

## The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

### The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

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#### Shiur #73: Achazya

##### Part 2: Achazya's Messengers: "Go, Ask" Vs. "Go, return" (2-6)

(2) Achazya fell through the lattice in his upper chamber that was in Shomron, and became sick. And he sent messengers, and said to them:

(3) Go, ask of Ba'al-Zevuv, the god of Ekron, whether I shall recover from this illness.

(3) Then an angel of God said to Eliyahu, the Tishbi:

Arise, go up to meet the messengers of the King of Shomron, and say to them:

Is it because there is no God in Israel, that you go to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv, god of Ekron?!

(4) Therefore, so says God: You shall not come down from the bed to which you have gone up, but you shall surely die.

And Eliya departed.

Why was Eliyahu not sent directly to Achazya? Why does God's angel command him to speak only with Achazya's messengers? We may suggest several possible reasons:

- a. Perhaps God does not want Eliyahu to appear before Achazya himself because he is such a wicked king, and because there is no hope of him repenting in the wake of such an encounter.
- b. We may go on to say that a venture into Shomron would endanger Eliyahu's life. Achazya, who is even more wicked than Achav, and – more importantly – his mother Izevel, may kill him. Izevel's threat (*I Melakhim* 19:2) is still valid, and she still holds power in her son's kingdom. Since God's word may be conveyed via Achazya's messengers, there is no need to create a situation in which Eliyahu will later require a miraculous rescue.
- c. The king's sin is expressed in practice by the journeying of his messengers to the Philistine city of Ekron. Eliyahu's engaging of them along the way therefore represents catching Achazya "in the act" of sinning; it is somewhat similar to Eliyahu's encounter with Achav in Navot's vineyard when Achav went down to take possession of it.

- d. Were Eliyahu to be sent to Achazya himself, the messengers would continue on their mission, eventually arriving in the foreign city. The resulting desecration of God's Name would be public knowledge: "It is because there is no God in Israel...?!"
- e. The mission entrusted to Eliyahu concerns not only the notice of punishment that will be conveyed to Achazya, but also the rebuke that he delivers to the messengers, leading them to repent for having served as "messengers for a sinful matter."

The final reason listed above relates to a central theme of the narrative: Eliyahu presents Achazya's messengers with the need to choose between obeying the king's demand that they carry out his sinful mission, and their obligation to obey God's word, which is revealed to them via Eliyahu. God's word is not only an exposure of the severity of the act to which they are lending their hand, by going to Ekron, and a demand that they desist, but also much more: God demands of them that they become Eliyahu's messengers to Achazya, conveying to their king the notice of his punishment, in the name of the Lord God of Israel.

When Eliyahu addresses them, Achazya's messengers represent the fulfillment of the prophetic words:

I answered those who did not ask me; I was found by those who did not seek me. I said, "Here I am, here I am" to a nation that was not called by my name. I have spread my hands all day towards a wayward nation that walks in a way that is not good, after their own thoughts. (*Yishayahu* 65:1-2)

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(5) So the messengers returned to him, and he said to them: Why have you returned?

(6) Then they said to him: A man came up to meet us, and he said to us: Go, return to the king who sent you, and say to him:

So says God: Is it because there is no king in Israel, that you sent to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv, god of Ekron?!

Therefore, you shall not come down from the bed to which you have gone up, but you shall surely die.

In acceding to Eliyahu's demand that they convey his own message to the king, the messengers transfer their allegiance from one side to the conflict to the other. Clearly, by doing so, they endangered themselves, since Achazya could punish them

for "betraying" him. Later on (in the next *shiur*) we shall see how the messengers managed to fulfill Eliyahu's mission without arousing the king's anger at them.

Let us now compare the words of God's angel to Eliyahu (verses 3-4), which are also the words that Eliyahu conveys to the messengers, to the conveying of these words by the messengers to Achazya upon their return. This comparison serves to support our contention that one of Eliyahu's aims is to cause the messengers themselves to engage in *teshuva* and to make them into his own emissaries, messengers who place themselves at the disposal of God's word.

Angel's message to Eliyahu:

(3) Arise, to up to meet the messengers of the King of Shomron, and speak to them.

Is it because there is no God in Israel **that you go** to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv, god of Ekron?!

(4) Therefore

**So says God:**

You shall not descend ... but you shall surely die.

Messengers' words to Achazya:

(6) Go, return to the king who sent you, and say to him:

**So says God:**

Is it because there is no king in Israel **that you send** to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv, god of Ekron?!

Therefore

You shall not descend ... you shall surely die.

Aside from the command to the messengers, "Go, return to the king..." (which is not to be found in the angel's words to Eliyahu, but which is implied in them) there are two changes in the message which the messengers pass on to Achazya, in relation to Eliyahu's words. The first is that they include the formula, "So says God," before the rebuke, while in Eliyahu's words they come later, preceding the punishment. The second is that instead of Eliyahu's, "That you go," they say, "That you send." These two changes are interrelated, and their reason will be discussed below.

Eliyahu's message to the messengers (in accordance with the angel's words to him) may be divided into two parts. At first, Eliyahu addresses the messengers themselves:

(3) Is it because there is no God in Israel that you go to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv, god of Ekron?!

Thereafter, he addresses (through their agency) Achazya, in the second person:

(4) Therefore, so says God: **You** shall not descend from the bed to which **you** have gone up, but **you** shall surely die.

Clearly, then, the first part of Eliyahu's speech is meant as a rebuke to the messengers, aimed at causing them to desist from their journey. As Malbim comments on verse 3:

"Arise, go up to meet the messengers of the King of Shomron' – He commanded him, a. that he should not go to the king, but only to meet the messengers, and b. that he should give them rebuke for their journey."

Obviously, the significance of the return of the messengers to Achazya is, as Malbim comments: "They listened to the prophet's rebuke."

In the conflict between the order of their king, "Go inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv, god of Ekron," and the contradictory order of the prophet, "Go, return to the king who sent you," the prophet's order prevails. By returning, they not only violate the king's order, but actually serve as messengers of the prophet – an enemy of the royal house and loathed by Achazya and by Izevel, his mother – to announce to the king that he will die as punishment for sending them to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv.

This achievement on the part of the prophet arises from his harsh criticism of the messengers:

"Is it because there is no God in Israel that **you go to inquire...?!**"

But they, in speaking to Achazya, replace the words, "You go," thereby exchanging the object of the rebuke:

"Is it because... that **you send to inquire** of Ba'al-Zevuv...?"

The messengers altered the message because, with regard to Achazya, there was no significance to the sin of his messengers (in agreeing to carry out his mission). On the contrary – they were obliged to emphasize the king's responsibility for having sent them.

Are the messengers entitled to alter the message in this way? The answer would appear to be yes, since the change is assumed and hinted at already in Eliyahu's words to them. Had Eliyahu's intention, in his first words, been merely to rebuke the messengers for their sinful expedition, it would be difficult to understand the

connection between the rebuke to them at the beginning of his speech and the message to Achazya at its end: "Therefore, so says God: You shall not come down...." This link, created by means of the word, "Therefore," turns the first clause into the cause, and the second into the result. This can be understood only explain the rebuke in the first clause as being directed towards Achazya, too, and not only the messengers. In other words, "Is it because there is no God that you go, **at the behest of your king**, to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv? Therefore – since you, Achazya, sent them – you shall not descend...."

This amendment by the messengers (which they appear to have made at their own initiative) leads in turn to another change. In Eliyahu's words we find the formula, "So says God," prior to the result: "Therefore, so says God: you shall not descend...." The messengers, on the other hand, bring it forward, so as to ring out as an introduction to the rebuke: "So says God: Is it because there is no God...." The reason for this change is that the messengers seek to emphasize that their whole speech is a prophetic message, delivered in God's Name – both the rebuke and the punishment. In contrast, in Eliyahu's words these words appear in the middle, so as to separate between the rebuke to the messengers and the message to Achazya himself. But when the entire prophecy becomes one intended for Achazya, there is no reason to postpone these words; it is altogether appropriate to introduce the prophecy with them.

Confirmation of the "legality" of the changes made by the messengers is to be found further on in the narrative, in Eliyahu's own words to Achazya, in which the same changes are repeated – for the same reason:

(16) He said to him: **So says God** – Since **you sent** messengers to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv, god of Ekron (is there then no God in Israel of Whom to inquire?!), therefore you shall not descend from the bed to which you have gone up, but you shall surely die.

We conclude that Achazya's messengers not only "listened to the prophet's rebuke," by refraining from fulfilling the mission entrusted to them by their king, but also took upon themselves a new and opposite mission, given to them by Eliyahu, and they carried it out insightfully and faithfully. The sign of a faithful and conscientious messenger is that he does not suffice with a mechanical fulfillment of his mission, but executes it throughout the changing circumstances of his mission in accordance with the aim of his dispatcher. This ideal is reflected in the messengers and the changes that they introduce into Eliyahu's words; in fact, their message anticipates the prophecy that Eliyahu is destined to declare before Achazya.

The transformation that takes place in the messengers of Achazya, whereby they become messengers of Eliyahu, is expressed in the story by means of the opposing roots *h-l-kh* (to go) and *sh-u-v* (to return), which function in verses 2-6 as a key inverse pair. These two opposite roots occur in close succession, a total of seven times, and then do not appear again in the story:

1. (2) Go (*lekhu*), inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv
2. (3) Is it because there is no God... that you go (*holkhem*) to inquire...
3. and Eliya departed (*va-yelekh*).
4. (5) The messengers returned (*va-yashuvu*) to him
5. and he said to them: Why have you returned (*shavtem*)?
- 6-7. (6) A man came up to meet us and he said to us, "Go, return (*lekhu shuvu*) to the king..."

The verses speak of three "goings": there is the "going" of Achazya's messengers to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv (appearance 1 – at the king's order, appearance 2 – in Eliyahu's rebuke for this); then there is the "going" of Eliyahu at the command of God's angel, aimed at halting the previous "going" and to send the messengers back to the king (appearance 3); and finally, the opposite "going," at Eliyahu's command, so as to fulfill the mission entrusted to them by the prophet (appearance 6). The "return" of the messengers to Achazya and his surprise at their "return" (appearances 4-5) turn out, ultimately, to represent their acquiescence to the prophet's command, "Go, return" (appearance 7). Thus, a sinful "going" is transformed into a journey of "return" – *teshuva*.

Translated by Kaeren Fish