

# [The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash](#)

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

---

### **Shiur #75: Achazya**

#### **Part 4: Why are the Two Captains of Fifty, and their Fifty Men, Consumed by Fire? (9-12)**

##### **1. The Question**

In his commentary, *Mar'ot Ha-tzov'ot*, Rabbi Moshe Alshikh raises the principal question in relation to the second part of our narrative with the following words:

"Attention should be paid: what was the sin of these two captains of fifty, and their respective companies of fifty men, whom Eliyahu consumed with fire? They were merely emissaries, having been commanded by their king to declare their message!"

In the series of *shiurim* devoted to "The Drought" and "Chorev," we noted that *Chazal*, in the Gemara and in the *midrashim*, do not hesitate to express themselves in criticism of Eliyahu and his actions. In our chapter, however, we find among their comments no hint of such criticism. This is explained by the fact that the Sages do not criticize Eliyahu on the basis of their subjective feelings, but rather on the basis of veiled criticism concealed in the text itself. In other words, they regard part of the Eliyahu narratives as having been recorded with the intention of criticizing his actions, and they decode these textual hints in their *midrashim*.

Such criticism – both on the level of the text itself and in its interpretation by the Sages – is possible only in a case where Eliyahu operates on his own initiative (as in his oath concerning the cessation of rain, in chapter 17, or his journey to the desert in chapter 19). But wherever Eliyahu is guided by a Divine command, and acts in accordance with it (as, for example, in the story of the vineyard of Navot), there is clearly no room for any criticism.

What is the nature of Eliyahu's actions in our narrative? Eliyahu is guided by an angel of God both at the beginning of the story – in the very idea of interfering with Achazya's dispatch of the delegation to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv, god of Ekron, and also at its end, where he is commanded to descend from the mountain together with Achazya's third captain of fifty. In the two middle units – the burning of the two

captains of fifty together with their men, representing the subject of our present discussion – Eliyahu acts on his own. He himself decrees the descent of fire from the heavens, and God immediately responds, time after time, with no hint of any tension or criticism. We return, then, to the question of the commentators, formulated this time in the words of Rabbi Yitzchak Arama in his *Akeidat Yitzchak*:

"What capital wrong did these first (two) captains of fifty and their respective fifty men do to him... such that he cast the fire of his anger among them, to consume them?"

## **2. For What Reason are Two Captains of Fifty Sent, with their Men?**

After Achazya correctly identifies the "hairy man with a girdle of leather about his loins," we are told:

"He sent to him a captain of fifty with his fifty." (9)

For what reason does he send them? This question is of great significance for a clarification of the main problem set forth above. Ralbag proposes a surprising explanation as to the purpose of this dispatch:

"This means to say that he sent to Eliyahu - to honor him and summon him – an important captain who would have fifty men walking before him, and those fifty men went with him."

To his view, the king sent an honorary delegation to ask Eliyahu to come to the king. Eliyahu's honor is expressed in the status of the captain who is sent to him. This is a captain of such importance that fifty men usually walk before him, and they do so now, too.

But this is a very problematic interpretation. Our text speaks of a "captain of fifty, with his fifty" – meaning, a captain who commands a unit of soldiers numbering fifty men. Thus, the captain is not of such important rank after all, and the purpose of sending him to Eliyahu cannot be to honor the prophet. We therefore return to our question: for what reason is a commander sent together with a platoon of soldiers to Eliyahu?

Clearly, the platoon of soldiers, with their commander, is dispatched with a view to violent "military" action. These fifty men are apparently entrusted with the task of seizing Eliyahu at any price. Such a great number of soldiers sent to confront

a single man must be meant to prevent any possibility of disappearance on the part of the prophet – who is known for his ability to disappear and elude his pursuers.

The approach that views the captains of fifty and their men as being sent in order to force Eliyahu to come down to them is accepted among certain commentators. But why would Achazya want to capture Eliyahu? We may suggest three possible reasons:

- a. Achazya wants to force Eliyahu to appear before him and to declare his prophecy directly, rather than through the agency of messengers.
- b. Achazya wants to punish Eliyahu for the prophecy of punishment that he has conveyed to him, and for preventing his messengers from carrying out their mission.
- c. Achazya wants to kill Eliyahu for the above reasons, and perhaps also as a continuation of the policy of Izevel, his mother, who had sworn to have him put to death (I *Melakhim* 19:2) and who was still capable of doing so (see II *Melakhim* 9:30-31).

