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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #:57 - Chorev Part 7: The Mission (15-18) (continued)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

3. "Your Prophecy is Impossible"

The approach that we presented in the previous *shiur* – viewing the mission given to Eliyahu as a punishment for his ongoing campaign of accusation against Israel (and as a test of his ability to realize these accusations through his own actions against his own nation) – was based principally on the parallel between this mission (verses 15-18) and the revelation that preceded it (verses 11-12). We shall now continue pursuing the same approach and demonstrate that the words of the verses describing the mission themselves serve to support it.

We shall focus on two precise linguistic analyses and one stylistic-thematic clarification.

a. At the start of the mission, in verse 15, we read:

"God said to him: Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damesek...."

This raises the obvious question: did Eliyahu come from the wilderness of Damesek, and he is now commanded to "return" there? Surely it was from Yizre'el that he came. The commentators offer various explanations; that of the Abarbanel appears to propose the most accurate answer:

"In accordance with the view of the Sages, and the accepted view among the commentators – that Eliyahu sought revenge upon Israel for their evil deeds, we might interpret the words, 'Go, return on your way' as a way of God telling him: Since your way is to be 'vengeful and unforgiving as a snake' (see *Yoma* 23a), your wish and request being that I should punish Israel and 'heap evils upon them' (*Devarim* 32:23), [therefore] GO FROM HERE AND RETURN TO YOUR CUSTOM AND YOUR WAY of seeking to punish Israel. THEREFORE, go to the wilderness of Damesek... and they [Chazael, Yehu and Elisha] will exact your revenge."

The Abarbanel interprets the command, "Go, return on your way," not in the primary, literary, geographical sense, but rather in the borrowed sense of "returning" to one's way of thinking and behaving.

b. The specification of Eliyahu's destination – "The WILDERNESS of Damesek" – is no less unusual. A prophet is sent to act in inhabited places; why does the Divine command make mention of the wilderness? If we recall Eliyahu's journey to the wilderness of Be'er Sheva, and the significance of that journey, this command arouses an association with "Eliyahu's way" – his personal preference for isolation in the wilderness, away from his people.

c. The list of appointments that Eliyahu is commanded to effect ends as follows (verse 16):

"...And Elisha, son of Shafat, of Avel-Mechola, you shall anoint as prophet in your stead."

What is the purpose of this appointment? At first glance its purpose seems identical to that of the two preceding appointments, i.e., to punish Israel, as we read in the following verse (17): "...And he who escapes from the sword of Yehu shall be put to death by Elisha." But if this is the case, we are faced with two difficulties – one stylistic, the other thematic.

If we compare the style of the three commands in verses 15-16, we immediately note the difference between the command to anoint Elisha and the preceding commands to anoint the two kings. Chazael is to become King of Aram, Yehu is to become King of Israel, while Elisha is to be anointed as "prophet in your stead."

The similarity between the three commands, finding expression in the instruction to anoint all three figures (although a prophet is not anointed at all), would seem to require that in Elisha's case, as in the case of the two kings, there should be a definition of the "target population" amongst which he will be active: "a prophet in Israel" (corresponding to "King of Aram/Israel"), or alternatively, the two preceding appointments should include mention of the kings that they will be replacing: "Chazael as King of Aram in place of Ben-Haddad."

The thematic difficulty concerns the purpose of the command. Why should Eliyahu himself not be the prophet who continues the work of Chazael and Yehu in killing Israelites?

For the above reasons, *Chazal's* teaching in the *Mekhilta* (beginning of *Parashat Bo*) would seem to be directed, in this case, towards the literal sense of the text:

"Eliyahu sought the honor of the Father [God] and not the honor of the son [Israel], as it is written: 'I have been zealous for the Lord God of Hosts.' Hence what the text means in saying, 'God said to him: Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damesek... And Yehu, son of Nimshi, you shall anoint as king of Israel, and Elisha, son of Shafat... you shall anoint as prophet in your stead,' IS NOT 'HE WILL SUCCEED YOU AS PROPHET,' BUT RATHER 'I DO NOT DESIRE YOUR PROPHECY.'"

In a previous *shiur* we noted that prophecy is a command that is given to a person; the prophet is not free to absolve himself of it. It is for this reason that God does not accept Eliyahu's request to die under the broom tree (just as He did not accept Yona's attempt to flee from his prophetic mission). But if the prophet maintains his stand and is not convinced by God's words, aimed at educating him and opening him up to God's attribute of mercy, then that mission, which is forced upon him, is his last in his capacity as prophet. While God will not retract the mission of a prophet who disagrees with it and seeks to be relieved of it, He also has no desire for a prophet to continue to stand before Him angrily and lacking a sense of identification with his mission.

