

# The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

## The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

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### SHIUR #70 - NAVOT PART 8: CONCLUDING STUDY - STRUCTURE OF THE NARRATIVE By Rav Elchanan Samet

We have chosen to discuss the structure of the narrative specifically as the concluding summary of this unit of *shiurim*, since most of the elements that will guide us here are based on the analysis of the narrative that has been conducted in the preceding *shiurim*.

We have mentioned on several occasions that this narrative is composed of two parts, or more or less equal length: the first covers sixteen verses (21:1-16), while the second covers fourteen verses (21:17-22:1). Indeed, according to the traditional division of the text, too, the first half of the story is all included as one *parasha*, while the second half (verse 17) introduces a new *parasha*.

Another clear sign of this division is the particular title used to refer to Achav at the beginning of each half. Achav is mentioned fifteen times in this narrative by name, but only twice is his royal title added. At the beginning of the story we read:

- (1) A vineyard belonged to Navot the Yizre'eli, which was in Yizre'el, close to the palace of Achav, King of Shomron.

Then, at the beginning of the second half, we find:

- (17) And God's word came to Eliyahu the Tishbi, saying:

- (18) Arise, go down to meet Achav, King of Israel who is in Shomron; behold, he is in the vineyard of Navot, where he has gone down, to take possession of it.

The most striking difference between the two halves is that in the second, we encounter two characters who were absent from the first: God, and His emissary – Eliyahu. It is with God’s word to Eliyahu that the half begins (verses 17-20) and also ends (28-29). As a result of God’s first words to Eliyahu, the prophet appears before Achav and conveys a harsh message in God’s Name, concerning Achav’s future and that of his dynasty (verses 21-24). This message brings about Achav’s submission (verse 27), and this in turn gives rise to another Divine message to Eliyahu.

What is the difference between the first and second half in terms of subject? The answer appears simple and clear: the first half describes Achav’s sin, while the second records God’s response to that sin – the announcement of his punishment. It is for this reason that God, and Eliyahu, His prophet, are the central “characters” in this half.

But this answer fails to address fully the substance of either the first half or the second. Does the first half describe the murder of Navot by Achav? Actually – no. We have already seen that Achav was not actively involved in either the murder or even its planning. Moreover, we have seen that the degree of Achav’s responsibility for the murder is gradually clarified over the course of the first half of the story; only at the end of that half does it reach its climax, when he is told of Navot’s death and he reacts with silence, and – especially – when he goes off to actualize the purpose of the murder, to take possession of Navot’s vineyard. Hence, the first half of the story is not a description of Achav’s sin in murdering Navot, but rather a description of Achav’s descent from coveting someone else’s possession, to silent acquiescence to the murder of that person, to actualizing the benefits that accrue to him from that act. Achav is depicted in this half as a person undergoing a process of moral deterioration. In his original proposal to Navot he commits a “light” sin, an almost imperceptible transgression of the command, “You shall not desire...” (*Devarim*5:18). His next sin

is his failure to come to terms with Navot's refusal, followed by his acceptance of Izevel's tempting promise, and concluding with the act of going down to take possession of the vineyard, which, as we have pointed out, demonstrates retroactively his complicity in the murder that was committed.

Nor is the second half of the story adequately summed up by the title proposed above – the announcement of Achav's punishment. This title suits the first (main) part of this half – verses 17-24, and seemingly also 25-26. However, the final four verses of this half deal with Achav's reaction of submission before God upon hearing the preceding announcement of his punishment, and God's message to Eliyahu concerning the postponement of that punishment until the days of Achav's son. The "announcement of the punishment" is a title suited to a static issue that is external to Achav, the main character of the narrative, whereas the second half of the story – like the first – actually describes a dynamic process. This dynamism is expressed first and foremost in Achav himself: the message concerning his punishment breaks his heart and brings about his submission before God. However, it is expressed also in the announcement itself, which softens in light of Achav's submission. Hence, it is not the announcement of punishment itself that is the subject of the second half, but rather the process of positive change that Achav undergoes in the wake of his encounter with Eliyahu and his stern message, and the consequent easing of his punishment.

This dual transformation that takes place in the second half – a change both in Achav and in his punishment – is not absolute. In a previous *shiur* we discussed the fact that Achav's repentance is only partial; it lacks some central characteristics of complete repentance (such as confession); for this reason the punishment is not cancelled outright, but rather is postponed until the days of his son.

Hence, it would be simplistic to sum up the relationship between the two halves of the story as “sin” and “punishment”; a relationship of cause and effect. The two halves reflect two inverse processes that Achav undergoes: there is his deterioration from transgressing a “light” prohibition to complicity in the most terrible of sins – murder, and there is his ascent from the depths of his sin to the level of a penitent (albeit not a wholehearted, complete one). It is these inverse processes that represent the crux of our narrative.

The above description of the narrative would seem to call for a structure that molds these two opposing processes; with the two halves of our story placed in inverse symmetrical parallel. We have already encountered this type of structure on several occasions in previous chapters that we have discussed; it is a fairly common phenomenon among biblical narratives in general.

