

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #65: Navot

Part 3: Navot's Refusal and its Motives

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1. Who Will "Give" the Vineyard to Achav?

The great dilemma that is presented in the first half of our chapter (verses 1-16) is: will Navot agree to give his vineyard to Achav, or won't he? This dilemma is crafted through repeated use of the verb root "*n-t-n*" (to give) in relation to Navot and to the vineyard. It appears a total of seven times, thus representing a key word in this narrative. Let us examine each of its appearances:

- 1) **Give me**, I pray you, your vineyard, that it may be a vegetable garden for me (2)
- 2) **God forbid that I should give** the inheritance of my fathers to you. (3)
- 3) ...Sullen and angry over the matter that he had spoken to him... **I shall not give you** the inheritance of my fathers. (4)
- 4) ... And I said to him: **Give me** your vineyard for money. (6)
- 5) ... And he said: **I shall not give you** my vineyard. (6)
- 6) **I shall give you** the vineyard of Navot the Yizre'eli. (7)
- 7) Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Navot the Yizre'eli, **who refused to give it to you** for money.... (15)

Achav's request to give the vineyard appears twice (1,4), while Navot's refusal is repeated four times (2,3,5,7). This creates a tension between Achav's desire that the vineyard be given to him and Navot's firm refusal, with the refusal prevailing.

The sixth appearance of the root "*n-t-n*," in Izevel's words to Achav, is strange: "**I shall give you** the vineyard of Navot the Yizre'eli" (7).

This is not a request from someone to whom the vineyard does not belong (as in 1 and 4), nor is it a refusal on the part of the owner to give it (as in the other appearances of the verb). Rather, it is a promise made by someone who does not own the vineyard at all, to give it!

In the last pair of appearances of the verb (6-7) lies the ironic tragedy of this chapter: Achav asks that the vineyard be given to him, Navot refuses to give it and

stands by his refusal, but ultimately the vineyard is in fact "given" to Achav. It is not Navot who gives it, nor is it given in return for money, as Achav proposes – for Navot "refused to give it to you for money" (verse 15) until the bitter end. Rather, it is Izevel who "gives" the vineyard as the one who promised it, and for free, too (she hints at the advantage of her "giving" in verse 15). Clearly, the "giving" in verse 7 is merely Izevel's ironic use of the verb that stands at the heart of the plot. From this point onwards the text is careful to note that Achav "**takes possession**" of the vineyard, which he had so wanted to **have given** to him (see verses 15 [Izevel's words], 16, 18, 19).

2. Navot's Reasons for his Refusal, and its Background

What is the meaning of Navot's categorical refusal to give his vineyard to Achav – the refusal that ultimately prevails over the request, but ultimately becomes a "giving" without a giver?

In a previous *shiur* we discussed Navot's legal right to refuse Achav's request. We clarified there that the "king's rights" have nothing to do with the subject at hand, and do not give Achav any right to Navot's field. Still – is Navot's stubborn refusal not spiteful? Is it not a matter of being mean just for its own sake? After all, he is promised fair conditions, and he is given a choice of two possibilities for payment:

"... a better vineyard than it, or... the worth of it in money." (2)

Achav's request is also supported by good, logical reasoning:

"Give me, I pray you, your vineyard, that it may be a vegetable garden for me, for it is close to my home." (2)

It seems eminently reasonable for a king to want to extend the area surrounding his palace (and Navot's vineyard is located "near the palace of Achav," as we read in verse 1); Achav even has in mind some orderly and well-defined development plans. Despite all of this, Navot refuses. Is he not responsible, in some measure, for the developments that follow? Would it not behoove him to concede to the logic of Achav (who, as king of Israel, is surely deserving of some honor, respect and sacrifice on the part of his subjects), rather than insisting on his legal rights, when none of his rights is being violated?

Let us look closely at the manner in which Navot's refusal is recorded. Our chapter records his refusal four times, and a comparison between them is most instructive:

1. The original refusal: "God forbid that I should give the inheritance of my fathers to you." (3)
2. As it sounds in Achav's thoughts: "I shall not give you the inheritance of my fathers" (4)
3. As related by Achav to Izevel: "I shall not give you my vineyard" (6)
4. Izevel's version: "To give you the vineyard of Navot the Yizre'eli for money" (15)

From this comparison it arises that the further we move from the original refusal, the more it loses of its moral, religious validity, instead becoming petty. The original refusal is substantiated by the claim that this would be a religious transgression, and therefore it is formulated as an oath in God's Name: "God forbid that I should...." The reason for this solemn refusal is that it is "the inheritance of my fathers"; only at the very end does the refusal contain the words "to you." In the first repetition of the refusal, in Achav's thoughts, the oath in God's Name disappears, becoming a simple "I shall not." The relational "to you" now precedes "the inheritance of my fathers," and thus the impression is created that Navot's objection is a personal matter directed specifically towards Achav.

