

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #71 - Navot

Part 8: Concluding Study - Structure of the Narrative (continued)

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b. As we move away from the central axis of the story, we encounter two units of different lengths, facing each other in the symmetrical structure that we have proposed:

- (8-14) False trial of Navot and his stoning (Izevel's instructions, their execution, and her reporting of this)
- (central axis)
- (19-20a) Achav is accused of the murder of Navot and told of his punishment; Achav's reaction

Aside from the obvious difference in length between these two units (seven verses vs. two verses), they are also very different in terms of the characters active in each of them; in fact, they do not share a single common character. In the "trial" scene the characters involved are Izevel, the elders of the city of Yizre'el and its inhabitants, the two false witnesses, and Navot. In the corresponding unit in the second half, the "characters" are God, Eliyahu, and Achav – none of whom is mentioned in the "trial" scene. Even from a linguistic point of view, there is no indication of any link between these two units. Nevertheless, it is proper that they be placed facing one another. The parallel between them represents a continuation of the parallel that we saw between the two units discussed in the previous *shiur*.

Achav's absence from the "trial" scene has been treated in a previous *shiur*; we explained it as a deliberate absence that is not innocent. It is the result of an intentional association between Achav, Izevel and the elders of Yizre'el, allowing Achav not to be party to the despicable deed and not to be informed of it. Achav will merely benefit from the final result, without having to dirty his hands with this crime. However, as we noted, Achav could have guessed how Izevel would go about realizing her promise – and this he did. This becomes clear retroactively, when he goes down to take possession of Navot's vineyard, having heard from Izevel that Navot is dead. His act can only be interpreted as the realization of a plan set out in

advance to take possession of the assets of a man murdered deliberately, and wrongfully, as a traitor (such that his property goes to the king).

God's words to Eliyahu, conveyed to Achav at the vineyard of Navot when he goes there to take possession of it – "Have you then murdered and also taken possession?!" – expose Achav's true complicity in Navot's trial and his death. The web of silence that all those involved wove in order to keep Achav out of the "trial" and to keep his hands clean has achieved nothing in relation to God, Who knows even that which has not been said. Just as God's command to Eliyahu – "Arise, go down..." – hints at the Divine Providence that listens to a conversation between a husband and wife that takes place in a closed room (as Izevel tells Achav, "Arise, take possession..."), so God's words to Achav – "Have you then murdered and also taken possession?!" – are meant to expose the identity of the person who was truly responsible for the murder of Navot, and to show that a person's maneuvering is of no value in the face of God Who knows everything.

Thus far we have examined the parallel that indicates a connection between the concealment of the sinner in the first half of the story and his exposure in the corresponding scene in the second half. But God's words in verse 19 are clearly divided into two parts: "You shall speak to him, saying... And you shall speak to him, saying..." The first utterance exposes Achav's guilt and his responsibility for the murder; the second declares his punishment:

"So says God: In the place where the dogs licked the blood of Navot, the dogs will lick your blood, too."

The parallel between this utterance of God and the act of stoning Navot requires no elaboration. The relationship between the sin and its punishment – measure for measure – is obvious.

c. Moving another step away from the central axis of the story, we find the following:

- (5-7) The dialogue between Izevel and Achav, and Izevel's promise to give Navot's vineyard to Achav
- central axis
- (20b-26) Punishment of Achav's house being cut off, and the punishment of Izevel. Summary of Achav's sins as an idolater (25-26)

Here, too, the units are of different lengths (three verses vs. more than six), and once again it would appear, at first glance, that there is no connection between them.

In the first half we read of a conversation between a husband and wife, which in itself seems unimportant. In the corresponding unit in the second half, we find the second part of God's message to Achav, with a final accounting of all of his sins – especially the idolatry that he has spread throughout Israel (verse 22: "The anger to which you have provoked Me, by leading Israel to sin"), and the final verdict concerning the cutting off of Achav's house from Israel. What is common to these two such different units, in terms of both subject and literary character?

The answer to this question is clear: Izevel, wife of Achav, is the link between these two corresponding units.

Izevel is introduced into our narrative for the first time in the unit under discussion here, in verses 5-7. She appears for the first time in an innocent dialogue between a concerned wife and her husband, who lies dejected upon his bed. But as this conversation progresses, Izevel is revealed in her "classic" role as Achav's wife – as the person who incites him to sin. Achav, lying upon his bed, is far removed from the murderous plot against Navot. He is tempted to agree to Izevel's opaque suggestion – "I shall give you the vineyard of Navot the Yizre'eli" – partly as a result of the scornful words that precede it: "Are you now ruler over Israel?!"

While Izevel's principal sin is described in the next scene – the "trial", in which she operates in an independent fashion, without any direct involvement by Achav – it is her role as Achav's wife, who incites him to commit terrible sins, that is addressed in the present scene.

The corresponding unit in the second half is the only one in this half that mentions Izevel. It starts with the verdict against her:

(23) "To Izevel, too, God spoke, saying: The dogs will devour Izevel by the wall of Yizre'el."

She is mentioned once again, in the summary of Achav's sins:

(25) "But there was none like Achav who gave himself over to perform evil in the eyes of God, **to which he was incited by Izevel, his wife.**"

From the context it is clear that the text refers to Izevel's incitement of Achav to idolatry (in keeping with the rest of Eliyahu's second speech, which addresses this sin on the part of Achav). The focus on the sin of idolatry arises from the fact that it is the murder of Navot that finally seals the fate of Achav and his household, and when this sin is addressed, Achav's principal sin – that of idolatry – is considered at the same

time. Izevel is the link between the two abominations committed by Achav – idolatry and murder. It is she who causes her husband to commit both of them.

