

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #44: Carmel

Part 12: "God's hand was upon Eliyahu... and he ran before Achav..." (45-46)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

(44) "... And he said: Arise, tell Achav: Ready your chariot and go down, that the rain not stop you.

(45) And it was, in the meantime, that the sky had darkened with heavy clouds and wind, and there was a great rain. And Achav rode and went to Yizre'el.

(46) And God's hand was upon Eliyahu, and he girded his loins and ran before Achav, up to the entrance to Yizre'el."

1. Significance of Eliyahu running before Achav

In one of our previous *shiurim* we noted that at three important points in our story – and only at those points – we find evidence of direct Divine involvement. The first is at the beginning of this unit:

(18:1) "And it was after many days that GOD'S WORD came to Eliyahu, in the third year, saying: Go, appear before Achav, and ii shall give rain upon the face of the earth."

The second point is at the climax of the story:

(38) "GOD'S FIRE DESCENDED and consumed the burnt offering and the wood..."

And the third is in the concluding verse:

(46) "GOD'S HAND was upon Eliyahu and he girded his loins and ran before Achav, up to the entrance to Yizre'el."

In the above-mentioned *shiur* we discussed the unique nature of the Divine intervention at the climax of the story, in the form of the fire that descends upon the

altar built by Eliyahu. In this *shiur* we shall discuss the conclusion of the story, which is similarly marked with the stamp of Divine intervention.

Although it would seem at first that the third instance of God's involvement here is related to the second (since they both involve miracles), a thematic and linguistic comparison between the three sources reveals that God's involvement in the third is actually connected to the first:

Point of departure (18:1):

"GOD'S WORD CAME TO ELIYAHU...
GO, APPEAR BEFORE ACHAV
And I shall give rain upon the face of the earth."

Conclusion (18:45-46):

"...there was a great rain.
AND GOD'S HAND WAS UPON ELIYAHU...
AND HE RAN BEFORE ACHAV."

Three elements repeat themselves in these two sources:

a. the connection between God and Eliyahu ("God's word" or "God's hand"); b. as a result – the connection between Eliyahu and Achav (the command "Go appear" to him, or the act of running before him); and c. the rain (as the original purpose of the command, or as the background to the deed). But the order of these elements is not the same in both cases. When God speaks to Eliyahu, the giving of rain serves as the purpose of the Divine command, and as the aim of his appearance before Achav. Only after the prophet appears before the king and gets him to cooperate will the result be a renewal of the rainfall. Indeed, this is what happens. But at the end of the story, the rain that falls is what proceeds Eliyahu running before Achav.

The clear connection between these two points in the story and the change in their internal order (which has the effect of creating a chiasmic parallel: going to Achav, promise of rain; rain falls, running before Achav), teach us that Eliyahu's appearance before Achav at the end of the story is a sort of reconciliatory gesture of honor towards the king. Achav, who had last met with the prophet at the height of the drought and in a situation that so eloquently illustrated it, argued with the prophet and was required by him to do things that must certainly have been difficult for him. During the course of the story, up until the end, Achav fulfilled all of the prophet's demands, thereby meriting to now see the renewal of the rainfall. Now, as the

precious rain is falling, the prophet returns to the king – not in order to make demands, but to express – without words – his praise for him. Eliyahu's running before Achav, in the pouring rain that BOTH of them have so longed for, is a sort of gesture of appreciation and admiration to the king: a demonstration of respect and loyalty. Through this action, which follows on the heels of the cooperation with Achav during the events at Carmel, Eliyahu gives legitimacy to Achav's kingship.

This is the way in which Eliyahu's running is perceived in the *Melkhilta of Rabbi Yishmael (massekhta de-pischa Bo, 13)*:

"... So Eliyahu demonstrates honor towards the king, as it is written, 'God's hand was upon Eliyahu, and he girded his loins and ran before Achav'."

2. "God's hand was upon Eliyahu"

This connection that we have pointed to, between Eliyahu's appearance before Achav at the beginning of the story and his running before him at its conclusion, raises the need to examine the relationship between "God's word" that came to Eliyahu at the outset and "God's hand" that was upon him at the end. Are these two instances of Divine intervention in the development of the story to be regarded as equivalent, or are they different from one another?

It is perhaps the very connection that we are presently discussing that leads some commentators to regard "God's hand" as a regular prophetic command. Ralbag writes:

"'God's hand was upon Eliyahu' – this means that GOD'S WORD HAD ALREADY COME TO HIM, [telling him] that he should do this – i.e., to gird his loins and run before Achav until Achav reached Yizre'el."

The expression "God's hand" may, indeed, be interpreted as referring to verbal prophecy. This is the case, for example, in II *Melakhim* 3:15-16 – "God's hand was upon him, and he said: So says God...." There are several more examples from the Book of *Yechezkel* and from other sources in *Tanakh*.

But most of the commentators reject this interpretation of the verse, preferring the approach adopted by *Targum Yonatan*:

"A spirit of valor emanating from God was with Eliyahu."

Accordingly, Rashi writes:

"'God's hand' – a spirit of valor emanating from God. He [Eliyahu] was garbed in strength so as to run by foot before the chariot."

Similarly, the Radak explains:

"'God's hand' – ...as interpreted by the *Targum*... that he was given extra strength and valor. For Achav had already started riding in his chariot, but Eliyahu went after him by foot and caught up with him, and then ran before him up until Yizre'el."

The same idea is echoed by the Abarbanel (whom we shall quote presently), the Ba'al ha-Metzudot, the Malbim, and other commentators. Indeed, the expression "God's hand" is used frequently in *Tanakh* as an expression of GOD'S STRENGTH as revealed in the physical reality.

The difference between these two commentaries – that offered by the Ralbag and the one preferred by those who disagree with him – is not limited to the understanding of the expression "hand of God" at the beginning of verse 46 (i.e., whether it refers to prophecy or to a special "spirit of valor" from God). This exegetical controversy also gives rise to different ways of perceiving the continuation of the verse. To the Ralbag's view, it would seem that Eliyahu's actual running before Achav's chariot is nothing out of the ordinary; certainly not something that would usually seem impossible. This was simply Eliyahu's fulfillment of the instruction that he had received from God.

As the other commentators see it, Eliyahu's running was something altogether exceptional - a clear deviation from normal human ability. Rashi highlights the fact that Eliyahu ran BY FOOT before a chariot drawn by horses. The Radak adds to this that Eliyahu started running only after Achav had already begun to ride away, and Eliyahu managed to catch up to him – on foot. He also adds that the prophet ran before him "up to Yizre'el." We may add to the astonishment that his explanation conveys by noting the great distance that Eliyahu ran (about twenty-five kilometers), through the pouring rain, which only made conditions more difficult. Were it not for the "hand of God" – in the sense of a "spirit of valor emanating from God" – Eliyahu could not have roused himself to such action nor succeeded in it.

The Abarbanel, criticizing the Ralbag's approach, explains most eloquently the dispute between the two exegetical approaches:

"God's hand was..." – some commentators have written that 'God's hand' mentioned here was a prophecy that came to Eliyahu, commanding him to run before Achav. With all due respect, what they say in this regard is not correct. For Eliyahu did not receive any word nor any prophecy after God told him, 'Go appear before Achav....' When he was atop Mount Carmel, where he acted 'with fire and water' and performed miracles and wonders, he received no prophecy about any of them. [Hence it is not logical that specifically here he would experience a prophecy.]

Rather, the "hand of God" mentioned here is the strength that God gave in his heart – Eliyahu being an elderly nazirite, a weakened recluse – to run before Achav, wanting to declare "my foot before his chariot is like a deer," [see II *Shemuel* 2:18], since Achav was riding upon his horse, and he maintained his pace until he came to Yizre'el.

Even if we do not accept the Abarbanel's depiction of Eliyahu as elderly and weak, it is clear that even in the case someone who is young and fit, there are some activities for which this healthy physical condition can only serve as a good basis for the special Divine aid that will be required. So it was in the case of Eliyahu's journey to Mount Chorev for forty days and forty nights, sustained by the single meal that he ate at the angel's command in the wilderness of Be'er Sheva (19:7-8). And the same may be said of his running before Achav from the top of Carmel to the city of Yizre'el in the middle of a downpour. It is with regard to such instances as these that the prophet declares:

"Youths shall grow faint and weary and young men shall stumble and fall; but they who wait upon God shall renew their strength; they shall rise up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not grow weary, they shall walk and not grow faint." (*Yishayahu* 40:30)

