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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #88: The Storm Part 3: Eliyahu and Elisha On Their Way to the Yarden

Twice the text describes Eliyahu and Elisha as journeying together: first in their initial meeting, in the fields of Avel Mechola, when Eliyahu takes Elisha from his father's house and Elisha follows him, to minister to him (I *Melakhim* 19:19-21); the second time is in our chapter, in their last encounter, where Elisha accompanies his master to the place from where he ascends in a storm to the heavens. These are the only two instances where the text speaks about Eliyahu and Elisha together. During the period in between them, Eliyahu acts alone (in the vineyard of Navot – I *Melakhim* 21, and in confrontation with Achazyahu and his messengers – II *Melakhim* 1). We should not conclude from this that Elisha spent no time with his master in between the first and the final meetings. At the end of the initial meeting we read, (19:21) "He went after Eliyahu and ministered to him," and after the Elisha is already serving as a prophet, following Eliyahu's ascent, he is described by one of the servants of the king of Israel as "Elisha son of Shafat, who would pour water over the hands of Eliyahu" (II *Melakhim* 3:11). Quite simply, Eliyahu likes to carry out his prophetic missions alone, and perhaps even when not engaged in some particular act he may tend to seclude himself at times.

The descriptions of the two encounters (and especially the one in our chapter) should be viewed as junctures of special significance, indicating a transition from the period of Eliyahu's prophecy to the period of Elisha's prophecy. These encounters give clear expression to the dialectical relationship between the master and his disciple, with great admiration on the part of the disciple towards his teacher and a strong desire to continue his path, on one hand, along with the disciple's insistent maintenance and expression of his own personality, so different from that of his master, on the other. It is this dynamic that fills these fascinating encounters with tension. They hold the key to understanding not only the relationship between the two prophets, but also the relationship between the two periods: the era of Eliyahu as prophet of the generation, and the era of Elisha as prophet of the generation.

1. "Remain here, I pray you..."

In the *shiur* that was devoted to the initial meeting between Eliyahu and Elisha, in the fields of Avel Mechola, we saw that despite the "magnetic attraction" that drew Elisha after Eliyahu, the encounter between them was characterized by the tension generated by two such different personalities. Elisha, who puts off going after Eliyahu until he has had a chance to bid his parents farewell and to arrange a parting banquet for the people of his city, receives an ironic, off-hand rejection on Eliyahu's part: "Go, return, for what have I done to you?" (19:20)

Is the final encounter between them characterized by greater harmony? Not necessarily. Here, too, we find a sort of rejection on Eliyahu's part after he comes to Gilgal, the place where Elisha resides, in order to bid him farewell. Three times (first in Gilgal – verse 2, then in Beit El- 4, and in Yericho – 6) Eliyahu tries to cut himself off from his loyal disciple by telling him, "Remain here, I pray you, for God has sent me...." What is the meaning of this request? Both the master and his apprentice know the secret of Eliyahu's journey to the place where he will be taken up; hence, as Abarbanel questions:

Why does Eliyahu coax Elisha to remain in Gilgal, or in Beit El, or in Yericho, such that he would not see him being taken up? Elisha has been his attendant and his disciple, and knows that he will achieve completion through his witnessing [of the event]; thus, he would be "withholding good from his owner" [i.e. from one who deserves it, Elisha].

We discussed this journey as being a farewell tour for Eliyahu, where he takes leave of the land and of the apprentice prophets stationed at the various places along his route. Eliyahu apparently meant to take his leave of Elisha, too. It is doubtful whether they were in the same place before our narrative begins. Elisha seems to have been permanently stationed in Gilgal, while Eliyahu comes to Elisha's place in order to bid him farewell. When he departs, with Elisha accompanying him, he tries to convince Elisha to remain in Gilgal, with the intention of continuing alone to bid farewell to the apprentice prophets until he reaches the Yarden. His plan is that when he reaches there, alone – as he was for most of his life – he will be taken up by God.

In repeating his exhortation, "Remain, I pray you..." in Beit El and again in Yericho, it is as though Eliyahu is trying to take leave of Elisha like any one of the apprentice prophets there. As Abarbanel comments, "He tried to get Elisha to remain, like one of them." Indeed, at each of these stations Elisha functions as a sort of link between Eliyahu and the apprentice prophets, for they – having become aware that Eliyahu is going to be taken on that day, and thus having an understanding of Eliyahu's visit to their city as a parting gesture – do not dare to address the great prophet himself. Abarbanel explains:

They did not speak to Eliyahu, owing to their awe of him, and lest he reply by rebuking them, "Do not inquire into that which is too wondrous for you." However, **to Elisha – who was an apprentice like them**, they said....

In terms of joining him for the journey, then, Eliyahu regards Elisha as one of the apprentice prophets. Although he has been his attendant and disciple, he does not wish to take Elisha along, to see him being taken up. Why does he behave thus? It is surely clear to him that Elisha is not merely "one of the apprentice prophets," but rather his successor, as he is told at Mount Chorev: (19:16) "And you shall anoint Elisha, son of Shafat, of Avel Mechola, as prophet in your stead."

