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### **The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion**

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#### **Shiur #59 - Chorev**

#### **Part 8: Was the Mission Fulfilled? (continued)**

**By Rav Elchanan Samet**

#### 2. The Prophecy of Punishment in our Narrative vs. Its Realization in the Days of Elisha

It turns out that the decree that Chazael, Yehu and Elisha will serve as God's agents in punishing Israel is not dependent on Eliyahu's criticism. The nation has sealed its fate by its own actions. Indeed, although Eliyahu is relieved of the heavy burden of appointing these personalities to their respective stations (for reasons addressed at length in the previous *shiur*), the nation of Israel is not exempted from the punishment that it deserves. Chazael and Yehu are eventually appointed by a prophet, so that they can wield their sword over Israel. Nevertheless, a comparison between God's words to Eliyahu concerning the destruction that these kings will inflict, and what actually happens – as described further on in *Sefer Melakhim* – gives rise to several questions.

First of all, let us examine how God's words to Eliyahu filter down through the words of Elisha and of his disciple to the kings whom they appoint.

Eliyahu is told: "It shall be that those who escape from the sword of Chazael shall be put to death by Yehu, and those who escape from the sword of Yehu shall be put to death by Elisha. And I shall leave of Israel seven thousand – all the knees that have not bowed to Ba'al, and every mouth that has not kissed it." (17-18)

In contrast, when Elisha notifies Chazael that he is going to reign over Aram, he tells him:

"For I know the evil that you are going to do to Benei Yisrael; you will set their strong places on fire, and kill their young men with the sword, and dash their infants, and rip up their pregnant women." (II *Melakhim* 8:12)

Then, when one of the "...sons of the prophets," Elisha's disciple, anoints Yehu at Elisha's order, he tells him:

"...You shall smite the house of Achav, your master, and you shall avenge the blood of my servants, the prophets, and the blood of all of God's servants, at the hand of Izevel. And the whole of Achav's house shall die... and Izevel shall be consumed by dogs in the portion of Yizre'el, with none to bury her."  
(II *Melakhim* 9:7-10)

But when we compare God's words to Eliyahu with the reality that is supposed to come about, we encounter several difficulties:

- a. The punishment that Yehu brings upon the house of Achav and all the worshippers of Ba'al in Israel is described at length in II *Melakhim* chapters 9-10. But this precedes the punishment inflicted by Chazael. Why, then, does God initially describe it as the completion of the punishment brought about by Chazael?
- b. The punishment inflicted on Israel by Chazael is described for the first time in the days of Yehu:  
"In those days God began to cut off parts of Israel, and Chazael smote them throughout the borders of Israel. From the Jordan eastwards, all the land of Gil'ad, of Gad and Reuven and Menasheh, from Aro'er which is by Wadi Arnon, and the Gil'ad, and the Bashan." (II *Melakhim* 10:32-33)

Here the text is speaking of the smiting (and perhaps even the conquest) of the eastern side of the Jordan. Far more grave is the punishment that Chazael is described as inflicting in the days of Yehoachaz, son of Yehu:

"God's anger burned against Israel, and He gave them into the hand of Chazael, king of Aram, and into the hand of Ben-Hadad, all their days.  
...for the king of Aram oppressed them.  
Nor did He leave for Yehoachaz any followers except for fifty horsemen and ten chariots and ten thousand footmen, for the king of Aram had destroyed them and had made them like the dust from threshing." (II *Melakhim* 13:3-4,7)

This punishment comes about a long time after Yehu's actions against Israel (in the days of Yehu's son, and some of it is brought about by Chazael's son). It is difficult to match this with the punishment foretold in the days of Eliyahu while Achav and Izevel ruled over Israel: more than a generation has passed since then, Achav's dynasty has been annihilated, and the worshippers of Ba'al have already been put to death by Yehu.

Likewise Elisha's words to Chazael, which we quoted above, do not appear to be fulfilled. Chazael admittedly destroys most of the army of Yehoachaz, king of

Israel ("...followers" – here meaning those who followed him into war), but there is no textual evidence of him annihilating a civilian population (women and children) with great cruelty, as described by Elisha.

- a. The most puzzling problem is that Elisha is described, in God's words to Eliyahu, as a prophet who will bring death upon Israel, completing the punishment inflicted on them from without by Chazael, and from within by Yehu. How distant this image is from Elisha, whose activities are described at length in the text – all acts of help to various individuals and to the nation of Israel as a whole. The text portrays Elisha's actions as the exact opposite of the role destined for him in Eliyahu's prophecy!

The commentators address themselves mainly to the issue of the order in which these three personalities acted – the opposite of what was told to Eliyahu. The Abarbanel explains the discrepancy as follows (with the basis of his thesis in the words of the Ralbag):

"While God said, 'Those who escape from the sword of Chazael shall be put to death by Yehu, and those who escape from the sword of Yehu shall be put to death by Elisha,' this does not mean that Chazael's sword precedes the sword of Yehu chronologically, and that Yehu's sword precedes that of Elisha, nor that such precedence implies greater vengeance – as some commentators have suggested [the reference here apparently being to the Radak, on verse 15]. I believe that what it means is that God appointed three agents of His Providence to punish these sinners with their lives – each according to what he deserved.

Chazael is set up to punish Israel in his wars, and to destroy them, and this is mentioned first, since its scope is vast. And because Izevel and the children of Achav, both younger and older, and the priests of Ba'al and the idolators, would not be going out to war and would not die there, [God] set up Yehu, who would slay and put to death all of the house of Achav and all of the idolators. He [Yehu] would not do this to [all of] Israel, for he would be king and would have mercy on them, so he would annihilate [only] the seed of Achav and his cohorts.

And because those that Chazael would kill in war would be men of war, and those that Yehu would kill would be [only] of the household of Achav and the idolators, therefore God readied Elisha ben Shafat; through his prophecy he would know and recognize those youth who were removed from the commandments, as *Chazal* teach (*Sota* 46b), and who would eventually end up sinning and sowing evil (*Ibid.*); he would kill them by cursing them.

It was for this reason that [God] said, 'Those that escape from the sword of Chazael' – in other words, those who were not accustomed to going to war and who would not fall by his hand – referring to the wife of Achav and his sons and all of his descendants and the priests of Ba'al. For these, God set up Yehu, to kill them, and this preceded Hazael, for there was no preparation for Chazael to kill them. 'And those who escape the sword of Yehu' – these are the youth: when Yehu killed and the idolaters, he would not kill the youth, for they were not deserving of punishment and he did not know what would become of them later on. For this reason God set up Elisha, who would curse them so that they would die, since he could recognize them as future idolaters.

Thus, the text does not describe these evils in their chronological order, but rather in accordance with the Divine decree that each would perform that which was proper for him to do: Chazael would smite the nation, Yehu – the idolaters, and Elisha – the youth."

The Malbim adopts an altogether different approach. Without changing the simple meaning of God's words to Eliyahu in any way, he resolves the discrepancy in the order by adopting the Abarbanel's explanation as the answer to a different question – which we discussed in the previous *shiur*: why did Eliyahu not fulfill the mission given to him, passing it on to Elisha instead? The Malbim writes as follows:

"'And you shall come and anoint Chazael... and Yehu...' – The [actual] order is not so, for first Elisha is anointed, then Yehu, and afterwards Chazael. But further on (21:29) I explain that because of Achav's repentance, the decree was changed, such that the killing of Yehu [i.e., the killing that Yehu would perpetuate] would not be in his days, but rather only in the days of his son, and for this reason Yehu was not anointed by Eliyahu, but rather by Elisha, and the anointment of Elisha precedes the anointment of Yehu. Likewise, the decree of Chazael is also changed and postponed... Thus, the prophecy that "those who escape from the sword of Chazael shall be put to death by Yehu" accords with the original decree, but afterwards it happened in the reverse order."

Achav's "repentance," which the Malbim perceives as the explanation for all of the changes that occur in the fulfillment of the prophecy, obviously refers to the repentance in the vineyard of Navot, following Eliyahu's rebuke (in 21:27-29).

The two solutions proposed above do provide satisfactory answers to the question of the discrepancy in order between God's words to Eliyahu and their historical realization in reality. But the list of questions that we posed above includes

another discrepancy: it seems that the punishment inflicted by the agents appointed by God was much lighter than that hinted at in God's words to Eliyahu. All three agents did cause harm to *Am Yisrael*, but the harm was limited in scope: Chazael smote principally the men of war, Yehu annihilated the house of Achav and a relatively limited number of Ba'al-worshippers, and Elisha caused the death of only forty-two youth who scoffed at him. This is not what we were led to expect by God's words to Eliyahu:

"Those who escape from the sword of Chazael shall be put to death by Yehu, and those who escape from the sword of Yehu shall be put to death by Elisha. And I shall leave of Israel seven thousand..." (17-18)

There is no satisfactory answer to this question in the commentaries quoted above.

In order to explain the matter, let us return to the hypothesis that we proposed in the previous *shiur*: the mission imposed upon Eliyahu was a sort of test for the prophet, to see to what extent he would be prepared to take practical action against his nation. The lack of fulfillment of the mission by Eliyahu reflects his retraction of the demand for revenge against Israel, "I have been exceedingly zealous for God..."

But here we must ask: the mission is not altogether cancelled (for the punishment that Israel deserves is not because of Eliyahu); rather, it is simply transferred from Eliyahu to Elisha, and it is for this reason that we find Elisha appointing Chazael and Yehu, after Eliyahu is taken up to heaven. What, then, is the significance of Eliyahu removing this mission from his own shoulders and transferring it to his disciple? After all, the punishment will ultimately be carried out. Moreover – it is fair of Eliyahu to give over this mission – which he himself no longer desires – to his disciple?

In order to answer this question we must first clarify a more fundamental issue: is there any connection between the content of a prophecy and its fulfillment in reality, and the personality of the prophet who receives that prophecy? Is the prophet merely a vessel for conveying God's word, or is he to some extent a partner in molding the process by which God's words are applied in reality? It would seem that the principle set down by *Chazal*, that "no two prophets prophesize in the same style" (*Sanhedrin* 89a), applies not only to their monologues, but also to their style of action. Each prophet's unique style of action reflects his personality and his influence in the application of the prophecy in reality.

A clear expression of this is to be found in the Babylonian Talmud (*Megilla* 14b). When the Sefer Torah was found in the Temple precinct in the days of Yoshiyahu, the king sent his messengers to Chulda, the prophetess, rather than to Yirmiyahu, the major prophet of the generation:

"Go, seek out God on my behalf and on behalf of the nation, and on behalf of all of Yehuda, concerning the words of this book that has been found, for great is the wrath of God that has been kindled against us... So Chilkiyahu the priest went... to Chulda, the prophetess..." (II *Melakhim* 22:13-14).

The Gemara asks: "How could Yoshiyahu put aside Yirmiyahu, and send to her?" Several answers are proposed. The first of them is: "Rabbi Shila said: Because women are merciful."

Thus, there is significance to the identity of the prophet who speaks God's words (which, in the case of Yoshiyahu, would certainly be words of rebuke and punishment), and the fact that the prophecy comes through a woman can have a softening effect.

In light of this we can understand the significance of the appointment of Chazael being transferred from Eliyahu to Elisha. Elisha, while a loyal disciple of Eliyahu and his attendant, pouring water over his hands, is a prophet whose personality and manner of action are completely different from those of his master. Almost all of his actions are acts of salvation extended towards individuals and towards the nation as a whole. The transfer of responsibility for appointing Chazael to his hands therefore symbolizes an attempt to soften the punishment. This is no mere theoretical consideration, but rather an effect that is clearly illustrated in the manner in which Elisha goes on to act. In his encounter with Chazael, where he appoints him king over Aram and tells him of the imminent death of his master, Ben-Hadad, Elisha adopts a peculiar manner:

"He held his countenance as long as he could, and then the man of God wept. And Chazael said: Why does my master weep? And he said: For I know the evil that you are going to do to Benei Yisrael; you will set their strong places on fire, and kill their young men with the sword, and dash their infants, and rip up their pregnant women. And Chazael said: But what is your servant, who is a dog, that he should do this mighty thing? And Elisha said: God has shown me that you will be king over Aram." (II *Melakhim* 11-13)

If later on we find no evidence of Chazael acting with such cruelty (although he succeeds in conquering parts of the land on the eastern side of the Jordan, and later on

also wipes out a large portion of the Israelite army), this may be explained by Elisha's weeping at the dramatic moment when he tells Chazael that he will soon be king. The news of his imminent new status, conveyed to Chazael by God's prophet, thereby granting legitimacy to his reign, must have accompanied him for the rest of his life, along with the memory of the prophet who bore these tidings weeping bitterly. Perhaps this influenced him, moderating his actions against Israel.

Here we are witness to the prophet's influence over the realization of the prophecy that is conveyed through him, in ways that are clearly discernible: not through the formulation of the prophecy, nor through prayer or supplication for mercy, but rather through overt psychological influence over the king who serves as God's agent in bringing punishment upon Israel.

Could we possibly imagine Eliyahu weeping as he appoints Chazael?

What arises from all of the above is that the transfer of the task of appointing Chazael from Eliyahu to Elisha is itself a testimony to Eliyahu's abandonment of his critical, prosecuting approach towards Israel, and represents part of his "repentance." By handing over to Elisha, Eliyahu reveals his wish to soften the punishment. He knows that if he himself were to carry out the mission it would not only be a punishment to himself, but would also not be to the benefit of the nation. Handing over the mission to Elisha is not only the removal of an unpleasant task from his own shoulders, but also represents a gesture aimed for Israel's benefit – it is a gesture that will to some extent ease the punishment that Chazael is destined to inflict on them.

Translated by Kaeren Fish