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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #79: Achazya

Part 8: "Who Has Ascended to Heaven and Descended Again?" (Mishlei 30:4) (continued)

3. Who, in our story, "goes up" but does not "come down," and who "goes up" and also "comes down"?

How does the "key pair of opposites" (*a-l-i* and *y-r-d*), as exposed in the previous *shiur*, contribute to our understanding of the significance of this story? We may say that this pair of roots serves to mold the confrontation that is at the center of the narrative, between the king and his emissaries, on one hand, and Eliyahu, on the other, with the eventual victory of the prophet. The narrative employs this pair of opposite verbs in relation to all of the main characters: Eliyahu, Achazya, and the captains of fifty are all somehow connected to these roots. However, we need to define the precise meaning of each of these verbs as they appear in the context of each of the characters.

Who, in the story, "ascends"? Everyone does:

- Eliyahu "goes up" to meet the messengers of Achazya, and this appears three times (verses 3,6,7).
- Achazya "goes up" to his sickbed, and this too is mentioned three times (verse 4,6,16).
- The captains of fifty "go up" to Eliyahu, and once again this happens three times (verses 9, 11,13).

However, the significance of the "going up" and its purpose is different in each instance:

- Eliyahu goes up to meet the messengers of Achazya with a view to causing them to repent and converting them into his own messengers to the king. While his ascent is also a literal, topographical one, it is principally meant in the metaphoric sense: he "ascends" to perform his prophetic mission.
- Achazya "goes up" to his sickbed, and this too is a literal description, in that the bed is a raised surface that a person must "ascend" to in order to lie flat upon it. However, in the present context, the reason for his "ascent" is his illness, and the significance of the ascent here is therefore a negative one. It is an ascent that expresses weakness and helplessness. The linguistic and numerical balance among the three "ascents" of Eliyahu and the three "ascents" of Achazya represents an ironic device meant to hint at the victory of the prophet, who succeeds in fulfilling his mission, over the king who is trying to sabotage him.
- The three captains of fifty also "ascend" to Eliyahu who is sitting at the top of the mountain. Their ascent is meant to serve as a tool in the hand of the king, who has "gone up" to his sickbed and is therefore incapacitated, in order to negate Eliyahu's "ascent" in the first part of the story. Their ascent is therefore a counter-strike, as it were, by Achazya, in response to the success of the prophet in his own ascent. Their ascent is meant to cause Eliyahu's "descent" at the king's command – i.e., to nullify the success of the prophet's ascent in the first half of the story. However, in this section of the story – covering the ascent by the captains of fifty – the unity that characterized the ascent in the previous sections starts to come apart. The ascent of the first two captains of fifty is indeed carried out in accordance with the king's wishes, and they demand that the prophet "come down" by order of the king. The third captain of fifty does "ascend" to Eliyahu, but it is an ascent that leads him to join Eliyahu:

"The third captain of fifty went up and he came and he fell upon his knees before Eliyahu, and beseeched him.... (13)

He does not relay the king's order – "Come down," but rather expresses the opposite idea: an awareness of the prophet's ability to prevail over his opponents.

Behold, fire has **come down** from the heavens.... (14)

Thus, Achazya's "counter-strike" fails twice because of Eliyahu's actions, and the third time because of the submission demonstrated by the third captain of fifty, which changes the meaning of his "ascent" into the opposite of what it had been in the case of his predecessors. He even uses the verb *y-r-d* in the opposite sense to the way in which they meant it.

Let us now review the various uses of the root *y-r-d*.

- The root *y-r-d* appears three times in relation to Achazya (verses 4,6,16), always accompanied with the negative prefix: "The sickbed to which you have gone up – you **will not come down** from it." The fact that Achazya will not descend from his sickbed (as a continuation of the negative implication of his "ascent" in the first place) does not mean that his situation will remain static, but rather that he will die – as we learn from the end of the sentence in each case: "You will surely die."
- We have already noted above that on three occasions the captains of fifty use the root *y-r-d* in their words to Eliyahu, but the aim of the first two captains (verses 9,11) is the opposite of that of the third captain (verse 14). The "descent" that is being demanded of Eliyahu by the first two, by order of the king, means coming down to his death (as discussed in a previous *shiur*), and it is not realized. Eliyahu persists in his "ascent" at the top of the mountain, i.e., in his prophetic victory over Achazya and his two emissaries.
- The root *y-r-d* appears four times in relation to the fire that comes down from heaven, consuming the first two captains of fifty and their men. Twice it occurs in Eliyahu's prior warning (verses 10,12), and twice more in the description of the event actually taking place (in the same verses). In other words,

Eliyahu does not "come down," as the king demands, but instead "brings down" fire, thereby preventing the captains from taking him down forcibly. At the same time, it prevents the return "descent" of the captains and their men. Thus, the first two delegations resemble the king who has sent them. Like him, they too have "gone up" (a negative ascent) but never "come down," and for the same reason: they are dead. The "descent" of the fire is what prevents their own descent.

- In the case of the third captain, the situation is different. Concerning him we are told explicitly that he "went up" to Eliyahu, and in his case Eliyahu is commanded explicitly to "go down to him." This he does: "And he arose and went down to him" (verse 15). Thus, this third captain who goes up and demonstrates submission to Eliyahu, merits to come down with him.

Twice the root *y-r-d* is used in relation to Eliyahu in this verse: first in the angel's command, "Go down to him," and then in his fulfillment of this command: "He went down to him, to the king." The prophet, then, is the only character in the story who is said to go up and also to come down from the place of his ascent. (The third captain and his men do come down, but the verb is used in relation to Eliyahu, not to them.)

In summary we may say that the question that is asked in this story, in which everyone "goes up," is: who goes up and also comes down? Those whose ascent was positive, merit also to come down. They are then able to continue their lives and to complete their missions. Those whose ascent was bound up with sin (the ascent of Achazya – because of the sin of idolatry; the ascent of the first two captains of fifty – because of their intention to assault the prophet) do not merit to come down from the place of their ascent, for they die.

The victory of Eliyahu, as bearer of God's word, is expressed not only in his "ascent" at the beginning of the story – for the act of ascent is not limited in the story to him: Achazya "goes up" before him, and the captains of fifty "go up" after him. Rather, his victory is expressed in the fact that he later "comes down." His descent is to life and safety, and he completes his

mission by standing before the wicked king and fearlessly declaring God's message to him.

This analysis of our narrative on the basis of the "key pair of opposites" serves to strengthen our thesis set out earlier, that Eliyahu's "descent" at the end of the story is a "descent for the purposes of ascent." It expresses the duty of a prophet in Israel to "come down" after every spiritual "ascent."

(In this regard it is interesting to compare the next narrative, which likewise speaks of an "ascent" by Eliyahu: "And it was, when God caused Eliyahu to go up (*be-ha'alot*) in a storm to heaven... and Eliyahu went up (*va-ya'al*) in a storm to heaven." This ascent is not followed by any descent, but at the same time there is no statement of his "not descending," as in our story with regard to Achazya and the first two captains of fifty. Indeed, this ascent by Eliyahu is not perceived as an image of death and destruction, but rather the opposite, the preface to his renewed revelation at the end of days [*Malakhi* 3:23]: "Behold, I send to you Eliyahu, the prophet, before the great and terrible day of God....")

Translated by Kaeren Fish