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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #62: Chorev

Part 9: The First Encounter between Eliyahu and Elisha (19-21) (continued)

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4. Eliyahu vs. Elisha (continued)

b. The casting of Eliyahu's mantle towards Elisha causes the latter immediately to abandon his work as an inexplicable, "magnetic" pull draws him after Eliyahu. No economic or professional consideration can stand in his way. He does not even wait to complete the furrow that he is busy plowing; he spares no thought for the pair of oxen that he was leading, nor for the other eleven yokes that his father's servants are leading in front of him.

"He abandoned the oxen and ran after Eliyahu."

It immediately becomes apparent, however, that this magnetic "pull" is an attraction of opposites, between two people of utterly contrary character. Is there really no consideration that stands in the path of Elisha, postponing his pursuit of Eliyahu? Does he really run after him with no hesitation or restraint? Not necessarily, for, as we read at the beginning of the second half of this brief unit: "He said: 'I pray you, let me kiss my father and my mother;'" only afterwards "'I shall follow you.'" It is not the economic consideration that gives Elisha pause, but rather something far more important: his love and reverence for his parents.

Thus the text provides a very clear character sketch, pointing to the warm, human personality of Elisha. Not only is his father's name provided, but also concrete evidence of his relationship with his parents: he is a beloved son who "goes to receive permission from his father and his mother" (as Radak explains) and to share a parting embrace.

Eliyahu, zealous for God, would appear to have a different way about him:

Who said of his father and of his mother, "I have not seen him," and who did not recognize his brothers, nor did he know his children; for they observed Your utterance and preserved Your covenant. (Devarim 33:9)

The preservers of the covenant, who are called upon to stand guard and protect it while Yisra'el violates this covenant, require absolute devotion to their job, to the extent of nullifying any family loyalties or sentimentality. Who, more than Eliyahu, is a defender of the covenant ("angel of the covenant"); who is more pained than he over the fact that "Benei Yisra'el have abandoned Your covenant"? Therefore, this is not a time, nor a position, that allow for family ties. The person who is destined to serve Eliyahu and to be his disciple—later on inheriting his role as prophet—should be someone who follows his master with no hesitation, not tarrying even to kiss his father and mother.

Tradition records the following about the Ari *z"l* and his disciples:

Once, on Erev Shabbat, close to the time of welcoming the Shabbat bride, he went with his disciples out of the city of Tzefat... to accept the Shabbat, starting with "A psalm of David, Give to God, you sons of the mighty" (Tehillim 29)... and the established song for accepting Shabbat and "A psalm, a song for the Shabbat day" (ibid. 92) and "God reigns" (ibid. 93)... with a pleasant tune. While they were singing, the rabbi said to his disciples: "Friends, would you like us to go to Yerushalayim before Shabbat, and we shall spend Shabbat in Yerushalayim? (Yerushalayim is more than 25 *parsa'ot* from Tzefat!) Some of the disciples answered: "We shall do as you say." **Some others answered: "Let us first go and tell our wives."** When they said, "Let us first go home," **the Rabbi was greatly distressed**; he clapped his hands together and said: "Woe to us, that we did not have the merit to be redeemed. If all of you had answered unanimously that you wanted to go, with great joy, all of Yisra'el would immediately have been redeemed, for that moment was the appointed time for redemption. However, since you rejected it, the exile returned to its full strength, for our many sins."

c. With a note of disappointment and with bitter irony, Eliyahu reacts to Elisha's words ("Let me kiss my father and my mother"), telling him: "Go, return, for what have I done to you?"

In other words: if your father and mother are more important to you than following me immediately, here and now, then "Go, return" from following me. Perhaps you are not suited to the task; perhaps you are not worthy of being my disciple and my successor. If so, remain here, in the bosom of your family. Go on plowing, "for what have I done to you," that you should come after me? Does the casting of my mantle oblige you to run after me?

Elisha gives no verbal answer to this implied criticism. He neither agrees nor argues with his new-found master. His answer is expressed in actions. What will he do now? Will he go back on his request and following Eliyahu without taking leave of his parents, as Eliyahu's veiled criticism would seem to require of him, or will he follow his heart and act in accordance with his personality, and go to them? Here, again, we find a clear depiction of Elisha's personality: he does not go back on his intention. Without speeches he does what he believes to be right, while his great master stands and waits for him, "forced by the Word"—the same Source that told him, "and Elisha, son of Shafat of Avel Mechola you shall anoint as prophet in your stead."

Radak comments: "'He turned back from after him'—to kiss his father and mother, even though this is not noted in the text."

We ought to consider the reason for this omission. Why does the text leave out the description of Elisha taking leave of his parents in verse 21, replacing it with a series of other actions which Elisha did not tell Eliyahu about in advance, in verse 20?

There is something that is common to the kissing and to the feast that Elisha holds. Both are acts of taking leave of those around him in his birthplace and in the various spheres of his life. The kissing is meant for taking leave of his parents, who are the closest to him; the feast is meant for taking leave of his father's laborers, with whom he had worked, and perhaps also the other people of his city. This being so, we may say that Elisha's announcement to Eliyahu in verse 20, and the description of his actions in verse 21, serve to complement one another. His announcement to Eliyahu should be interpreted with elaboration: Let me take leave of those who are close to me, and then I shall go after you. However, Elisha does not wish to list all of the acts of farewell that he is planning; quite the opposite, he wants to minimize the impression of the delay that he is about to cause, referring to it as a brief act (a kiss) and one that is necessary from a human, family perspective (to his father and mother). When Eliyahu understands and agrees to this, so Elisha believes, he will be able to broaden his farewell gestures to other spheres too.

But this attempt by Elisha to earn Eliyahu's approval fails, and his words only arouse Eliyahu's bitterness. Nevertheless, Elisha is not deterred from his plan. He carries it out—not in its minimalist form, but in full, as he had apparently planned from the outset.

But how was Elisha not fearful of exacerbating Eliyahu's impatience towards him by lengthening his delay even further with actions that he had not even mentioned in advance? The solution to this puzzle lies in the additional significance to these

actions of Elisha: they are not merely polite gestures of farewell, but actions symbolizing his taking final and absolute leave of his former life as a farmer, in order to assume the new life of a prophet (we shall discuss this idea further below). Therefore, Elisha believed that these actions would not anger Eliyahu; quite the opposite, they express the wholeheartedness of his going after him; they show his decision to be irreversible.

Thus, Elisha's actions express two opposing ideas. On one hand, his delay speaks of his perception of prophecy not as severance from the cycle of life surrounding him, as Eliyahu viewed it, but rather as a connection to that cycle. On the other hand, his delay allows him to express in action the transition that he experiences from being a tiller of the soil on his father's estate, to being a prophet of Yisrael.

d. Finally, attention should be paid to the use of the verbs "*h-l-kh*" (to go, walk) and "*sh-u-v*" (to turn back, return) by Eliyahu, by Elisha and by the narrator. The interplay of these verbs hints at the essence of the polemic between the two characters, without giving it explicit expression. Elisha tells Eliyahu, "I pray you, let me kiss my father and my mother, and I shall go (*elekha*) after you." Eliyahu answers him, "Go (*lekh*), return (*shuv*), for what have I done to you?"—meaning: why are you going after me; go, turn back from after me. Thus Eliyahu, in his criticism, inverts the direction of Elisha's act of "going."

But Elisha remains firm in his perception: "He turned back (*va-yashav*) from after him." The text does not say: he went (*va-yelekh*) and turned from after him; this is because the concept of "going" (*h-l-kh*) is reserved, in Elisha's consciousness, for going after Eliyahu. His turning back from after Eliyahu is not done with the intention sarcastically proposed by Eliyahu—that he should turn back from after him and not return—but rather in accordance with his own intention: first "Let me turn back from after you" to kiss my father and mother; after that I shall once again "go after you." Indeed, after Elisha completes his parting gestures, "He arose and went after Eliyahu, and attended him." He did as he had intended to do.

The young disciple has vanquished his great master in their first encounter; he has established his view and his approach—and immediately thereafter, he becomes Eliyahu's attendant. There is no clearer illustration of Elisha's attitude toward Eliyahu, his master: he is powerfully attracted to the personality of his master and has unbounded admiration for him; he runs after him, pours water over his hands and serves him. However, all of this is done while maintaining his own independent personality and unique way, since it is for this reason that he was chosen.

Rabbi Chayim of Volozhin, disciple of the Vilna Gaon and founder of the famed Volozhin Yeshiva, writes as follows in his commentary on Mishna Avot, entitled "Ruach Chayim":

"Yosei ben Yo'ezer, a man of Tzereda, used to say: 'Let your house be a gathering place for the wise; cover yourself ("*mitabek*"; also related to the word "*ma'avak*," battle, hence "wrestle") with the dust of their feet...'" (*Avot* 1:4)

Torah study is called "battle," for it is written "the war of Torah;" if so, then Torah scholars must be called "fighters." As our Sages taught (*Kiddushin* 30b), "'They shall not be ashamed when they speak openly with their enemies' (*Tehillim* 127:5): even a father and his son, a teacher and his disciple, who are engaged in a debate over a matter of Torah, become like enemies, but they do not end their debate until they are friends again." A disciple dare not accept his master's teaching if he finds flaws in it. Sometimes, the truth will lie with the disciple, just as a match may kindle a large log. This is as it is written, "Let your house be a gathering place for the wise, and wrestle..."—in the sense of the expression, "A man wrestled (*va-ye'vek*) with him" (*Bereishit* 32:25), meaning the wrestling of battle, for it is a worthy battle. Likewise we, against our holy teachers in the world... we are exhorted in this regard, and we are permitted to wrestle and do battle with their words, to defend our position and not to retreat in deference to their status, but simply to love the truth.