There are two aspects to this parallel. One concerns Izevel herself: her incitement of Achav, and her various endeavors leading to the murder of Navot – although undertaken in secret – are revealed before God, and therefore even Izevel herself will not escape the punishment that awaits the house of Achav; her end will be like that of her husband: just as "the dogs will lick his blood", so they will consume her flesh. This is measure for measure, a punishment for her role in the murder of Navot.

The other aspect concerns Achav, and here the significance of the parallel is reversed. The unit that we are now addressing in the first half, describes Izevel's decisive role in the process that brought about the murder of Navot. This serves to lessen some of Achav's guilt, since at the beginning of this stage Achav is indeed innocent of any thoughts of murder; not for a moment does he entertain such a possibility. It is only after Izevel incites him (with her scorn – "Are you then king of Israel?!") that he finds himself acquiescing to her veiled plans ("I shall give you the vineyard of Navot the Yizre'eli"). This, then, is a mitigating factor for Achav, who is not the instigator of the crime.

This point is highlighted, in an unusual way, in the concluding verses that sum up Achav's rule:

(25) "But there was none like Achav who gave himself over to perform evil in the eyes of God, **to which he was incited by Izevel, his wife.**"

The *Yerushalmi* (Sanhedrin 10:1, 28b) records the following teaching of R. Levi, who addresses this verse:

"For six months, R. Levi interpreted this verse – 'But there was none like Achav who gave himself over to perform evil in the eyes of God' – to Achav's discredit. Then Achav came to him in a dream, and said: How have I sinned towards you? What wrong have I caused you? You are looking only at the beginning of the verse, and not at the end – 'To which he was incited by Izevel, his wife.' Then for six months R. Levi took a more charitable view towards Achav: 'But there was none like Achav... to which he was incited by Izevel, his wife.'"

This significance of the parallel in question is the first sign, within the structure of the narrative, of the two opposite processes that Achav undergoes, and which we

have addressed in a previous *shiur*. The symmetrical structure of the story is what creates the parallel between similar stages of inverse processes. In the next two corresponding pairs, this phenomenon continues.

d. The next pair of corresponding units is made up of the descriptions of Achav's two reactions. In the first half, there is his reaction to Navot's refusal to sell his vineyard; in the second half – his reaction to hearing God's dual message from Eliyahu:

- (4) "Achav came to his house sullen and angry **for the thing that Navot had spoken to him...**

And **he lay** upon his bed and turned away his face, **and would not eat bread"**

– (central axis)

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

Here the parallel is clear: both units describe similar behavior on the part of Navot, in both cases arising from "bad news" that he has heard.

However, this parallel also serves to illustrate the inversion that takes place between the first half and the second in terms of the description of Achav. In the first half, Achav's tortured reaction to Navot's refusal to part with his vineyard represents a stage in Achav's moral descent, which deteriorates from transgressing the command "You shall not covet" to complicity in the sin of "You shall not murder." It is his original pining that leads Izevel to intervene "for his benefit." In the second half, in contrast, Achav's fasting and his other customs of mourning represent an ascent from the depths of his sin, to become a penitent who submits before God.

Attention should be paid to the fact that Achav's expression of sorrow are more intensive at the end of the story than they are in the beginning: upon hearing God's word from Eliyahu he casts himself into real mourning; tearing his clothes and wearing sackcloth on his flesh. The point of similarity between the two reactions – refraining from eating – is also described in more extreme terms in the second half: as opposed to "and did not eat bread", we are told that after hearing Eliyahu's message he actually "fasted." This tells us that the commission of the sin did not ultimately ease Achav's psychological state, his depression; on the contrary, it exacerbated it. The sin had missed its aim. The illusion that once he attained the vineyard that he had so coveted all would be well, burst in the face of the bitter reality: Here he was, at the

moment that should have been full of joy; instead, he was sunk in even greater mourning and depression.

e. What remains is for us to compare the three verses at the beginning of the story (1-3), describing Achav's request of Navot to give him his vineyard for a fair price, and Navot's categorical refusal, with the three verses at the end of the story (21:28-22:1) in which God tells Eliyahu that the punishment of the house of Achav will be delayed until the days of Achav's son, and in which the text records three years of quiet that prevail between Aram and Israel.

It is difficult to detect any linguistic or thematic connection between these two units. Nevertheless, we may say that a reading of the first verses of the chapter give rise to a mental image of Achav as a generous man, who offers his neighbor a substantiated and fair offer, not in any way exploiting his status as king to coerce Navot. It is difficult for the reader to imagine, at this stage of the story, the way in which Achav is going to descend from this innocent request to what actually happens in the end. In truth, were it not for the intervention of Izevel ("who incited him"), it would not have happened.

A reading of the closing verses likewise depicts a positive character who, having understood the significance of his actions and the punishment to which they have led him, breaks down and submits to his God, and is indeed granted something of a reprieve. In this sense the beginning of the story and its conclusion are similar. Between the beginning and the end, both of which are at the same "height," Achav undergoes two opposite processes – one of descent to the lowest possible level; the other – of ascent from that lowest point to the positive position that he attains at the end.

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