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

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### **Shiur #85: The Storm Part 2: Eliyahu's Journey to His Place of Ascent**

#### **3. The Reason for Eliyahu visiting Beit El and Yericho**

The clarification in the previous *shiur* of Eliyahu's point of departure – at Gilgal – may guide us in seeking the reason for the continuation of the journey via Beit El and Yericho. Apparently, the purpose of Eliyahu entering these cities is connected to the only event that the text describes as happening when he gets there. Both of these cities house "sons of the prophets," and they approach Elisha and conduct identical conversations with him (verses 3 and 5):

They said to him: Do you know that today God will take your master from your head?

And he said: I do know it; be silent.

Apparently, then, Eliyahu's passage through these cities, at God's command, is meant as a gesture of farewell to the apprentice prophets. As we know from the narratives about Shemuel (I *Shemuel* 19) and Elisha (II *Melakhim* 4), the prophet of the generation is regarded as the teacher of the apprentice prophets of his generation. While Eliyahu does not seem to have served as the head of a group of apprentice prophets, as Shemuel and Elisha did (perhaps because he was not based on one place), all the "sons of the prophets" of the generation are considered his disciples, and he must therefore take leave of them before he is taken from them.

Here we must ask: where is there any hint of Eliyahu taking leave of Elisha in Gilgal, or of the apprentice prophets in Beit El and in Yericho? The apprentice prophets do not say a word to Eliyahu in either place, nor does Eliyahu say anything to them!

Addressing the rather surprising dialogue that the apprentice prophets have with Elisha both in Beit El and in Yericho, and its implications, Abarbanel asks:

Who told all of the apprentice prophets, those in Beit El and those in Yericho, that Eliyahu was going to be taken on that day? If it came to them in the form

of a prophecy, how is it that all of them experienced it? ... And what was the purpose of and the need for this revelation to them?

Seemingly, the answer to Abravanel's questions is connected to our discussion concerning the purpose of Eliyahu's stopover in Beit El and in Yericho.

The knowledge that Eliyahu is going to be taken up to the heavens in a storm is known to us, the readers, already in the first verse of the narrative. However, as discussed in the introductory *shiur* to this chapter, it remains a secret that is not discussed before it happens, nor are its details made clear afterwards. In this situation, Eliyahu's farewell to Elisha and to the apprentice prophets could end up being one-sided and hence meaningless: Eliyahu knows that he has come to give honor to Elisha and to the apprentice prophets by taking leave of them before he is taken from them, but since they are unaware of what is going to happen (and of course Eliyahu will not reveal his secret), Eliyahu's passage through Gilgal, Beit El and Yericho will be strange and unintelligible in the eyes of those to whom Eliyahu is meant to be bidding farewell.

In order to avoid such a situation, there is a prophecy that comes in advance to tell both Elisha ("I do know it") and the apprentice prophets in the two cities where Eliyahu will be stopping over, that on this day God will be taking Eliyahu from them. It is possible that the prophecy is experienced by all of them; however, it may be revealed to only one, or to a few. In any event, the news is spread throughout the entire company.

Nevertheless, this prophetic revelation remains a secret, and the apprentice prophets do not dare to mention it to Eliyahu himself – the subject of the secret – out of their immense awe and respect for him, and especially on this auspicious and awesome day. Hence, we are left with a peculiar farewell: the act of farewell on the part of Eliyahu lies in his mere appearance in those cities where the apprentice prophets are to be found, while the act of farewell on their part is realized in their emotionally charged dialogue with Elisha, in which they reveal their awareness that this encounter with Eliyahu is their last; it is their farewell.

Thus, everyone – Eliyahu himself, Elisha, and the apprentice prophets - is fully aware of why Eliyahu visits these stations on his journey, but the atmosphere of secrecy prevents this knowledge from being raised in open conversation with Eliyahu. Even Elisha, Eliyah's faithful disciple and attendant, does not express his knowledge of what is going to happen in his words to Eliyahu.

#### 4. The Reason for Eliyahu Being Taken Up On the Plains of Moav, Opposite Yericho

Now that we understand the reason for Eliyahu's appearance in Gilgal, and the significance of his passing through Beit El and Yericho before being taken from his disciple, we are in a better position to explore the meaning of his journey as a whole, and its objective – to reach the eastern side of the Yarden, the "plains of Moav opposite Yericho," where he is destined to be taken up.

Some of the commentators explain the reason for Eliyahu being taken up specifically at this place as a continuation of the parallel between Eliyahu and Moshe that we discussed in the story of the revelation at Mount Chorev (*I Melakhim* 19). Radak, commenting on verse 1, formulates the idea as follows:

The reason for them going to the other side of the Yarden would appear to be that Eliyahu had been told, through prophecy, that he would be taken there. Perhaps he was taken up at the same place where Moshe Rabbeinu was gathered up, to honor him, since his greatness was close to that of Moshe Rabbeinu. God appeared to him at Mount Chorev just as He had appeared there to Moshe; he fasted for forty days and forty nights just as Moshe had.

Indeed, like chapter 19 of *I Melakhim*, in our narrative too there is a clear theme of comparison between Moshe and Eliyahu in several areas. However, behind these similarities there lies a fundamental distinction between the two prophets, and perhaps this is the purpose of the comparison between them. Concerning Moshe we are told explicitly that after he completed his life's mission, he died and was buried. In Eliyahu's case, there is no mention of either death or burial. Thus, these two leaders do not end their lives in the same way; it is only the geographical location and the mystery surrounding the manner of their departure that serve to create the parallel.

Let us now turn our attention to the question of the place where Eliyahu is taken up, and the reason for him having to undertake the lengthy journey described in our narrative. Perhaps the parallel to Moshe can be of assistance here – but in inverse fashion. Moshe led Bnei Yisrael on their journey to the land of their destiny up to the plains of Moav, at the Yarden, opposite Yericho – the place from which they would soon depart in order to cross over the Yarden and conquer the land. Eliyahu, in contrast, reaches the same point from the opposite direction – from the very heart of *Eretz Yisrael*, now well-populated, from Mount Ephraim, from the land of Binyamin and from Yericho. He crosses over the Yarden in an easterly direction, to the place where Bnei Yisrael encamped before entering the land.

Thus, Eliyahu's journey is the inverse of the journey of conquest of the land in the days of Yehoshua. From Gilgal, in Mount Ephraim, Eliyahu heads for Beit El, and from there to Yericho, from whence he proceeds to cross the Yarden in an easterly direction, at the place where Bnei Yisrael had once crossed over the Yarden heading westward. In the same place where Bnei Yisrael readied themselves for the conquest of the land, on the plains of Yericho – right there Eliyahu departs from *Am Yisrael* and from *Eretz Yisrael*.

In the previous *shiurim* we suggested that Eliyahu's intention, in this journey of farewell, was to take leave of his disciple, Elisha, who was in Gilgal, and of the apprentice prophets (also his disciples) who were in Beit El and in Yericho. Now we may broaden this hypothesis to include the entire journey up until its ultimate destination. Eliyahu undertakes a journey of farewell from his generation, from the land in which he has been active, and from the historical process whose realization is described in *Tanakh* – the process of conquest and settlement of the land.

What is the meaning of this journey of farewell, signifying Eliyahu's taking leave of *Am Yisrael* and of the land?

In the world of *Tanakh*, a Jew who dies in the bosom of his family would be "gathered unto his fathers" in their burial ground, such that his presence would still somehow be felt – even after his death – at the place where his children and grandchildren would continue their lives, on the family estate. Thus, while the deceased person would have departed from the living, he (or the tangible memory of him) would not be cut off from the human process that continued after his death. His "name" and the place of his burial would remain a part of the lives of his descendants.

Eliyahu is taken up in a storm to the heavens, leaving no tangible memory and no link with the living. Therefore, in his case, the opposite process takes place.

In a future *shiur* we shall discuss the significance of Eliyahu ascending to the heavens while still alive. It would seem that this ascent does not signify an act of separation between death and life, but rather a separation from the reality that continues in this world. Therefore, Eliyahu's journey prior to his ascent – a journey of taking leave of the people and the land – is a journey of only temporary separation. A person who departs in this way means to return to the object of his farewell at a later time in the future.

Translated by Kaeren Fish