In the second repetition, in Achav's report to Izevel, in addition to all of the above, the highly significant expression "the inheritance of my fathers" becomes "my vineyard," expressing mere economic value. Thus, nothing remains of the original justification for Navot's refusal; his position now seems altogether spiteful.

Achav seems to want to forget the real justification, and even more than that, he seems to want to hide it from Izevel – to the point where in Izevel's version there is an emphasis on Navot's refusal to give "his vineyard" (as in the second repetition), despite the offer of monetary payment. Above, the expression, "For money," was interpreted as an expression of Izevel "patting herself on the back" for "organizing" the vineyard for Achav for free. But her words may convey a different, or additional meaning: Izevel hints that Navot's refusal stems from his appetite for profit; he wants to be offered a higher price. Thus the entire situation is turned upside down: what Achav actually offered was a vineyard better than Navot's, and the offer was rejected by Navot for religious reasons!

Why does Achav change, time after time, the formulation of Navot's refusal? It seems that in his heart of hearts, Achav understands the justness of Navot's refusal, not only in terms of the law, which awards him the right to refuse, but also from the perspective of religious law and custom, which obligate him to refuse. But since Achav's desire for Navot's vineyard is very strong, he tries to silence this voice of

truth that echoes in his memory, and to turn it into an inexplicable, mean stubbornness.

3. Preserving the Patriarchal Inheritance in the *Tanakh*

Let us now return to Navot's original refusal and try to draw from there – and only from there – the answer to our question as to the meaning of his point-blank refusal. We have already noted that his refusal carries the validity of a religious obligation, "God forbid," and it arises from the fact that this vineyard is, for Navot, "the inheritance of my fathers." But this requires further clarification.

The piece of land upon which an Israelite dwelled, in ancient times, and which had been bequeathed by his ancestors, was not regarded merely as an asset with monetary value, nor even as a mere "means of production," as modern man tends to regard it. The Torah tries to create a fixed and permanent relationship between a person and his inheritance in the land (his "possession"), as part of a social structure in which the individual is connected to his family, his tribe, and the inherited land that belongs exclusively to them. At the end of *Sefer Bamidbar*, we read the following concerning the daughters of Tzelofchad:

"An inheritance shall not be transferred from one tribe to another, for each person of Bnei Yisrael shall cleave to the inheritance of the tribe of his fathers, in order that Bnei Yisrael may inherit, each individual the inheritance of his fathers." (*Bamidbar* 36:7-8)

It is for this purpose (inter alia), that the Torah institutes the law of *Yovel* (the Jubilee Year):

"You shall return, each man to his inheritance, and you shall be restored, each man to his family." (*Vayikra* 25:10)

Between one jubilee year and the next, "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is Mine, and you are sojourners and residents with Me. And throughout the land of your possession, you shall give redemption to the land." (23-24)

When the sons dwell on the land of their fathers and continue to work it, they carry the connection of their fathers' lives to their children, from generation to generation. The cleaving of successive generations to the family inheritance of land, which "stands forever" and serves as a force that binds the generations together, grants the transient individual a foothold in eternity. This being the case, the individual's

hold on the inheritance of his fathers represents an act of kindness towards previous generations that have passed on. An interruption of the order of inheritance and settlement of the inheritance of the fathers is therefore a deviation from the intention of the Torah, and a violation of its commandments.

The very sale of land - even only until the Jubilee Year, which is really a kind of rental, "For what he sells you is the number of its harvests" (*Vayikra* 25:16) – is permissible only in dire circumstances. Even then, the seller, or his relatives, are entitled to redeem the field, if they are able to – as explained in *Parashat Behar*. But the sale of an inheritance in perpetuity is altogether forbidden, under any circumstances, both to the seller and to the buyer.

The sale of the field to Achav is therefore not halakhically proper – especially since Achav certainly had no intention of permitting the redemption of the field or its return in the Jubilee Year. His intention is to buy it in perpetuity. Indeed, it is in this light that Abarbanel understands Navot's refusal:

Navot answers him, "God forbid that I should give the inheritance of my fathers to you." It seems to me that his intention was that since the Torah commands that the land should not be sold in perpetuity, and that every part of the land should always remain in the hands of its inheritors, as it was divided among their father's households – therefore it would be a transgression for [Navot] to give him the vineyard. He could sell it neither for money nor for another vineyard in exchange, since it was the inheritance of his fathers from the time of the division of the land. Therefore he says, "**God** forbid" – because Navot believes that God prohibits this and that it would be evil in His eyes, since [the vineyard] was the inheritance of his forefathers.

Navot's refusal to give his vineyard to Achav therefore testifies to the independence of the individual in Israel, and the preference given to the laws of the Torah over the request of a sinful king. It also demonstrates the extent of inculcation of the Torah laws pertaining to inheritance of land amongst the nation.

Translated by Kaeren Fish