

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #17: Eliyahu on his way to appear before Achav (18:1-16) (continued)

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2. Eliyahu's encounter with Ovadyahu (18:3-16) - questions

On Eliyahu's way to appear before Achav, as he was commanded (18:1), there is a slight delay. Before he reaches Achav, he first meets Achav's officer, Ovadya, who is "in charge of the house." This brief stop on Eliyahu's way presents a difficult problem: the lengthy description devoted to it in the text. No less than fourteen verses (3-16) cover this encounter. This part of the story is very strange. First of all, in general, for what reason does the text record every detail of the meeting at such painstaking length? Secondly, it is also strange in terms of various specific details of the story, which we shall discuss below.

The direct continuation of verse 2, "Eliyahu went TO APPEAR before Achav, and the famine was severe in the land," would seem to be verse 17: "And it was, when Achav SAW Eliyahu, Achav said to him: Is that you, O troubler of Israel?" What would be lacking if the intervening fourteen verses were removed? Is there, perhaps, somewhere further on in the story, some matter that requires these fourteen verses for its proper understanding? Seemingly not, and therefore the significance of these verses must be sought within themselves.

An examination of the section under discussion reveals that it is comprised of two main parts. Verses 3-6 represent the "setting;" here we make our acquaintance with the new character who has just appeared in the story - Ovadyahu - and the text describes the circumstances in which Eliyahu finds him as well as Achav. This prepares us for the crux of the action in verses 7-16, including the encounter between Eliyahu and Ovadyahu, and the dialogue between them. Verse 16 describes the result of their meeting.

What is the content of the dialogue between Eliyahu and Ovadyahu? When they meet, Ovadyahu recognizes Eliyahu and takes pains to emphasize his subjugation to him: he falls upon his face before him (verse 7), calls him "my master" (7, 13), and refers to himself as "your servant" (9, 12). Eliyahu's words in this encounter are brief: he

affirms his identity with a single words, "*anokhi*" ("it is I") (8), and immediately attaches a command, consisting of only five words: "Go, tell your master: Eliyahu is here!" Ovadyahu, in contrast, gives a long and emotional speech that lasts an entire six verses (9-14). Eliyahu's reaction to this speech is, once again, brief and forceful. In verse 15 he swears an oath, to ease Ovadyahu's fears, and the latter then goes off to do as he is told (verse 16).

There are many instances of repetition in this section:

- i. The description of Ovadyahu's fear of God, his act of saving the prophets, which is noted in the introductory setting (verses 3-4), are repeated in his own speech (verses 12-13).
- ii. Eliyahu's command to Ovadyahu (verse 8), "Go, tell your master: Eliyahu is here!," is quoted another TWO TIMES in Ovadyahu's speech (verses 11, 14).
- iii. Ovadyahu's fear of the outcome of his mission - being put to death by Achav - is expressed THREE TIMES in his speech (verse 9, "to put me to death"; verses 12, 14, "he will kill me").

All of these seemingly redundant repetitions are included in Ovadyahu's speech.

But beyond the multiple repetitions, there are even more troubling questions of content:

- i. Why does Eliyahu have any need for Ovadyahu's agency in order to announce his arrival to Achav? Can he not appear before Achav unexpectedly, unannounced - as he in fact does later, in Navot's vineyard (21:20)? If we want to assume that he prefers to use the opportunity afforded him by Ovadyahu's appearance, the moment it appears that his request of Ovadyahu is going to cause problems, surely he could forego it. His continued insistence on his previous command - to the extent that he is ready to swear to Ovadyahu (verse 15), reveals that he attaches great importance to Ovadyahu's agency. But the text seems to present Ovadyahu as crossing Eliyahu's path by chance.
- ii. How on earth can Ovadya fear that Eliyahu will disappear after commanding him explicitly to go and tell Achav, "Eliyahu is here!?" Ovadyahu himself explains (verse 12): "God's spirit will carry you I know not where," but on what basis does he imagine that this will happen? Does he not trust Eliyahu?
- iii. Why does Ovadyahu think that Achav will kill him because Eliyahu has disappeared? What accusation can be made against Ovadyahu, to the extent that he is deserving of the death penalty?

