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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #93: The Storm

Part 6: After Eliyahu's Ascent (continued)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

2. "Eliyahu's mantle, which had fallen from him"

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

And he lifted Eliyahu's mantle which had fallen from him, and he went back and stood at the bank of the Yarden.

And he took Eliyahu's mantle which had fallen from him, and he struck the water. (12-14)

Here we close the circle that began with our discussion of the original encounter between Eliyahu and Elisha, and we find ourselves returning to Eliyahu's mantle. This mantle is the tangible artifact that connects Eliyahu and Elisha from the very beginning of their acquaintance until after their final encounter. We have already discussed the role of the mantle in these two appearances. Here we shall complete the discussion by clarifying the significance of its appearance here, at the beginning of the second half of our story, which follows Elisha as he takes his first steps as the heir and successor of Eliyahu as prophet of the generation.

There are two phenomena that stand out clearly in the verses cited above:

- i. The contrast between Elisha's two actions – in verse 12 and in verse 13, each involving a garment.
- ii. The seemingly superfluous word-for-word repetition in 14 of the description of the mantle: "Eliyahu's mantle, which had fallen from him."

The first part of our narrative (recounting Eliyahu's ascent to heaven) concludes with Elisha's mourning in response to his master's passing: "He took hold of his garments and he tore them into two pieces." The second half of our chapter, covering the beginning of Elisha's journey as an independent prophet who has inherited his master's role, begins with the opposite action: the lifting and taking of Eliyahu's mantle. Corresponding to "he took hold of" for the purposes of tearing, we now find "he lifted" – for the purposes of using. Instead of Elisha grasping "his (own)

garments," he now read that he lifts "Eliyahu's mantle." Replacing the act of tearing his clothes into two pieces, he now takes up Eliyahu's mantle in its wholeness.

What is the meaning of this contrast? It seems to be an expression of the ambivalent nature of the situation. On one hand there is sorrow and mourning over the parting, the pain of loss now that the master has left his disciple alone and orphaned. Elisha's sense of abandonment is expressed in his act of tearing his own clothes.

At the same time, Elisha feels joy at the privilege of being Eliyahu's heir and successor as prophet in Israel. (This status could not be taken for granted, as discussed in previous *shiurim*.) Elisha expresses this feeling – the opposite of the previous one – by lifting up Eliyahu's mantle and then making use of it.

However, these two contradictory emotions are not intermingled, at least with regard to their external manifestation. First, Elisha reacts with a gesture of mourning; only thereafter does he take up Eliyahu's mantle.

In a Beraita in *Massekhet Berakhot* (59b) we find a halakhic formulation of this ambivalent emotional state:

If a person's father dies and he is his heir – first he says, "Blessed is the True Judge," and thereafter he says, "Blessed is He Who is good and Who does good."

This halakha seems strange: is a financial windfall that comes to a person through such tragic circumstances sufficient reason to mix joy with his mourning? Surely if the person was given the choice, he would happily forego the money; he would far rather that his father remain alive! The answer is that the Gemara is not talking about a mere monetary bonus. The very possibility of a person who leaves this world being able to bequeath to his own children the assets that he toiled to accumulate during his lifetime, the products of his conscientious efforts, is a privilege – both for the person who bequeaths, and for his heirs. (It is a special privilege if the inheritance includes assets passed down through several generations.) An inheritance is not merely a technical, monetary arrangement for the transfer of rights to property whose owner has passed away, from the owner to his closest family – a sort of "most logical option." There is far more that is involved. The inheritance is a link connecting generations; as such, it allows children to continue their parents' endeavors in the world. The blessing of "Who is good and Who does good," recited by the children, refers not only to their financial good fortune, but also to the fact that it represents the inheritance of their father. This creates a continuity that is "good" both for them and

for their father who left it to them. For this reason, the possibility of passing on an inheritance represents a drop of consolation within the bitter cup of mourning.

What we have said above concerning the inheritance of material assets is even more true in our case, when it comes to the spirit of the person who has passed on and the continuity of his role as prophet in Israel. However, attention should be paid to the fact that even Elisha's inheritance of his master, although mainly centered around the inheritance of Eliyahu's spirit, is also expressed in the inheritance of a tangible object – Eliyahu's mantle. And although this object is full of symbolic and spiritual significance – both as the prophet's typical garb and as the mantle associated with several of Eliyahu's miraculous deeds, it is ultimately a physical object, which may be taken up and worn. It is specifically in the lifting of this object, and the use of it, that we find the contrast to the preceding mourning. It is these acts that express the joy of inheritance and continuity.

Why, in verse 14, does the text repeat the fact that the mantle that Elisha uses to strike the water is "Eliyahu's mantle which had fallen from him," after this has just been stated, in verse 13? It would appear that each time this description of the mantle occurs, it fills a special role. In its first appearance, it comes to explain that which preceded it – Elisha's act of lifting it – and to answer the question of where the mantle comes from. In its second appearance, the description of the mantle is meant to explain the purpose of the mantle falling, and to clarify the significance of what comes next: "And he struck the water." In other words, had the text simply read, "And he took the mantle and he struck the water," we would have understood it as a sort of "improvisation" on Elisha's part; an idea that occurred to him right there and then – to use Eliyahu's mantle in order to cross the Yarden. However, the seemingly superfluous elaboration causes Abarbanel to comment:

There is no doubt that [the mantle] did not fall by chance; rather, [Eliyahu] deliberately cast it towards Elisha, because it was a tool by means of which to effect the [Divine] blessing and prophecy that had rested upon Eliyahu. Elisha was meant to garb himself in [Eliyahu's] mantle and in his prophecy, and to remain in his stead.

The language of the text seems to suggest that Elisha's act of striking the water, upon his return, with Eliyahu's mantle – as Eliyahu himself had done when they were walking together – is perceived by Elisha as a command implied by the falling of Eliyahu's mantle. It is for this reason that the mantle fell.

The apprentice prophets see Eliyahu's mantle, with all that it implies, in Elisha's hand, and they see what Elisha does with it, repeating the miracle of crossing the

Yarden as Eliyahu had previously done. This leads these fifty apprentice prophets, waiting upon the western bank of the Yarden, to recognize Elisha as Eliyahu's heir and successor:

And the apprentice prophets who were in Yericho, on the opposite side, saw him... (15)

This "seeing" implies "understanding": they saw all of these things, and understood their significance.

And they said: The spirit of Eliyahu rests upon Elisha. And they came towards him, and bowed down before him to the ground.

Thus it becomes clear that Elisha's request to be Eliyahu's heir, inheriting "a double portion of his spirit," as the "eldest son," as it were, has been answered. The very fact that he sees his master ascending in the storm to heaven in a chariot of fire and horses of fire is sufficient for Elisha to know that his request has been fulfilled: "If you see me taken from you, it shall be so for you"; "And Elisha saw...." Yet, while this "seeing" is a sign from heaven that Elisha is the heir of his master, Elisha is the only one who knows this. However, the commandment to bequeath a double-portion to the eldest son involves a formal, public acknowledgment of the eldest son's status by the father: "For he shall **acknowledge**... the firstborn, to give him double." Apparently, Elisha's request of his master included the element of this formal recognition. How does Elisha achieve open, public recognition as Eliyahu's successor? Through the falling of Eliyahu's mantle, and the implied signal as to how Elisha should use it, Elisha is given a tangible sign, full of symbolic significance, which will allow him to be acknowledged by the apprentice prophets – and perhaps even by all of Israel – as Eliyahu's successor. Since the apprentice prophets were not witness to the lofty, secret "changing of the guard," some alternative evidence is required. Eliyahu's mantle, in Elisha's hand, serves this purpose.

Let us examine the place of the mantle in each of the two encounters between Eliyahu and Elisha. In the first narrative, in I *Melakhim* 19, it is the mantle that introduces the story of the encounter, immediately creating the attraction between the master and disciple: "And he cast his mantle to him. And he left the cattle, and ran after Eliyahu" (verses 19-20). Immediately thereafter, we already discover the tension between them and we detect a note of rejection: "Go, return, for what have I done to you?" The rest of the story highlights their differences in personality and nature.

Our chapter follows the reverse order. From the beginning of the story we note a suppressed tension between Eliyahu and Elisha, and there is a hint of rejection by

Eliyahu towards his disciple: "Remain here, I pray you..."; "As God lives, and by your life, I shall not leave you." However, as the story progresses, this tension dissipates, and Eliyahu grows increasingly accepting of Elisha's accompaniment of him. The mantle of Eliyahu falling to Elisha is the symbolic climax of the rapprochement; it is a closeness that becomes a continuation. Ultimately, the rapprochement prevails. Thus the circle is closed. Despite the tension that prevailed between Eliyahu and Elisha after the mantle was cast for the first time, and before it falls for the second time, the transfer of the mantle from master to disciple is what ultimately defines the nature of the bond between them.

Translated by Kaeren Fish