

SEFER MELAKHIM BET: THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS
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Shiur #03:
Healing, Death and Immortality

Last week's *shiur* focused upon Eliyahu's ascent to heaven, and Elisha's succession of Eliyahu. We witnessed the manner in which Elisha replicates his master's miracles, splitting the Jordan River with Eliyahu's cloak, and we learned of the group of fifty *benei ha-nevilim* – apprentice prophets or disciples of the prophet – who watch Elisha's splitting of the Jordan and proclaim his new status:

“The spirit of Eliyahu rests upon Elisha!” And they came to meet him, and bowed down to the ground before him.” (2:15)

Now, Elisha returns to the town of Yericho. The townsfolk are aware of his prophetic status and they approach him to solve a pressing municipal problem:

The men of the city said to Elisha, “Look, the situation of the town is pleasant, as my lord can see, but the water is bad and the land causes bereavement.” He said, “Bring me a new flask, and put salt in it.” So they brought it to him. Then he went out to the spring and cast the salt into it, saying, “This is what the Lord says: ‘I have healed this water. Never again will it cause death or bereavement.’” And the water has remained healed to this day, according to the word Elisha had spoken. (2:19-22)

The water source in the beautiful city of Yericho has become polluted, and the residents turn to Elisha for help. In fact, they don't ask for assistance directly; perhaps they consider it to be arrogant to make such a request of the prophet, or they don't think he can solve the problem. Nonetheless, they do share their problems with him. Elisha immediately responds by casting salt into the spring, miraculously healing the water, and he proclaims in God's name: “I have healed this water” (2:21).

This episode, which immediately follows Elisha's splitting of the Jordan River, evokes the Torah's account of Mara (*Shemot* 15:22-26), which immediately follows the story of the crossing of the Red Sea. In Mara, as in Yericho:

- The water is undrinkable.
- The water is rendered drinkable by casting into it ("*va-yashlekh*") a substance that would seem unrelated to the treatment of water (a tree).

- The motif of three days appears: "And they walked for three days but did not find water" (15:22).
- A proclamation is made in God's name that identifies God as the "healer" of the nation: "I am the Lord your healer" (15:26).

The crossing of the Red Sea signified the end of the period in which God functioned by means of plagues. From Mara onwards, God's guidance would be manifest through the provision of life, water, food (manna) and the teaching of Torah. Similarly, under Elisha's leadership the "word of God" which he conveys offers practical assistance and relief. Indeed, a hallmark of Elisha's prophetic tenure is his repeatedly procuring food for those who surround him. This scene highlights one of the contrasts between Elisha's prophetic style and that of Eliyahu. Eliyahu's opening act was to withhold the rain in God's name;¹ Elisha's is to provide water, transforming a poisonous spring into a source of life. It is Eliyahu's "dwelling" (2:18) in the town of Yericho that enables its residents to broach this topic with Elisha. As we shall see, Elisha is comfortable in the company of the common people. Eliyahu, who was always in transit and elusive, is never the address for personal or communal life-problems. This concise and simple story shines the spotlight on a new style of leadership.

"GO ON UP, YOU BALDHEAD!"

From there he went up to Beit-El. As he was going up the road, some youths came out of the town and jeered at him. "Go on up, you baldhead!" they said. "Go on up, you baldhead!" He turned around, looked at them and cursed them in the name of the Lord. Then two bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the youths. And he went on to Mount Carmel and from there returned to Samaria.

This is a morally challenging story. At first glance, it sounds like a group of children teased Elisha about his unflattering appearance, and he cursed them, killing forty-two children. Was Elisha unaware of the power of uttering a curse in God's name?² Should young children (*ne'arim ketanim*) be blamed for a prank, a tease? And even if these were adults, forty-two casualties is an

¹ *I Melakhim* 17:1. Interestingly *Chazal* suggest that Eliyahu's opening declaration was made in Yericho! See the connection with 16:34 and the Radak's comments there.

² An interesting question is whether these stories (and chapter two as a whole) should be framed as the tail-end of the Eliyahu stories or the first of the Elisha stories. On the one hand, certain elements seem as if they are features of the Eliyahu stories. Most prominent is Elisha's use of lethal force as he strikes down forty two children, echoing Eliyahu's repeated killing of fifty soldiers in chapter one. Moreover, the literary style of three-fold recursive stories and the presence of fifty (specifically fifty in number) prophets are motifs in Eliyahu stories. Elisha uses Eliyahu's "*adere!*" in crossing the Jordan River, but it is used exclusively in this story, leading us to conclude that this is the final chapter of the Eliyahu unit. Lastly, the Eliyahu "unit" (beginning in *I Melakhim* ch.17) is immediately preceded by a cryptic reference to a curse in Yericho and the death of children in that context. The story ends with a curse and the death of children in Yericho. So we would be justified in viewing this chapter as a conclusion to the Eliyahu stories.

