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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #52: Chorev

Part 4: "He Announced Rebuke at Sinai, and Judgments of Vengeance at Chorev" (9-10)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

1. God's question

(9) ... "And behold, God's word came to him, and He said to him: What do you seek here, Eliyahu?"

The Radak interprets this question as follows:

The reason for the question is that God starts talking to him in order to hear his response, as is customary in human speech....even though He knows man's heart. Similarly, "He said to him, Where are you?" (*Bereishit* 3:9); "What is that in your hand?" (*Shemot* 4:2). Likewise, the meaning of "What do you seek here?" is "Why did you leave your place; what are you looking for here?"

The Ba'al ha-Metzudot adopts a similar interpretation:

The question comes in the manner of a person's speech, asking IN ORDER TO ENTER INTO CONVERSATION WITH HIM. Likewise we find (*Bereishit* 4:9), "Where is Hevel, your brother?"

However, we must still seek – not only here, but in every instance where God asks a person something "in order to enter into conversation with him" – the hidden meaning behind the specific question that is chosen to introduce the dialogue. The question is always connected to the essence of the conversation that it serves to introduce, and it hints to the direction that the dialogue will take. If the person to whom the question is addressed is able to sense its intention, he can know in advance what God is going to ask of him.

What, then, hides behind the question that God asks Eliyahu here? In light of all that we have discussed in previous *shiurim* concerning Eliyahu's journey into the

desert and the significance of him being led to Mount Chorev, it is clear that this question is meant as a covert rebuke and a gentle attempt to lead him to change his path. Indeed, this is what arises from *Midrash Eliyahu Zuta* (chapter 8) which we quoted in a previous *shiur*:

When the Holy One said to Eliyahu, "What do you seek here, Eliyahu?" Eliyahu should have answered: "Master of the universe, they are Your children, the children of Your faithful ones – Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, who performed Your will in the world..."

It would seem that the emphasis, in God's question, is on the word "here." However, while some commentators view it as a negative emphasis (i.e., "here" – as opposed to some other place), others view the emphasis in the positive sense ("here" – specifically here). The Malbim, for example, takes the first view:

Is a prophet not meant to be amongst the people, to reprove and to prophesize, rather than isolating himself in the desert and in the mountains?

The question, then, is – "Why are you here – and not amongst the nation?" Thus, the question refers to Eliyahu's journey into the desert and its deepest cause: "If only I could be in the wilderness, a lodge for wayfarers, that I may abandon my nation" (*Yirmiyahu* 9:1). The question, clearly, is meant as a rebuke.

The problem with the Malbim's interpretation is that the word "here," to his view, does not refer specifically to Mount Chorev, but rather to the whole great desert, as the place of Eliyahu's flight and isolation. But, as we noted in the previous *shiur*, there is special significance in Eliyahu being led specifically to Mount Chorev, and God's question would appear to hint to that special meaning. This question appears to be aimed at clarifying whether Eliyahu has understood and accepted what is being hinted to him in the fact that he is led to Chorev. What it means is, "Have you understood why you were brought here, Eliyahu? Has this hint had any effect on you and changed your position?"

Therefore, to supplement the Malbim's view we may quote the commentary of Rav Moshe Alshikh, who explains most eloquently the importance of the emphasis on Mount Chorev in God's question:

"And behold, God's word came to him... What do you seek here, Eliyahu?" – As though to say, "Behold, this place – that which took place here is the opposite of your intention. For there Moshe entered, by God's command (*Shemot* 33:22), "I shall place you in the cleft of the rock, and I shall place My

hand over you until I have passed over," and there (*Shemot* 34:6), "God passed over his face..." – listing the thirteen attributes of Divine mercy... For it was in that cave that God was revealed to Moshe as He passed over before him, and He told him the thirteen attributes of mercy by which He shows compassion to Israel. And therefore God said to Eliyahu, "What do you seek here, Eliyahu" – for your intention is the opposite of what once took place here. IN OTHER WORDS: HAVE YOU REPENTED OF THAT TRAIT; WILL YOU NOW ASK FOR MERCY AND LONG-SUFFERING PATIENCE TOWARDS MY CHILDREN? What God sought was that Eliyahu would reverse his intention, such that God could commit Himself to do the same, and exercise long-suffering patience and have mercy upon His people.

2. Eliyahu's response

How does Eliyahu respond to God's question? His answer is set out in a lengthy declaration composed of six brief clauses:

"He said: I have been zealous for the Lord God of Hosts,
For the children of Israel have abandoned Your covenant,
They have destroyed Your altars
And put Your prophets to death by the sword
And I am left alone
And they seek my life, to take it." (10)

Clearly, in order to match Eliyahu's answer here with God's preceding question, such that his answer will indeed be a response to what he was asked, we must return to our discussion from the previous section as to the intention of the question. Any commentator who proposes a certain meaning for God's question must go on to explain Eliyahu's answer as addressing that meaning.

Those who regarded Eliyahu's journey to the desert as a flight from his prophetic mission and a sign of despair over the nation of Israel, and his being led to Mount Chorev as a hint to Eliyahu to change his view towards the nation, and who then go on to explain God's question as a concealed rebuke to the prophet and an invitation to present his stand in the argument, will have no difficulty revealing, within Eliyahu's response, a harsh condemnation of Israel, with four accusations listed as a single continuum. The entire nation here bears responsibility for the guilt of Queen Izevel, since they do not protest against her policies. Eliyahu attributes even the threat to his life to the nation as a whole: "They seek my life, to take it." The plural form here refers to "the children of Israel," against whom three other accusations have already been presented.

The seamless juxtaposition of this final clause with the preceding ones shows that what happened in the interim, between the events of the previous clauses and the events of the final one (the climactic mass repentance at Mount Carmel, and the slaughter of the prophets of Ba'al) has been forgotten as though it never happened, and is not even given consideration as a reason for calming Eliyahu's zealousness for God. The renewed threat to Eliyahu's life resurrects the previous sins, creating a continuum with them that nullifies any transient achievement that may have been attained in the interim. We explained this perspective of Eliyahu in a previous *shiur*.

In what way does this litany of accusation serve as a response to God's question, "What do you seek here, Eliyahu"?

The Malbim, according to whom God's question was why Eliyahu was not now amongst the nation as his mission as a prophet requires, explains Eliyahu's response as follows:

"And he said..."- Behold, I cannot be a prophet, instructing and rebuking this nation, for I am oppressed by my zealousness over their evil deeds.

Thus, Eliyahu explains his flight to the desert as being prompted by despair at the state of the nation, and his lack of will and ability to continue in his role amongst them.

Rav Alshikh, who regards God's question as a call to Eliyahu to cleave to Moshe's trait of mercy, interprets Eliyahu's answer accordingly:

But he [Eliyahu] maintained his view and said, "I have been exceedingly zealous..." – I have been zealous for Your glory... I shall not turn back from it... – he did not recant his view.

In other words, a refusal to accept the instruction implied in being led to Chorev, in the footsteps of Moshe. Mount Chorev, for Eliyahu, is not a place of prayer on behalf of Israel, as it was for Moshe, but rather a place to accuse them for "abandoning Your covenant" – the very covenant that was forged at that place.

In any event, whether we adopt the interpretation of the Malbim or that of Rav Alshikh, the repeated verb "I have been exceedingly zealous" (*kano kineiti*) should not be interpreted as referring only to the past; rather, it describes an action that began in the past and continues in the present: "I was zealous, and I continue to be zealous now, too." The reason for the continued zealousness is that which was revealed to

Eliyahu when "they seek my life, to take it." the slaughter of prophets continues; Izevel is still free to act, with the approval of Achav, her husband, and the silent acquiescence of the entire nation.

It would seem that we have not yet altogether clarified the far-reaching ramifications of Eliyahu's answer. Does his answer contain merely a description of his mood ("I have been exceedingly zealous...") or is there more? The Ralbag interprets his answer as follows:

Behold, Eliyahu answers that he is zealous for God [in the present!] because Bnei Yisrael have abandoned the covenant of the Torah and have destroyed God's altars, for they wanted to worship only foreign gods, and they have put God's prophets to death by the sword – because Izevel is slaughtering them as before; Eliyahu alone remains of all the prophets known to her, and she seeks to kill him, too. IT IS AS THOUGH HE ASKS OF GOD TO EXACT HIS VENGEANCE FOR THESE EVILS THAT ISRAEL HAS COMMITTED. But this has happened to Eliyahu because of his great anger over Israel's sins.

According to this view, not only is Eliyahu consumed with "anger over Israel's sins," but this very anger gives rise to a plea for revenge on Israel in the present! It is this request for revenge that is the practical essence of what Eliyahu is saying.

Long before the Ralbag, the same idea was expressed in *Sefer Ben-Sira*, in the expression that we have borrowed as the title of this *shiur*:

"He [Eliyahu] announced rebuke at Sinai, and JUDGMENTS OF VENGEANCE AT CHOREV."

What is the source of this idea?

Zealousness, in *Tanakh*, is never just a mood. It is always an impulse for drastic action that accompanies it and which it requires. Let us examine a few verses that speak of God's jealousy and express its practical result:

"For the Lord your God IS A CONSUMING FIRE, a jealous God."
(*Devarim* 4:24)

"For then God's anger and jealousy shall smolder against that person... AND GOD WILL ERASE HIS NAME FROM BENEATH THE HEAVENS."
(*Devarim* 29:19)

"I have been jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion, with a great zealousness. AND I AM GREATLY ANGRY AT THE NATIONS THAT ARE AT EASE...."(Zekharya 1:14-15)

The same applies to human jealousy, or zealousness – whether for the sake of God or for other things that are dear. In the case of a husband over whom "a spirit of jealousy has passed, and he is jealous for his wife," he brings her to the *kohen* to clarify the matter and to cause the wife to swear:

"... A man over whom a spirit of jealousy passes, and he is jealous for his wife – HE SHALL PRESENT THE WIFE BEFORE GOD...." (*Bamidbar* 5:30)

The following verse includes both Divine jealousy and human zealousness for God:

"Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aharon the *kohen*, has turned back My anger from upon Bnei Yisrael, in his zealous zeal in their midst, SUCH THAT I DID NOT ANNIHILATE BNEI YISRAEL in My jealousy." (*Bamidbar* 25:11)

Pinchas's zealousness was that "he took a spear in his hand... and pierced both of them... and the plague was stopped from upon Bnei Yisrael" (*Ibid.* 8-9).

From the above examples, and others which we have not quoted here, we see how correct Ben-Sira and the Ralbag were in their interpretations, attributing to Eliyahu's cry – "I am exceedingly zealous for God" – the sense of asking for revenge on Israel for the evil that they have committed.

Now the argument between Eliyahu and God assumes even sharper significance. The argument concerns not only the past, the fact that Eliyahu has abandoned his role and his people, but also God's policy towards Israel now and in the future. Eliyahu demands punishment and revenge – the exact opposite of the stance adopted by Moshe, who – standing at this very spot – succeeded in turning back God's anger from against Israel.

This interpretation of Eliyahu's words also explains, retroactively, his journey to the desert and his request to die there. These actions reflect not only despair over Israel, and not only the wish to be relieved of his mission, but more. Eliyahu's actions reflect his protest against God's policy towards the nation of Israel in that generation; a policy that Eliyahu regards as excessively merciful and forgiving. When his request to die is not accepted, and he is led to Mount Chorev and asked to clarify his position,

Eliyahu gives vent to his innermost feelings and explains his argument with his Creator in clear and fiery terms:

"I am exceedingly zealous for the Lord God of Hosts...."

Translated by Kaeren Fish