4. Eliyahu's Way and God's Way.

With God's command to Eliyahu, "Go, return on your way," Eliyahu's journey is about to be completed: from Mount Chorev he will return to *Eretz Yisrael*, and the only station mentioned in the text in the description of his return is Avel-Mechola, where Elisha lives. This completes an almost perfect geographical circle. Eliyahu left the city of Yizre'el, situated to the west of Beit She'an (18:46); he journeys via the city of Be'er Sheva into the heart of the wilderness and arrives, after a very long walk, at the end and purpose of his journey – Mount Chorev. From there he retraces his footsteps, ending up in Avel-Mechola, which is to the east of Beit She'an.

Although most of the action (verses 8-18) takes place at Mount Chorev, and the events there also represent the crux of the story in every sense, it would not be fair to call our story "Eliyahu's journey to Mount Chorev and his return from there." After all, it was not to Mount Chorev that Eliyahu directed himself when he set out, and his arrival there – as well as his return from there – are unexpected developments in the story. Eliyahu's journey may be divided into three stages: three times he sets off

(heading, respectively, for Be'er Sheva, Mount Chorev, and Avel-Mechola), but only the first time does he set off at his own initiative, to achieve an objective that he has set for himself. The other two journeys are undertaken at God's command, and their respective purposes are dictated to him either directly (in God's words at Chorev) or through indirect Divine instruction (after the angel's revelation to him).

The Journey to Be'er Sheva, and from there to Mount Chorev

The first two stages of the journey – to Be'er Sheva and to Mount Chorev – are on the same geographical continuum; therefore, they may be viewed as a single journey whose second stage is simply a completion of the first stage. Eliyahu's stay in Be'er Sheva is, as it were, no more than a station on the way to his main destination: Mount Chorev.

However, there is a linguistic symmetry between these two journeys, indicating that the road from Yizre'el to Chorev should not be viewed as a single, continuous journey (with a stopover in Be'er Sheva), but rather as two parallel journeys. A comparison of the two reveals its significance:

FROM YIZRE'EL TO THE WILDERNESS OF BE'ER SHEVA:

1. (3) When he saw it HE AROSE AND HE FLED for his life, and he came to Be'er Sheva which is in Yehuda...
2. (4) AND HE CAME AND SAT BENEATH A CERTAIN BROOM TREE...
3. (5) AND HE LAY DOWN AND SLEPT UNDER A BROOM TREE...
4. (5) AND BEHOLD, AN ANGEL TOUCHED HIM AND SAID TO HIM: Arise, eat...
5. (7) GOD'S ANGEL CAME BACK A SECOND TIME, AND TOUCHED HIM, AND SAID: Arise, eat...
6. for THE WAY IS FAR FOR YOU...

FROM THE WILDERNESS OF BE'ER SHEVA TO MOUNT CHOREV:

1. (8) HE AROSE and he ate and drank, AND HE WENT... until the mountain of God at Chorev
2. (9) AND HE CAME THERE TO A CAVE
3. (9) AND HE STAYED THE NIGHT THERE
4. (9) AND BEHOLD, GOD'S WORD CAME TO HIM, AND HE SAID TO HIM: What do you seek here, Eliyahu?

5. (13) AND BEHOLD, A VOICE CAME TO HIM AND IT SAID: What do you seek here, Eliyahu?
6. (15) God said to him: GO, RETURN ON YOUR WAY...

What was the purpose of going to the wilderness of Be'er Sheva? Eliyahu determined the purpose himself. He set off on this journey of his own initiative, in order to flee from his people to the wilderness, where he could seclude himself, with a view to removing the yoke of prophecy – together with the yoke of life itself – from his shoulders: "If only I could be in the wilderness, a lodge for wayfarers, that may leave my people...."

The trek towards the unknown at the beginning of the second part of the journey is a continuation of the first part of the journey only in the geographical sense (extending even further southward). But after forty days and forty nights, Eliyahu discovers that his feet have led him to Mount Chorev, recalling the root of the existence of Israel as God's covenantal nation. In fleeing from the nation of Israel, Eliyahu finds himself connecting, against his will, with the roots of his nation's existence. Thus, the GEOGRAPHICAL CONTINUATION of the path that Eliyahu walks is, in fact, the very OPPOSITE OF THE PURPOSE of his journey – a reversal that happens through Divine guidance. Therefore, the broom tree in the wilderness of Be'er Sheva is not a halfway station on a single, continuous journey, but rather a clear point of separation between two paths with opposing purposes.

The conflict that we are discussing here is the conflict between ELIYAHU'S PURPOSE in heading for the wilderness of Be'er Sheva and GOD'S PURPOSE in leading him from the wilderness of Be'er Sheva to Mount Chorev. This opposition is expressed in the first parallel demonstrated above – a contrasting parallel:

- (3) "He arose and went FOR HIS LIFE and he came to Be'er Sheva"
- (8) "He arose... and went... UNTIL THE MOUNTAIN OF GOD at Chorev"

But from God's perspective, there is one single intention that operates in relation to Eliyahu, both during his first journey and during his second. The revelation of the angel, taking Eliyahu by surprise under the broom tree and commanding him, "Arise, eat," and the revelation of God that takes him by surprise at the cave at Mount Chorev, asking him, "What do you seek here, Eliyahu" – the fourth parallel above – share the same purpose: they aim to dissuade Eliyahu from forsaking his nation and accusing them, and to return him to his place. But because Eliyahu fails to respond to what is hinted to him in Be'er Sheva by the angel, and does not return to his place and to his role, the Divine message must be made clearer by means of the journey to Mount Chorev, in the footsteps of Moshe.

From Eliyahu's point of view, too, there is little change in intention between the first and second parts of his journey. He treats the cave at Mount Chorev – the cleft in the rock – in the same way that he treated the broom tree in the wilderness of Be'er Sheva: as a hideout. We learn this from the second parallel set out above, as well as from the third parallel, in which we discover that Eliyahu lodged at the cave just as he slept under the tree. As becomes clear from Eliyahu's response to God's question, "What do you seek here," Eliyahu has not absorbed the message that he should have learned from being led to Mount Moriah and to this cave. For this reason, God commands him to leave the cave in preparation for a revelation that will communicate the Divine message even more clearly, as well as preparing Eliyahu for what awaits him if he persists in maintaining his stand.

Nevertheless, there is something of a contrast between Eliyahu's words under the tree in the wilderness of Be'er Sheva and his words at the cave at Chorev. Under the broom tree he asks to die, telling God, "TAKE MY LIFE." At the cave he complains over and over about Israel, who seek "MY LIFE, TO TAKE IT." This contrast is only external. It is his complaint at the cave that reveals what is really troubling Eliyahu: it is the threat to his life that troubles him; this is the root of his flight from his nation, just as this is what stands at the basis of his argument with God.

The Journey from Mount Chorev Northward:

What is the meaning of God's command to Eliyahu, "Go, return on your way" from Chorev northward? Geographically speaking, it would seem to indicate a return to his point of departure, a NULLIFICATION OF THE FLIGHT from *Am Yisrael* and from his role as prophet in their midst. "Returning on the same way" is an expression used in some places in *Tanakh* to mean a nullification of the meaning of what has happened, or been achieved, during the first journey. (We may explain in this light the Torah's prohibition against returning to Egypt in the way in which we left – *Devarim* 17:16; 28:68. In contrast, when Avraham returns from Egypt to Canaan he is careful to retrace his steps exactly in order to "erase" the significance of his journey to there – compare *Bereishit* 12:8 and 13:3; 12:9 and 13:1.)

Eliyahu is commanded, then, to cancel having turned his back on his people and to return to them and to his land, bearing a mission that renews his role as prophet. But all of this is only the superficial appearance – because in truth, his return to his land is a sort of punishment for Eliyahu, who has maintained his view and his zealotness that is undesirable in God's eyes. The return that he is commanded to undertake is "to your way" – Eliyahu's way, not God's way. Therefore he is given the prophetic mission of bringing punishment upon Israel. This mission will be final

chord in his performance as prophet; his final task is to appoint Elisha "as prophet in your stead" – for God no longer desires Eliyahu's prophecy. The mention of Eliyahu's destination – the wilderness of Damesek is likewise reminiscent of the wilderness of Be'er Sheva to which he fled.

Thus, it is specifically in God's command that Eliyahu return to his nation and to his land that the prophet is granted his wish to be absolved of the burden of prophecy, and to see Israel punished for their sins. But this happens not out of Divine approval of his view; rather, it is out of rebuke for the prophet who insists on maintaining his stubborn opinion. ONCE AGAIN, IT TURNS OUT THAT THE GEOGRAPHICAL DIRECTITON OF ELIYAHU'S PATH, RETURNING TO ISRAEL, IS THE OPPOSITE OF THE INTENTION THAT IT CONCEALS – to conclude his role as prophet in Israel. The final comparison set out above presents a clearly contrasting parallel between "THE WAY – to MOUNT CHOREV - is too far for you," and "Go, return TO YOUR WAY – from MOUNT CHOREV TO *ERETZ YISRAEL*. As stated, this contrast on the geographical level (distancing oneself from Israel as opposed to returning to them) contains an inverse contrast on the spiritual level: between the command to journey to Chorev, with its intention to repair the path of the prophet and restore him to his nation (by means of having him walk in the PATH OF MOSHE, the master of all prophets), and the command to journey IN THE PATH OF ELIYAHU, back to *Eretz Yisrael* – with its inherent punishment for the prophet who has not accepted the lesson of his previous journey.

Thus we discover that God's way, leading Eliyahu to different places, should not be understood at face value, and its purpose should not be analyzed in geographical terms. For God's way is the opposite of Eliyahu's way – even where, on the surface, they would seem to be in harmony.

"For your thoughts are not My thoughts, nor your ways – My ways, says God. For just as the heavens are high above the earth – so My ways are elevated above your ways, and My thoughts – above Your thoughts." (*Yishayahu* 55:8)

Translated by Kaeren Fish