### **3. The "Innocent" Possibility and its Difficulties**

Of the three possible reasons why Achazya would want to seize Eliyahu, there are some commentators who appear to support the first reason, even if they do not state this explicitly. This unquestionably represents the view of Ralbag, who maintains that Achazya "sent for Eliyahu, to honor him, a captain and great man." For what reason was he "sending" for Eliyahu? It could not have been to punish him, since such an intention would not sit well with giving such honor to the prophet. Apparently, what Ralbag means to say is that Achazya called for Eliyahu in order to clarify the prophecy that had been conveyed to him second-hand.

Abarbanel elaborates in the same direction:

"Achazya sent a captain of fifty to Eliyahu, and commanded them to bring him forcibly, if he would not be willing to come to Shomron, for the king knew that on account of Izevel, his mother, he had not been there for a long time... Then the captain of the fifty says to him, "Man of God – the king has spoken; come down!" He does not say, "The king has said that you should go to see him, for he is ill and bedridden," but rather, "the king has spoken; come down" – come down from the top of the mountain, for he does not wish for you to sit there in isolation.

And when Eliyahu saw that the captain of the fifty was preparing his men to bring him down forcibly, with wrath and anger, he said: "And if I am a man of God" – as you have said – then I am not subordinate to the king, nor am I under his control, for I am a servant of God. But if the matter is as I say, a fire of God will emerge from the heavens and consume you and your fifty, so that you will know that "there is a God Who judges the earth."

When yet another captain of fifty comes, adding insult to injury by ordering, "So says the king: Come down quickly!," with malice and arrogance, then he replies as he replied to the first, and they are all burned there.

Eliyahu chooses to bring fire down upon them and to burn them, just as at Mount Carmel he brought down fire from the heavens, before the eyes of Achav and all of his servants. And now that they had seen this Divine miracle with their own eyes and still did not fear him, but instead came to him with malice and arrogance, their punishment was to be burned with fire, for "Anyone who approaches the Sanctuary of God will be put to death," and the prophet was God's Sanctuary."

However, this explanation raises several difficulties:

1. Why would Achazya want Eliyahu to appear before him? Was it not enough that he had received the message in Eliyahu's name via the messengers?
2. Why did they decide to act violently against Eliyahu, rather than bringing him with honor and dignity? Even if he could be brought with force, they would not be able to force him to speak!
3. The captains of fifty give no hint that the purpose of their mission is to bring Eliyahu to Achazya in order to state his prophecy in front of the king.
4. From the perspective of this interpretation, the grave punishment of burning which Eliyahu decrees for the captains of fifty and for their men, makes no sense. If their sin was merely committing an affront to Eliyahu's dignity, the prophet could forego his honor, go along with them, and state God's word before Achazya - as he eventually does anyway.
5. Abarbanel adds the following to his words above:

"There is no doubt that Eliyahu thought that Achazya meant to kill him, and therefore he sought to avenge his own death and to burn the captains of the

forces so that Achazya would fear him and not harm him. It was his intention to do this to anyone who would come to him."

Abarbanel seems to be saying that while Eliyahu "thought" that Achazya meant to kill him, this was not really the case. According to this understanding, some one hundred men are burned to death by mistake, owing to a misunderstanding! This is a terrible thought. Why would Eliyahu not clarify the reason for the order to bring him to Achazya before meting out such a punishment to the king's emissaries?

#### **4. "They Schemed to Take his Life"**

Having examined the many difficulties that arise from the first possible explanation of Achazya's motives, we see that there is no choice but to accept one of the two more "sinister" explanations. This was not a misunderstanding on Eliyahu's part, but rather an accurate understanding of Achazya's intention to harm him. The aggressive nature of the delegations sent to seize him – consisting of a captain of fifty, and his fifty men – and the brazen orders that each of the captains issue, leave no other possibility as to Achazya's intention in sending them.

It must be remembered that the "royal lady" of the kingdom of Israel at the time was Achazya's mother, Izevel, who had long ago sworn to avenge the deaths of the prophets of Ba'al, whom Eliyahu had slain:

"So may the gods do to me, and more, if by this time tomorrow I do not make your life like the life of one of them." (I *Melakhim* 19:2)

All that time, Eliyahu had succeeded in eluding her, but since then there is no record of him having been active in Shomron. Achazya himself walks "in the way of his father and in the way of his mother" (I *Melakhim* 22:53), and therefore it can be assumed that he is also hostile to Eliyahu.

Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that of the two remaining possibilities – that the delegations are sent either to punish Eliyahu or to kill him – the latter is more likely. We must conclude that Eliyahu's appearance close to the city of Shomron following years of absence, in a manner that Achazya would perceive as a taunt to the royal family, would have led the wicked king to try and realize his mother's old dream: to kill the prophet.

Indeed, this is the conclusion reached by Rabbi Moshe Alshikh:

"Why did he send a captain of fifty and his fifty men? To give him honor, he could have sent one, two, or three men of valor. Moreover, why did [the captains of fifty] not say, "The king has spoken: come down to him," but rather, "The king has spoken: come down"?... The intention was not that he come down to the king, to speak with him, but rather to speak with them. He should come down to them, to the foot of the mountain, since they had schemed to take his life because of the message that he had sent to the king in God's name, that he would not arise from his sickbed. Therefore they said: "You, the man of God who sends messages in His Name – the king has spoken: Come down."... They do not say, "Come down to the king," but rather "come down" – to us, their intention being to take his life."

Support for Rabbi Alshikh's view – not only as to the general intention that he attributes to Achazya (to take Eliyahu's life) but also as to the novel idea that it was the captains of the fifty themselves who were to carry this out, is to be found in verse 15, which refers to the third captain and his fifty:

"An angel of God spoke to Eliyahu: Go down to him; do not be afraid of him."

For what reason is Eliyahu commanded not to fear? Some commentators understand the verse as referring to Achazya, but syntactically this is problematic, since the king has not been mentioned here, and only appears at the end of the verse in a different sentence: "So he arose and went down with (to) him, to the king." The flow of the verse would suggest that "do not fear him" refers to this third captain of fifty. From the angel's message we understand that Eliyahu need not fear this captain of fifty, since he will do him no harm; he will simply bring him to the king. The two previous captains, however, did give Eliyahu good reason to fear, since they themselves had been ordered to harm him.

## **5. Achazya's Main Motive in Harming Eliyahu**

It seems that Achazya's desire to kill Eliyahu includes more than we have said thus far. There is an element within it that may well have been his main intention, and it is important that we discern its identity in order to understand the story properly. According to the prevailing perception in Tanakh, there is a close connection between the personality of the prophet and the prophecy that he utters. The significance of this is that the personal and family life of the prophet are subjugated to God's message, turning them into a prophetic sign.

But the connection between the prophet himself and his prophecy is perceived in a negative light by those opposed to his prophecy: they believe that by causing the

prophet bodily harm, they are also harming his prophecy and causing it to be nullified. This explains the attempts on the part of several kings in Tanakh to harm or even kill prophets who had uttered prophecies of punishment against them. It is not merely an attempt to silence the opposition, as the modern reader may interpret the move. Rather, it is a "metaphysical" intention to nullify the prophet's undesirable message.

It seems that for Achazya, lying in his sickbed and surely terrified that the prophecy conveyed to him from Eliyahu will be realized – an assault on Eliyahu represents an act nullifying the validity of his prophecy. He sends his soldiers to harm Eliyahu in order to bring about his own recovery. The opposition to the "man of God" is therefore, in essence, opposition to the "word of God." The battle against the prophet is an attempt to thwart the realization of his prophecy.

This analysis of Achazya's motives, shedding new light on the second half of the story, brings all the elements of the story together around a single theme: the victory of God's words over His opponents, until they are realized in full.

In the first part of the story, God's word is revealed via Eliyahu, and wins over Achazya's messengers. They abandon the mission entrusted to them by their king and become Eliyahu's messengers instead, bearing his message to Achazya. This is the first victory of God's word, and it is a double victory: firstly, Achazya's act of desecration of God's Name (inquiring of Ba'al-Zevuv) is halted. Secondly, God's word is brought to Achazya against his will and by his own messengers. This dual victory is facilitated thanks to the repentance of the messengers and their subjugation to God's word as conveyed by Eliyahu.

The second part of the story addresses Achazya's response to this first victory of God's word. He tries to thwart the realization of God's decree by sending soldiers who are meant to kill Eliyahu. The battle to preserve the life and independence of the man of God is a "minor battle" that is part of a larger battle for the realization and victory of God's word. God's word is indeed bound up with the prophet, but not in the sense understood by Achazya. (Were the prophet to disappear from the scene, for whatever reason, God's word would not be dependent upon him; it would still be realized.) Rather, it is bound up with him in the opposite sense: the immunity of God's word in the face of His opponents renders the prophet, who bears God's word with selfless devotion, similarly immune to any attack. Thus, the victory of the man of God over his opponents becomes a prophetic sign, foretelling the imminent victory of the word of God that he conveys. As discussed above, the prophet in person – through his very existence and the events of his life – serves as a sign and symbol of the prophecy that he utters.

Eliyahu's immunity in our chapter arises not only from the Divine protection afforded him by virtue of his bearing God's word for the practical end of allowing him to fulfill his mission. Eliyahu's victory over his opponents is also his own victory: "If I am a man of God, let fire descend from the heavens and consume you and your fifty!" And indeed, Eliyahu's decree is fulfilled: "A fire descended from the heavens and consumed him and his fifty." This comes to tell us that Eliyahu's immunity is the product of his being a man of God, and his victory over his opponents represents a premonition of the victory of God's word. The similarity between the victory of God's emissary over the emissaries of the king, and the victory of God's word concerning the king himself, finds expression in the fact that both involve a decree of death and destruction.

God's word, once it has descended to the world, needs no further protection by God. From the moment it comes into the world, it is subject to the principle: "So shall be My word that emerges from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty unless it has performed that which I desired, and has succeeded in that for which I sent it" (*Yishayahu* 55:11). Similarly, the bearer of God's word – the prophet – is independent in his battle: it is he who decrees how his victory over his opponents will come about, and God fulfills his word.

In two instances, there is conflict between the word of the king – a word borne by his emissaries, the captains of the fifty ("The king has spoken...") and meant to lead to the prophet into being trapped and killed - and the opposite word of the man of God. In both cases, the word of the man of God prevails. There is a third time when the man of God prevails over the king who seeks to harm him, but this time it is not achieved by means of his own words. Rather, it is the words of the third captain of fifty, who recognizes the superiority of the man of God over the king, and pleads with Eliyahu for his life, that represent the victory of the man of God. Here there is no longer any need for Eliyahu to speak; indeed, the prophet is silent.

Eliyahu's third "minor" victory in his battle against the king who seeks his life brings about – necessarily, in the context of the events – a renewed appearance of God's original message. It is also and a new victory of this word of God in the major battle, which takes place in the outer sphere of the story. The victory of God's word near the end of the second half resembles, to some extent, the victory in the first half: here too, an angel of God is revealed to Eliyahu and commands him to convey God's word once again, as revealed to him in the first half. But the nature of the victory of God's word this time is related to the previous victory of the man of God, who bears it, in the course of the second half of the story. After Eliyahu prevails, time after time, in the king's attempts to harm him by means of his messengers, he appears before the

king himself, immune from any harm in the very "lion's den," and he declares God's word to the king once again. Once again, the king is forced – surely to his immense dismay – to hear the prophecy that sentences him to die on his sickbed. Now the king knows that he does not have the power to oppose God's word. He can neither silence it nor thwart it by harming the prophet.

The text does not tell us how Eliyahu is saved from harm at the time when he fulfills his mission and appears before the king, and various hypotheses may be offered to fill in this gap. However, we must question the reason for this silence on the part of the text. It would seem that at this stage of the story we return to the victory of God's word that is proudly uttered before the king. If the text were to start describing how Eliyahu eludes assault by the king or his servants, we would be back in the "minor battle" of the previous scene, conducted between the king (and his emissaries) and the man of God. Thus our impression of the resounding victory of God's word would be lost.

The last verse of the story (17) brings us to its purpose, from the prior victory of the prophet in bearing God's word, to its actual fulfillment in reality. The continuity between God's word as borne by Eliyahu and its realization is underlined by the three-fold repetition of the root "*m-v-t*," twice in God's message and a third time in its realization: "The bed to which you have gone up, you shall not come down from it, for you shall surely die (*mot tamut*). And he died (*va-yamot*), according to God's word...."

With the fulfillment of God's word in the death of Achazya, the text reminds us that this word of God was not merely a heavenly decree of whose existence only we, the readers, are aware. Rather, it is "according to the word of God **which Eliyahu had spoken.**" It is the same word of God that has been identified throughout the story with its speaker. The ultimate victory of God's word is, at the same time, the victory of the prophet who bears it.

## 6. "... And do not Render Evil to My Prophets"

Let us now return to the question with which we started: Eliyahu acts out of self-defense in the face of those who seek his life, but at the same time his actions also bring a well-deserved punishment to the two captains of fifty and their men. They find themselves on the battleground between the king and the prophet. Admittedly, they are acting by order of their king, who has ordered them to kill the man of God. However, what is this order worth – the order of a mortal, miserable king, a sinner and transgressor, in comparison with the command of God, the King of kings? The attempt to kill Eliyahu is not just an act of murder; it is an attempt to kill the

prophet of God because he is a prophet of God, while he is fulfilling his mission. For lesser offenses the psalmist declares, (*Tehillim* 105:14-15): "He allowed no man to oppress them, and reprov'd kings for their sakes. Do not harm My appointed ones, nor render evil to My prophets."

The argument that they were "carrying out orders" is not an excuse; on the contrary, this itself is the indictment. The order to kill the man of God for fulfilling his prophetic mission stands in contradiction to a person's subservience to Him to Whom all are subservient – from the king to the lowliest of his servants. The two captains of fifty and their men (even though the latter may have been of low rank) were faced with a conflict between the order of their king and the command of the King of the world – and they chose the former.

It was not through misunderstanding or lack of knowledge that they made their choice. Eliyahu is not an unknown, anonymous prophet whose authenticity and credentials may be questioned. Likewise, no-one suggested that he was a false prophet and that he was therefore deserving of death. On the contrary, the order to kill him came specifically because he was a well-known prophet whose words had always been fulfilled. Here, the intention behind killing him is to thwart his prophecy and nullify it; the attempt therefore arises from the knowledge that he speaks the truth, in the name of God.

The clear awareness of the two captains of fifty, who knowingly chose to prefer the order of their king over that which was represented by the man of God, is expressed explicitly in their words to Eliyahu:

The first captain of fifty: (9) "He spoke to him: Man of God, the king has spoken: Come down."

The second captain of fifty: (11) "He answered and spoke to him: "Man of God, so says the king: Come down quickly."

Their words reveal their acknowledgment of Eliyahu as a man of God and their preference, notwithstanding, for the order of their king.

These captains of fifty are not the first characters in our narrative to be placed on the battlefield between the king and the prophet. They are preceded by Achazya's messengers, who were sent to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv, god of Ekron. Eliyahu met these messengers and challenged them to choose between loyalty to God's word as conveyed by His prophet, and blind obedience to the orders of their sinful king. Those messengers "believed in the word of God, and returned to Achazya"

(Abarbanel). Not only did they desist from continuing on the mission of their king in the wake of Eliyahu's rebuke, but they also became Eliyahu's messengers to Achazya.

The captains of fifty are introduced into the conflict between the king and the prophet at Achazya's initiative. It is he who presents them with the challenge, by ordering them to seize the man of God and kill him. The two captains of fifty should have learned a lesson from Achazya's earlier messengers; they should have had the proper respect for him and shown preference for him over their sinful king. They ignore the lesson, and are duly punished.

## **7: Eliyahu's Victory – a Prophetic Sign of the Victory of God's Word**

In section 5, we devoted extensive discussion to the reason why Achazya sought to kill Eliyahu. We concluded that his intention was to thwart God's word as conveyed by Eliyahu, concerning Achazya's imminent death. Has this clarification added a further dimension to the question of justifying the burning of the two captains of fifty together with their men?

The answer to this question is certainly in the affirmative. Thus far we have seen, in Eliyahu's actions against the two delegations, self-defense along with punishment for their sin. These two explanations leave his actions within the realm of his own initiative, contrasting them with the two other actions of Eliyahu – at the beginning of the story and at its conclusion – where he acts according to the instructions of an angel of God. As actions undertaken at his own discretion, they are open to criticism: perhaps there is some personal animosity or revenge here, or even excessive zealotry. It is precisely the fact that at the beginning of the story, Eliyahu is guided in his actions by an angel of God, while further on he acts without such guidance, that gives rise to the possibility that God may not wholeheartedly endorse his choices. (The fact that God responds to him by bringing down fire from heaven does not necessarily imply God's full agreement with his decree.)

However, on the basis of the above explanation for our narrative as a whole, we find that all the parts of the story come together around one single subject: the victory of God's word over His opponents. The events of the second half are not a side issue; rather, they are part of the battle for the victory of God's word. We referred above to Eliyahu's battle in this half as a "minor battle." The victory of the man of God in this instance is a prelude to the victory of God's word that follows: the victory of the man of God over his opponents is a prophetic sign, foretelling the imminent victory of the word of God that he bears.

It is specifically because the victory of the prophet must precede and mold the victory of God's word that comes later, that the prophet must prevail over his opponents in an independent manner, just as God's word prevails over His opponents as an independent entity. Only after the immunity and independence of the bearer of God's word has been proven, and the attempt to assault him has failed, does God's word reappear in the story (again, at the command of God's angel), and is ultimately realized in full.

It turns out then, that the transition that Eliyahu makes from prophetic action guided by the angel to independent action undertaken at his own discretion and by his own decree (as well as in the later transition back in the other direction) is necessary for the purposes of the battle between God's word and its bearer, and those opposed to them. It is not out of personal motives or inclinations that Eliyahu decrees concerning the captains of fifty and their men, but rather within the framework of his activity as a prophet, to bring about the realization of God's word and its victory over all of its opponents.

Translated by Kaeren Fish