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

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### **Shiur #66 - Navot**

#### **Part 4: Achav's Personal Punishment for the Murder of Navot, and the Punishment of His Household**

**By Rav Elchanan Samet**

#### **1. Eliyahu's Mission**

In the second half of our narrative (21:17 – 22:1) Eliyahu appears in the vineyard of Navot, at the time when Achav goes down to take possession of the vineyard, and conveys God's word to him. This section may be divided into six units, each with its own subject:

- a. (17-19) God's command to Eliyahu to meet Achav at the vineyard of Navot and to convey God's word to him.
- b. (20a) Brief dialogue between Achav and Eliyahu
- c. (20b-24) Eliyahu's words to Achav: the cutting off of Achav's house, and the punishment of Izevel
- d. (25-26) Parenthetical narrative: negative summary of Achav's reign
- e. (27) Achav's sorrowful reaction
- f. (28 – 22:1) God's word to Eliyahu – postponement of the punishment of Achav's house to the next generation.

In this *shiur* we shall address the first four units, up to verse 26. Each of these units presents some difficulty. Let us address each in turn.

Unit a.

(19) You shall speak to him, saying: So says God, Have you murdered and also taken possession?!

And you shall speak to him, saying: So says God: At the place where the dogs liked the blood of Navot, the dogs shall lick your blood, too.

These words, which Eliyahu is commanded to convey to Navot, do not appear later on in the chapter.

Unit b.

(20a) Achav said to Eliyahu: "Have you found me, my enemy?"

And he said: "I have found you."

The dialogue between the king and the prophet in this verse is sudden; we are given no background. There is no description of their actual meeting, prior to Achav's question.

Unit c.

(20b) Since you have given yourself over to do evil in the eyes of God,

(21) Behold, I will bring evil upon you and will sweep you away; I shall cut off from Achav every male, and him that is shut up and him that is left free in Israel.

(22) And I shall make your house like the house of Yeravam, son of Nevat, and like the house of Basha, son of Achiya, for the anger that you have provoked in Me, and for causing Israel to sin.

(23) And God spoke of Izevel, too, saying: The dogs shall eat Izevel by the wall of Yizre'el.

(24) He who dies of Achav in the city – the dogs shall eat him, and he who dies in the field – the birds of the sky shall eat him.

What Eliyahu says in this unit is not what he was originally commanded to say, in unit 1. The accusation of Achav is all encompassing, and does not address his specific sin with regard to Navot (verse 22, "For causing Israel to sin," refers to the sin of idolatry). The punishment, too, is general; it is not related to the sin of killing Navot. It speaks of Achav's house being cut off, like the prophecy of Achiya the Shiloni concerning the house of Yeravam (*I Melakhim* I 14:9-11), and that of Yehu, son of Chanani, concerning the house of Basha (*I Melakhim* 16:1-4); indeed, these two kings are even mentioned by Eliyahu. He is not talking about Achav's personal fate, with a punishment that corresponds measure-for-measure to what he did not Navot, as God commanded him in verse 19. Izevel's punishment (verse 23) is also something new; it is not mentioned in God's words to Eliyahu.

Unit d.

(25) There was none like Achav, who gave himself over to do evil in the eyes of God, to which he was incited by Izevel, his wife.

(26) And he acted most abominably in going after idols, like all that the Emorites did – whom God cast out before Bnei Yisrael.

This summary of Achav's evil interrupts the continuity of the narrative, which continues afterwards, such that its location seems peculiar. Its proper place would logically be at the end of the next chapter (22:39), after the description of Achav's death.

As we shall discover from the resolution of these difficulties, they are connected to one another.

## 2. A Single Solution to the Problems Arising from Units a-c

When, in a biblical narrative, God commands His prophet to convey a message to an individual or to the public, the content of the message is sometimes recorded twice in the text: once in God's words to the prophet, and again when the prophet delivers the message. In many cases, though, the text is economical in style, and the message is not repeated. Ramban, in his commentary on the Torah (*Bamidbar* 16:5), sets forth this phenomenon:

"I have already demonstrated that in many places we find that the text will either elaborate in [recording] God's words to Moshe and be brief in Moshe's speech, or the opposite; and **sometimes one of these [speeches] is not mentioned at all.**"

The words that we have emphasized in the Ramban include two possibilities. One is that God's word to Moshe is recorded in the text, while "Moshe's speech" – i.e., his conveying of God's message to the "recipient," is not recorded. The second possibility is that that text mentions only "Moshe's speech," and from this we are meant to deduce that he was previously commanded by God to say this, even though God's words do not appear in the text.

