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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #49: Chorev

Part 3: The Double Revelation of God's Angel to Eliyahu (5-8)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

1. First revelation vs. second revelation

God's angel is revealed twice to Eliyahu, and the descriptions of the revelations and their content are almost identical in both cases:

First revelation:

Eliyahu's state: (5) "HE LAY DOWN and he slept under a broom tree

Description of angel's revelation: And behold, an ANGEL TOUCHED HIM

Substance of angel's message: AND HE SAID to him: ARISE, EAT

Eliyahu's response: (6) He looked, and behold, by his head... SO HE ATE AND HE DRANK..."

Second revelation:

Eliyahu's state: ... "And he LAY DOWN again.

Description of angel's revelation: (7) Then God's ANGEL came back again AND TOUCHED HIM

Substance of angel's message: AND HE SAID: ARISE, EAT, for the way is still far off for you.

Eliyahu's response: (8) So he arose AND ATE AND DRANK, and he went on the strength of that meal..."

If we compare the wording in each case, we see that most of the differences arise from the fact that the second revelation is a repetition of the first; hence the expressions "again" and "came back." The place where Eliyahu lies ("under a broom tree") is omitted in the second revelation because it is superfluous. Likewise, the element of surprise upon seeing the angel ("Behold, an angel...") and discovering the cake and the cruse of water ("behold, there was a cake...") is also absent the second time.

There is only one substantial difference between the two revelations. In the second one, the angel adds that which was omitted the first time: the purpose of the eating which he commands Eliyahu, "Arise, eat, for the way is too far for you." As a result, Eliyahu's response to the second command relates to this new element, as we shall presently explain.

There are two differences between Eliyahu's first response and his second. The first thing that strikes us in his response to the second command is that "He arose." This was not mentioned in his response to the first command, since there the command, "Arise," was meant in the sense of "wake up," so as to eat. Eliyahu could continue to lie (or lounge, or sit) while eating. There is, therefore, no need for the text to note explicitly that he "arose," since the very fact that we read, "He looked... and he ate and drank" tells us that he awoke from his sleep. But in the second command,

the instruction, "Arise," is meant in contrast to Eliyahu's sitting position; it means "to get up." This interpretation arises firstly from the fact that we are not told that Eliyahu slept in between the two revelations, only that he lay down; and secondly, that getting up on his feet is a necessary preparation for the journey.

The second, striking difference between Eliyahu's two responses is that after Eliyahu eats and drinks for the second time (apparently partaking of the same cake and water, this time finishing them), we are told, "He went on the strength of that meal for forty days and forty nights." This accords with the angel's warning that "the way is still far off from you."

The almost identical repetition obviously invites the question: why? Why could the angel not tell Eliyahu immediately, in his first revelation, that he must eat and drink for the purposes of a lengthy journey, thereby sparing the need for a whole separate revelation?

Our assumption here is that Eliyahu's eating had one, single purpose - preparing him for a long walk in the desert, but this purpose becomes apparent retroactively, only after the angel's second appearance. But this assumption is not necessarily accurate. Perhaps each revelation has its own individual purpose.

Clearly, if we seek to discover the purpose of the angel's first revelation, we must connect it to the last thing that we learned about Eliyahu in the previous unit: i.e., the fact that Eliyahu wanted to die and asked God to take his soul.

Earlier, we explained Eliyahu's request of God as an expression of despair over his mission, and as a request to be relieved of prophecy. How is this request related to the first appearance of the angel?

The answer would appear to be simple. The angel who appears to Eliyahu and commands him, "Arise, eat," is expressing God's refusal of Eliyahu's plea to be relieved of his role as prophet and die. The angel answers him, as it were: "You will not die; you will live!" In other words, Eliyahu is required to continue in his mission as prophet. For this purpose he must return to the ways of life, he must awaken, eat and drink, and stand up with renewed vigor, ready to serve his God, as in the past. Perhaps the angel touching him also expresses the transmission of renewed Divine strength.

Prophecy is not only a privilege granted to the prophet – one that he may take on of his own free will or reject. It is a commandment to the prophet – like any other commandment addressed to any other Jew. The prophet has no right to dismiss it. Indeed, God has never accepted a "resignation" from any prophet, nor any request to be relieved of a prophetic mission. This was the case from the time of Moshe – the father of all prophets – until the time of Yirmiyahu. Eliyahu, even in our chapter, does not succeed in becoming an exception to this rule. His profound despair, under the broom tree, and his request to die, are countered by the command of the angel, who touches him and instructs him quite unequivocally, "Arise, eat!" If Eliyahu were to acquiesce to this demand and its implications, he would depart right then, on the strength of THIS meal, heading back north towards his people and his land, to continue his task of bringing *Am Yisrael* back to God. But this is not what he does.

How does Eliyahu respond to the angel's command and its implications? He obeys the command, but only on the literal level, and even then – only in the narrowest sense. He fulfills the demand, "Arise, eat!" – as we read afterwards, "He ate and drank" – but he does not get up on his feet; he appears to conduct his meal under the tree, either sitting or lounging. Above, we explained that Eliyahu interpreted the instruction to "arise" in its narrow sense – meaning to wake up. In this sense, Eliyahu did indeed fulfill the command. But did he accept the implications of the angel's command concerning the continuation of his prophetic role and his return to his country?

If we are correct in our understanding of the significance of the angel's command, the answer to the question is clear: Eliyahu does not respond to the implications of the command. Not only does he not actually "arise," but after eating and drinking a little – so as to fulfill the letter-of-the-law requirements of the

command – he lies down again. What is the meaning of this behavior? Eliyahu maintains his refusal to return home; he wants to remain in his isolation under the broom tree in the desert. This being the case, the argument between the prophet and God has only just begun. If the prophet is not ready to return northward, to his home, to continue his prophetic service, he will not be granted a reprieve allowing him to languish and die in the burning desert heat. He will be sent southward, with the explicit information that "the way is still far for you." He will face new arguments and instructions that he cannot begin to imagine.

Therefore the angel appears to Eliyahu – still lying in the same spot under the tree – a second time. Corresponding to "He lay down AGAIN," we read: "God's angel appeared to him AGAIN, A SECOND TIME, and touched him." The Divine demand does not let up on Eliyahu; the prophet's insistence is met with insistence on the part of the angel, who even adds a new demand: "For the way is still far for you." In other words, "If you are not ready to set off northward, as the first command suggested, prepare yourself for a long and surprising journey in the opposite direction."

Thus, the second revelation is not a clarification of the first (as we originally assumed); on the other hand, it is also not a substantially different revelation. Both turn on the same axis: the argument between a despairing prophet seeking to end his mission and his life, and his Sender, Who wants him to continue serving as a prophet and to return to his land and his people. The first revelation is the first stage of the argument: the angel's announcement that his "resignation" has been refused. The second revelation – the result of Eliyahu's stubborn stance – is a preparation for the continuation of the argument on a different level: the confrontation at Mount Chorev.

The deliberate echoing of the first revelation in the wording of the second may now be understood in terms of the common goal that they share; both are aimed at turning the prophet back from the path that he is pursuing, and they represent two stages of the same argument.

But why is Eliyahu led to Mount Chorev, and what is the meaning of the events that take place there? We shall address these questions in the coming *shiurim*.

Translated by Kaeren Fish