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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #54: Chorev Part 5: Revelation in a "Small, Silent Voice" (11-14) (continued) By Rav Elchanan Samet

Now we can explore the meaning of God's revelation in the context of our narrative.

In a previous *shiur* we quoted the Midrash that understands this revelation to Eliyahu as a reminder of the revelation at Sinai and the receiving of the Torah. This perspective admittedly serves to connect this revelation with the main subject of our narrative – the ongoing debate between God and His prophet (the purpose of the revelation being to remind Eliyahu of the merit of Israel for having forged a covenant with God at this mountain and accepting the Torah). But according to this approach, the wind, the earthquake and the fire in and of themselves (and the negation of their identification with God) serve no independent function that is connected to the plot. Their role is merely to introduce the association with the revelation at the time of the giving of the Torah.

We may raise two difficulties in relation to this approach. First, the revelation at Sinai (*Shemot* 19) actually lacks the sharp distinction between the noises and the fire, on the one hand, and the actual revelation of God, on the other, that we find in our chapter. Second, the above approach connects the revelation to the plot of the story in a secondary way, but we have the sense that this revelation contains a direct and central argument in the ongoing debate between God and Eliyahu.

Let us now examine the approaches of two commentators whom we quoted in a previous *shiur* in explaining the first dialogue between God and Eliyahu, and we will see how each of them molds his interpretation of the present revelation in such a way as to adapt it to the interpretation of the previous dialogue.

The Malbim, we recall, interprets God's question as a rebuke to the prophet for being "here" - in the desert - rather than amongst the people, guiding them and prophesying for them. He also interprets Eliyahu's response to mean, "I cannot be a prophet guiding and rebuking this nation, because I am consumed with zealousness in light of their evil deeds." The Malbim pursues the same idea further, interpreting the prophetic revelation here as a rebuke to Eliyahu and as instruction to him as to how to act as a prophet among the people. God's rebuke is already lurking in the question, "What do you seek here, Eliyahu?" In the revelation it becomes overt and explicit, with a response to Eliyahu's preceding words (as interpreted by the Malbim):

He showed him that God is not to be found in the camp of wind, earthquake and fire; [He is to be found] only in a small, silent voice. From this God's emissaries and prophets are to learn that they should not "raise a storm," nor cause the earth to quake, nor cause fire to burn (as Eliyahu did in his zealousness for the Lord of Hosts – by shutting up the heavens and by slaughtering the prophets of Ba'al). God sends His prophets to go to [the people] with a silent voice – (i.e.,) to draw the nation with cords of love and with soft words.

The Ralbag, on the other hand, interpreted Eliyahu's words, "I have been exceedingly zealous..." as a quest for revenge upon Israel for their evil deeds. He, too, continues with the same approach and regards the revelation as a response to this demand on Eliyahu's part:

So the blessed God told him to go out and stand at the mountain, before God... And it would appear that God did this so that Eliyahu would ask for mercy upon Israel, and not pray that they be destroyed for their evil deeds. For it was the will of the blessed God to be patient with them, so that they would return to Him. It was for this reason that He showed him the destructive phenomena, such as the great and strong wind that broke apart mountains and shattered rocks, but God was not in the wind – BECAUSE IT IS NOT GOD'S WAY TO BRING ABOUT EVIL THINGS UNLESS THERE IS SOME POSITIVE RESULT THAT WILL EMERGE FROM THEM. And since it was clear to the blessed God that they would not accept rebuke (after all, we see that the withholding of dew and rain for three years did not lead them to submit

themselves to God), He did not wish to punish them for their sins as they deserved, but rather waited for them so they might repent their evil way.

And after the wind came – an earthquake; this was destructive, it is a phenomenon that overturns countries, and once again we are told that God was not in the earthquake, just as we read concerning the wind. And following the earthquake – a fire, which is even more destructive. There, too, we read that God was not in the fire, for the same reason that we discussed above.

The Ba'al ha-Metzudot, who interprets Eliyahu's words, "I have been exceedingly zealous for God", in the same way as the Ralbag does – i.e., as a demand for revenge on Israel – also goes on to understand the revelation in a similar way:

He was shown the Divine glory, which did not pass over in a wind or in the earthquake or in a fire, but rather in a small, silent voice, FOR HE DESIRES KINDNESS AND DOES NOT AROUSE ALL OF HIS ANGER, to come in [the form of] wind or an earthquake or fire.

According to the Malbim, the wind, the earthquake and the fire - and, in contrast to them, the small, silent voice – are a METAPHOR as to the improper and proper attitudes towards Israel. They represent God's approach, and they are also the approach worthy of being adopted by the prophet. The revelation as a whole is a rebuke and guidance to Eliyahu as to how he should go about his role as prophet amongst the nation. According to the Ralbag and the Ba'al ha-Metzudot, on the other hand, the wind, earthquake and fire are to be understood literally. They are the forces of destruction that God unleashes in order to punish His creations – both individuals and entire nations. The purpose of the revelation is to make known God's ways in managing the world, and it provides a response to Eliyahu's demand for revenge: "It is not God's way to bring about evil things unless there is some good that will emerge from them." Therefore it is not proper that the prophet pray for their destruction; rather, "Eliyahu should plead for mercy upon Israel."

In a future *shiur* we will hopefully return to the discussion of the significance of God's revelation to Eliyahu, and discover a new facet to it.

Translated by Kaeren Fish