The same principle obviously applies to understanding the books of the prophets.

According to this rule, we may posit that the solution to our questions on units a. and c. is one and the same: the text is brief in unit a., recoding only God's words to Eliyahu, while omitting the repetition of the same exact words when Eliyahu conveys

them to Achav. At the same time, in unit c. the text suffices with "Eliyahu's speech"; it is clear that Eliyahu is speaking in God's Name, even though the initial Divine message that preceded this unit of the narrative is left out. This manner of presentation serves to "save" a considerable volume of text, and the two units shed light on one another: just as the message in unit a. is conveyed by God to Eliyahu, so likewise the message in unit c.; and just as the message in unit c. is conveyed by Eliyahu to Achav, so likewise the message in unit a.

But we must still ask: why does the text choose this particular manner of presentation, rather than one of the other devices that are usually employed for the sake of brevity? For instance, the text could have conveyed God's message to Eliyahu in its entirety, and then given us to understand that it was passed on faithfully to Achav. Alternatively, this section could have started immediately with Eliyahu's encounter with Achav and the speech that Eliyahu delivers in God's Name, in such a way that it would be clear to the reader from Eliyahu's words ("So says God...") that he had been commanded by God to bring this message. Furthermore, concerning the complex technique that the text employs here – with one part of God's message recorded only in its passing from God to Eliyahu, while the other part of the message is recorded only as conveyed from Eliyahu to Achav – we may ask: why is this continuity "interrupted" with the summary at this particular place and not elsewhere?

Let us start with the last question: Eliyahu's speech is cut off in the middle for two reasons. One reason is related to the content of the parts of his speech: as noted in the question we posed on unit c., the content of unit c. is not directly related to Achav's sin in the episode of Navot. The same is not true of unit a., in which the two parts of the Divine message – the part containing the accusation and the part containing the punishment – both clearly relate to the sin that preceded them.

The other reason is connected to Achav's reactions upon hearing God's word. The first message (which is not explicitly recorded as having been conveyed to Achav, but the reader is expected to deduce that this did happen), leads to the reaction, "Have you found me, my enemy?" and to Eliyahu's response, "I have found you". This creates a division between the two parts of Eliyahu's speech. Clearly, this dialogue could not be held off until the end of his speech, since its second part (section c.) leads to an altogether different response on Achav's part: "He tore his garments...."

In light of the above, there is clearly no possibility of conveying God's entire message to Eliyahu as a single unit, since it would be impossible to incorporate Achav's reaction in the middle of God's speech to Eliyahu. The incorporation of his reaction is possible only when the text narrates Eliyahu's actual appearance before Achav.

What remains, then, is to clarify the reason for avoiding the one other possibility: for the text to start this section by immediately describing Eliyahu's appearance in the vineyard of Navot and his words to Achav there, in God's Name. This would have facilitated the incorporation of Achav's words at the proper juncture, and the division of the two halves of Eliyahu's speech. The advantage of this presentation would have been the cohesiveness of the description and a natural flow that would not have required complex interpretation.

The reason for the text not adopting this approach would seem to be as follows: when the reader arrives at the result of the sin of Achav and Izevel, when Achav comes to take possession of the vineyard of the murdered Navot, he expects to read – first and foremost – God's reaction to this crime. And an immediate reaction indeed appears: "God's word came to Eliyahu..." (verse 17). If, instead of this verse, we were to read – as proposed above – "Eliyahu went down to meet Achav, and he found him in the vineyard of Navot, and he said to him: So says God..." not only would there be some delay in the reader's hearing of God's immediate response, but more importantly we would hear of God's response only indirectly, from Eliyahu's mouth, and by deducing that he had been told by God to say this. This would weaken the impact of the Divine response, while what the text is trying to do is the opposite: to strengthen and amplify its impact. This effect is achieved by conveying God's word to Eliyahu in direct speech.

