

## The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

### The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

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#### Shiur #78: Achazya Part 7: "Who Has Ascended to Heaven and Descended Again?" (*Mishlei* 30:4) By Rav Elchanan Samet

#### 1. Descent for the Sake of Ascent

In the last *shiur* we saw that, in order to spare Eliyahu the compromising position imposed on him by the third captain of fifty, God's angel appears to him once again. It is instructive to compare this revelation to the previous one (verses 3-4):

First revelation:

(3) An angel of God spoke to Eliyahu the Tishbi: Arise, **go up** to meet the messengers of the king of Shomron.

Second revelation:

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

In the first revelation, Eliyahu is commanded to go up to meet the messengers of Achazya and put them to the test. They will have to either remain loyal to their king, or accept the prophet's rebuke and turn back. In the second revelation he is commanded to go down with Achazya's emissaries, thereby saving the captain of fifty from his fearful mission.

This inversion ("going up" as opposed to "going down") is no mere topographical issue. Rather, the metaphoric significance of "ascent" and "descent" hint that the proper path for a prophet is one of flexibility and consideration for changing circumstances. There is a time to go up, and there is a time to come down.

A Midrash *Chazal* which appears in several different places (*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*; *Pesikta Rabbati* 5; *Bamidbar Rabba* 12:11; *Midrash Mishlei* chapter 30) expresses this idea specifically in relation to Eliyahu, addressing this very scene:

"'Who has ascended to heaven and come back down' (*Mishlei* 30:4)... 'Who has ascended to heaven' – this refers to Eliyahu, as it is written concerning him (II *Melakhim* 12), 'Eliyahu ascended heavenward in a storm'; 'And came back down' – (this refers to the verse,) 'Go down to him; do not fear....'"

In the first revelation of the angel to Eliyahu, the prophet is commanded to act in a manner of "going up." Presenting Achazya's messengers with a challenge will be a real "ascent" for them, an "ascent" in Eliyahu's status, and – most importantly – an "ascent" of sanctification of God's Name, and avoidance of its desecration. Now, however, in the second revelation, Eliyahu is commanded to act in a manner of "going down." From his lofty position at the top of the mountain, he must temporarily forego his honor, and – out of consideration for mortal weakness and distress – go down with the captain of fifty and face the king.

However, at the same time, this "descent" is, in truth, "for the sake of ascent." Firstly, Eliyahu is revealed, in this descent, in a new light. The prophet who has projected power and authority from his very first appearance, bringing punishment to those around him and bringing down fire from the heaven, is exposed in his "descent" as considerate and merciful towards those who are deserving of it, even at the price of a temporary loss of status in his clash with the king.

Secondly, we have already seen how it becomes retroactively clear that even this surrender is simply a prelude to the final victory in the battle between the king and the prophet. Eliyahu's victory as he stands fearlessly before Achazya and conveys his terrible prophecy, with no fear of any harm, is greater than his victory in punishing the emissaries of Achazya who come seeking to harm him. The same words that Eliyahu told to Achazya's first messengers, when he **went up** to them, are now repeated before the king himself, directly and openly, after Eliyahu **comes down** with the king's messengers.

## **2. The Roots *a-l-i* and *y-r-d*: Key Opposites in our Narrative**

From a broader perspective we note that the opposite roots *a-l-i* and *y-r-d* are "key opposites" throughout our narrative. We refer here to a pair of opposite words which together serve as a two-part "key word" in a literary unit in *Tanakh*.

The roots *a-l-i* and *y-r-d* appear a total of twenty-one times as verbs: there are seven appearances in the first half of the story (verses 2-8), and fourteen appearances in the second half (9-17). It is not only the convenient total (3x7) or the division between the two halves of the story (7:14) that support the view of these roots as "key opposites." We shall see below that the story as a whole is forged around this pair of verbs, following a fixed pattern.

Let us start by reviewing all the appearances of these verbs:

### First half:

1. An angel of God spoke... Arise, **go up to meet** the messengers of the king of Shomron and speak to them...
- 2-3. The bed to which you have **gone up** – you shall not **come down** from it, but shall surely die.
4. They said to him: A man **came up to meet** us and he said to us...
- 5-6. ...Therefore the bed to which you have **gone up** – you shall not **come down** from it, but shall surely die.
7. He spoke to them: What was the description of the man who **came up to meet** you and who spoke to you...

### Second half:

8. He sent to him a captain of fifty with his fifty men, and he **went up** to him... and he spoke to him:
9. Man of God, the king has spoken: **Come down!**
10. And if I am a man of God, let fire **come down** from the heaven...
11. And fire **came down** from the heaven and consumed...
12. He sent him another captain of fifty with his fifty men, and he **answered** (*va-ya'an*) and spoke to him:
13. Man of God, so says the king: **Come down** quickly!
14. If I am a man of God, let fire **come down** from the heaven...
15. And a fire of God **came down** from the heaven, and consumed...
16. And again he sent a third captain of fifty and his fifty men, and he **went up** and he came... and he spoke to him...
17. Behold, fire has **come down** from the heaven...
18. And the angel of God spoke to Eliyahu: **Go down** to him...
19. And he arose and he **went down** to him, to the king.
- 20-21. The bed to which you have **gone up** – you will not **come down** from it, but shall surely die.

The obvious question arising from our schematic presentation above concerns appearance no. 12 (verse 11): the root of the word "*va-ya'an*" is *a-n-h*, meaning to lift one's voice. Nevertheless, we propose that this word be read as "*va-ya'al*," by exchanging the *nun* for a *lamed*. (It should be noted that in most of the early manuscripts of the Septuagint, the word is indeed translated as "went up.") We are prompted to suggest this interpretation by the clear structural pattern of the story, with the roots *a-l-i* and *y-r-d* at its foundation. Let us consider the pattern followed in the first half of the story:

1. Eliyahu **goes up** to meet the messengers of Achazya (verse 3 – command by God's angel)

- 2-3. Achazya **goes up** to his sickbed and **does not come down** (verse 4 – command by God's angel)
- 4. Eliyahu **goes up** to meet Achazya's messengers (verse 6 – report by the messengers)
- 5-6. Achazya **goes up** to his sickbed and **does not come down** (verse 6 – report by the messengers)
- 7. Eliyahu **goes up** to meet Achazya's messengers (verse 7 – Achazya's question)

The second half follows a pattern that groups appearances of our "key opposites" into pairs of appearances:

- 1. First captain of fifty **goes up** to Eliyahu.
- 2. He demands that Eliyahu **come down**.
  
- 3. Eliyahu calls for fire to **come down**.
- 4. Fire does in fact **come down**.
  
- 5. Second captain of fifty **goes up** to Eliyahu.
- 6. He demands that Eliyahu **come down**.
  
- 7. Eliyahu calls for fire to **come down**.
- 8. Fire does in fact **come down**.
  
- 9. Third captain of fifty **goes up** to Eliyahu.
- 10. He asks of Eliyahu that fire not **come down** upon him and his fifty men.
  
- 11. God's command to Eliyahu to **go down** with him.
- 12. Eliyahu in fact **goes down** with him.
  
- 13-14. Achazya **goes up** to his sickbed and **does not come down**.

A fixed pattern is repeated for all three captains of fifty: first the roots *a-l-i* and *y-r-d* appear in connection with the captain of fifty and his demand of Eliyahu, then we find the root *y-r-d* twice in connection with Eliyahu's response. The pattern is repeated in identical form for the first two captains of fifty, while in the case of the third captain only the outer framework remains the same, while the inner limbs are inverted: the first two appearances of *a-l-i* and *y-r-d* are still attributed to the captain, but although he goes up to Eliyahu and speaks to him, like his two predecessors, he does not command him – as they did – to "come down"; rather, he recalls the "coming down" of the fire, which consumed the previous companies, and he begs not to suffer

the same fate. The next two appearances of the verb *y-r-d* occur within the framework of Eliyahu's response, as in the two previous episodes, but this time Eliyahu does not bring down fire; this time, he himself comes down with the captain of fifty.

A slight change in one of the linguistic components of *a-l-i* and *y-r-d*, such as the omission of the "going up" of the second captain of fifty, would destroy the entire pattern of the description of these three delegations around the *a-l-i* and *y-r-d* pair.

A linguistic comparison of the verses describing the arrival of the three captains of fifty serves to reinforce our interpretation of verse 11, according to which "*va-ya'an*" should be read as "*va-ya'al*":

(9) He sent to him a captain of fifty  
and his fifty men, And he **went up** to him,  
and behold he was sitting...  
And he spoke to him

(11) And again he sent to him another captain of fifty  
and his fifty men, And he answered  
and he spoke to him

(13) And again he sent a third captain of fifty  
And his fifty men, And he went up and he came... and begged him  
And he spoke to him

The linguistic element that is common to all three delegations therefore boils down to the phrases:

"He sent a captain of fifty and his fifty men" and  
"And he went up... and spoke to him."

The first phrase ("He sent... and his fifty men") undergoes slight changes, in the case of the second and the third captains, owing to the fact that they follow after the first captain. As to the second phrase ("And he went up... and spoke to him"), it is specifically its appearance in connection with the second captain of fifty that preserves the minimal common basis (on condition, of course, that we read "*va-ya'an*" as "*va-ya'al*"). In connection with the first captain there is an addition ("and behold, he was sitting...") that arises from the need to indicate the place to which this captain went up, while in the case of the third captain there is a lengthy addition that describes the captain's different actions before Eliyahu ("He fell on his knees"), and the change in the content of his words ("he beseeched him").

The linguistic comparison, then, serves to strengthen the case for reading "*va-ya'an*," in the case of the second captain, as "*va-ya'al*."

However, we must ask why it is that specifically in verse 11, "*va-ya'al*" became "*va-ya'an*." One possible answer is that the exchange is influenced by the beginning of the next verse, verse 12: "*Va-ya'an Eliyahu*" – "And Eliyahu answered..." Thus the following parallel is created:

- (11) **And he answered**  
And he spoke to him:  
Man of God...
- (12) **And Eliyahu answered**  
And he spoke to them:  
If I am a man of God...

Another possible explanation is that "*va-ya'an*" implies a lifting of the voice – as Rashi and other commentators usually understand the root "*a-n-h*" wherever it introduces speech (e.g. *Shemot* 15:21; *ibid.* 20:13; *Devarim* 26:5; *Iyov* 3:2, etc.). This would hint to us that although the second captain of fifty also "goes up" to Eliyahu (since *va-ya'an* = *va-ya'al*), he does not come close to him, as the first captain did, but rather stands at a "safe distance," and therefore has to lift his voice in order to say what he wants to say to Eliyahu. Malbim adopts this interpretation of our verse.

To this latter possibility, which awards a deliberate dual significance to the "*va-ya'an*" which arises from "*va-ya'al*" we may add that the two roots *a-l-i* and *a-n-h* may actually be connected. Both express a "lifting": the one implies a lifting of the body, the other a lifting of the voice. The exchange between them is therefore not merely a phonetic issue (i.e., the exchange of *lamed* and *nun*, which belong to the same consonantal group) but also an exchange of actions that share a similarity.

(to be continued)

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