On the other hand, the depiction in this chapter of bands of prophets as a social group, living in Beit-El and Yericho, as well as Elisha's miraculous provision of food for this group, is typical of the Elisha stories.

exceedingly heavy death-toll. We shall attempt to clarify what happened, although, admittedly, we shall probably not resolve the moral questions entirely.³

Let us begin by exploring the identity of these youths and what they were shouting at Elisha. Was this innocent banter? Who are these children?

If we read the story in context, we understand that he left Yericho and "from there, he went up to Beit-El." Then, "youths came out of the town." Which town? Yericho or Beit-El? At first glance it seems like this is his reception party from Beit-El. However, if we read closely, we notice that "**He turned around**, looked at them and cursed them." His turning around indicates that his tormentors emerge from the town of Yericho. This is the city that he has just saved! He has just removed the "death and bereavement" from the town. Is this the reward that Elisha deserves for his assistance?

And what was the opposition to Elisha? What made him *persona non grata* in Yericho? According to one fascinating interpretation,⁴ the rowdy youths are characterized as people who had earned their living by transporting water to Yericho. Now that Elisha has fixed the local water source, they find themselves suddenly unemployed!

Several commentaries⁵ point out that the gibe "Go on up, you baldhead!" is an oblique reference to Eliyahu, whose most obvious identifying characteristic is that he is a "hairy man" (1:7).⁶ The barb of baldness is then a biting insult, insinuating that Elisha is unsuitable for the task of prophecy, that he is "bald" in comparison to the "hairy man." This is not mere banter; it is a provocation, a mockery, a protest or even an attempt to sabotage Elisha's newfound status. Why do these youths mock Elisha? What is their motivation? We can only speculate. Could it be that there was a group of residents in Yericho who opposed the presence of prophets in their midst? Alternatively, within the groups of prophets in Yericho, perhaps some felt

³ The Talmud (*Sota* 46b) is similarly troubled by several aspects of this story. It is a masterpiece of rabbinic struggle to resolve the ethical issues. Amongst its resolutions, it suggests that these were not children but adults called "*ne'arim*" because they came from a town called Na'aran, or "they were youths who behaved like children." The Talmud then attempts a different line of argument, proposing that these were thoroughly evil people deserving of death: "Samuel said: ... their mothers had all become conceived with them on the Day of Atonement... R. Yochanan said ... there was no sap of the commandments in them ... R. Eleazar said ... neither in them nor in their descendants unto the end of all generations." Could parental supervision have helped control the children, or alternatively might the townsfolk be guilty for leaving a lone Elisha vulnerable to a large jeering crowd? "Had the men of Yericho escorted Elisha, he would not have stirred up bears against the children." These are just a few of the lines of argument; however, one senses the rabbinic discomfort and the endeavor of teasing out every possibility to resolve the troubling ethical question.

⁴ Rashi, *Sota* 46b, s.v. *shehikracha*.

⁵ Abarbanel, Malbim. See also a useful article by Prof. Yair Zakovitch, "Go up, Baldhead! Go up, Baldhead!; Rings of Commentary in a Biblical Story," *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 7 (1985), 7-22 (Heb.).

⁶ It refers either to long and unkempt hair or to his prophetic garb, the "*aderet sei'ar*." See *Zekharia* 13:4 and *Daat Mikra* on *I Melakhim* 1:7.

there was a more worthy candidate, or they resented Elisha for some undisclosed reason. If these were young children, had they heard these views in their parents' homes? Did the articulation of this challenge to Elisha genuinely threaten his future success? Whatever the precise motivation, this is a direct affront:

Because Eliyahu his master had hair, and he was bald, they said in derision and ridicule, "Go up to the heavens like your master, Eliyahu!" as if to say, "You are not of his pedigree." (Metzudat David)

So now, let us imagine the scene: Elisha is leaving the town whose waters he has cured, heading to Beit-El. Anyone who knows the topography of the region understands that we are dealing with an arduously steep ascent. One imagines that he is climbing the path, panting and sweating, when a large group arrives to heckle him, to hound him on his way out of town. If forty-two "of the youths" were killed, then the crowd was larger; was it fifty, eighty, one hundred people? Even more? And as he struggles with the climb they shout out, "Go on up, you baldhead!" Alternatively, his adversaries pose it as a rhetorical question: "Can you go up (*'aleh*), baldhead? Can you 'ascend' as your master Eliyahu 'ascended' (to heaven)? No! You are bald, and he was hairy! You are not of the same quality! You can't even climb this hill!"

Elisha curses the youths, invoking the name of God, and bears emerge and maul some of the youngsters. It is possible that the language employed, namely, that the two bears "came out (*va-teitzena*)" of the woods, is intended to correspond to the verb used when the youths "came out (*yatz'u*)" of the town, which would be indicative of a measure-for-measure (*mida ke-negged mida*) type of punishment. But why particularly bears? In several places in *Melakhim*, a lion mauls an individual who disregards the words of a prophet, for example in *I Melakhim* 13:24 and 20:36. This seems to be a standard divine retribution for a direct attack on prophecy.⁷ However, our case is the sole instance in which a bear, rather than a lion, attacks and kills. Bears, and more specifically she-bears, are mentioned in the context of bereavement several times in *Tanakh*, for example, "a bear robbed of her young (*dov shakul*)."⁸ The implication is that generally a bear won't attack humans, but after a she-bear has lost her young, she is highly dangerous. This is highly resonant in our story, as Elisha has just been bereaved of his master – he is the bereaved she-bear – as is in pain at the loss he has incurred. Abarbanel even suggests that the two bears, "one for Eliyahu's honor and the other for Elisha's honor," correspond to the mockery of these two prophets.

Did Elisha possibly overreact, distraught by the loss of Eliyahu?⁹ If so, the text offers no indication of disapproval. Accordingly, despite the severity of

⁷ Lions are also featured in a divine punishment later in *II Melakhim* (17:25).

⁸ *Shmuel* II 17:8, *Hoshea* 13:8, *Mishlei* 17:12. A further linguistic connection ties the bereaved bear theme to our story in that the previous episode phrases the death and bereavement of Yericho as "*meshakalel*," the same Hebrew root as "*shakul*."

⁹ Again, *Sota* 46b suggests that Elisha shares some culpability: "Our Rabbis taught: Elisha was afflicted with three illnesses: one because he stirred up the bears against the children ..."

the response, we are left with the conclusion that this is God's way of defending and protecting the reputation of his prophet. *Chazal* view this incident as "a miracle within a miracle,"¹⁰ reflecting a clear example of God defending Elisha. Possibly, the early days of a leader's tenure are highly sensitive and will set the tone for his or her future leadership. We have suggested that just as chapter two depicts Eliyahu's route from Gilgal to Beit-El, Yericho, the Jordan River, and across the Jordan River, similarly Elisha ascends across the Jordan River, to Yericho, Beit-El, Carmel and then to Samaria where, we assume, he is in a position to confront the king of Israel. This is Elisha's designated route, and these youngsters come to deflate Elisha, undermining his leadership. Perhaps this perspective can contribute in some way to an explanation of the punishment that these youths receive.

IS ELIYAHU IMMORTAL?

One of the most striking difficulties of the chapter is the manner in which Eliyahu dies. Did he in fact die, or is he still alive in some manner or form? Tradition speaks of Eliyahu as visiting every *brit mila*, and walking through our opened doors on Seder night. In the Talmud, Eliyahu seems to commute freely between heaven and earth. Eliyahu is said to be the herald of the messiah. Is Eliyahu still alive or did he die?

This is a fascinating debate amongst the *Rishonim*. Radak, in his opening comments to the chapter, says that Eliyahu died – or at least lost his human form:

The storm raised Eliyahu from Earth into the air ... above the "sphere of fire." There his clothes burned except his cloak, his flesh and his physical form were consumed, and his spirit returned to God."

On the other hand, Ralbag suggests something very different:

One cannot understand that he (Eliyahu) was taken to heaven, because a human body cannot be taken there. But rather [when it refers to Eliyahu's ascent in a storm to heaven] it means high in the air as in the phrase, "cities, large and fortified to the heavens" (*Devarim* 9:1), or [regarding the Tower of Babel] "a tower with its peak in the heavens" (*Bereishit* 11:4). An angelic force of God raised Eliyahu to an unknown location, and he lives there.

Indeed there is an opinion in the Gemara that maintains that Eliyahu never died (Resh Lakish in *Moed Katan* 26a). But I think we can identify a solid grounding for the wealth of traditional thinking that sees Eliyahu defying ordinary human constraints and achieving immortality.

IN HIS LIFETIME

¹⁰ "There was no forest; there were no bears" (*Sota* 47a).

In his own lifetime, people thought Eliyahu possessed superhuman abilities to disappear, even fly away at will, to the unknown, carried by an undefined "spirit of God." This is what Ovadia, Achav's courtier says to Eliyahu:

"When I leave you, **the spirit of God will carry you off** I don't know where; and ... he will not find you." (*I Melakhim* 18:12)

And the fifty *benei ha-nevi'im* make an almost identical claim:

"...perhaps **the spirit of God has carried him off** and cast him upon some mountain or into some valley." (*II Melakhim* 2:16)

Thus, this is Eliyahu's reputation even in his lifetime. However, the *Tanakh* itself leaves room to suggest that Eliyahu can live even after his death.

