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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #92: The Storm Part 6: After Eliyahu's Ascent

By Rav Elchanan Samet

1. Rent pieces that can never be made whole

Elisha saw it, and he cried out... and he saw him no more. And he took hold of his clothes and he rent them into two pieces. (12)

Elisha has merited to witness his master's ascent in a storm to heaven, and has thereby been shown to have inherited a double portion of Eliyahu's spirit. As Eliyahu is carried up he cries out, "My father; my father – the chariot of Israel and its horsemen!" Now comes the final bitter moment, the watershed defining the new reality: "And he saw him no more." This is the clear line of demarcation in Elisha's life, separating his former role as a disciple serving his master and accompanying him, thereby meriting his guidance and patronage, and his new role as a prophet in his own right, orphaned, facing his responsibility alone. At this difficult moment, before he starts to make his way back – this time alone, Elisha performs the customary rite of mourning:

He took hold of his clothes and he rent them into two pieces.

What a mighty emotional load weighs down on this simple action! There is the mourning of a son for his father – "My father, my father"; the mourning of a disciple for his most revered teacher, after whom he had been drawn – "And he ran after Eliyahu" (19:20) and whom he served – "And he followed Eliyahu and he ministered to him" (ibid. 21), "who poured water over the hands of Eliyahu" (3:11); and mourning for the prophet of the generation, the defender of the generation: "the chariot of Israel and its horsemen."

Indeed, the halakha deduces from Elisha's act the relative levels of mourning involved here with regard to the tearing of garments. The Beraita (*Semachot* chapter 9, *Mo'ed Katan* 26a) teaches:

[In] the following [instances] the rent pieces are not sewn together: [in the case of] one who tears for his father, for his mother, for his teacher who taught him Torah, and for the Nasi, and for the Av Beit Din....

The Gemara, in *Massekhet Mo'ed Katan* (ad loc.) seeks to clarify the source for the above law:

"For his father, for his mother, for his teacher who taught him Torah" – from where [do we learn these]?

As it is written: "Elisha saw it and he cried out, My father, my father; the chariot of Israel and its horsemen":

'My father, my father' – [from here we deduce] for his father and his mother, 'chariot of Israel and its horsemen' – this refers to his teacher who taught him Torah...

'Are not sown together' – from where [do we learn this]?

As it is written, "And he took hold of his clothes and he rent them into two pieces." From the fact that it says "he rent them," is it not clear that it was "into two pieces"?

What the text is teaching is that they remain rent into two pieces forever.

What is the significance of rending into pieces that are never sewn together?

The act of rending in mourning is an outward manifestation of the mourner's sense that something of himself has been rent; part of his own personality has been lost. For most of the close relatives for whom one is obliged to rend clothes and to mourn, this inner "rending" is healed after thirty days. After all, there is "a time for rending and a time for sewing" (*Kohelet* 3:7), and "the dead are destined to be forgotten from the heart" (as Rashi explains on *Bereishit* 38:35, based on *Pesachim* 54b). If the rending is an outward expression of the sense of loss over someone who has been part of the mourner's self, then the sewing together of the pieces reflects the consolation; the rehabilitation of his life which must go on.

A rending that is never sewn together expresses mourning that has an element of permanence to it. The other customs of mourning gradually cease at the various stages of rehabilitation: some cease after burial, others after three days, after the *shiva*, after thirty days, and after the year of mourning. The rent garment, on the other hand –

in those cases where halakha teaches that it is never sewn together – remains in that state for the rest of the mourner's life, reminding him of his mourning for the person who is gone, or for the act because of which the garment was rent.

A person's father and mother and his primary Torah teacher live on in his heart forever. Even after they leave his earthly world, they appear in his dreams and speak to him, and their guidance continues throughout his life. It is precisely because their image is a continuous part of his life even after they have died that he will experience moments, at various junctions in his life, in which he feels alone and bereft of those who brought him into the world and guided his early steps in it. The "rent pieces that are never sewn together" express this. They are an expression of continuous memory, of the eternal presence and vitality, in a person's consciousness, of those who are most precious to him.

The Beraita quoted above, teaching us when the garment that is rent is not to be sewn up, goes on to list eleven such instances. Only the first three – one's father, mother, and Torah teacher – are private rendings over personal loss. The other eight involve public, national and spiritual sorrows: "The death of the *Nasi* or of the *Av Beit Din*; hearing bad news [such as the nation's defeat in battle]; hearing blasphemy; a *Sefer Torah* that is burnt; the cities of Yehuda; the [ruins of the] Temple; and Jerusalem." In these cases, as stated, the "rending that is not sewn together," as an expression of unceasing mourning, is clear to all. Here it is not a matter of a private loss, destined to be "forgotten from the heart," but rather the sorrow of a living nation; the sorrow of the land bereft of its children and waiting to be redeemed by them; the sorrow of the Divine Presence. From these eight instances where rending expresses mourning over some living thing, and where the pieces may therefore not be sewn together, we learn something about the three instances of private loss: here, too, there is an expression of mourning that does not cease, because of the memory of a person's father, mother, and Torah teacher, which live on in his memory throughout his life.

All of this is especially true in the case of Elisha's mourning for Eliyahu – who has not died, but rather was carried up in a storm to heaven. This manner of Eliyahu's "passing" expresses his continued existence and hints to his revelation in the future. Therefore, the mourning for the loss of Eliyahu joins the mourning over all the other living, eternal values listed in the Beraita, like the mourning over a *Sefer Torah* that is burnt (concerning which Rabbi Chanina ben Teradion testifies that "the scroll is burnt, but the letters fly up from it" – *Avoda Zara* 18a), or the mourning for the cities of Yehuda, the Temple, or Jerusalem. Therefore, "he rent them into two pieces" – "they remain rent into two pieces forever." The image of Eliyahu will continue to accompany Elisha, his heir and successor, throughout his prophetic career. Even now that he is an independent prophet, Elisha will always be the one "who poured water

over Eliyahu's hands" (3:11). In all of his future actions, he will have Eliyahu in mind, and all of his aspiration will be to follow in the footsteps of his master and to realize his legacy, revealed to him as he witnessed him being carried up in a storm to heaven.

The fact that Eliyahu does not die the same death as other people who leave the world, departing in a manner that is unlike the death of "one's father, and mother, and Torah teacher," leads Reish Lakish to raise a question regarding the Gemara's extrapolation from Elisha's rending to the other rendings of mourning. The Gemara records the following:

Reish Lakish said to Rabbi Yochanan: [But] Eliyahu still lives! [Hence, how can we learn laws of mourning from his example?]

He said to him: Since it is written, "And he saw him no more" – for him, it was as though he was dead.

(to be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish