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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #:58 - Chorev Part 8: Was the Mission Fulfilled?

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1. Why Does Eliyahu Not Fulfill His Mission?

The mission entrusted to Eliyahu at Mount Chorev, in verses 15-18, has thus far been addressed in terms of its significance in relation to the preceding narrative. We saw how this mission represents a continuation and practical summary of the ongoing polemics between the prophet and God. We shall now examine the mission in terms of its relationship to what follows in our chapter, in verses 19-21.

The attempt to match what Eliyahu is told, within the framework of this mission, with what actually happens afterwards, gives rise to serious difficulties – first and foremost in the comparison between the command and its fulfillment. Eliyahu is commanded to perform three actions:

- (15) Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damesek,
 - a) and you shall come and anoint Chazael as king over Aram;
- (16)
 - b) and Yehu, son of Nimshi, shall you appoint as king over Israel,
 - c) and Elisha, son of Shafat, from Avel-Mechola, you shall appoint as prophet in your stead.

Further on in our chapter we are told that Eliyahu starts to fulfill this command, but in inverse order:

(19) He went from there and found Elisha, son of Shafat, and he was ploughing with twelve pairs of oxen in front of him..."

Eliyahu's first stop, then, was in Avel-Mechola. Why?

To this question we must add even more difficult problems: nowhere do we find Eliyahu fulfilling the other two parts of the Divine command! We are not aware of Eliyahu ever reaching Damesek. Chazael is "appointed" by Elisha in Damesek (II *Melakhim* 8:7-15), long after Eliyahu is gathered in a storm heavenward. And

Yehu, son of Nimshi, is anointed by one of the sons of the prophets, a disciple of Elisha, and by the latter's command (II *Melakhim* 9:1-10). This happens even later than Chazael's ascent to the throne in Aram.

Even that which Eliyahu does appear to fulfill – the appointment of Elisha – he performs in a different manner than he was commanded to do. He is told to appoint Elisha as a prophet IN HIS STEAD, but in practice this is not what he does. We are told only that "[Elisha] arose and went after Eliyahu, and HE SERVED HIM" (21).

Indeed, we encounter no prophetic activity on the part of Elisha until after his master is gathered up to the heavens, at which point the sons of the prophets declare (II *Melakhim* 2:15), "Eliyahu's spirit rests upon Elisha." Until then, Elisha operated only as Eliyahu's attendant. The occasion of Eliyahu's departure is itself the occasion of Elisha's appointment as prophet in place of his master (see II *Melakhim* 2:9-15).

From the above it also becomes clear that Eliyahu did not cease serving as a prophet following his return from Mount Chorev. The essence of God's message to him – "...You shall anoint as prophet in your stead," as interpreted by *Chazal* – "I do not desire your prophecy," was not fulfilled. Not only does Eliyahu continue to act as a prophet for a long time, but God Himself even sends him to fulfill various prophetic missions in the battle against the house of Achav. Thus, in chapter 21, in the story of the vineyard of Navot, God sends him to rebuke Achav, who is taking possession of the vineyard (*Ibid.* 17-29); likewise, in II *Melakhim* 1, Eliyahu is sent by God's angel to halt the emissaries of Achazya on their way (*Ibid.* 3-4) and to appear before Achazya himself (*Ibid.* 15).

In summary, then, we may ask: why does Eliyahu not fulfill the command to him from Mount Chorev?

The question of why Eliyahu fails to fulfill the first two commands, leaving these tasks to Elisha, is addressed by various commentators. Let us review some of their explanations:

The Radak and the Ralbag divest the expressions, "You shall come and you shall anoint" and "You shall anoint," of their primary meaning as absolute commands, regarding them rather as a command enabling him to convey these responsibilities to Elisha, who will replace him. Since Elisha's acts will be carried out by virtue of having been instructed by Eliyahu, his teacher, it will be "as though Eliyahu anointed them." Clearly, this is a forced and improbable explanation. Therefore these two commentators endeavor to explain how Eliyahu deduced that this was how he was meant to interpret the Divine command. They are forced to conclude that Eliyahu

derived this from the fact that when he went to fulfill the command to appoint Chazael, he happened upon Elisha on the way. He viewed this as a sign that he should first appoint Elisha, and then make Elisha the executor of the first two tasks – the appointment of Chazael and the appointment of Yehu.