AFTER HIS DEATH

During the reign of King Yehoram of Yehuda, "A letter came to him from Eliyahu the Prophet" (*II Divrei Ha-yamim* 21:12-15). Now this is certainly after Eliyahu's heavenly ascent. It is problematic to claim that Eliyahu would have written the letter and delayed its delivery, seeing that Elisha had already taken over in the reign of Yehoshafat, Yehoram's father. Therefore, this is certainly some years after Eliyahu's heavenly ascent. Radak suggests:

Eliyahu appeared in a prophecy to one of the prophets, dictated him the letter and told him to write it and deliver it to King Yehoram.

However, Ralbag, Malbim and even Ibn Ezra¹¹ suggest that Eliyahu takes on some life-form after death. Malbim notes:

This was after he [Eliyahu] had been "taken," and this explains that he is still alive and extant, and appears on occasion as is the tradition of the Rabbis.

A further crucial source is found in the final verses of the book of *Malakhi*:

Behold, I will send you the prophet Eliyahu before the arrival of the great and terrible Day of God. He shall restore the heart of fathers to their children, and the heart of children to their fathers – lest I strike the land with destruction. (3:23-24)

Malakhi is undoubtedly a prophet in the early Second Temple period. If he predicts the sending of Eliyahu before the great and terrible day of the Lord, a phrase that indicates an eschatological judgment day, then from where would Eliyahu be arriving? Moreover, the book of *Malakhi* identifies the judgment day with an angel:

¹¹ Comment to *Malakhi* 3:24

"Behold, I shall send My angel (*mal'akhi*), and he shall clear a path before Me, and suddenly God Whom you seek will come to His Temple. And the angel of the covenant (*mal'akh ha-brit*) in whom you delight – behold, he shall come," says God of Hosts. "But who can bear the day of his coming, and who shall be standing when he appears? For he is like a smelter's fire and like the washers' soap...
Behold, I shall send to you Eliyahu the Prophet, before the coming of the great and awesome Day of God... (3:1, 2, 23)

Upon observing this interesting parallelism, one could conclude that Eliyahu is indeed that angel – the "angel of the covenant!"

SECOND TEMPLE TEXTS

The future role of Eliyahu appears in other sources, as well. One second century BCE text, the *Book of Ben-Sira* (sometimes quoted by the Talmud), states:

You were taken in high by a whirlwind, by fiery legions to heaven.
Ready, it is written, for the time to put [divine] wrath to rest, before the day of the Lord,
To restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and to reestablish the tribes of Israel. (*Ben-Sira* 48:9-11)

Ben-Sira is essentially restating the verses from *Malakhi*, although he goes further than the prophet in two areas. First, it seems that Eliyahu will put divine wrath to rest in general. For whom? For Israel? For the world? Second, he will restore the tribes of Israel. Possibly, this was Ben-Sira's reading of the phrase in *Malakhi*: "He shall restore the heart of fathers to their children, and the heart of children to their fathers." This verse becomes a fascinating debate in *Massekhet Eduyot* (8:7):

Rabbi Yehoshua said: "I learned from Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, who in turn heard it from his teacher, and his teacher from the teacher before him, all the way back to Moshe at Sinai, that Eliyahu does not come to declare people impure or pure, nor to distance people or bring them close, but rather to distance those who have come close by force, and to draw near those who have been distanced by force."

Rabbi Yehuda says: "To bring close, but not to distance."

Rabbi Shimon says: "To solve (halakhic) disputes."

The Sages say: "Neither to distance nor to bring close, but rather to make peace in the world..."

The discussion in the mishna takes Eliyahu's role as herald of the messianic era for granted. But it seeks to probe what his precise function will be. Based on the aforementioned phrase of "restoring the hearts of sons to fathers ..." Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Yehuda suggest that Eliyahu will use

his prophetic powers to clarify questions of genealogy, identifying who is Jewish and who is not. Possibly this is an extension of Ben-Sira's portrayal of Eliyahu returning lost tribes. Rabbi Shimon sees him as serving a halakhic function – clarifying legal disputes. However the sages suggest that he will come to make peace!

These sources might provide an explanation as to why this is merely the beginning of the road for Eliyahu in *aggada*, mysticism and folklore.¹²

¹² For more on Eliyahu in *aggada*, folklore and mysticism see *Encyclopedia Judaica* vol. 6, columns 632-642.