

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #46: Chorev Part 2: Eliyahu's Flight (1-4)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

1. Izevel's threat

(19:1) "Achav recounted to Izevel all that Eliyahu had done, and that he had put all the prophets to death by the sword."

Achav's recounting to Izevel, his wife, of "all that Eliyahu had done," is at once the point of departure for our story and the connecting link between the present narrative and the previous one. The character of Achav, and his motives in telling Izevel what had happened, are given no further treatment in our story (and no unequivocal conclusion can be drawn from the indirect reporting of the verse itself); hence, we shall move on to address the results of his report:

(2) "Izevel sent a messenger to Eliyahu, saying: So shall the gods do to me, and more, if I do not end your life like the life of one of those by this time tomorrow."

Why does Izevel postpone the death sentence for Eliyahu by a whole day, and why does she inform him of it in advance? By doing so, she leaves open the possibility of his escape!

In the *Midrash Shemuel* (*parasha* 22), Rabbi Yehuda, in the name of Rabbi Simon, draws a parallel between this act of Izevel and a somewhat similar act by Shaul, who DOES NOT inform David in advance of his plan to kill him:

(I *Shemuel* 19:11) "Shaul sent messengers to the house of David, to guard him and to kill him in the morning."

As disapproval for Shaul's act, Rabbi Yehuda in the name of Rabbi Simon expresses praise for Izevel:

Concerning that which is written, "Because you have been more tumultuous than the nations surrounding you... and have not acted [even] in accordance with the practices of the nations that are around you..." (*Yechezkel* 5:7), Rabbi Yehuda said in the name of Rabbi Simon: You have not acted even as the worst (among the nations). Izevel was the daughter of pagan priests, but she sent to Eliyahu and told him "By this time tomorrow I shall end your life like the life of one of them," THEREBY LEAVING HIM AN OPPORTUNITY TO ESCAPE. But here, "Shaul sent messengers...." Thus, you [the nation of Israel] have not acted even as the worst of the nations.

This view of Izevel's motives – i.e., that she wants to leave Eliyahu an opportunity to escape - seems difficult to accept as an accurate interpretation of the literal text. Along with the threat, Izevel attaches an oath to her gods: "So may the gods do to me, and more." If she really means to allow Eliyahu to escape, her oath is meaningless.

A different possibility as to Izevel's motives may arise from the story of the Vineyard of Navot, in chapter 21. A question that is somewhat similar to our question arises in relation to the complicated plot that Izevel weaves around Navot, to put him to death by means of a false, staged verdict with the hidden cooperation of the elders of his city. The Radak comments as follows (on verse 10):

"We must ask: Since the princes and nobles knew that this matter was false, why did they need all of this [procedure of a court case]? They could simply put him to death at Izevel's command, with no need for testimony or anything else!

The answer is... [THAT] IF IZEVEL WANTED TO KILL HIM WITHOUT ANY JUDGMENT, SHE WOULD NOT BE ABLE TO DO IT... IF [ACHAV AND IZEVEL] WERE TO KILL AND SEIZE WITHOUT JUDGMENT, THE NATION WOULD REBEL AGAINST THEM, for they would not allow a king to reign over them who did not rule by justice... Therefore Izevel sought some ruse whereby Navot could legally be put to death...."

In light of the above explanation by the Radak, we may similarly explain in our chapter that Izevel was obligated to "organize" Eliyahu's death in a legal manner – i.e., through a "just judgment" and by presenting official, open accusations. Izevel is aware of the limitations of her power; she is not able to kill Eliyahu through an act of royal despotism. Masses of subjects would object to such an act, and they would rebel. Therefore she must prepare Eliyahu's execution in an apparently legal way, so as to silence the claims that Eliyahu's supporters might raise. For this purpose she

needs the cooperation of Achav, her husband, and the legal authorities, and all of this will take some time. (The Malbim suggests that Achav's account of Eliyahu's actions had been sympathetic towards the prophet, and Izevel wanted time to convince him that Eliyahu was indeed deserving of death.)

This, then, is the reason for the delay, and for the messengers. In other words, this is a declaration of Izevel's intentions. She will not kill Eliyahu in secret, by means of covert executioners. She intends to put him to death openly, in an official, open court case. She wants his death to repay – measure for measure – his execution of 'her' prophets of Ba'al. She expresses this explicitly: "I shall end your life LIKE THE LIFE OF ONE OF THEM." Just as they were killed openly, so Eliyahu will be killed openly. And since the Kingdom of Israel, with its legal and executive institutions, is the plaintiff, as it were, and consolidated against him, Izevel has no fear that he will escape. It is possible that Izevel even took the trouble to post guards around the area where Eliyahu was located. However, as we know, Izevel's plan fails, and Eliyahu escapes:

(3) "He [Eliyahu] saw this, and he arose, and ran for his life...."

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish