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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

This shiur is dedicated to the memory of Shlomo Yosef ben Chaim Shmuel Finkelstein z"l.

Shiur #97: The Storm Part 7: Eliyahu Lives On (Continued)

3. Revelations of Eliyahu in Legend – The Transformation

Thus far, we have seen that the description of Eliyahu's ascent in a storm to heaven is meant to tell us that Eliyahu does not die as all people do, but rather is destined to continue his mission in various ways. The prophecy of his future appearance before the coming of the Day of God, therefore, rests upon the description of his ascent.

It seems that Eliyahu's appearances in Talmudic times – a unique and unparalleled phenomenon – similarly rests on the description of his ascent in *Sefer Melakhim*. His revelation to the Sages fills in the void that stretches from his revelation in the letter to Yehoram ben Yehoshafat – just a few years after his ascent – to his revelation in the future, before the coming of the great Day of God. However, his revelations to the Sages are more than just a timely "fill-in" between two distant eras; it is also a fill-in in terms of the nature of his appearance. The nature of his message in the letter to Yehoram matches his biblical image as presented in all of the stories about him: the prophet rebuking the house of Achav. His future revelation, in contrast, depicts him as a prophet foretelling the great redemption and "making peace in the world." His revelation in rabbinical literature is a contrast to each of these images. Eliyahu is mentioned, in Talmudic and Midrashic literature (and even later sources) as appearing to save individuals from various states of distress, to clear up misunderstandings and quarrels between people, and to fill the role of Israel's great advocate before their Father in Heaven.

The scope of this *shiur* does not allow for a comprehensive or even general review of the huge quantity of material concerning Eliyahu's appearances in rabbinical literature, from the time of the Sages until our own era. We shall therefore suffice with a few characteristic examples, drawn from A. Margaliyyot's work ("Eliyahu the

Prophet in Jewish Literature, Faith, and Spiritual Life" [Heb.], Jerusalem 5720). We have divided the sources cited there into three spheres in which Eliyahu's great transformation is manifest in Aggadic literature, in contrast with his Biblical prophetic image.

a. First, let us see how Eliyahu is perceived in Aggada after his ascent, when he is **not** manifest in our world. What is he doing in heaven? What is he engaged in?

Seder Olam Rabba (Chapter 17) offers the following answer: "And in the second year of Achazya, Eliyahu passed away... and now he inscribes the doing (*ma'aseh*) of all generations." Does this mean to say that Eliyahu engages in the occupation of the author of *Seder Olam Rabba* himself, chronicling Jewish history? Perhaps this is indeed the intention. However, it seems more likely that it is referring to the good deeds (*ma'asim tovim*) of generations of Jews, as reflected in a different *aggada* (*Vayikra Rabba* 34:8):

Previously, a person would perform a mitzva and the prophet would inscribe it; now, a person performs a mitzva – and who inscribes it? Eliyahu and King Messiah; and the Holy One, Blessed be He, signs it for them.

The same idea is echoed by the Maharil, at the end of his Laws of Shabbat, in the name of the Maharash (Rabbi Shalom of Ostreich):

The reason for the custom to recite the verses about Eliyahu and songs about him on *Motza'ei Shabbat* (Saturday night) is because it is written in the Torah^[1] that on *Motza'ei Shabbat*, Eliyahu sits beneath the Tree of Life and inscribes the merits of those who observe Shabbat.

On special occasions too, according to the Midrash, Eliyahu serves as Israel's advocate in heaven (*Bereshit Rabba* 71:9):

When the Holy One, Blessed be He, shakes His world, Eliyahu recalls the merit of the Patriarchs... and the Holy One, Blessed be He, is filled with compassion for His world.

In *Midrash Ester Rabba* 7, Eliyahu is described as calling upon the Patriarchs and Moshe to save the Jews from Haman's decree, and as the one who notifies Mordekhai of "all that was done (*na'asa*)" (*Ester* 4:1).

b. Let us now turn our attention from Eliyahu's activities in Heaven to some of his revelations in the world, most of which describe his performing kindness for those

in need or for the nation as a whole. For the sake of brevity we shall merely hint at some of the most famous of his revelations, noting sources for further study:

- Eliyahu appears as Charvona and tells Achashverosh (*Ester* 7:9), "Here also are the gallows which Haman made for Mordekhai..." (*Ester Rabba* 10:9).

- Eliyahu is revealed to Rabbi Eli'ezer ben Horkanus, weeping and afflicted, and advises him to go up to Jerusalem to study Torah with Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eli'ezer*, Chapter 1).

- Eliyahu comes to the rescue of Nachum Ish Gimzo, in his mission to the caesar (*Ta'anit* 21a).

- Eliyahu comforts Rabbi Akiva and his wife, daughter of Kalba Savua, when he is revealed to them as a destitute old man, requesting that they give him straw for his wife, who has just given birth (*Nedarim* 50a).

- Eliyahu stands at the entrance to the cave where Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is hiding and notifies him of the caesar's death and the annulment of his decree (*Shabbat* 33b).

- Eliyahu heals Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi's toothache, thereby restoring peace between him and Rabbi Chiyya (Yerushalmi, *Kilayim* 9:3, 32b, and parallel versions).