It seems that Eliyahu believes that he fulfilled this part of the Divine command at the time when he cast his mantle towards Elisha and then took him under his patronage as a disciple and attendant. This constituted Elisha's preparation for his future role. As Ralbag comments on 19:21 –

"And he arose and went after Eliyahu and ministered to him" – in order that he [Elisha] could learn more of his wisdom than his other disciples learned. For an attendant is always with his master, and observes his behavior and hears his words at all times, such that he could learn more than a disciple who was not an attendant.

However, it is not within Eliyahu's power to make Elisha the next prophet of the generation. Only God can decide this. "As prophet in your stead" is not enough to define fully the nature of the relationship between Eliyahu's prophecy and that of Elisha. Will Elisha be the prophet who **succeeds** and **replaces** Eliyahu, or will he also **continue** the prophecy of his teacher, standing in his stead not only in chronological terms but also in substance?

It seems that the contrast of personality that is revealed from their very first encounter (and which becomes much clearer after Elisha starts to act as an independent prophet) leads Eliyahu to assume the first possibility. Elisha will succeed him, but only in terms of chronology; he will not be his inheritor who continues his way. Therefore Eliyahu believes that when he leaves the world, his way will also come to an end. He knows that God has appointed another prophet to bear His word, and he knows that it will be Elisha. In keeping with his characteristic prophetic style, tending to isolate himself even from the attendant who accompanies him (see 18:43-44; 19:3), Eliyahu wants to take leave of everyone and stand alone even at the auspicious moment of being taken up by God. This will be a moment of mystery that

will be shared only by the prophet and his God, and then the way of the great prophet, who has no spiritual heir, will come to an end.

Like Avraham, who conceals the reason for his journey with Yitzchak from his attendants, telling them, "Remain here (*shevu lakhem po*) with the donkey, while I and the boy proceed further..." (*Bereishit* 22:5), Eliyahu tells Elisha: "Remain here (*shev na po*), for God has sent me to Beit El" (*II Melakhim* 2:2).

Thus, Eliyahu's recurring "rejection" of Elisha in our chapter carries the distant echo of his rejection of him in chapter 19: "Go, return, for what have I done to you?" There, the words were uttered with irony (expressing personal criticism), with no practical intention, while in our chapter the opposite is true: the words "Remain here..." are addressed to Elisha with no hint of criticism and with no personal misgiving; at the same time, they have practical meaning in that they convey a rejection of Elisha as Eliyahu's spiritual prophetic heir.

2. "As God lives, and by your life, I shall not leave you" – "and the two of them journeyed"

Elisha thinks differently. On each of the three occasions where Eliyahu tries to turn him away (verses 2,4,6) Elisha utters a solemn vow: "As God lives, and by your life, I shall not leave you." This commits him, by oath, to continue with his master on his special journey. As in the fields of Avel Mechola, here too the disciple "prevails" over his master and forces him to accept his escort.

Why does Eliyahu "submit" to Elisha time after time? After Elisha swears the first time, in Gilgal, Eliyahu could have spoken up more forcefully, in Beit El, and thereby prevented Elisha from continuing with him. Not only does he "accede" to Elisha again and again, but after Elisha utters his oath for the third time, in Yericho, it seems that Eliyah comes to term with the idea of Elisha escorting him to the place on the other side of the Yarden, from whence he will be taken up:

And the two of them journeyed. (6)

Had this journey resembled their previous stations, the text would have stated, "They went to the Yarden," in keeping with the model: "They went down to Beit El" (verse 2); "They came to Yericho" (verse 4). The omission of any destination this time indicates that this is not another temporary "accession" on Eliyahu's part, until they reach the next stop. He is now ready to accept Elisha accompanying him for the entire journey.

The expression "the two of them journeyed" is again reminiscent of the story of the *Akeida*, in the repeated expression referring to Avraham and Yitzchak: "The two of them journeyed together" (*Bereishit* 22:6,8). Thus Elisha is transformed from the status of Avraham's attendants, who are told "Remain here," to the status of Yitzchak, who accompanies his father. Here, though, we read only that "the two of them journeyed," as yet without the decisive "together."

Proof of our assertion as to the change in Eliyahu's attitude towards Elisha is the fact that when they reach the Yarden (concerning which Eliyahu had previously said that "God has sent me there," as in the case of Beit El and Yericho) he does not tell him, "Remain here, I pray you, for God has sent me to the other side of the Yarden." On the contrary, he takes Elisha with him over the Yarden:

... And the two of them passed over on dry land. (8)

Has Eliyahu then gone back on his original intention to isolate himself before being taken up? To a large extent, we must answer in the affirmative. What has caused this? It must be the firmness of Elisha's intention to accompany him, reflecting his desire to be Eliyahu's successor and prophetic heir, from the moment in time and space when his "master is taken from over his head." The very fact of Elisha's presence at the secret occasion of Eliyahu's ascent to heaven, serves to indicate the fact that he is his great master's heir. His three-fold "stubbornness" in making his oaths is proof that he may be worthy of this, and therefore Eliyahu softens and agrees for him to come along.

It would seem that from the outset Eliyahu's mind was not firmly made up with respect to Elisha, and therefore he makes his request rather feebly, with an unconvincing explanation ("Remain here, I pray you, for God has sent me..."), so as to invite a stronger response on Elisha's part. We may perhaps allow ourselves to suggest that Eliyahu says what he says in order to test Elisha, to see whether he will leave him alone or accompany him further. Elisha's three-fold rise to the challenge gains him Eliyahu's agreement that he continue with him.

Translated by Kaeren Fish