iv. A final question, most perplexing of all: whatever the subjective reason for Ovadyahu's fear, we know in advance that it is not justified: Eliyahu has been commanded explicitly to go and appear before Achav (verse 1), and he indeed does this (verse 2). Even Ovadyahu is eventually convinced of the seriousness of Eliyahu's intent, after the latter swears by God's Name that "today I SHALL APPEAR to him" (verse 15, using the same verb as the original command in verse 1, "Go and APPEAR," and the start of its fulfillment in verse 2, "He went off to APPEAR...") Ovadyahu's entire lengthy and emotional speech, then, is based on a mistake. His fear for his life is based on a mistaken evaluation of Eliyahu's intentions. And even though we are still in the dark as to the reasons for this fear, we know - from the beginning of his speech to the end - that he is mistaken. Why, then, does the text bother to record the speech? A person is allowed to make a mistake, but why eternalize his mistake and its correction in seven whole verses? The text could "save" us all of this by simply moving from verse 8 directly on to verse 16.

We shall try to address all of these questions in the sections below.

3. Why does Eliyahu meet with Ovadyahu before meeting with Achav?

We shall start off our attempt to answer the questions posed in the previous section by examining verse 7 more closely. Do Eliyahu and Ovadyahu really meet each other by chance? For Ovadyahu it is certainly a complete surprise, as the language of the verse indicates:

"Ovadyahu was on the way, and BEHOLD, Eliyahu was coming towards him..."

In many instances in *Tanakh*, the word "behold" (*hinei*) indicates surprise. Ovadyahu's reaction, further on in the same verse, when he asks, "Is that you, my lord Eliyahu?" likewise testifies to his surprise, as we shall discuss below.

But is it a surprise for Eliyahu? The text gives us no reason to think so. The factual background preceding their meeting makes it more likely that Eliyahu initiated their encounter. It is he, after all, who is coming to surprise Achav with an unexpected visit; he, then, decides on the time and place of his appearance - as well as THE PERSON to whom he will appear first.

Why, then, does Eliyahu first want to meet Ovadyahu? Undoubtedly - in order to send him to Achav. Eliyahu does not want to make a sudden appearance before Achav, for several possible reasons:

i. Eliyahu wants Achav to come to him, rather than the other way around, so that Eliyahu's appearance before him will not be interpreted as capitulation out of weakness. The strategy that Eliyahu chooses makes it look as though he happened to meet Ovadyahu by chance, and since the opportunity has arisen, he is also prepared to meet Achav. It should be emphasized that this is not a matter of personal prestige; rather, Eliyahu has in mind the goal of ensuring Achav's agreement to cooperate with him in staging the contest at Mount Carmel.

ii. Ovadyahu is a righteous, God-fearing man, and Eliyahu initiates his meeting with Achav specifically through him so as to hint that it is only by Ovadyahu's merit that he is prepared to speak with Achav.

iii. What is Ovadyahu - a God-fearing man - doing in the service of Achav? It would seem that Achav seeks his services, perhaps to counter-balance the influence of Izevel. It is difficult to imagine that Ovadyahu had a hundred prophets for a prolonged period, providing them with regular sustenance, without Achav's knowledge. In any event, his service in the royal palace is a point of merit for Achav. In appearing before Achav through the agency of Ovadyahu, Eliyahu wants to hint at this merit that the king has, resulting in Eliyahu's appearance.

Either way, whatever the explanation (or combination of them, since they do not contradict one another in any way), it arises that there is INDEPENDENT IMPORTANCE in Eliyahu's plan to meet Achav specifically through the agency and invitation of Ovadyahu. What is common to all of the possible explanations listed above is that Ovadyahu's agency will serve to "soften" Achav before Eliyahu's appearance, preparing him to cooperate with the prophet in facilitating the event at Mount Carmel and the consequent renewal of rain upon the earth. It is for this reason that Eliyahu decides to meet Ovadyahu first, and for the same reason he maintains his insistence (to the extent that he is ready to swear) that Ovadyahu call for Achav, even though this request is met with strong protest.

4. Why does Ovadyahu fear that Eliyahu will suddenly disappear?

Having clarified Eliyahu's intentions, we must now try to understand Ovadyahu's thinking. First, let us try to answer our question concerning the source of his fear that Eliyahu is going to disappear. We may suggest three possible reasons to explain this fear; only a combination of all of them produces an acceptable answer.

i. Ovadyahu asks himself, with justification, what has changed in the kingdom of Israel and in the palace of Achav that has brought Eliyahu back. Is Eliyahu's sudden appearance to be understood as a sign of his intention to change his decree of drought? This seems unlikely, since Achav has not done *teshuva* - and Ovadyahu,

savior of the prophets from the hand of Izevel, knows this better than anyone. Ovadyahu is unaware of what we, the readers, are privy to: God's command to Eliyahu.

ii. The language of the instruction that Eliyahu gives to Ovadyahu - "Go, tell your master: Eliyahu is here!," does not testify to any desire on the prophet's part to maintain a dialogue with the king for any constructive purpose. Had he had any such intention, Eliyahu would have formulated his command differently: "Go, tell your master that I wish to see him and speak with him," or the suchlike.

