leading Eliyahu to the conclusion that his approach thus far has not led to success, nor will it do so in the future, and a different and more constructive approach (not by continued pressure in the form of drought) is needed in order to cause the nation to do *teshuva* and to fulfill God's intention, "and I shall give rain upon the land." Thus Achav himself joins all the other characters who have expressed opposition to Eliyahu's oath. Despite his direct responsibility for the prophet taking this drastic step in the first place, his words represent real proof of its failure. Clearly, one of the most obvious disadvantages of Eliyahu's approach was that it allowed the party that was truly guilty - the king - to bring serious, moral claims against the prophet, and thereby to remove the burden of responsibility from himself.

Despite what we have said above, Eliyahu could have detected in Achav signs of readiness to cooperate from this point onwards. Firstly, the situation in which the prophet finds the king going to extraordinary lengths to find fodder for his animals reveals something of Achav's psychological state. Moreover, Achav's readiness to come to the prophet alone (after the latter has summoned him through the agency of Ovadyahu), foregoing the opportunity to capture Eliyahu, is clear proof of his agreement to speak with the prophet - and even an expression of submission to him. His angry outburst, "Is it you, O troubler of Israel?!" ultimately reveals the extent to which the suffering of his people as a result of the drought has troubled him, and how greatly he yearns to bring this unbearable situation to an end.

Therefore, Eliyahu is wise enough, in response to Achav's offensive words, not to increase the tension between them so as to cause an "explosion." Rather than seething with anger over Achav's words, he defends himself against them. Instead of dwelling on the past, he turns Achav's comment - an expression of genuine pain over Israel's suffering - in a constructive direction: towards the present and the future. "And now" - let us have a useful discussion aimed at ending the "troubling" of Israel. Since it is your Ba'al worship, and that of Israel, that is the reason for the drought that is troubling Israel, let us deal with the root of the problem:

(19) "Send forth [messengers] and gather all of Israel to me at Mount Carmel, as well as the four hundred and fifty prophets of Ba'al...."

Achav, without adding a word to their exchange thus far, listens and accepts the instruction:

(20) "Achav sent [messengers] among all of the children of Israel, and he gathered the prophets to Mount Carmel."

Thus Eliyahu redirects the confrontation between himself and Achav from the painful and controversial past to a somewhat opaque future situation in which there will be cooperation between them, with a view to a positive solution to the suffering of the famine.

Thus the next narrative in the greater anthology of stories - the ceremony at Mount Carmel - begins.

5. Appendix: Comparing the confrontation between the king and the prophet in our chapter and their confrontation in Navot's vineyard (chapter 21)

We noted previously the need to compare the confrontation between Achav and Eliyahu in our story to the next and final confrontation between them that is described in the text: the dramatic meeting at Navot's vineyard (*Melakhim I 21:17-24*). This comparison will allow us to appreciate the full significance of the dialogue between the two characters in our story, and of the moral position that each of them adopts here for himself and for his opponent.

(*Melakhim I 21:17*): "God's word came to Eliyahu the Tishbi, saying:

(18) "Arise, go down to Achav, King of Israel, who is in Shomron - behold, he is in the vineyard of Navot, to which he has gone down in order to possess it.

(19) Speak to him, saying..."

(20) Achav said to Eliyahu: "Have you found me, my enemy?"
And he said: "I have found you, because you have devoted yourself to performing evil in the eyes of God.

(21) Behold, I shall bring evil upon you..."

The external framework is similar in both meetings: in both cases God commands Eliyahu to meet with Achav. In both cases Achav reacts to Eliyahu's appearance (or to his opening words) with a rhetorical question aimed at offending the prophet

("troubler of Israel"/"my enemy"), and in both cases Eliyahu's response to the king includes an accusation of the king concerning severe transgressions.

But, as in many other instances in *Tanakh*, the external similarity between the two situations conceals a fundamental contrast between them, with the external similarity merely serving as a convenient opportunity for the reader to examine the contrast in greater depth.

Firstly, the reason for the command to Eliyahu in each case is quite different. In our chapter, God's command arises from His mercy: "And I shall give rain upon the face of the earth"; Eliyahu is therefore sent to cancel his previous oath. Achav, in this case, serves as the vehicle for the realization of this Divine mercy, by virtue of the fact that he helps Eliyahu to guide the nation toward *teshuva*. But in chapter 21, it is Divine justice that lets its voice be heard; Eliyahu is sent to Achav to tell him of the terrible punishment that will befall himself and his household.

Sec, Achav's situation is quite different in each of the two occasions. In both cases the meeting takes place in a field outside the city, but the circumstances are entirely diverse. In our chapter, Achav arouses our pity - perhaps even identification - as he foregoes his royal honor and goes out alone "in the land, to all the springs of water and all the streams - perhaps we shall find grass to keep the horses and mules alive, that the livestock not be altogether destroyed" (verse 5). It seems that it is his sense of royal responsibility for the lives of the animals that are needed for the army and for the kingdom that causes him to do this.

In chapter 21, in contrast, the appearance of Achav in the vineyard of Navot, "to which he had gone down in order to possess it," following the murder of its owner, arouses anger and hatred towards the king who has so abused his power.

Thirdly - and here we come to the essence of the comparison - we must examine Achav's offensive, rhetorical question in each story. Once again we find that the questions are in fact the inverse of each other in every respect, and their inversion arises from the other differences between the two situations. In our chapter, it is Achav who is seeking Eliyahu, as Ovadyahu testifies (verse 10); it is he who comes towards him (verse 17). In chapter 21, the prophet seeks out the king. Achav certainly has no interest in meeting Eliyahu at that place and at that time. If, by his question in our chapter - "Is it you..." Achav means to say, "Here, I've finally managed to find you!" his question in chapter 21 - "Have you found me, my enemy?" - means exactly the opposite: "You have finally managed to find me." This indicates the respective positions of Achav and Eliyahu in each situation. In Navot's vineyard it is clear to Achav, to Eliyahu and also to the reader that Achav is the accused, while Eliyahu is the stern accuser. Achav speaks strictly for himself when he calls Eliyahu, "my

enemy." He is well aware of the weakness of his position before the prophet, and what his question-declaration means is, "Have you finally managed to catch me in my sinfulness, o prophet who lies in wait for me, preparing for my downfall?" Eliyahu's decisive response is accordingly: "I have found you!" - "Indeed, you have been caught red-handed, at the height of your sinfulness, and in the very place of the sin." And at that point the prophet foretells Achav's demise.

In our chapter, Achav seeks Eliyahu and goes towards him, armed with a moral position which HE PERCEIVES to be superior to that of the prophet; for this reason, he perceives himself as the prophet's accuser. He, the king, is concerned for the fate of his people, collapsing under the suffering of the drought, while the "cruel" prophet who brought the drought upon them and then disappeared, is the "troubler of Israel"! What his rhetorical question here means, as we have said, is: "Have you finally been good enough to appear - you, the prophet who has troubled Israel with your severe decrees, and whom I have pursued for so long?!" Accordingly, Eliyahu's response is almost apologetic: he does not thunder against the king who has shown such disrespect, nor does he speak of any punishment. He suffices with pointing out that it is the actions of Achav that are the true reason for the troubling of Israel, "by your abandonment of God's commandments, and going after the *Be'alim!*" (verse 19). The prophet then immediately moves on to propose productive cooperation between them: "And now, send and gather to me all of Israel, at Mount Carmel..." (verse 20).

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)