

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #:76 – Achazya Part 6: The First Captain of Fifty vs. The Second (9-12)

The fate of the first delegation sent by Achazya to seize Eliyahu – being burned by a fire from heaven – is repeated almost exactly in the case of the second delegation. However, in most places in *Tanakh* where this sort of almost identical repetition occurs, small changes can be detected – and our case is no exception. Many scholars ignore these differences, but some commentators – especially the later ones – note every tiny discrepancy and attempt to explain its significance.

Let us compare the respective descriptions of the two delegations. This will serve to highlight the difference between them. (Words that appear in one case but not the other are indicated in bold; words that occur in both cases but in a different way are underlined).

First delegation (verses 9-10):

(9) He sent to him a captain of fifty and his fifty, and **he went up to him and behold, he was sitting at the top of the mountain**. And he spoke to him: Man of God, the king has spoken, come down.

(10) And Eliyahu answered and spoke to the captain of fifty: And if I am a man of God, let a fire descend from heaven and consume you and your fifty. So a fire descended from heaven and consumed him and his fifty.

Second delegation (11-12):

(11) **He repeated this** and sent to him **another** captain of fifty and his fifty. And he answered and spoke to him: Man of God, So says the king, come down quickly.

(12) And Eliya answered and spoke to them: If I am a man of God, let a fire descend from heaven and consume you and your fifty. So a fire **of God** descended from heaven and consumed him and his fifty.

The differences that arise from the above comparison may be analyzed on three levels:

a. Distance – Concerning the first captain of fifty, the text says, "He went up to him"; this is omitted with regard to the second. Commenting on this, Malbim writes: "The first captain had no fear of him; he simply went up to him, to the top of the mountain... [but] the second captain was afraid to go up to Eliyahu..."

Despite the "bravery" of the second captain and his complete loyalty to his king, he adopts some cautionary measures in order to guard himself from the fate met by his predecessor. The highlighting of this act serves to explain how the second captain could have dared to undertake this mission, after what had happened before: he kept a good distance from Eliyahu, believing that the power of this man of God to bring down fire from the heaven was limited to his close environs.

This brings in its wake another difference. Eliyahu's response to the first captain is prefaced with the words, "He spoke to the captain of fifty," while his response to the second starts, "He said to them" – meaning, to the captain of the fifty as well as all of the fifty men. Once again, Malbim addresses this difference:

"Eliyahu answered and he spoke to the captain of the fifty' – His fifty men were standing at a distance; only he was close by, therefore Eliyahu answered him alone."

With regard to the captain, he comments:

"Eliya answered and he spoke to them' – He spoke to all of them, for now the captain of fifty was standing below [at the foot of the mountain]."

b. Style – in comparing the way in which the two captains address Eliyahu, we find two differences:

1. The first captain says, "The king has spoken" (i.e., "commanded"), while the second says, "So says the king." The second captain awards the king's message greater authority and power by introducing it with a formula that is usually associated with kings (as *Da'at Mikra* comments here). Thus, the second captain compares the words of his king to Eliyahu's words in God's Name (verse 6), "So says God."

2. The first captain says, "Come down," while the second commands Eliyahu to "Come down quickly." Rabbi Alshikh offers the following insight:

"The second captain is doubly guilty. He should have learned a lesson [from the fate of the first captain] and acted as the third did, but instead, he was even more disrespectful, adding 'Come down quickly,' as if to say – it is not as it was at first, when you could have [permitted yourself to] come down slowly, since you were unwilling, now the decree has been decided decisively. This is the meaning of, 'Come down quickly.'"

Clearly, there is no contradiction between the differences arising from distance and those related to style; on the contrary, they share the same root. The assumption by the second captain – that if he stood far enough from Eliyahu then he would not be harmed – and his brazenness, arise from the same source.

c. The punishment – Having considered the disrespectful behavior of the second captain, we now come to the third point: the severity of the punishment. In relation to the first captain, we read, "A fire descended from heaven"; the second time, we read, "A fire of God descended from heaven." Obviously, the first fire had also been from God, and its descent was no less miraculous; the text notes explicitly that it came "from heaven." What, then, is the significance of the emphasis, in the second instance, that this was a "fire of God"?

Radak offers an explanation that appears for the first time in connection with the second verse of *Bereishit* – "The spirit of God hovered upon the surface of the water" – and then reappears in several other places in his commentary on *Tanakh*:

"This is a figure of speech; when the Torah wants to amplify something it juxtaposes it with God, as in, 'A great city to God' (*Yona* 3:3); 'cedars of God' (*Tehillim* 80:11)."

Clearly, this is the intention in our instance, too – meaning that the fire that descended the second time was greater than the previous one. Rabbi Alshikh concludes as follows:

"Therefore [since the second captain was even more brazen than the first], this fire [that descended] to the second [captain] was higher and burned faster."

Malbim, having already drawn our attention to the distancing of the second captain from Eliyahu, writes:

"Since [the second captain] thought that if he stood far from Eliyahu then the latter could not harm him, therefore [Eliyahu] said to him: If I am indeed a man

of God, I shall do this, too. Therefore it is written, 'A fire of God descended' – this indicates a great fire that burns even from a distance."

Finally, we may comment that the punishment meted out to the second captain of fifty also fulfills a certain linguistic measure for measure. Since he sinned in saying, "Man of God... come down," he is punished by "a fire of God."

If we consider the accumulated significance of all of these differences, we arrive at their common denominator: the confrontation between the second captain of fifty and Eliyahu is more acute than the first, both in terms of the behavior and speech of the captain and in terms of the punishment that emerges from heaven at Eliyahu's decree.

This conclusion arises not only from the details of the descriptions of the two episodes, which we have discussed above, but also – first and foremost – from the very fact that the second delegation is what it is: a commander and his men who arrive after the burning of the first delegation (as noted by Rabbi Alshikh in the commentary that we cited above, concerning the "style" of the second captain). The fact that this is already a second delegation is underlined in the text in the first and most obvious of the differences arising from our comparison: "He repeated this and sent to him another captain of fifty and his fifty."

Both Achazya and the second captain of fifty (along with his men) have failed to learn their lesson from the burning of the first delegation: the attempt to sabotage God's word by means of assaulting the man of God who bears it will not succeed. The second captain of fifty would have had an excellent excuse – had he sought one – for not obeying his king's order and endangering his life and the lives of his soldiers. However, not only does he not seek to evade his mission; he sharpens his words to Eliyahu with even greater brazenness and disrespect. This disgrace, against the backdrop of the burning of the first delegation, shows that he is a full partner, in heart and mind, of the king and his views.

Translated by Kaeren Fish