The advantage of the approach adopted by the text here could also have been a disadvantage, since the proximity of God's word to the criminal deed on one hand, may have distanced it from Achav's reaction to it, on the other. This would have diminished the drama of Eliyahu's encounter with Achav. This would have been the case if the text were to have gone back and spelled out Eliyahu's going to the vineyard of Navot, and recorded the encounter with Achav there, and the conveying of God's

word. But the text describes the rebuke in such a way as to maintain and heighten the drama. It is specifically by refraining from describing the actual encounter between them, and the recording of Achav's rhetorical question, "Have you found me, my enemy?" immediately after God's preceding words, that the text deliberately creates the impression that this is Achav's reaction to God's words which have just been conveyed to him by Eliyahu. God's words to Eliyahu thus "become," in the text, Eliyahu's words to Achav.

### **3. Why is Achav's Sin of Idolatry Recalled in the Story of the Murder of Navot?**

In section 2. above, we arrived at an answer to questions a., b. and c. However, we have not yet explored the content of unit c. Having established that Eliyahu's message to Achav in this unit was given by God, as a continuation of the message in unit a., let us now try to understand why this general message, seemingly extraneous to the sin of killing Navot, appears here and now, in the encounter between Eliyahu and Achav in Navot's vineyard.

Eliyahu's message here is indeed a sweeping indictment of Achav's sins as king, with the inference that he also led Israel astray to practice idolatry (verse 22). In keeping with the accusation, the punishment is also a thorough, collective one for Achav's entire household. This message belongs right here and nowhere else. The killing of Navot was not a sin of merely local significance, requiring a personal punishment for Achav and Izevel. This was the "last straw," as it were, an addition to the accumulation of all of Achav's previous sins. This is what brought about God's final decision concerning Achav's royal dynasty, which was no longer worthy of continuing. This reflects on the severity of this sin, which not only led to the punishment of Achav personally (as suggested in God's initial message, in verse 19), but also – by following all of his other sins - brought about the end of his dynasty.

Rambam presents as follows the relationship between this sin of Achav and all of his previous sins (Laws Pertaining to a Murderer, chapter 4, law 9):

"Although there are sins that are more serious than bloodshed, they do not lead to destruction of civilization in the way that bloodshed does. Even idolatry, or – needless to say – prohibited sexual relations, or desecration of Shabbat, are not like bloodshed [in this respect]. For these belong to the category of transgressions between man and God, while bloodshed belongs to the category of sins between man and his fellow. And anyone who commits such a sin is a completely wicked person, and all the commandments that he may have performed throughout his life are not equal in weight to this sin, nor will they save him from judgment. As it is written (*Mishlei* 28:17) 'A man who is burdened with the blood of a person – let him flee to a pit; let none support him.' We learn this from the example of Achav, who was an idolater, as it is said of him – 'But there was no-one like Achav, who gave himself over to do evil in the eyes of God... and acted most abominably in going after idols' (verses 25-26 in our chapter), but when his sins and merits were set out before God, there was no sin that made him deserving of being wiped out, nor any other matter that stood against him, like the blood of Navot...."

We may point out another aspect of the relationship between the murder of Navot, which is the subject of our chapter, and the sin of idolatry that is also mentioned here in relation to Achav. The common denominator underlying both of these abominations is, of course, his wife – Izevel, "who incited him". These words in verse 25, in the summary of his reign, unquestionably refer to the idolatry that is mentioned in the following verse. But in the episode of Navot's murder, too, Izevel's central role is so obvious in the story as to require no comment.

Having noted above that the murder of Navot was the last straw, coming after all of Achav's previous sins of idolatry and thereby sealing the fate of his household, we may now add that the root of Achav's sin in our chapter – the sin of murder, which is the most serious of all sins between man and his fellow man – lies in the idolatry that preceded it. The foreign, pagan culture that entered Israel together with Izevel, introduced new concepts into Israelite society and into the Israelite royalty with regard to the status of the king and the norms of the monarchy. Religious corruption is the source of the moral and social corruption that ultimately characterizes Achav's household. But it is specifically the social corruption – epitomized by the story of Navot – that seals their fate.

In light of the above, it now becomes clear why specifically here, in unit d. (verses 25-26), the text presents its negative summary of Achav's reign. This summary, which speaks mainly of his idolatry, is necessary because of the sin of killing Navot and the punishment decreed for him as a result. On the other hand, this negative summary would be out of place at the end of chapter 22, since there we read of Achav's heroic death in battle against Israel's enemies – an episode that certainly stands in his favor. For this very reason, the summary is presented in the midst of our narrative rather than at its conclusion, since Achav ultimately demonstrates subservience to God's word, thereby earning an easing of his verdict.

Translated by Kaeren Fish