

The Eliyahu Narratives
Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #26: Carmel

Part 1: Was Eliyahu Commanded to Act as He Does? (continued)

2. "And by Your word I have done all of these things"

The conclusion of the previous *shiur* - that Eliyahu's actions were undertaken on his own initiative, but as an active partner in realizing the Divine plan - depends, to a great extent, on our interpretation of one verse later in the story – a clause from Eliyahu's prayer for fire to descend from heaven onto the altar that he has built. Let us therefore "fast-forward" to that verse now:

(36) "Lord God of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yisrael: today let it be known that You are God in Israel, and I am Your servant, AND BY YOUR WORD I HAVE DONE ALL OF THESE THINGS."

"These things" to which Eliyahu refers apparently include not only the present act - offering a sacrifice upon the altar at Mount Carmel, with the expectation that God's fire will descend from heaven and consume it - but undoubtedly also all of Eliyahu's activities in our story: the gathering of the nation and Ba'al prophets at Carmel, his proposal of the test, his goading of the prophets of Ba'al, causing them to intensify their call to Ba'al, and the series of actions aimed at bringing about the fire's descent. But since we have already concluded that all these actions were performed on Eliyahu's own initiative, without any explicit Divine command – given the absence of any record of such a command - how are we now to interpret this declaration – "AND BY YOUR WORD I have done all of these things"?

Radak comments as follows:

"The meaning of the expression 'by Your word' is: 'Let them not say that I did all that I did on my own account, and that all the times when I performed miracles were instances of witchcraft or magic. If You answer me with fire descending from the heavens, they will know that all that I do is WITH YOUR FAVOR, AND OUT OF MY FAITH IN YOU'."

Radak, then, understands "by Your word" as referring not to an explicit Divine command, but rather to Divine approbation or approval.

A different interpretation is provided by Abarbanel:

"When [Eliyahu] says, 'by Your word,' he does not mean that he did it by Divine command, but rather that he did it FOR THE GLORY OF GOD'S NAME, AND FOR THE SAKE OF THE TORAH, WHICH IS HIS WORD. And thus we learn in the *Tanchuma (Naso 28)*, that Eliyahu did what he did for the sake of God's Name, as it is written, 'by Your word [i.e., FOR Your word] I have done it'."

Metzudot adopts Abarbanel's approach (as he usually does), but clarifies it somewhat:

"'By Your word' - meaning... Are all the things that I did not... IN ORDER THAT THEY WILL OBSERVE YOUR WORD? I did not do them for my own sake."

The latter two commentators (in contrast to Radak) agree that "Your word" means "Your commandments," or "Your Torah," and both alter the meaning of the letter 'bet' that prefixes the word "*devarkha*" (Your word) so that it means not "BY" Your word, but rather "FOR THE SAKE OF" Your word. This interpretation changes the entire meaning of Eliyahu's remark. Eliyahu here speaks not about the source of authority for his actions, but rather about their purpose: to bring Israel to observance of God's commandments, which are "His word."

Finally, let us return to the beginning of Ralbag's explanation, which we addressed in last week's *shiur*:

"'And by Your word I have done all of these things' - ... Even though our assumption is that he was not commanded with regard to these things, it is still possible for him to say that he did them 'by God's word,' BECAUSE GOD TOLD HIM TO APPEAR BEFORE ACHAV AND HE WOULD GIVE RAIN UPON THE FACE OF THE LAND (18:1), and it would not be proper for Him to give rain while they continued their wickedness...."

Unlike the other commentators we have quoted here, Ralbag does not change at all the simple meaning of Eliyahu's statement - "by Your word" - "by Your command," and this "even though our assumption is that he was not commanded concerning these things." Since the prophet's actions, undertaken on his own initiative, are aimed at fulfilling God's command IN THE SPIRIT IN WHICH IT WAS INTENDED, we may say that they are done "by God's word," even if all this is not made explicit within the command. Eliyahu's profound clarification of God's command (18:1), "Go, appear before Achav, and I shall give rain upon the face of the earth," requires that several

actions be inserted in between appearing before Achav and the giving of rain, all aimed at bringing Israel to *teshuva*. The choice of these actions is left to the prophet; it is at his discretion to decide upon the most effective way to achieve *teshuva* on the nation's part under these circumstances.

This is the source of the prophet's power, and hence his glory: that he is a partner with God in bringing Israel to *teshuva*. But this is also the source of his weakness: when it comes to actions that lack a clear Divine stamp - actions which even the prophet himself will not claim to have been commanded to perform - the people can easily claim that they are not performed by God's word and do not reflect His will, having rather been contrived by the prophet. Only God's response to the prophet's initiative - in a clearly miraculous revelation that astounds and terrifies all who see it - can negate such a claim against the prophet. Eliyahu therefore prays,

"Today let it be known that You are God in Israel AND I AM YOUR SERVANT."

In other words - let it be known that all my actions are performed by "Your servant" - not for my honor or the honor of my father's house, but rather as part of my role as a servant of God, standing before You always, ready to perform Your will. And since this is the definition of the prophetic role,

"BY YOUR WORD I have done all of these things."

Eliyahu is like a servant whose master relies on his judgment, leaving him in charge of running his affairs. Therefore, all the servant's actions performed within the framework of his job are meant only to perform his master's will and to fulfill his word, even if he decides upon specific courses of action independently, without explicit instruction.

Translated by Kaeren Fish