This ability on the part of "they who wait upon God" – to run without growing weary, faster and further than all the youths and strong young men (who do not wait upon God) – is a gift bestowed by God from His own strength, as it were. This idea arises from the verses immediately preceding those quoted above:

"... the everlasting God, the Lord, Creator of the ends of the earth, does not grow faint, nor does He tire; there is no searching of His understanding. He gives power to the faint, and to the powerless he increases strength." (40:28)

Hence we must conclude that the "hand of God" that was upon Eliyahu, although this is not stated explicitly and we are told only about an act that would have required

extraordinary human strength, means that a gift of Divine strength was bestowed upon the prophet when he decided, of his own accord, to perform a great deed – or, as Rambam puts it in his *Moreh Nevukhim*:

"A person is accompanied by Divine aid, stirring and urging him to perform some great, valuable good... such that he finds WITHIN HIMSELF a stirring and urging to action... the purpose of this strength is to arouse that valiant person to action."

3. A moment of blessed rest

While the great rain falling serves as the BACKGROUND to Eliyahu running before Achav, we would be underestimating this act were we to assume that it results from an explicit Divine command – as the Ralbag would suggest. At this point, the prophet is reconciled with his people and their king. Therefore, just as Eliyahu offered a lengthy prayer (accompanied by prolonged self-affliction) in order for the rain to fall immediately, thereby giving expression to the change in his attitude towards THE NATION, so we now expect him to give some practical expression, THROUGH HIS OWN ACTION, to the change in his attitude towards the king. And this action is his running before Achav. The Abarbanel is correct in his observation that after having performed all of his actions atop Carmel without any explicit Divine command, after having succeeded – at his own initiative – in causing the entire nation to repent by means of the test at Carmel and having restored God's mercy towards His nation, Eliyahu has no need for an explicit Divine command at this point to run before the king's chariot.

The description of the "hand of God" that was upon Eliyahu is meant to explain Eliyahu's ability to perform such an extraordinary and difficult feat. But we may add to this that at the conclusion of the story, Divine intervention is mentioned as a sort of SEAL OF DIVINE APPROVAL to the reconciliation and harmony symbolized by Eliyahu's act. Just as the fire that descended upon Eliyahu's altar immediately after he offered his prayer expressed God's approval of his actions at Carmel, so the Divine aid granted him in his running, and its emphasis in the text, express God's approval of Eliyahu's final act in this story: the gesture of honor towards the king.

Attention should be paid to this concluding picture, in which we see Eliyahu running before Achav's chariot in the driving rain. This is the only image in all of the stories of Eliyahu in which total harmony prevails among the prophet, his nation, and their king, and between all of these and God. Eliyahu is a prophet whose path is strewn with difficult battles; he fights on every front. He challenges his nation and the

royalty, and he is also in conflict with his Sender. There is one sole moment of blessed rest in all of his endeavors, at a moment when his prophetic activity has succeeded in a way that every prophet dreams to succeed: in restoring the heart of the nation of Israel to God and God's kindness towards Israel. What joy can be compared to that of a prophet who has succeeded in that task? We may permit ourselves to imagine this wondrous running of Eliyahu before Achav's chariot, his heart overflowing with happiness and satisfaction at having arrived at a situation where he is able to show the proper respect to the king of Israel. This act represents Eliyahu's full and whole-hearted return to his people.

The great rain not only fails to halt his running and to dampen his joy; it is the very testimony to the Divine approval of all that he has done. The rain itself is the reason for the joy and the running.

The rain coming down from heaven, the royal chariot progressing through the mud, the drenched prophet with girded loins, running joyfully and without tiring before the chariot, God's hand replenishing his strength – this is the most perfect and harmonious image that exists throughout the chapters of Eliyahu's activity, and one of the happiest moments in all of the history of prophecy.

We sense that this picture contains the first germ of Eliyahu as he is destined to be revealed in the future: as the one to restore the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; the prophet who comes to bring peace to the world. Eliyahu, as revealed in *Sefer Malakhi* as the bearer of tidings of redemption, and in the legends of *Chazal* as an old man who loves Israel, sows the seeds of this future activity in our chapter, by running before the chariot of the king of Israel in the middle of the pouring rain.

Translated by Kaeren Fish