

## [The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash](#)

### **The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion**

---

#### **Shiur #41: Carmel Part 9: Achav's "Return" to the Scene (41-42) Or: The Elliptical Nature of the Biblical Narrative**

**By Rav Elchanan Samet**

(41) "Eliyahu said to Achav: Go up, eat and drink, for there is the sound of rumbling rain.

(42) So Achav went up to eat and drink, and Eliyahu went up to the top of the Carmel..."

Simon writes as follows (in his article, p. 241):

"Since Achav first gathered the prophets and the representatives of the people to Carmel (verse 20), the narrator has not referred to or even hinted at him again; the reader might well conclude, from this consistent silence, that the king was not present at the confrontation between Eliyahu and the prophets of Ba'al. But now, suddenly, with not a word of explanation, Eliyahu turns to Achav; "Go up, eat and drink, for there is the sound of rumbling rain" (verse 41). Is this the text's way of telling us that the King of Israel was not only witness to the failure of the prophets of Ba'al and the success of God's prophet, but was even party to the general prostration of the nation and their great shouting Moreover, if the command "go up" and its fulfillment – "went up" – point back to the expression "took them down" in the previous verse [discussed in the previous *shiur*], the indirect implication is that Achav even joined those who went down to the Kishon, putting aside any hesitation as to the far-reaching implication of his presence there: lending legitimacy to the slaughter of the prophets of Ba'al."

As eloquently as Simon formulates the problem of Achav's sudden appearance towards the end of the story, having maintained a lengthy absence, so elegantly does he answer his own question:

"The narrator's... silence as to Achav's actions as Carmel... comes to teach us... [that] Achav was passive and did not intervene in any meaningful way in the course of events. Since Achav's reaction to Eliyahu's dramatic activity... is not part of the subject of the story, the narrator prefers to remain silent in this regard. Leaving one of the characters in the story in complete darkness goes against the literary norms to which we are accustomed, and our bewilderment is an expression of the fact that our expectations and our curiosity have not been satisfied. However, in this matter the biblical story is different from what has become acceptable in western stories; it should be understood only on its own terms."

Simon brings several proofs from our story to demonstrate this characteristic of the biblical story – that it fails to settle the questions that arise in the reader's mind with regard to matters lying outside of the central subject:

"Just as no explanation was previously given as to who supplied the two altars and the two oxen, and where the twelve jugs of water came from, so we will presently find no explanation as to the "attendant" who "looks out towards the sea" (verse 43) and where he entered the picture, or when it is that he catches up with his master after the marathon run to Yizre'el. Moreover... we do not hear of the attendant accompanying Eliyahu on his flight from Yizre'el, until [we are told that] Eliyahu leaves him in Be'er Sheva (19:3)!"

In these examples, we indeed see that the narrative ignores various details along the way where they do not serve the main theme. But Simon's argument is meant to apply to Achav – who, after all, is not an irrelevant detail, a minor character, in the story! Nevertheless, Simon maintains that his contention applies even when the text ignores an important element in the narrative, and for this purpose he brings a proof from the next story (p. 241):

"The narrator's perplexing disinterest in Achav is renewed at the beginning of Chapter 19... When Achav returns to Yizre'el he tells Izevel about all of Eliyahu's actions at Carmel and at the Kishon (19:1), and this – unexpectedly – concludes his role in the story. Not only is the threat to the life of the prophet uttered by a messenger of the queen, but we are told nothing at all about Achav's stand on this counter-attack on the part of the Ba'al-worship loyalists."

Again, Simon (further on in his article) offers the same answer: in Yizre'el, too, the narrator's silence as to Achav's actions tells us that Achav was passive. Although the significance of this passivity in the face of Izevel's actions may be the very opposite of

its significance in relation to the deeds of Eliyahu, the text nevertheless avoids elaborating on it since it adds nothing to the main subject.

Simon enlists further evidence of the narrator ignoring a central character in a story from the continuation of our episode (p. 242):

"Just as the narrator ignores Achav in the account of Eliyahu's confrontation with the nation, so he now ignores the nation in the description of the renewal of contact between the prophet and the king."

It should be pointed out that this disregard continues until the end of our narrative, in verse 46. In note 114, Simon offers further comment on this:

"It cannot be denied that this silence bewilders even someone who has accustomed himself to the elliptical style of the biblical text, for it would have been sufficient to include a brief note of clarification (such as, "All the nation went back – each man to his house") within verse 46... It is simply because he [the narrator] knows that his readers will not question that which we, in fact, do – because the literary norms that they and he shared were different from ours."

Simon is attempting, mainly, to explain the reason for the narrator's silence as to Achav's actions during the course of the story thus far. He explains this in terms of Achav being a secondary character in the story, such that his reaction does not belong to the main subject. "This ellipticism [of the biblical story] is especially common in relation to the appearance of secondary characters on the scene and their disappearance from it... [The biblical story retains] the freedom... to pursue a secondary character or to ignore him."

It is specifically because of this habit of the biblical narrative with regard to its secondary characters that the reader must ask himself: why does a secondary character who has disappeared from the stage, suddenly "pop up" again later on? In our case: why is Achav retrieved from the oblivion to which he was consigned, specifically towards the end of our story? What new role is being conferred on this secondary character, at this late stage?

A full answer to this question will be given only after a clarification of Eliyahu's instruction to Achav (verse 41), "Arise, eat and drink" and a discussion of the significance of Achav's acquiescence to it, as well as an exploration of the meaning of Eliyahu running before Achav's chariot. But without getting into the details of these actions, we may assert at the outset that Achav's return to the scene is meant to illuminate the great change that has taken place within – paradoxically - the

person of Eliyahu. Eliyahu's wholehearted return to his people (following the religious turnaround of all of the nation and its king, at Carmel) is dramatically completed with the reconciliation between the prophet and the king. This reconciliation is the big news with which the story concludes, and which – from the perspective of the process of reunion between prophet and nation – represents its climax.

From the point of view of the structure of the story, Achav's return to functioning in relation to Eliyahu at the end represents a closing of a circle. The story began (verse 19, continuing the confrontation of verses 17-18) with an encounter that was admittedly full of tension, but showed indications of a readiness for cooperation. This cooperation produced spectacular results in the continuation of the story, and it concludes with a renewed encounter between the prophet and the king. But this time the meeting is devoid of any tension; all that is left is the cooperation. There is also another difference between the cooperation at the beginning and that at the end. The second time, there is no practical objective to the cooperation; it is principally symbolic. Furthermore, this time not only does the king acquiesce to the demands of the prophet, but the prophet honors the king. All of this will be further clarified in the coming *shiurim*.

Translated by Kaeren Fish