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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #91: The Storm Part 5: Eliyahu's Ascent (11-12)

1. The Parting

And it was, as they proceeded – walking and talking – that there appeared a chariot of fire, with horses of fire, and they parted them from one another, and Eliyahu went up in a storm to heaven.

And Elisha saw it... (11-12)

The condition – "If you see me taken from you" – is fulfilled. This was not a physical, external observation, but rather a prophetic vision. This "chariot of fire with horses of fire" appear to Elisha later on (6:14-17), when they come to protect him in Dotan from the real horses and chariots, the mighty army, of the king of Aram, when these come to encircle and capture him by night. His attendant, awakening early in the morning to find the host of Aram surrounding the city, calls to Elisha:

Alas, my master! What shall we do?

And he said to him: Do not fear, for those who are with us are more numerous than they.

And Elisha prayed and he said, Lord – I pray You, open his eyes that he may see. And God opened the eyes of the youth and he saw, behold – the mountain was full of **horses and chariots of fire** around Elisha. (15-17)

In our instance too, then, it would seem that there is a need for "opening of the eyes" to see the hidden, supernal reality that is far above and removed from the tangible scene that is perceived through regular vision. The ascent of Eliyahu, alive, in a storm to heaven, in that "chariot of fire with horses of fire" that are sent to honor him and carry him up, is a vision that would not be perceived by a regular person standing at the scene.

The emphasis in the text that Elisha "sees" his master's ascent is meant to establish that Elisha is worthy of being Eliyahu's loyal successor. His request of Eliyahu – "I pray you, let a double portion of your spirit be upon me" – has been

fulfilled. Eliyahu told him, "If you see me being taken from you, then it shall be so for you" – "And Elisha saw...."

Elisha, who is going to return alone from the place of Eliyahu's ascent, succeeds and continues his master's path, but also repairs and sweetens it, by virtue of this very fact: he is the heir to the prophet "who never tasted the flavor of death and burial" (as the poem "*Eliyahu ha-Navi*", recited on Motzaei Shabbat, describes him), and whose path needs continuation and repair.

"And Elisha saw, and he cried out: My father, my father..."

Elisha voices two cries of sorrow when Eliyahu is taken from him to the heavens, each expressing a different relationship with his great master. The first is his repeated cry, "My father, my father." This expresses the personal, intimate relationship that Elisha felt towards Eliyahu, like a son towards his father. We are reminded here of their first encounter, when Elisha tells Eliyahu (19:20), "I pray you, let me kiss my father and my mother, and I shall follow you." At that time Elisha left his own father and mother, "and he went after Eliyahu and ministered to him." His revered master became a new father figure for him.

This "fatherly" relationship between a teacher and his disciple is regarded by *Chazal* as the proper relationship between every teacher and his disciples (see *Sifri* on *Devarim*, *Va'etchanan*, 6:7), and not as something unique to Eliyahu and Elisha. Nevertheless, Elisha's cry – "My father, my father!" – gives expression to a most personal pain, for the loss of someone who was as close to him as a real father. As a contrast, when the apprentice prophets speak to Elisha about Eliyahu, they call him "your master" – both prior to Eliyahu's ascent (verses 3,5) and afterwards (verse 16). Although they are "disciples" and therefore "sons" in the pedagogic sense, the degree of closeness that they feel towards their great master does not allow them to relate to him as a "father." Even when they are talking about Elisha's relationship with Eliyahu, they do not dare to refer to Eliyahu in any other way than what they themselves call him – "master."

Indeed, what the apprentice prophets feel towards the generation is different from the relationship between Eliyahu and Elisha, who has "poured water on his hands" (3:11), accompanying him and ministering to him. This particular disciple has earned an unmediated closeness with Eliyahu, as *Chazal* teach: "The practice (practical ministering) is greater than the study." It is on the basis of this relationship that Elisha's request of Eliyahu – "I pray you, let a double portion of your spirit be upon me" – is understood as the request of a firstborn son of his father, asking that he acknowledge his status and award him a double portion of his inheritance. Even

before we hear Elisha's cry – "My father, my father!" – the bond with Eliyahu as his spiritual father has already found expression in his request and its specific formulation.

"... The Chariot of Israel and its Horsemen!"

In the second part of his cry of sorrow, Elisha calls Eliyahu "the chariot of Israel and its horsemen." This is meant to express Eliyahu's value for the whole Jewish nation.

What is the meaning of this title?

Targum Yonatan provides the following interpretation: "That his prayer is better for Israel than a chariot and horsemen."

Rashi and Radak cite this Targum in its Aramaic original, while other commentators offer their own formulations, approximating the Targum's idea more or less accurately.

Ba'al ha-Metzudot notes the similarity between a chariot with horsemen and a prophet:

"For he was of assistance to Israel before the enemy like a chariot with horsemen, as Targum Yonatan explains."

Ralbag identifies the chariot and horsemen with Eliyahu:

"He calls him, 'the chariot of Israel and its horsemen' as if to say that he (Eliyahu) is the spine and strength of Israel in war; in this sense he is the 'chariot and the horsemen' by means of which they are victorious in battle."

Abarbanel perceives the advantage of the prophet in the midst of Israel over the earthly 'chariot and horsemen,' and his interpretation is closer to the intention of the Targum:

"He says, 'the chariot of Israel and its horsemen' as if to say that it was [Eliyahu] who protected the people of his nation, delivering them from their enemies **to a greater extent** than the chariot and horsemen did."

How does Elisha arrive that this unique appellation for Eliyahu, describing him as protecting Bnei Yisrael in their wars? Nowhere do we find any connection between

Eliyahu and any of Israel's wars! In the chapters that describe battles that took place during the period of Eliyahu's activity (*I Melakhim* chapters 20 and 22, describing Israel's wars against Aram), Eliyahu is nowhere to be seen; instead we meet another prophet – Mikhayahu ben Yimla, who is active here. Is this description of Eliyahu as "the chariot of Israel and its horsemen" really suited to the nature of his activity, as described in the previous chapters?

Firstly, it is necessary that we consider the source for this specific image. The source is to be found in the previous verse:

And behold, a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared, and they parted the two of them. (11)

Radak, commenting on verse 1, points to the connection between Elisha's cry and the vision that preceded it:

"The chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared to Elisha, to tell him that when [Eliyahu] was taken up, Israel lost its chariot and horsemen – as Elisha then says: 'My father, my father; the chariot of Israel and its horsemen!'"

Chariots and horsemen are associated with war; therefore, the "chariot of fire with horses of fire" is a symbol connected to war. The meaning of this symbol is clarified later in the text (6:14-18) when the king of Aram sends his forces to Dotan, where Elisha dwells, with the mission of capturing him:

He sent horses to there, and chariots, and a great host, and they came at night and surrounded the city.

And the attendant of the man of God arose early, and he went out, and behold – there was a host around the city, with horses and chariots. And his attendant said to him: Alas, my master! What shall we do?

And he said to him: Do not fear, for those who are with us are more numerous than they.

And Elisha prayed and he said, Lord – I pray You, open his eyes that he may see. And God opened the eyes of the youth and he saw, behold – the mountain was full of **horses and chariots of fire** around Elisha.

And they came down to him... (14-18)

This tells us that "horses and chariots of fire" is a prophetic image of God's hidden power, protecting Israel (or, in chapter 6, protecting Elisha and his attendant), and superior to the physical power of actual "horses and chariots" (15). In the words of a different prophet – "Their horses are flesh but not spirit" (*Yishayahu* 31:3), and

therefore "those who are with us are more numerous than they" (16). The chariots of fire and horses of fire, as an expression of Divine protection, are connected to the prophet and are granted in his merit. Thus they are revealed to Elisha's attendant: "Behold – the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire, **around Elisha. And they came down to him...**" In our chapter, too, the chariots of fire and horses of fire come down to receive Eliyahu and to take him up to the heavens. Hence the image of Eliyahu as formulated by Elisha – "the chariot of Israel and its horsemen." As the Targum explains, this means that Eliyahu was, for Israel, a chariot of fire with horsemen of fire, preferable to (stronger than) real chariots and horsemen.

Here we must ask once again: is this image truly appropriate, given the nature of Eliyahu's activity as we have witnessed it in the preceding chapters? Is Eliyahu depicted there as being connected to the wars waged by Israel and the victories attained?

It may be specifically because Eliyahu is **not** connected to the great political and military events of his generation that Elisha seeks to expose the hidden truth. Eliyahu, who has chastised his generation and at times brought suffering upon them, is the one by whose virtue they have enjoyed victory and success. By the mere fact of his existence as part of this generation, he represents a source of inner spiritual empowerment for Bnei Yisrael, and this is worth more than any sort of material, military empowerment.

According to our discussion in the previous *shiur*, concerning Elisha's role as Eliyahu's heir and successor specifically through his own adaptation of this role, this cry by Elisha may be understood as his first step on the way to softening and "sweetening" his master's path. This is something that he undertakes not only from this point onwards, in his actions as an independent prophet who has inherited his master's role, but also retroactively: through this cry, Elisha reveals the hidden dimension of Eliyahu as someone who, by his very existence, protected Israel from their enemies. This dimension will be revealed in the continuation of Elisha's path as Eliyahu's heir, just as it is destined to be revealed in the distant future, in Eliyahu's own appearance in Jewish history.

Elisha, starting from his very first steps as a prophet, while still not fully recognized (3:11), and until the end of his life, in his final illness, is openly and energetically involved in the deliverance of Israel and the furthering of their victories over their enemies. It is to this end that much of his activity is directed. Therefore, when he reaches the end of his life, he is mourned by Yoash, king of Israel, with the same words that Elisha uses in farewell to Eliyahu:

And Elisha fell ill with the illness that he would die from, and Yoash king of Israel came down to him, and wept over his face, and said: My father, my father; the chariot of Israel and its horsemen. (13:14)

The expression and the image that Elisha, the disciple, creates in describing the aspect of Eliyahu that has been hidden from his generation, comes back to garb him on the day of his own death, as open acknowledgment of him by the representative of the entire nation, the king of Israel.

Translated by Kaeren Fish