The combination of both of the above points leads us to the possibility that Ovadyahu perceived Eliyahu's intention to simply provoke Achav and mock him. Against the backdrop of Achav's desperate searches for Eliyahu (as revealed to us in Ovadyahu's words in verse 10), Eliyahu must obviously mean to appear somewhere in Achav's close environs, only to disappear immediately afterwards, irritatingly, as if to say, "See Achav - I'm still alive and active; all your searching for me is of no avail. I still stand by my oath; only a change in you and in Israel will cause me to change it; no violent attempt to force me will have any effect." If this is indeed Eliyahu's intention, the purpose of his appearance here and now, before Ovadyahu, sits well with the battle that Eliyahu embarked upon "many days" ago, when he announced his oath of drought before Achav and then disappeared immediately afterwards in a most wondrous manner. This sort of intention would also explain the style of Eliyahu's instruction, which actually means nothing more than, "Tell your master: Eliyahu is here, in town; we must quickly try to catch him."

We, the readers, obviously know that it is incorrect to attribute this intention to Eliyahu. Eliyahu is appearing by God's command, with a positive intention to meet with Achav and to act in cooperation with him. The formulation of his instruction to Ovadyahu, to tell Achav only that "Eliyahu is here," means only to prevent the possibility of Achav thinking that Eliyahu has "capitulated" and has come to withdraw his oath for no apparent reason. The formulation of the instruction is meant as a reserved expression of readiness to meet Achav "incidentally," since Eliyahu happens to be in the area.

iii. Here we come to the third point that explains Ovadyahu's concern: If, indeed, Ovadyahu attributes the intention described above to Eliyahu, we must explain on what basis he thinks that Eliyahu's plan - to appear and then immediately disappear, suddenly and completely - is realistically possible. Without such an explanation, there is no point in our whole reconstruction of Ovadyahu's thinking. After all, the king could easily instruct his forces to block all possible escape routes, such that Eliyahu will ultimately be caught.

The answer to this is provided by Ovadyahu himself:

(12) "It will be that I will go from you AND THE SPIRIT OF GOD WILL TAKE YOU I KNOW NOT WHERE, and I will come to tell Achav, but he will not find you..."

This doubt in Ovadyahu's mind, which seems altogether fantastic to us, illustrates the way in which the people of that generation perceived the figure of Eliyahu and his activities. Not only the common people, who tend towards exaggerated and wondrous folk tales, but even important people like Ovadyahu - a respected officer of the kingdom and a God-fearing man, and even the children of the prophets in Yericho (*Melakhim* II 2:16-18), perceive Eliyahu in this way. This was the result of Eliyahu being a figure shrouded in mystery, living outside of society, and particularly as a result of the prophet's custom of making unexpected appearances and sudden disappearances. The years that had passed since Eliyahu vanished, after declaring his oath of drought, only strengthened this perception of him. What rational explanation could be offered for Achav's failure to find Eliyahu, despite having sent search parties throughout the entire geographic region surrounding the Kingdom of Israel?

(10) "As the Lord your God lives, there is no nation or kingdom to which my master has not sent to seek you, and they answered, He is not here, and he made the kingdom and the nation swear that they had not found you."

Indeed, we know that it is only thanks to great and revealed miracles that Eliyahu has been able to maintain his secrecy and hide from human society.

This deep-rooted perception of Eliyahu's disappearances is what leads Ovadyahu to mistakenly attribute to him the intention of mocking Achav.

Malbim interprets Ovadyahu's speech (verse 12) in a manner similar to the approach we have taken above:

"'It shall be, when I go from you, that God's spirit will take you...' - we must conclude that you do not wish to appear before him; you wish only to show that he seeks you in vain in other lands, since you are here. But nevertheless, 'It shall be, when I go from you, that God's spirit will take you I know not where - this is what you intend to show him!'"

(to be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish