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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #90: The Storm

Part 4: The Dialogue on the Other Side of the Jordan (9-10) (continued)

3. "You have asked a difficult thing"

"You have asked a difficult thing," Eliyahu replies to his disciple's direct request that Eliyahu recognize him as his successor and heir. This tells us that Eliyahu's doubts about whether Elisha would continue his path are still nagging at him. Although Eliyahu has agreed for Elisha to accompany him, he is not yet convinced that Elisha's physical presence at the scene of his ascent necessarily indicates that he is Eliyahu's spiritual heir. Eliyahu has certainly brought Elisha close to that status by allowing him to accompany his master to the very end of his journey, but Elisha's status is not yet final. Now Elisha asks that Eliyahu assert and declare it, openly. However, his request is a difficult one. Is it possible for a person with qualities so different and opposed to those of Eliyahu to inherit his role and his prophetic path?

Malbim offers an interpretation that is different from those we discussed in the previous *shiur* concerning Elisha's request for a "double portion" of Eliyahu's spirit:

He asked... that Eliyahu's spirit rest upon him, as it is written (later in, in verse 15), "Eliyahu's spirit rested upon Elisha," and that at the same time he would still retain his own thoughts, such that he would have "double" – his own spirit, and the spirit of Eliyahu that would be added to him. And this is what is meant by the words, "I pray you, let double..." – by having your spirit added to me.

Although this explanation does not sit well with the literal meaning of the words ("*pi shenayim*," as we have noted in the previous *shiur*, does not mean "double," but rather two portions out of the whole), Malbim's interpretation reflects the situation wonderfully. Elisha requests Eliyahu's recognition of him as his successor, although it is clear to both of them that Elisha has "thoughts" that are different from those of his master, and he is not prepared to negate them. What he wants is for Eliyahu's spirit to rest upon him in addition to his own, independent and different spirit.

"You have asked a difficult thing" – is such a merging of Eliyahu's spirit with the spirit of Elisha possible? Can a person who maintains his independent thoughts, so different from those of his master, become his master's heir and successor – to the extent that his master would recognize him as such?

4. "If you see me when I am taken from you, then it shall be so for you; if not, it shall not be so"

Eliyahu directs his doubts heavenward. It is not he who will rule on this complex question. He Who chose Elisha as "prophet in your stead" will decide what the nature of the continuity between these two prophets will be. Will "in your stead" mean merely "who comes after you" chronologically, or will it mean "from you," as his successor and spiritual heir? Eliyahu tells Elisha, "If you see me when I am taken from you, then it shall be so for you; and if not, it shall not be so."

This is not just an external sign testifying to God's decision concerning Elisha, but rather an internal test as to the degree of Elisha's involvement in this event and all of its implications. This, we recall, was the crux of the question at the beginning of our narrative: would this auspicious occasion of Eliyahu's ascent to heaven in a storm represent the end of his path? Would this be a mysterious occasion that would be shared only by the prophet and his God – as Eliyahu perceived it – or would it be an occasion of great national significance, expressing the "changing of the guard" between the prophet who was taking leave of his generation and ascending to heaven, and the new prophet who was ascending the stage, as his heir – as Elisha saw it? This was the purpose of Elisha's repeated oaths; the purpose of his stubborn accompaniment of his master on his final journey: to be present at this great occasion, in order to be considered the continuer of his master's path and his prophecy. Eliyahu allows Elisha to accompany him, but when it comes to the possibility that Elisha will be present not only in body, but also in "seeing" – in prophetic vision – this is not for Eliyahu to decide. Only God, Who is about to take Eliyahu up to heaven, and Who long ago chose Elisha as prophet in Eliyahu's stead, can decide this.

What is there in seeing Eliyahu's ascent that would turn Elisha into his spiritual heir and successor? What is the secret of Eliyahu's ascent, and how is this secret connected to Elisha's status?

In a future *shiur* we shall discuss the assumption that Eliyahu's bodily ascent to heaven implies that Eliyahu did not die. The deeper implication of this is that Eliyahu did not complete his mission. He must return to this world, to his people, in the generations to come, and soften his zealotry.

This "softening" that is destined for Eliyahu's re-appearance in the future, has its origins in our very narrative, in the generation of and after Eliyahu, **in the form of Elisha**. As Eliyahu's attendant and as his spiritual "son," continuing his path, as someone upon whom Eliyahu's spirit rests and who, by virtue of this, carries out his prophetic activity – Elisha repairs and softens Eliyahu's impact, specifically by virtue of his independent way of thinking, so different from that of his master. However, he does this because he is Eliyahu's disciple and continuer. In this sense he may be compared to a son who brings credit to his father through his actions.

"If you see me when I am taken from you, then it shall be so for you."

If God opens Elisha's eyes and shows him the wondrous vision of Eliyahu's ascent to heaven, alive, and also the meaning of this vision – that Eliyahu's mission is not yet complete, and that his path in this world must be continued, with a change of direction, with a softening of the way – then "it shall be so" for him, as he has asked: he will be Eliyahu's heir and successor. He will be his spiritual "firstborn," assuming a double portion of his prophetic spirit, and everyone will recognize him as the heir of the prophet who is elevated above the nation.

"And if not, then it shall not be so."

If Elisha does not merit this, and the vision of Eliyahu ascending, live, to heaven escapes him (as it escapes the apprentice prophets, who are aware only that Eliyahu is no more, without having any knowledge of how he disappeared), then it will be clear that God does not desire for Elisha to be Eliyahu's successor. It will then be clear that the special attributes of this disciple – quite different from the attributes of his master – are his own, and their independent existence is not a continuation of those of his master.

Will the different path chosen by Elisha, prophet of the next generation, represent a revolution against the path of his master, or will it be the continuation of his master specifically by virtue of its different-ness? It is this question that is put to the test on the other side of the Yarden.

Translated by Kaeren Fish