But at the same time, a person should take care not to speak with pride or arrogance... Therefore it should be [done] only with great humility, with the sense that "Although I am not worthy, this is Torah and I must [do my best to] study it." This is what is meant by the expression "*hevei mitabek*" ("wrestle" [with their words]), as we have explained above, but on condition that it is "with the dust of their feet." In other words, one must do so with humility and submission, presenting one's case from a position of inferiority.

5. The Parting Feast

We should not ignore another aspect of Elisha's personality that is revealed here. Before going after Eliyahu to serve him, Elisha does something else, which takes much longer than it took him to kiss his father and his mother:

He took the yoke of oxen and slaughtered them,
And cooked the flesh with the instruments of the oxen,
And gave it to the people to eat.

We have already seen that this act has two meanings, one of which is suited to Eliyahu's difficult demand of him: it symbolizes his parting with his previous way of life and the beginning of a new one. It should be noted that for the purposes of this feast he slaughters the very pair of oxen that he has just plowed with, and to cook the flesh he uses the wooden plowing implements. Radak explains his actions as follows: "In his great haste to follow Eliyahu, he does not tarry to hew wood for making a fire; he breaks apart the 'instruments of the oxen'—meaning, the plow—and cooks the meat upon them." However, it seems that we may go further and suggest that by slaughtering the oxen that he has just plowed with, and cooking their meat upon the instruments that he has likewise just used for plowing, Elisha is showing himself, as well as those who partake of the feast, and even Eliyahu, that the period of him plowing at his father's house is over. His parting from his birthplace and from his way of life is final and absolute; it is irreversible. He turns his face towards the role of the prophet; a person who fulfills this role can no longer concern himself with the "settling of the world," with production and making a living, as he has done until now.

The commentators address this extra significance to Elisha's actions:

Rashi: "Out of great joy, he made a feast."

Radak: "He slaughtered the oxen and made a feast in that same field for those engaged in the plowing and for the people who came with him, to escort him... for he was parting from them."

Going after Eliyahu, as preparation for his new role as prophet, does not, to Elisha's view, require that he separate himself from the people; it does not require the sort of severance that characterizes the approach of his master. Moreover, his going off to his new role should be a source of joy: his own personal happiness—"out of great joy he made a feast"—and rejoicing with his family, his father's laborers and all of people of his city, whose leave he takes with a *se'udat mitzva*. It is for their sake and for their benefit that he is going to be a prophet of God.

Already in this act we discern Elisha's essence; asking, as it were: "'Now, let a musician be found for me.' It was when the musician would play, that God's hand would be upon him" (II Melakhim 2:15). We see, too, his path as a prophet who cares for the people around him, for the sons of the prophets and for everyone. The expression, "He gave it to the people and let them eat" (v. 21) is echoed several times with reference to Elisha (in II Melakhim 4:41-44): "He poured for the people and they ate... 'Give to the people, that they may eat...' 'Give to the people, that they may eat...' He set it before them and they ate, and left some over, according to God's word."

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Our analysis of the encounter between these two such different personalities shows that it was not without tension: Elisha's instant "magnetic" attraction to Eliyahu gives off sparks. Is this tension the reason that in Eliyahu's next appearances—at the vineyard of Navot (chapter 21) and in the clash with Achazya and his messengers (II Melakhim 1)—he acts alone? May we assume that Elisha's job of attending his master did not last long, and they met up again only when Eliyahu is gathered up to the heavens (II Melakhim 2)? This would seem to be a mistaken impression. The sons of the prophets in Beit El and in Yericho regard Elisha as Eliyahu's main disciple, as evidenced in their words to him: "Do you know that this day God will take your master from over your head?" (II Melakhim 2:3, 5). This implies that up until this time Eliyahu was Elisha's master and his crown. Later on, one of the king's servants describes Elisha thus: "Here is Elisha, son of Shafat, who poured water over the hands of Eliyahu" (II Melakhim 3:11). This means, then, that Elisha attended Eliyahu constantly, from the moment that he went after him to serve him (in our narrative) onwards.

Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the fact that Eliyahu – even when accompanied by his attendant (as we saw previously, at the end of chapter 18, and as we see at the end of our chapter here), tends to engage in his prophetic activity alone (I Melakhim 18:46, 19:3, 21; II Melakhim 1). Elisha, in contrast, often appears with his attendant, or in the company of the sons of the prophets; it is rare to find him alone. This is yet another aspect of the huge contrast between the two figures.

We see now how, in three verses that describe a few actions and a few words that are exchanged in the first encounter between the two prophets, the text presents us with two different worlds. All of the difference and contrast between them, and the attraction that exists despite them (or perhaps because of them) between the disciple and his teacher—all of this is illustrated here quite clearly, as if in a sketch, representing the basis for the great images that will come later, in the description of Elisha's career.

Translated by Kaeren Fish