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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #:55 - Chorev Part 6: "They Seek My Life, to Take It" (14)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

Following God's revelation in a "small, silent voice," God repeats His question to Eliyahu: "What do you seek here, Eliyahu?" This time the question comes against the background of the insight afforded by the revelation; hence, its meaning now is, "Have you understood the lesson of the revelation? Do you still maintain your position?" And Eliyahu, whose response here is a word-for-word repetition of the previous one, means to say: "I have not changed my view in any way; I maintain my position."

How are we to regard this prophet, who clings to his opinion with such tenacity, not agreeing to relinquish it even after such a sharp and prolonged argument with God? Should we not admire such uncompromising loyalty to his principles? *Chazal* take a more critical view, questioning the authenticity of Eliyahu's zealotry for God, for which God has no desire. In the *Midrash Shir Hashirim* Rabba (1:39), they analyze very closely the arguments that he repeats over and over:

"'He said: I have been exceedingly zealous for the Lord God of Hosts, for the children of Israel have abandoned Your covenant.' The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: 'My covenant – is it then your covenant?'

'They have destroyed Your altars' – [God said,] 'My altars – are they then your altars?'

'And they have slaughtered Your prophets by the sword' – God said, 'My prophets – of what concern is it to you?'

'And he said: I alone remain, and they seek my life, to take it!'"

In this sharp dialogue, God breaks down Eliyahu's fundamental accusations against Bnei Yisrael, one after the other. Each of his claims to zealotry for the sake of God's Name is thrown back by the "interested party" Himself: the covenant is His

covenant, the altars are His altars; why should any mortal need to show greater concern for these than does God Himself? But when Eliyahu raises the accusation, "They have slaughtered Your prophets by the sword," the style of God's questions changes: He does not ask, "My prophets – are they then your prophets?" following the pattern of the previous questions, because this accusation by Eliyahu is already touching on his real issue. Therefore the question here is posed so as to draw out Eliyahu's answer: "Of what concern is it to you?" – in other words, perhaps this is what concerns you more than all of the previous accusations? And Eliyahu's response indeed confirms this: "Of course it concerns me; they seek to take my life, too!" Thus the cause of Eliyahu's zealousness is uncovered: it arises from his fear for his own life, and his indignation at the fact that it is in danger. The *mussar* masters call this the "point of contact" that exists in the deepest recesses of a person's psyche, even while he declares all kinds of idealistic and important motives for his actions.

Does the above analysis of Eliyahu's claims arise from the claims themselves, or do they reflect the perspective of *Chazal* in their interpretation – a perspective in which they garb Eliyahu's words, using an imaginary dialogue between the prophet and God as the exegetical device by means of which their view is conveyed?

At first it would seem that Eliyahu's accusations against Bnei Yisrael would all seem to give voice to the same protestation of zealousness of his own part. Even the last three clauses, describing the fate of God's prophets, and Eliyahu among them, would seem to bemoan not Eliyahu's own problem, but rather God's situation in a world that will, seemingly, soon be bereft of all prophets: "They have slaughtered Your prophets by the sword!" Lest anyone protest, "There are plenty of prophets; the loss is not so terrible," Eliyahu adds, "I alone remain" – and even this represents no surety as to the future of God's message, since "They seek my life, to take it!" If they succeed, God's world will be left with no prophets. It is possible that this represents the significance of Eliyahu's words on the overt level (ignoring, for the moment, the strangeness of his argument). But, as we shall see, a close syntactical analysis of his argument leads us to a justification of *Chazal's* view in the Midrash.

Eliyahu's response is comprised of six short clauses. The first four mention God – either explicitly or through use of the suffix *khaf sofit* (a final *khaf*, indicating possession in the second person – "Your covenant," etc.). Only the last two clauses, which address Eliyahu's fate, lack any reference to God. The first of them places Eliyahu's own "I" as the subject and focus of the sentence – "I alone remain"; the second, while admittedly presenting Israel as the subject and Eliyahu's life as the object, now lacks the possessive suffix that characterized the previous clauses. Eliyahu does not say, "They seek the life of YOUR SERVANT, to take it." Bnei Yisrael are being accused only for their attitude towards Eliyahu's life; there is no

connection to God in this act. "I" and "my life" are therefore at the center of Eliyahu's concern, at the end of his speech, and this uncovers the "point of contact" – the personal interest – that lurks behind the previous clauses, too. Thus, the syntactical analysis of Eliyahu's words serves to support – on the literal, "*peshat*" level – the exegesis (*derash*) of Chazal.

We may bring further support for Chazal's view that it is Eliyahu's concern for his own life that underlies his actions and speech in our chapter. A sensitive reading of our narrative (up until verse 18) reveals quite easily that there is one word that repeats itself over and over throughout: that word is "*nefesh*" (soul, life); it is a key word that appears seven times in the story. Let us list its appearances:

1. (verse 2) By this time tomorrow I shall make YOUR LIFE...
2. (2) like THE LIFE of one of them
3. (3) He fled for HIS LIFE
4. (4) and asked (lit. "pleaded for HIS LIFE") to die
5. (4) It is enough, God; take MY LIFE (my soul)
6. (10) They seek MY LIFE, to take it
7. (14) They seek MY LIFE, to take it

Every one of the appearances of the word "life" or "soul" refers to Eliyahu. Even in no. 2, where the subject is the slaughtered prophets of Ba'al, it is meant to equate between their lives and his. We may therefore say that "Eliyahu's life" is what stands at the center of the story. In the first two appearances of the key word it is Izevel who uses it, expressing her wish to take Eliyahu's life. Corresponding to these two expressions of Izevel we find the word repeated twice at the end of the list (6,7), this time by Eliyahu, in his complaint over Izevel's attempt to take his life. The three appearances in the middle of the list (3,4,5) testify to Eliyahu's intensive occupation with his own life: he "flees (goes) for his life" – "*va-yelekh el nafsho*" (while the unusual expression indicates an act of escape, it may also hint here that Eliyahu takes himself off to occupy himself with matters of his own life). His soul asks to die ("*va-yishal et nafsho la-mut*"), and he asks of God to take his life ("*kah nafshi*").

The expression "to take a/the life," voiced in Eliyahu's request of God – "take my life" – appears twice more afterwards, in his complaint: "They seek my life TO TAKE IT." Thus we conclude that Eliyahu awards great value to his life. It is the source of his "going for his life" to the desert; it is also the root of his zealousness for God and his request that God take revenge upon Israel. The desire of his soul to die and his request of God, "Take my life," are simply an inverted expression of the great value that he attaches to his life – to the extent that when his life is endangered and he has no protection, he reacts with the vehemence that we witness here.

Our conclusion in a previous *shiur* was that it was despair over his role as prophet that led Eliyahu to flee to the desert. Now we may modify this statement and formulate it as follows: It is Eliyahu's preoccupation with his "soul," his life, his personal fate, that leads to both his despair over his role and his flight to the desert.

Translated by Kaeren Fish