The Abarbanel offers a completely different approach to the above question (commenting on verse 17):

What appears to me to be the case, in this matter, is that the blessed God told Eliyahu that he would soon anoint Chazael and Yehu, for it was God's will to punish Israel in the days of Achav and in the days of Eliyahu. When Achav yielded and turned to God in repentance [after Eliyahu rebukes him at the vineyard of Navot, 21:27-29], God saw fit to withhold His anger. As He tells Eliyahu (21:29), 'Have you seen that Achav has yielded before Me... I shall not bring that evil in his days; in the days of his son I shall bring the evil upon his house....' It was for this reason that Eliyahu did not anoint either Chazael or Yehu, as God had commanded him, for God had retracted the evil and withheld His anger towards them; therefore Elisha anointed them after the death of Achav. There is no doubt that Eliyahu instructed him as to their anointing by God's word, for [although] you will not find any Divine command or utterance to Elisha concerning the anointment of either of them, he himself told Chazael that he would be king over Aram after the death of Ben Hadad (II *Melakhim* 8:13), and he likewise commanded the prophet Yona (according to the Midrash), of his own initiative, to go and anoint Yehu (*Ibid.* 9:1-3), for he did this since Eliyahu had commanded him, by God's word. Hence, that which Eliyahu could not do because the blessed God withheld His anger from Achav, was done by Elisha in the days of [Achav's] son."

But Abarbanel's solution does not really answer the question. Achav's repentance happened a considerable time after Eliyahu's return from Mount Chorev. How, then, did Eliyahu know to first head for Elisha, and refrain from anointing Chazael and Yehu? If one were to suggest that this was revealed to him in prophecy by God, to Whom everything is revealed and known in advance (even though Achav still had free choice as to whether to yield to God or not), then what was the point of giving Eliyahu this mission in the first place?

Let us try to propose a different solution to our problem. In our previous *shiur* we chose to view Eliyahu's mission as a test for the prophet, and as a punishment for his accusations against Israel and his call for revenge on them. His call is answered, but he himself is the one who will have to bring the punishment upon his nation, and this mission will be his last. We speculated there as to whether

Eliyahu would be capable of carrying out these actions: whether his hands would not tremble as he anointed the enemy of his people as king, to wave his terrible sword over Israel.

But actually we do not find Eliyahu carrying out his mission. Even that which he does fulfill, out of all that he is commanded – the appointment of Elisha – is not fulfilled in the spirit of the command, nor in accordance with its intention, as noted at the start of this *shiur*. He does not appoint Elisha as prophet in his stead, but rather takes him along as his attendant, while Eliyahu himself continues to act as prophet for a not insignificant period of time. How, then, can Eliyahu's actions be reconciled with *Chazal's* teaching that God's words to Eliyahu – "Anoint as prophet in your stead" – represent a sort of "giving notice" to him – "I do not desire your prophecy"?

It must be that Eliyahu, returning from Mount Chorev to the Kingdom of Israel, has finally changed his mind and his attitude towards his nation; he no longer desires the termination of his prophetic mission. If this is so, it is no longer appropriate that he be "fired" from his job, and his encounter with Elisha no longer requires the transfer of the prophetic mission to him. Instead, Eliyahu takes Elisha along with him, to serve him and to be apprenticed to him in the ways of prophecy.

This change that takes place in Eliyahu is admittedly absent from the text, but it is depicted in the brief concluding image in our chapter. In this image (verses 19-21), two highly powerful personalities meet; we discern a desire on the part of the teacher to draw the disciple along with him, just as the disciple is drawn to the teacher by a magnetic force. Even though this image is meant to describe the beginning of a new era – the era of the prophecy of Elisha – it in no way testifies to an end of the previous era – that of Eliyahu. On the contrary, Eliyahu stands out in this picture with the full force of his personality, and there is no sign of any cessation of his prophetic activity in the near future.

The integration of the concluding image within the overall structure of the narrative points to the far-reaching significance of its content. In part 1 of the section on Chorev we noted that our chapter is built as a symmetrical framework around a central axis – the revelation at Chorev in verses 11-12. Each pair of units arranged around this axis, we noted, represents a parallel – sometimes inverse. The unit corresponding to the concluding image (verses 19-21) is the description of Eliyahu walking off to the desert of Be'er Sheva, in verses 1-4.

These two images are clearly the inverse of one another. In the opening scene Eliyahu is fleeing from the center of the kingdom, from the city of Yizre'el, towards the wilderness, with the intention of abandoning his nation and his mission. He makes

his way to Be'er Sheva – the furthest outskirts of habitation in the southern part of *Eretz Yisrael* – accompanied by his attendant. But at Be'er Sheva he leaves his attendant behind while he goes to isolate himself in the wilderness. Consumed with despair, Eliyahu lies down under a certain broom tree and asks to die.

In the concluding image, Eliyahu returns from the wilderness, where he has spent considerable time alone, towards the eastern side of the same valley that lies at the heart of the Kingdom of Israel, to the city of Avel Mechola. He does this despite the danger still lurking over him, as a result of Izevel's threat, to which he now pays no attention. He appears to make his return journey to his land, to habitation, alone. But at Avel Mechola he takes up Elisha, who goes after him and attends to him. This is the inverse of Eliyahu leaving his attendant in Be'er Sheva in order to go and isolate himself in the wilderness.

The significance of this inverse parallel between the beginning of the story and its end is that Eliyahu, in the act of taking Elisha with him, returns to human company, returns to his nation, and nullifies the implications of his isolation in the wilderness and his will to die there. If the image of Eliyahu under the broom tree symbolizes his will to cease serving as a prophet in Israel, out of despair at his nation, then the concluding image symbolizes exactly the opposite: a nullification of his previous desire, and an expression of his reborn will to serve in the role of prophet of Israel.

Thus, in light of the exposure of the story's structure, several contrasts between the beginning of the story and its conclusion are brought together to show that in the end, there is a change in Eliyahu's position. Ultimately, God's word has achieved its aim: at the end of their long debate, Eliyahu is convinced. The angel that appears to him twice, the journey in the footsteps of Moshe Rabbeinu to Mount Chorev, God's repeated rebuke – "What do you seek here, Eliyahu?"; and the wondrous revelation in the form of a small, silent voice following God's absence from the wind, the earthquake and the fire; and the mission of punishment entrusted to the prophet who stubbornly maintains his view – the compound effect of all of these factors finally soften Eliyahu and convince him to return to his nation and to his role in their midst. But it would seem that out of all of these "arguments," the final one was the most decisive. Giving Eliyahu the terrible responsibility of appointing a cruel king who would be the enemy of his nation, and who would slay with his sword many thousands of Israelites – this was the test of the limit of Eliyahu's criticism. Eliyahu does not agree to this mission, and thereby withdraws from the position that he has maintained throughout the argument.

"Like the rain and the snow fall from the heavens but do not return to there, but rather water the earth and cause it to bring forth and grow, and give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so My Word that proceeds from My mouth shall not return to Me empty; it shall accomplish that which I please, and shall succeed in that for which I sent it." (*Yishayahu* 55:10-11)

Sometimes God's word is "absorbed" in the heart like rain that waters the ground, and immediately it begins to have its effect inside. But sometimes God's word remains "frozen" at the entrance to a person's heart, like snow that builds up upon the ground. Even then, the delay in God's word having its effect is only temporary. Ultimately the snow will melt and penetrate the ground, watering it and causing it to bring forth vegetation.

Now we must ask: if it is indeed true that at the end of our story, in the final three verses, there is a turnaround and Eliyahu retracts the stand that he has maintained since the beginning of the story, why does the text not state this explicitly? How can such a significant conclusion to the story be left to the reader's sensitivity, to his ability to discern the meaning of the final image and the message arising from its comparison with the introductory image?

Before attempting to answer this question, it must be emphasized that unlike certain other personalities in *Tanakh* who are depicted as God's enemies, and whose ultimate submission the text therefore takes pains to describe in very clear language (Pharaoh, Yeravam, Achav), Eliyahu is not – heaven forefend – opposed to God's word. He represents a position that has some truth to it, but it is a one-sided position that God does not want upheld by His prophet. The "argument" that is conducted in our chapter is an internal, delicate matter between God and His prophet, and there is no point in presenting Eliyahu's withdrawal from his position as "submission," or as a "victory" for God's word. Nevertheless, we must still answer the question we posed above. Even if Eliyahu's turnaround is not presented as "submission," it could still be noted explicitly, in such a way as to preserve the prophet's dignity.

The answer would seem to be that wherever the text "hides" a person's reaction and the change that takes place within him – as we believe to be the case concerning Eliyahu – there is a reason for this. It comes to depict the nature of the change, and we are able to appreciate its extent. In our instance, in stating that Eliyahu retracts his position, we do not mean that he underwent a comprehensive change in his approach, nor that some fundamental change occurred in his personality. The crux of the change in Eliyahu concerns his attitude towards his prophetic role: he is ready for a change in policy. He will no longer demand punishment for the nation, nor will he abandon his position in protest. He is now ready to go back to acting as God's emissary,

attempting to act to promote *teshuva* amongst Israel, and particularly through criticism of the royal house.

The fact that Eliyahu has not fundamentally changed, and that he remains just as strict a prophet as he always was, is reflected in the concluding image of the story. Even though Eliyahu is described as returning to his people and to his role, a careful examination of the verses leads us to the conclusion that he reacts sternly to Elisha and to his request – "Let me kiss my father and my mother, and I shall go after you." Likewise throughout the remainder of his prophetic activity, until he is carried up to the heavens: in chapter 21 he rebukes Achav for killing Navot and inheriting his vineyard, and declares a terrible verdict; in II *Melakhim* 1 he rebukes Achazya, son of Achav, for seeking out Ba'al Zevuv, the god of Ekron, during his illness, and sentences him to die of that same illness. In chapter 2, when God "carries Eliyahu up in a storm towards the heavens," we still sense Eliyahu's stern attitude towards Elisha; this cold treatment thaws only towards his dramatic departure.

On the other hand, there is a noticeable change in Eliyahu's manner. In the same two appearances in which he acts as a prophet in Israel, he acts only by explicit Divine command:

Vineyard of Navot (chapter 21):

(17) God's word came to Eliyahu the Tishbite, saying:

(18) Arise, go down to meet Achav, king of Israel...

(19) and you shall speak to him, saying:

So says God: Have you murdered and also inherited?!

To the messengers of Achazya (II *Melakhim* 1):

(3) An angel of God spoke to Eliya the Tishbite:

Arise, to up to meet the messengers of the king of Shomron and speak to them.

Is it for lack of any God in Israel that you go to seek out Ba'al Zevuv, god of Ekron?!

Eliyahu's behavior until now has been characterized by actions undertaken without any explicit Divine command, but rather at his own initiative and discretion. This was the case when he vowed that there would be no rain, and again in the test that he arranged at Mount Carmel. But now, following his return from Mount Chorev, Eliyahu is no longer zealous at his own initiative; but rather only when he is sent by God with an explicit instruction.

How does all of this solve the question that we posed at the very start of this *shiur*? In a manner that is essentially similar to the approach of Abarbanel, but

with one important difference: it is not the future *teshuva* of Achav – as yet unbeknownst to Eliyahu (and to us, the readers) – that cancels Eliyahu's appointment of Chazael and Yehu, but rather the present *teshuva* of Eliyahu himself. The perception of the mission entrusted to him as a test and a punishment turns it into a conditional mission: so long as Eliyahu maintains his position and his accusations – "I have been exceedingly zealous for God" – he must fulfill it. But when Eliyahu returns to his nation and to his role, thereby implicitly nullifying his previous accusations against Israel, this reproachful mission is wordlessly removed from his shoulders.

Thus we learn that the fact that Eliyahu began to fulfill God's command backwards, by first taking Elisha with him – as well as the character of this act, deviating from the instruction to appoint Elisha as prophet in his stead – are the key to the question of why Eliyahu did not fulfill the first two instructions and anoint Chazael and Yehu.

Eliyahu's failure to fulfill the instructions that he was given reinforces our perception of these instructions as having been given as a test and as a punishment. Upon his return from Mount Chorev, there is a change in the position of the prophet who has been zealous for God, and he is therefore exempted from the heavy task of fulfilling these instructions.

(to be continued)

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