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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #:68 - Navot

Part 6: The Significance of Achav's Submission (27-29)

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After Eliyahu finishes the second part of his speech (20b-24), in which Achav is told that his household is going to be cut off, Achav responds for a second time. This time, his reaction is not verbal, but rather behavioral:

(27) "And it was, when Achav heard these things, that he rent his garments and placed sackcloth upon his flesh, and he fasted, and lay upon sackcloth, and he went about softly."

What is this behavior meant to express? Is this genuine and complete repentance, with heartfelt regret for his whole life's work, or is it simply broken-heartedness in the face of the terrible punishment of which he has just been informed by God's prophet? The absence of any verbal reaction makes it difficult for us to decide. Clearly, however, Achav's behavior in some way reflects submission before God. As God Himself tells Eliyahu:

(29) "Do you see how Achav humbles himself before Me?
Since he has humbled himself before Me, I shall not bring the evil in his days; in the days of his son I shall bring the evil upon his household."

Once again we ask, using the terminology of Malbim: was this a submission "in the face of the greatness and exaltedness" of God, or was it "out of fear of punishment"?

The commentators are divided in this regard. To Abarbanel's view, "He did not repent out of fear of punishment, but rather from the greatness of the Lord God of Hosts." Abarbanel bases his view on God's words of testimony, quoted above, as well as on the actual postponement of Achav's punishment until the days of his son.

However, based on the very same source – God's words in verse 29 – Malbim draws precisely the opposite conclusion. He notes the change in God's formulation, from "...that Achav has humbled himself before Me (*mi-lefanai*)" to the continuation of His words – "Since he has humbled himself from [fear of] Me (*mi-panai*)":

"There is a difference between '*mi-lefanai*' and '*mi-panai*.'
'*Mi-lefanai*' means – because of His greatness and His exaltedness, while '*mi-panai*' means – out of fear of punishment. One who humbles himself '*mi-lefanav*' will try to draw close to God and to serve Him; he will submit himself to God's grandeur. One who humbles himself '*mi-panav*' will hide himself and flee from God, so as to save himself from punishment. In other words [God is saying to Eliyahu]: Even if he appears to you to have submitted himself '*mi-lefanai*' ('Do you see that Achav submits himself before Me'), this is not the case; he merely humbles himself out of [fear of] Me – out of fear of punishment ('Since he has humbled himself out of [fear of] Me'). Therefore, 'Since he has humbled himself out of [fear of] Me' – I shall not bring the evil in his days, but because he has not humbled himself before Me – I shall bring the evil in the days of his son; the decree shall not be nullified completely."

Malbim's explanation for this exchange of wording in our verse does not appear to represent the plain meaning of the text, especially as regards his interpretation of God's question, "Do you see that Achav humbles himself before Me...", which – according to his thesis – is not meant to praise Achav, but rather to castigate him. Nevertheless, let us consider his position.

Firstly, Malbim proves his explanation from the conclusion of verse 29: the verdict is not cancelled altogether, but rather postponed, for a period that is not very long. Moreover, only the punishment of having his household "cut off" is postponed for his son's lifetime. "The decree that the dogs would lick his blood cannot come about during his son's lifetime; it can only be [at the end of] his own life," as Rashi points out.

Secondly, the absence of a verbal response in verse 27 is not a trivial matter: the confession of the sinner is central to the process of repentance. As Rambam teaches in his Laws of Repentance (2:2): "He must confess verbally and utter these matters that he has resolved in his heart." We also learn (2:4), "It is the way of repentance for the penitent always to cry out before God in weeping and supplication...." Achav's silent behavior therefore does not testify to ideal, complete repentance.

Thirdly, it would seem that the use of the verb "*k-n-a*" (humbling, submission) in relation to Achav testifies to an inferior level of repentance. This root does appear several times in *Tanakh* in the sense of repentance (particularly in *Divrei Ha-yamim*),

but when the repentance in question is genuine and deep, there are usually other verbs that accompany it, expressing a higher level of repentance. For example:

II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 7:14 – "My nation, upon whom My Name is called, shall submit themselves and pray and seek My countenance and return from their evil ways, and I shall hear...."

II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 33:12-13 – "[Menasheh:] And when he was afflicted he sought out the countenance of the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. And he prayed to Him and beseeched him, and He heard his supplication...."

II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 34:27 – "[Yoshiyahu:] Since your heart was submissive and you humbled yourself... and you tore your garments and wept before Me, I too have heard you...."

Furthermore, God's response to the penitents in the verses above is described in terms of "hearing." In our verse, in contrast, God asks Eliyahu: "Do you see how Achav humbles himself..." - since Achav's repentance is truly just a matter of appearances.

The matter of Achav's repentance and its evaluation is treated in various *midrashim*, but the opinions of the Sages is not always expressed directly. There is one Midrash that does formulate a direct and unequivocal judgment of Achav (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, chapter 43):

"Take note of the power of charity and repentance. Learn from Achav, king of Israel, who made great repentance [!]. He stole and oppressed and murdered, as it is written, 'Have you murdered and also taken possession?' but he sent for Yehoshafat, King of Yehuda, and [the latter] would administer forty lashes to him three times every day, and with fasting and prayer he would arise and go to bed before God, and he occupied himself with Torah all of his days [!] and never again returned to his evil deeds [!], and his repentance found favor. As it is written, 'Do you see how Achav humbles himself before Me....'"

However, this view is not the prevailing one in the *midrashim*. From most of the sources we deduce that the Sages regard Achav's repentance as having been less than perfect. R. David Luria cites some of these *midrashim* in his commentary on *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer ad loc* (Warsaw, 5612). We shall merely add that in Mishna *Sanhedrin* (10:2) we read:

"Three kings... have no portion in the World to Come... Yeravam, Achav, and Menasheh. Rabbi Yehuda says: Menasheh does have a portion in the World to Come, as it is written (*II Divrei Ha-yamim* 33:13), 'He prayed to Him and He heard his supplication.'"

Here we must ask: why does Rabbi Yehuda not extend his exclusion of Menasheh from the list, to Achav as well, on the basis of the verses in our chapter describing his submission? The answer must surely be that he does not believe that Menasheh's repentance, and God's acceptance of it, as described in *Divrei Ha-yamim*, to the repentance of Achav and God's acceptance of it as described in our chapter.

From the continuation of the text's description of Achav in the next narrative (chapter 22), which records the last episode in which he is active, it is likewise difficult to accept a depiction of Achav as being wholeheartedly repentant and qualitatively different from how we have known him until now. We refer here to the episode of Mikhayahu ben Yimla. Achav himself testifies to his attitude towards this prophet:

(22:8) "I hate him, for he prophesizes about me not good, but evil."

Further on in the narrative, before he sets off for his final battle – which he embarks on despite what the prophet Mikhayahu appears to be telling him – he commands:

(22:27) "Place this person in prison, and feed him scant bread and scant water, until I return in peace."

Are these words, and Achav's optimism that he will return in peace from the battlefield, appropriate to a true penitent?

"The way of penitents is to be downcast and extremely humble... for to the extent that they are ashamed of the deeds that they have done and are mortified over them, so their merit is great and they attain greater levels." (Rambam, Laws of Repentance, 7:8)

How far Achav is from this description of "the way of penitents"!

Hence, we may conclude that the description of Achav that arises from *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* should not be regarded as reflecting the plain meaning of the text. Achav, in humbling himself before God, did show that he believed Eliyahu's words and was fearful, and even took pains to act (for the meantime) as though, in his great anguish, he was in mourning. But nothing more than that. Still, even this demonstration of humility is worthy of consideration, and indeed – God responds

immediately, with His attribute of mercy speaking out in inverse parallel to the attribute of justice that previously decreed Achav's fate:

God's original decree:

(17) "God's word came to Eliyahu the Tishbi, saying:
(19) ... Have you murdered and also taken possession?!
... In the place where the dogs licked...
The dogs will lick your blood, too."

God's amended decree:

(28) "God's word came to Eliyahu the Tishbi, saying:
(29) Do you see how Achav humbles himself before Me?!
Since he has humbled himself out of [fear of] Me
I shall not bring about this evil in his days...."

The stylistic similarity here is meant to highlight the contrast of content. Both utterances are introduced with identical words. Then comes a rhetorical question, followed by a verdict that arises from the implicit answer to the question. However, the intention behind these three components (introduction, rhetorical question, and verdict) in the one case is the opposite of the intention in the other case.

This parallel must still be treated with some reservation. Firstly, the easing of the punishment in God's amended decree does not apply to the punishment set out in the original decree: the "evil" that is postponed from Achav's lifetime until the lifetime of his son is not the licking of Achav's blood, but rather the cutting off of his household. Secondly, while God's first speech to Eliyahu is meant to be conveyed to Achav, and is addressed to Achav in the second person, the second speech is addressed to Eliyahu himself, with no intention of conveying it to Achav. The significance of this is that Achav is not worthy of this prophetic revelation of the Divine attribute of mercy (even if Eliyahu later makes it known to him). The whole point of this Divine message is to teach Eliyahu himself about God's acceptance of repentance, even where it is only partial and defective.

We have not yet exhausted the lesson to be learned from God's message. What is the purpose of the rhetorical question that God addresses to Eliyahu – "Do you see how Achav humbles himself before Me"? What would be lacking were the text simply to begin with the words that follow: "Since he has humbled himself..."?

It seems that God's question here expresses the great wonder at the fact that a person with the status of the king of Israel, who is mired in the depths of terrible sin, can break down and humble himself before God. Even if this is not complete

repentance, Achav's submission demonstrates a person's **ability** to melt his own heart of stone and thereby to attain some measure of Divine pardon.

Indeed, this is the lesson to be learned from this narrative: the great power that a person possess to turn back from the depths of sin, and the power of repentance which, even if not complete, is accepted before God and has an effect.

The lesson is formulated as follows in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana shuva, piska 24,11*:

"Israel said before God: Master of the universe, if we engage in repentance, will You accept us?

He said to them: I accepted the repentance of Kayin; shall I not then accept your repentance?

I accepted the repentance of Achav; shall I not then accept your repentance?

He had a terrible verdict decreed upon him. As it is written, 'Have you murdered and also taken possession? And you shall speak to him, saying: So says God – in the place where the dogs licked the blood of Navot, the dogs will lick your blood, too.'

'And it was, when Achav heard these things, that he tore his garments and he wore sackcloth upon his flesh, and he fasted, and he lay upon sackcloth, and he went about softly.' To what extent did he fast? If he was used to eating every three hours, he now ate only after six hours. If he would usually eat every six hours, he now would eat only after nine hours... What is written there? 'God's word came to Eliyahu the Tishbi, saying: Do you see how Achav humbles himself before Me?...' God said to Eliyahu: Do you see, Achav has made repentance. 'Do you see that Achav has humbled himself' – **shall I not then accept your repentance?**"

Translated by Kaeren Fish