The symmetrical structure of a biblical narrative often turns on a “central axis,” which serves as the focus of the plot. Where, in our narrative, do the two inverse processes cross one another? Where is the lowest point in Achav’s descent, representing the beginning of his ascent? This point would appear to be located in verse 16:

“And it was, when Achav heard that Navot had died, that Achav arose to go down to the vineyard of Navot, the Yizre’eli, to take possession of it.”

From the point of view of the plot, this verse still belongs to the first half (indeed, it is the concluding verse of the traditional *parasha* that covers this half). However, if we try to expose the structure of the narrative as a whole, this verse should be regarded as the central axis. In this case, the central axis represents the lowest point in the story. It is located almost exactly in the middle of the narrative (this, too, characterizing many narratives of similar structure): there are fifteen verses that

precede it, and fourteen that follow. We addressed the importance of this verse, as evidence of Achav's hidden complicity in the act of murder, in a previous *shiur*; there we discussed why Eliyahu is sent to bring God's word to Achav specifically at that place – in Navot's vineyard, and specifically at the time when Achav goes there in order to take possession of it.

Can the two halves of the story be set in inverse symmetrical form around verse 16? The answer is yes, but with some reservation. We are able to point to some clear parallels between the two halves, but this is not the precise symmetrical structure that we see, for example, in chapter 19. The reason for this is that the literary nature of each of the two halves is very different. The first half has a narrative, descriptive nature, while the second is mostly a prophetic monologue.

Let us note the parallels, with a view to sketching the structure of the narrative as a whole.

Surrounding verse 16 (the central axis) and adjacent to it, we find two monologues: there is Izevel's message to Achav in verse 15, and the beginning of God's message to Eliyahu in verses 17-18. We may summarize this schematically as follows:

A. (15) And it was, when Izevel heard that Navot had been stoned and had died, that Izevel said to Achav:

**Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Navot, the Yizre'eli...** for Navot is not alive, but dead.

B. (16) And it was, when Achav heard that Navot was dead, that Achav **arose to go down to the vineyard of Navot the Yizre'eli, to take possession of it.**

A1. (17-18) And God's word came to Eliyahu the Tishbi, saying: **Arise, go down** to meet Achav, king of Israel who is in Shomron; behold, he is in **the vineyard of Navot, to which he has gone down in order to take possession of it.**"

The linguistic and substantial parallel between Izevel's message to Achav and God's message to Eliyahu is clear. Both speakers send the person to whom they are talking to the same place, and using the same command: Izevel tells Achav, "Arise, take possession," while God tells Eliyahu, "arise, go down" (the discrepancy arising from the difference in circumstances). Both utterances are also both linguistically and substantially linked to the verse that stands in between them – the description of Achav's act: Achav, having been commanded by Izevel, his wife, "**Arise, take possession** of the vineyard of Navot, the Yizre'eli," executes the mission: "Achav **arose** to go down to the vineyard of Navot, the Yizre'eli, **to take possession of it.**" Only one word (in the Hebrew) is added to the description of Achav's act: "*la-redet*" (to go down). This addition prepares us for the next parallel – between the description of Achav's actions and God's word to Eliyahu. Corresponding to the description, "Achav arose **to go down** to the vineyard of Navot the Yizre'eli, **to take possession of it,**" God tells Eliyahu, "Behold, [he is] in the vineyard of Navot, to where he has **gone down, to take possession of it.**"

This dual connection between the description of Achav's actions in the central axis and the respective utterances on each side of it, is not uniform in nature. The linguistic connection between Izevel's words to Achav and the description of Achav's actions arises from the fact that Izevel issues a command and Achav dutifully carries it out; hence, it is altogether logical that the language of the execution echoes that of the command.

The connection between God's word to Eliyahu and the preceding description of Achav's actions is seemingly a technical one: it arises from the need for God to indicate Achav's location for Eliyahu's benefit, in order that he will be able to find him. However, this is not sufficient reason for the parallel; if this were God's sole intention, it would suffice for Him to say, "Behold, he is in the vineyard of Navot." What is the purpose of the words, "To where he has gone down, to take possession of it"? (Since it is these words that create the parallel to the description of Achav's actions.) Not only Achav's location is important and worthy of noting in God's message, but also the timing. This is the exact time and place to catch Achav absolutely red-handed, as it were, and thereby to expose his complicity and shared responsibility for the murder. Only at this specific time and place is it appropriate to address him with the question, "Have you murdered and also taken possession?!" Hence the connection between the description of the criminal act and the command that Eliyahu receives to be present at the time and place of the commission of the crime.

Now, let us return to the echoing parallel between Izevel's words to Achav – "Arise, take possession (*kum reish*)," and God's words to Eliyahu - "Arise, go down" (*kum reid*), and consider its significance. Clearly, the intention behind the inverse parallel here is to underline the sin and the response to it: the terrible instruction by Izevel, and its acceptance by Achav, are met with a Divine response. Just as Izevel's instruction is meant to pave the way for the completion of the act of murder in the act of Achav taking possession of the vineyard, so God's command to Eliyahu is meant to pave the way for the message of the punishment that will come later. This echoing similarity between the two commands invokes the eye that sees and the ear that hears; the Divine Providence from which nothing is hidden – not even a secret conversation between a man and his wife.

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish