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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #77: Achazya Part 6: The Third Captain of Fifty (13-14)

(13) So he sent again, a third captain of fifty and his fifty.
And the third captain of fifty went up and came
And fell on his knees before Eliyahu, and he pleaded with him and said to him:
Man of God, I pray you, let my life and the life of your servants, these fifty, be
dear in your eyes.
(14) Behold, fire came down from heaven
And consumed the first two captains of fifty, and their fifties;
Now, let my life be dear in your eyes.

The story of the third delegation that Achazya sends to Eliyahu is placed in the same external framework as its predecessors. It is specifically the repetition of the fixed patterns that are familiar to us from the previous incidents that illustrates so clearly the great difference here:

The opening verse, "He sent again, a third captain of fifty and his fifty," is an almost verbatim repetition of the introduction to the previous delegation ("He sent again to him another captain of fifty and his fifty").

The third captain of fifty starts out ("The third captain of fifty went up and came") paints a similar picture to the beginning of the mission of the previous captain ("He went up to him, and behold, he was sitting at the top of the mountain").

Even the third captain's appeal to Eliyahu contains elements that echo his predecessors:

"He said to him: Man of God...."

These exact words, juxtaposed in this way, are to be found in connection with all three of the captains of fifty.

The almost exact repetition of the description of Achazya's action in dispatching the third captain of fifty testifies to his fixed, unchanged intentions. The king awards no weight to the disappearance of his two previous delegations and the

loss of life involved. He is quite determined: no price is too high to pay for the capture of the prophet whom he hates so bitterly. It is against Achazya's stubborn stance that the change in the behavior of the third captain of fifty stands out so prominently.

The difference here consists of more than simply what is added to or omitted from the fixed pattern of his predecessors. More importantly, there is a huge difference in the intention that is concealed in the "formulaic expressions" themselves as we hear them repeated once again.

This third captain of fifty does not desert his mission together with his men, nor does he refuse the order that he receives from his king. On the contrary – like his predecessors, he goes about carrying out his task. However, while the first captain ascended to the man of God sitting atop the mountain since he was unaware of the punishment awaiting him, and while the second refrained from ascending the mountain since he believed that he would thereby save himself from destruction, the third captain adopts the same policy as the first – specifically because he understands the extent of the danger. Although he fears the fate of his predecessors, he understands that distance will not save him (as it did not save the second captain). Instead, he tries a different approach: talking to the prophet directly, so that the prophet will understand his terrible situation. Therefore, "The third captain of fifty went up and came...."

Even before he opens his mouth to utter his plea, the third captain starts with an action, which symbolizes perfectly the difference between him and the other captains:

"He fell on his knees before Eliyahu...."

This falling expresses clearly the acceptance of the authority of the man of God and the preference for him over the king.

The words that are repeated in all three missions – "He spoke to him: Man of God..." – are preceded this third time by words that change the significance of his address entirely:

"He pleaded before him and he spoke to him: Man of God...."

Even before we hear what he has to say, we already know that the words of this man – uttered with bent knee and in supplication before the prophet – will be different in terms of content, too. The words, "He spoke to him," with reference to the first two captains of fifty, meant, "He commanded him" (as the Sages interpret elsewhere – "words as harsh as arrows"). When spoken by the third captain, however, these words assume the opposite meaning. The exclamation repeated by all three of them, "Man of

God," expresses the awareness shared by all of them that Eliyahu is a prophet and emissary of God. However, in the case of the first two, this awareness only increases their guilt, since their addressing of him means, "Although you are a man of God, that neither adds nor detracts anything in relation to fulfilling the king's order. Come down." When it comes to the third captain, the recognition that Eliyahu is a "man of God" translates into submission to his authority, and the supplications that follow. Let us examine these:

(13) ...Let my life and the life of your servants, these fifty, be dear in your eyes.

(14) Behold, fire came down from heaven
And consumed the first two captains of fifty, and their fifties;
Now, let my life be dear in your eyes.

This short speech comprises three parts: an opening plea, an explanation of the background to the plea, and an abbreviated repetition of the opening plea, using the same language.

What is it that this captain wants? To prevent the descent of fire that will kill him and his men, there is no need for him to ascend the mountain and plead before Eliyahu; he could simply remain at his place in Shomron. Clearly, then, he too is coming to demand something of Eliyahu, and he fears that his demand will bring about a descent of fire from heaven, as has happened already twice. But what is his demand, and why does he not express it?

Malbim asks why in verses 13-14 the captain asks twice, in the same words, "Let my life be dear in your eyes." While we may have regarded this repetition as a purely rhetorical device, so as to conclude the speech with the same language as in its introduction, with extra emphasis, Malbim adds a further insight:

"The first time [these words are mentioned] he was asking that [Eliyahu] not burn him and the others; therefore he says, 'My life and the life of your servants.' The second time, he was asking that [Eliyahu] **go with him**, for if he would not, the king would kill him for not having brought [the prophet] by force. Therefore he says, 'Let **my** life be dear.'"

To Malbim's view, then, these are not two identical requests. In the second request Eliyahu is asked in a clearer manner to do that which is only hinted at by the very request that the captain previously posed: to go with him and appear before the king.

Two differences between the opening and closing requests serve to support Malbim's interpretation. The first is the introduction to the second request with the words, "And now." It means, "Now, I am coming to the practical point of my words." However, an exact repetition of words spoken previously, with no new significance, cannot be regarded as "the point."

The second difference concerns that which is omitted from the second request in relation to the first. Here the captain does not plead for the life of his fifty men, but only for his own life. Seemingly, this omission is merely for the sake of brevity. However, the crux of the moral power of his request lies in the fact that he is concerned for the safety of his men, and not only for his own life. He should not be omitting this important element from his second request! Malbim's interpretation explains the omission: the danger posed by Eliyahu, who may bring down fire upon the third delegation in light of the veiled request that he accompany them, is a danger to all of them – the captain as well as his men, as the previous incidents have demonstrated. However, if Eliyahu were to answer this captain of fifty that he does not intend to punish him, but also refuses to come down with him, then the danger posed by the king affects the captain himself, since as the commander he alone will be held responsible for the command not being fulfilled. Therefore, in this context of his request that Eliyahu come down with him, he asks for himself – "Let my life be dear in your eyes" – i.e., "Do not give me into the hand of my king, to be killed by him."

Thus, the third captain of fifty makes exactly the same request of Eliyahu as did his two predecessors: he must come down from the top of the mountain, as per the king's order. In what way, then, is he better than them? In at least three respects:

- a. He falls on his knees before Eliyahu, pleads with him and does not command him.
- b. The actual request – that Eliyahu come down with him – is only hinted at; it is not stated explicitly.
- c. He explains his request on the basis of his own life being in danger, not on the fact that this is the king's command.

In his distress the third captain of fifty appeals to the only figure, of the two who threaten his life, who is likely to listen, to understand, and to have mercy on him: the man of God. Now, it is no longer he – the captain – who will have to deal with the contradiction between these opposing authorities, but rather Eliyahu who will have to find a solution to the situation that has come about.

The dilemma that Eliyahu faces is a difficult one: if he goes down with the captain of the fifty, he will thereby be submitting to the king's authority, by fulfilling

his order. This will represent an acknowledgment of the king's superiority over the man of God – and it is precisely over this acknowledgment that the battle has been conducted thus far. On the other hand, if he refuses to go down with the captain of fifty, evil will befall this innocent man who deserves no such punishment. Eliyahu's deliberation is expressed by his silence. Unlike the two previous incidents, this time he offers no verbal reaction to the words of the captain of fifty. He waits for God to guide him as to what he should do.

To save Eliyahu from the dilemma in which the third captain of fifty has placed him, God's angel is once again revealed to him:

(15) An angel of God spoke to Eliyahu: Go down with him; do not fear him.

In the angel's first appearance to Eliyahu in this narrative (verse 3), Eliyahu was commanded to go up to meet the messengers of Achazya and to present them with a test: a choice between proceeding, out of loyalty to their king, or accepting the rebuke of the prophet and returning home. Now, in the angel's second appearance, Eliyahu is commanded to go down to Achazya's messengers, thereby saving the captain from the difficult test that the king has given him.

Eliyahu acts as the angel commands him:

"He arose and went down with him to the king."

On the surface, Eliyahu's descent from his seat at the top of the mountain, together with the captain of fifty, looks like capitulation. However, we soon discover that this is simply a prelude to the final victory in the battle between the king and the prophet:

(16) He spoke to him: So says the Lord: Since you sent messengers to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv, god of Ekron – is it for lack of any God in Israel that you seek his word?! Therefore, you shall not descend from the bed to which you have gone up, for you shall surely die.

Eliyahu's victory at this moment, as he appears confidently before Achazya and conveys his terrible prophecy with no fear of any harm, is greater than the victory he experienced in transforming Achazya's messengers into his own messengers, and greater than his victory in punishing Achazya's messengers who came seeking his harm.

Translated by Kaeren Fish