- In several later sources there are stories of Eliyahu appearing to anonymous individuals in distress and coming to their aid.[\[2\]](#)

c. A separate category includes all of Eliyahu's debates with various Sages in matters of Torah, Halakha and Musar. In the famous story of the oven of Akhnai (*Bava Metzia* 59b), Eliyahu reveals to the Sages what goes on in heaven. After the heavenly voice emerges, declaring that Rabbi Eli'ezer's interpretation of the law is correct, the rest of the Sages refuse to accept this verdict, since the law is not decided on the basis of heavenly voices. Rabbi Natan then encounters Eliyahu:

He said to him: "What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do at that moment [when they overruled the heavenly voice]?"

[Eliyahu] said to him: "He smiled and said, 'My children have prevailed over Me; My children have prevailed over Me.'"

One of the Sages who converses regularly – daily, even – with Eliyahu is Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi. The Yerushalmi (*Terumot*, 8:4, 46b) recounts how the Romans sentence to death a man named Ulla bar Kushav, and he flees to Lod, the city of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi. The Romans threaten to destroy the entire city if Ulla bar Kushav is not handed over to them. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi convinces Ulla to surrender and hands him over, and Eliyahu stops appearing to him. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi then takes upon himself a number of fasts, until Eliyahu reappears:

[Eliyahu] said to him: "Am I then revealing myself to one who hands Jews over to non-Jewish rulers?"

He answered: "Did I not act in accordance with the law?"

He replied: "Is this, then, how pious people behave?"

This story is a typical example of Eliyahu chiding the Sages when they do not act charitably towards common people. In these stories, Eliyahu is depicted as sternly admonishing, but his severity is expressed in criticism for those Sages who do not pass the test of complete love of the Jewish people, as he demands of them.

This may shed light on the following account, recorded in *Sanhedrin* 113a-b:

Rabbi Yosei taught, in Tzipori: "Father Eliyahu is strict." Eliyahu used to come to him, but he then disappeared for three days and did not come.

When he came, he said to him: "Why did my lord not come?"

He said: "You called me strict."

He replied: "This itself is proof that my lord is strict!"

Rabbi Yosei's evaluation of Eliyahu is correct – but not completely, for it fails to take into account the change in his character since the days of Achav. It is not the same strictness that characterizes him in the *Tanakh*, directed towards the Israelites. His sternness is now expressed on their behalf, and it is always directed against the sages and leaders of Israel. Eliyahu is no longer strict towards the simple people at all! Therefore, Eliyahu chides Rabbi Yosei this time too, for his failure to discern this. While his response does indeed represent further proof of his strictness, it also clarifies whom the reproach is directed against, as well as the reason for the reproach: Rabbi Yosei's failure to note the great transformation that Eliyahu has undergone since the days of the *Tanakh*.

It should further be noted that Eliyahu continues to appear to great Torah scholars long after the Talmudic period, and legends abound describing his appearances during the period of the Geonim, Rishonim and even Acharonim, to masters of Torah, Kabbala and Chasidut.

Accounts of Eliyahu's appearance to help people in distress or to be present at moments of spiritual upliftment have been passed down orally and in writing to the present day. In this connection, we may note the relatively new custom in some communities of placing a "cup for Eliyahu" on the Seder table, in honor of Eliyahu the Prophet, who visits Jewish houses on that night.

We conclude this discussion by referring the reader back to Margaliyyot who, in his brief introduction (pp. 8-11), summarizes the main characteristics of Eliyahu's appearances over the generations.

The point of the above review is to approach the great question that is formulated quite clearly by the scholar A. Kaminka, in his article, "Eliyahu the Prophet in the Bible and in Aggada" (*Kitvei Bikkoret Historit*, New York 5704, pp. 12-13):

These are two seemingly different faces, far removed from one another and with no relationship between them: the Eliyahu of the *Tanakh*, and he of Aggada. Eliyahu of the *Tanakh* is the angry prophet, the great zealot... "I have been very zealous for Lord, God of Hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant" (*I Melakhim* 19:10, 14). However, by the end of the Books of the Prophets, what seems to be an entirely new tradition grows around him. The image of Eliyahu in later Aggada starts to become manifest (*Malakhi* 3:23): "Behold, I send you Eliyahu the Prophet..." This Eliyahu who, at first glance, appears to have a fundamentally different character from, and no connection to, the great prophet zealous for God and for justice in the world, is already, by the time of the ancient Mishna, at the end of the Second Temple Period... a sort of angel of God... ready to make peace throughout the world.

After citing various examples from Aggada, presenting Eliyahu in sharp contrast to the Biblical description, he again asks:

Are these truly different faces, the zealous prophet of the Bible... and the Eliyahu of Aggada, who is merciful, good and beneficent, recalling only the merits of Israel? We cannot assert this, since already at the end of Malakhi we find the connection between the two faces, with the promise that Eliyahu will come to (*ibid.*, v. 24) "restore the heart of fathers to their children, and the heart of children to their fathers." There can be no doubt that this is one single historical and aggadic personality.

We shall address this important question further in the next *shiur*.

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

[1] Margaliyyot notes in his book (p. 19, n. 68), that he finds no source for this in either the Tosefta or in the Tosafot.

[2] Two such stories are to be found in *Midrash Rut Zuta* (1:20, 4:11).