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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #48: Chorev

Part 2: Eliyahu's Flight (1-4) (continued)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

3. "Eliyahu – who made decrees that the Holy One fulfilled... how could he fear Izevel?"

As we read of Eliyahu's hurried flight in the face of Izevel's threat – "He saw this and he arose and went for his life and came to Be'er Sheva..." – we cannot but echo the question posed by the Zohar (I, 209a):

But Eliyahu – who would decree and the Holy One would fulfill his decree; who decreed concerning the heavens that they would not give rain and dew – how could he fear Izevel who sent to him, as it is written, "At this time tomorrow I shall make your life like the life of one of them" – and immediately he was afraid and fled for his life?

The Zohar answers the question as follows:

It may be established that righteous people do not seek to trouble God [to provide them with special protection] in cases of common, obvious danger. Like Shemuel, who protested (*IShemuel* 16:2), "How can I go? Shaul will hear

of it and will kill me!" and God told him, "You shall take a heifer with you...." Likewise here, Eliyahu – seeing that danger was clear and immediate – did not wish to trouble his Lord.

But this answer, seeking to explain the behavior of these two great prophets (Shemuel and Eliyahu) in situations of danger, gives rise to a real difficulty. The threat facing each of these prophets was not an incidental danger that happened to arise in the course of their mission as Divine agents. Were this the case, we could indeed argue that since this was a common sort of danger, they would be obligated to take the appropriate precautions. But the danger involved in each of the instances in question arose from opposition to the very prophetic mission itself, and the opponents who represented the "common and obvious danger" were the very people against whom the prophetic mission was directed, and they therefore sought to sabotage it! How is it possible that a prophet should be forced to fulfill his mission in a roundabout manner, or to flee from it, rather than being able to stand squarely against his opponents? Should a request of God that He protect His emissaries against those seeking to destroy them and silence the word of God that they bear, at the very time that they are trying to fulfill their mission, be considered as "troubling" God?

There are many instances in *Tanakh* that would seem to contradict this theory. The prophets are not afraid to carry out their missions – even where the danger to their lives is clear and predictable. Eliyahu himself has appeared before Achav and before his son, Achazyahu, with stern messages that may put him at risk. We understand the readiness of the prophets to take these risks on the assumption that the very imposition of the mission upon the prophet includes a Divine promise to protect him from those plotting against him and his message. Indeed, God tells Yirmiyahu explicitly, at the outset of his prophetic endeavor (*Yirmiyahu* 1:17-19):

As for you – gird your loins and arise and speak to them all that I shall command you; do not be dismayed at them, lest I dismay you before them. Behold, I have made you this day a fortified city and a pillar of iron and walls of brass against the whole land, against the kings of Yehuda and its princes, its kohanim, and the people of the land. They shall fight against you but shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says God, to deliver you.

Indeed, on several occasions Yirmiyahu was in fact in danger of his life, but he did not desist from prophesying.

The Netziv provides insight as to a proper understanding of Shemuel's fear of fulfilling his prophecy by noting the context in which the dialogue between God and the prophet takes place:

A person who is utterly devoted to God, with no will of his own at all, should not fear anything – even common and obvious danger... But Shemuel sensed in himself some sadness concerning Shaul, as we know, and could not muster joy at the fulfillment of the Divine command, bringing him to love of God and closeness to Him. For this reason he asked, justifiably ["How shall I go? ..."], and the Holy One answered him, appropriately ["Take a heifer..."].

Thus, it is only when the prophet performs his mission without identifying with it, that it is appropriate that he fear any common danger. And then, God too allows for this (even though He does not thereby justify the reason for the prophet's need for precautionary measures).

Let us now return to the Zohar's question concerning Eliyahu. Here, too, we may say that were Eliyahu completely agreeable to his prophetic mission, and were he prepared to continue in his efforts to return Israel to serving God, then even in the face of Izevel's threat to his life – with no opposition on the part of the nation – he would be able to muster the strength to face her without fear, and he would merit Divine protection from this danger. Then the promise made to Yirmiyahu would be fulfilled in him, too: "Behold, I have made you this day a fortified city and a pillar of iron and walls of brass against the whole land... for I am with you, says God, to deliver you."

But Eliyahu does not wish to continue his prophetic mission. Without the joy of fulfilling God's command, with no sense of identification with his endeavor, he does not feel safe against Izevel's threats. Therefore he justifiably senses the obvious, immediate danger, and flees for his life to Be'er Sheva.

We may now conclude that it is not the flight from Izevel that gives rise to Eliyahu's despair and his wish to die; in fact, the reverse is the case. Eliyahu's despair of his role and of *AmYisrael*, to whom his mission is addressed, comes first; it is this despair that causes him to fear and to flee from Izevel.

4. Appendix: "A man and not God"

As we noted at the end of the previous *shiur*, this moment – when Eliyahu sits, alone and despairing, under the broom tree and asks to die – represents the lowest point in his prophetic career. But even here, where it seems that the text is making no attempt to speak in the prophet's favor, describing him instead as wallowing in the depths of despair, the Midrash finds something good to say about him.

The Midrash Tanchuma (*Bereishit* 7) presents a lengthy indictment of great rulers who considered themselves gods: Hadrian, the Roman Caesar, the King of Tzor – to whom an entire chapter (28) in the book of *Yechezkel* is devoted in light of his declaration (*Ibid.* 2), "I AM GOD; I sit in God's seat in the heart of the seas," while in truth "YOU ARE A MAN, NOT GOD, although you have set your heart as the heart of God." The Midrash continues this rebuke by quoting, as the shining example of the opposite of the King of Tzor, the quintessential Israelite character who is the most elevated above humans and the closest to God – Eliyahu, the prophet:

"'You are a man, not God' – the Holy One said:

I revive the dead and Eliyahu revived the dead – BUT HE DID NOT SAY, 'I AM GOD.'

I bring rain and Eliyahu brought rain;

I withhold rain and Eliyahu did too, as it is written – 'If there be during these years any rain or dew except by my word' (17:1).

I brought down fire and sulphur upon Sodom, and Eliyahu did too, as it is written; 'If I am a man of God, let fire descend from the heaven' (II *Melakhim* 1:12), BUT HE DID NOT SAY, 'I AM GOD.

YET YOU SAY, 'I AM GOD; I SIT IN GOD'S SEAT'?!

If you say that it is because you lived long [according to the Midrash, this King of Tzor concerning whom Yechezkel prophesied at the time of the destruction of the Temple was the same king who reigned in the days of David] – he [Eliyahu] lives and continues to live until the resurrection of the dead.

CONCERNING GOD it is written, 'His throne is sparks of fire' – *Daniel* 7:9), and CONCERNING ELIYAHU it is written, 'Behold – a chariot of fire and horses of fire' (II *Melakhim* II 2:11).

CONCERNING GOD it is written, 'God's way is in the tempest and the storm' (*Nachum* 1:3), while CONCERNING ELIYAHU it is written, 'Eliyahu ascended in a storm to the heavens' (II *Melakhim* 2:11).

FINALLY: 'HE ASKED FOR HIMSELF TO DIE' – YET YOU DECLARE, 'I AM GOD'?!"

The Midrash draws six parallels between Eliyahu and God. Four are related to miracles that Eliyahu brought about, and these are quoted to prove that despite the prophet's immense power to perform acts that can generally be performed only by God, Eliyahu never claimed to be God. The Midrash awards special emphasis to the fact that Eliyahu did not die a normal mortal death, but rather "lives and continues to live until the resurrection of the dead." His passing from the mortal world – to which the Midrash devotes another two comparisons to God – was in a wondrous ascent in a storm to the heavens, in a chariot of fire with horses of fire. But all of these proofs are only meant to emphasize the negative assertion: Eliyahu did such-and-such BUT DID NOT SAY, "I am God." Finally, the Midrash seeks out a final and decisive positive proof that Eliyahu saw himself as a mortal and not as God. What is this proof? What is the most human situation in which Eliyahu is described? We must answer: the scene in which he sits, alone and despairing beneath the broom tree in the wilderness, asking

to die. (The Midrash may also be alluding to the continuation of the verse – "For I am no better than my forefathers.")

This is the highest praise of the great figures of *Tanakh*; this is what makes them our moral guides and shining examples for all of humanity: for all of their elevated greatness, far above our understanding, they never cease being human. And for this reason, they are susceptible to human mistakes and weaknesses. Examples of this in *Tanakh* are meant not only to teach us a lesson but also to lend the characters in question a human dimension, and thereby to imbue them with the power to serve as our models.

Translated by Kaeren Fish