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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #98: The Storm, Part 7: Eliyahu Lives On (Continued)

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4. The Uniqueness of Eliyahu's Ascent and Continued Appearances

The commentators – and we, too, in their wake – are so deeply immersed in the question of **what** happens when Eliyahu is taken up in a storm to Heaven, that the more important question of **why** he is taken in a manner so different from the deaths of other people is pushed to the sidelines.

The Abravanel formulates the question as follows:

Still, why is Eliyahu taken in this surprising way, remaining alive in body and soul in the Garden of Eden? Why does he not die like Moshe, "the dust returning to the earth, as it had been" (*Kohelet* 12:7); why was he not buried in the dust like the other prophets? Among our early and later sages alike I find nothing, either extensive or slight, on this matter.

The Abravanel goes on to offer three explanations; we cite here only the third:

The third reason comes from the **purpose**... Eliyahu is going to appear many times in the future, to prophets, esteemed pious people, or the Sages of Israel in their study halls, as well as in the time of our Messiah, as it is written (*Malakhi* 3:23-24), "Behold, I shall send to you Eliyahu the Prophet before the coming of the great and awesome Day of God. He shall restore the heart of fathers to their children..." Since he is destined to show himself among people and to appear many times, he is taken in body and soul; he remains alive constantly, in his [full] constitution, to indicate that **he is still needed in this world**.

What the Abravanel says here is unquestionably true, and we have noted this in previous *shiurim*, by pointing out the connection between the description of Eliyahu's ascent to the heavens and his appearances later on, in *Tanakh* and elsewhere. However, the **theoretical** question that the Abravanel raises does not find its solution in his explanation. We may formulate the question thus: why is Eliyahu taken in this surprising manner, remaining alive in order to reappear many times

throughout Jewish history, up until his coming as the harbinger of the redemption? This happens to no other prophet, nor any other personality in the *Tanakh* (or afterwards); why does it happen to Eliyahu? Why is it necessary for Eliyahu to keep reappearing throughout history, until the redemption? The Abravanel's answer only adds to the question surrounding this unique phenomenon — a question that includes both the manner of Eliyahu's ascent and the fact of his reappearance later on.

The key to answering this puzzle lies, to our view, in a different question, which we addressed in a previous shiur: the striking contrast between the image of Eliyahu that arises from *Sefer Melakhim* and his alternative image, which begins to be formed already at the end of *Tanakh* (in the final verses of *Sefer Malakhi*) and continues to develop over the course of Eliyahu's many appearances during the times of the Sages and later on. We noted the sharp contrast between the strict prophet waging a battle against Israel out of his zealousness for God, and the compassionate grandfather who loves Israel and defends them before their Father in heaven, directing his criticism to those who are not sufficiently merciful towards the nation.

What is the connection between these two questions, and how does the one resolve the other?

It appears that Eliyahu's virulent, one-sided zealousness, as expressed in his first and most important appearance in *Sefer Melakhim* (in the series of episodes in Chapters 17-19 of *IMelakhim*: "I have been exceedingly zealous for Lord, God of Hosts," 19:10, 14), arouses criticism which in turn finds expression in the biblical narrative itself, as well as further illumination in the teachings of the Sages, who interpret the verses in such a way as to highlight God's dissatisfaction. All of this was addressed at length in our discussions of those chapters, and we shall not repeat it here. We note only the *Mekhilta* (from the beginning of *Parashat Bo*), with its negative view of Eliyahu's one-sidedness, in comparison to another prophet, who fulfills his mission in a more complete way:

We find that there are three sons: one upholds the honor of the Father (God) and the honor of the son (Israel); one upholds the honor of the Father, but not the honor of the son; and one upholds the honor of the son, but not the honor of the Father.

Yirmiyahu upholds the honor of the Father as well as the honor of the son... Therefore his prophecy is doubled...

Eliyahu upholds the honor of the Father, but not the honor of the son, as it is written, "I have been exceedingly zealous for Lord, God of Hosts" – and what is written there? "God said to him: 'Go, return to your way, to the wilderness of Dammeseq... And Elisha, son of Shafat... shall you anoint as prophet in your stead'" (19:15-16) — this does not mean: as a prophet under you, but rather: ["in your stead", i.e.,] "I do not want your prophecy."

Yona upholds the honor of the son, but not the honor of the Father... What is written? "And God's word came to Yona a second time, saying..." (*Yona* 3:1) – He speaks to him a second time, [but] not a third.

The prophet's task in Israel is a dual one: he must defend the honor of the Father, in his mission to His sons as God's prophet, but – no less importantly – he must also defend the honor and welfare of Israel, as their representative before God. The first time that the word "*navi*" (prophet) appears in the Torah, with reference to Avraham, it is used in this latter sense (*Bereshit* 20:7): "And now, restore the man's wife, for **he is a prophet; and he will pray for you, that you may live.**"

The ultimate test of a prophet comes specifically in a sinful generation, where there is an acute rift in the relations between Israel and God. At such a time, there is a contradiction, as it were, between the two roles of the prophet, who is called upon to heal the rift and to serve as a "go-between," giving alternate representation to the seemingly opposing sides. It is for this reason that the *Mekhilta* cites the example of Yirmiyahu, the prophet who is tragically torn between loyalty to his Divine mission and his total love and dedication towards his people. Yirmiyahu (unlike Moshe) does not succeed in his mission of bringing the nation back to God and restoring peace between the Father and His children, but this is not his fault. From the perspective of his own actions, Yirmiyahu acts properly; therefore God approves and "his prophecy is doubled."

However, when a prophet takes a one-sided view of his role, as though he identifies with only one side of the encounter, God has no desire for his prophetic mission to continue. "I do not want your prophecy," God tells Eliyahu, who is zealous for God and critical of Israel, God's nation; God sends him from before Him, in order to appoint a prophet in his stead. Likewise, Yona – who, according to the *midrash*, defends the honor of the son (Israel) to the point where he refuses to undertake the Divine mission to Nineveh – is punished with a termination of his prophecy after he completes his mission: "He spoke to him a second time, but not a third."

Like Yirmiyahu, Eliyahu lives in a generation of spiritual crisis. Israel is ruled by a powerful king who has given his foreign, pagan queen power over himself and

his kingdom. Eliyahu chooses to approach his prophetic mission in this generation with complete zealotry for his Sender, while ignoring the other aspect of his role: showing compassion for his generation and defending them. When he stands before God at Mount Chorev, it becomes clear that Eliyahu's zealous approach is more than just a drastic prophetic tactic aimed at bringing the nation to repentance (as one may have argued in Chapter 17). It reflects a one-sided identification of his role as God's messenger, to the point where he actually condemns Israel before God. It is not for this purpose that God appoints him prophet, and since he is not fulfilling his role properly, his prophetic mission is brought to a premature halt.

Indeed, just as Eliyahu's first appearance is sudden and dramatic, in the midst of his activity, as it were, so his departure is surprising, inexplicable, and without any prior signs of failing strength: (v. 1) "And it was, when God took up Eliyahu in a storm to the heavens..." Eliyahu does not complete his mission; he is taken in the midst of his activity. The story of his prophecy is one that ends in the middle.

Should Eliyahu's abrupt ascent be regarded as some sort of punishment for this zealous prophet? This seems unlikely, since Eliyahu's departure is not through death. Rather, Eliyahu does not die, in order that he will be able to continue to be active amidst the reality of Jewish history in the generations to come and to amend the zealous prophetic approach that characterizes the period of his activity described in *Sefer Melakhim*. This amendment will become possible when Eliyahu returns to his people and becomes aware of the great change that has taken place: this is no longer a nation "straddling the two options" (18:21) alternating between worshipping Ba'al and worshipping God; Achav and Izevel (and their like) are no longer the leaders. Instead of a strong nation dwelling securely in its land and exposing itself to pagan influences, Eliyahu encounters an abused people, suffering persecution and fighting to survive – precisely because of their stubborn loyalty to God. Then Eliyahu gathers his supernatural strength to help this persecuted nation and its individual members to withstand their struggle for survival. Instead of being zealous for God, as has been his way throughout *Sefer Melakhim*, Eliyahu will now be zealous for the welfare of Israel, and he will act to that end. His arguments in heaven will also be reversed, and he will become Israel's defender before God. Thus he corrects and heals his path. His zealousness will now be whole and perfect, insofar as it will be directed to the welfare of Israel.

It is impossible for the image of this great prophet to remain as incomplete and one-sided as depicted in *Sefer Melakhim*. That which Moshe and Yirmiyahu merit to realize and fulfill during their lifetimes is completed by Eliyahu after his ascent to heaven, in his reappearances amongst Israel.

Eliyahu's criticism of *Am Yisra'el*, the Jewish people, reflects the perspective of a prophet living in a very specific generation. However, the prophet in his lifetime views only a very small portion of the historical reality. The truth about *Am Yisra'el* is revealed to Eliyahu only over the course of all of the generations until the final redemption, as he encounters the nation in its future states. Eliyahu then acknowledges the unfairness of his criticism, and this acknowledgment is expressed in the very actions that he is destined to perform; i.e., in his own turnaround.

It is not only the *tikkun* (repair) of Eliyahu's way that is expressed in his reappearance after his ascent; the manner of his reappearance represents something of a retroactive cleansing of his image in *Tanakh*, amending the impression of him and of his motives that arises from *Sefer Melakhim*. Thus we find in the Midrash (*Pesikta Rabbati* 44, "*Shuva Yisra'el*"):

It is said of Hoshe'a and of Eliyahu that they were cruel. Heaven forbid! They were not cruel, for would a cruel person save [his victims]...

When Eliyahu saw *Benei Yisra'el* straying after Achav, he said: "It is better that they have three years of famine, rather than falling into the bottomless pit." In other words, Eliyahu did this to them out of love.

Admittedly, "Eliyahu did this (decreeing famine) to them out of love," but his love for them in *Sefer Melakhim* is hidden, while his rebuke is overt and painful. He causes them real suffering – even if he does this out of caring and concern – and therefore people err and think that Eliyahu is cruel.

Eliyahu's reappearance shows that his heart burns with passion for Israel. His hidden love rises to the surface and is manifest to all; thus, his image is cleansed and his motives clarified – retroactively.

Thus, it turns out that the contrast between Eliyahu's image as arising from his appearance in the Aggada and his image as arising from the stories about him in *Sefer Melakhim* reflects necessary correction and repair. It is the key and the solution to the question of his wondrous ascent, live, to the heavens, as well as to the question of his reappearance over the course of all generations.

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish