

[The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash](#)

The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #19: Eliyahu on his way to appear before Achav (18:1-16) (continued-part 4)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

7. Ovadyahu's mistake as a disputation over Eliyahu's approach

To conclude our study of this section, we must still answer the most difficult question of all: for what reason does the text eternalize Ovadyahu's mistake and record his speech in such detail, occupying an entire six verses? The fact that he has misunderstood Eliyahu's intention is clear to Eliyahu himself, as well as to us - the readers - from the outset. The text could therefore move from verse 8 to verse 16, and "save" the intervening seven verses. What is their contribution?

The answer to this question is that the text intends to include the confrontation between Ovadyahu and Eliyahu within the framework of the literary units that comprise chapter 17, and adapts it to this purpose. A mistake such as the one under discussion, although altogether insignificant in the actual plot of the story and not serving in any way to further its practical development but rather to obstruct it, is sometimes of great importance in another sphere of the story: the molding of the characters and creating the authentic situation in which the action takes place.

Ovadyahu will not appear again in this story or in any other biblical narrative, and therefore it is not so much his own personality as such that the incident comes to illuminate, but rather his personality as representative of many others like him in Israel: people who are loyal to God and to His prophets. Ovadyahu's speech comes to teach us (as well as Eliyahu) how this great prophet is perceived in the eyes of the people. Ovadyahu's mistake is of marginal importance in the story, but the practical and psychological background that makes such a mistake possible - the attitude towards the figure of Eliyahu on the part of Ovadyahu and others like him - is of critical significance.

The fact that Ovadyahu attributes to Eliyahu the type of intentions that he does, tells us that, as Ovadyahu saw it, it was quite reasonable to assume that the prophet who was familiar to him from the beginning of his battle with Achav would indeed act in

this way. He would display hard-heartedness, a lack of consideration for the distinction between those deserving of punishment and those not deserving - to the point of causing the death of a righteous man. Ovadyahu's emotional speech is a condemnation of Eliyahu and his approach, EVEN THOUGH ITS FACTUAL BASIS IS MISTAKEN. Ultimately, the reason for Ovadyahu's mistake is that he does not know that which we do know - that Eliyahu is now acting on God's command; he has been sent to appear before Achav. It is specifically this lack of information that opens a window for us to understand how Eliyahu was perceived by the righteous people of his generation; it allows us to understand the great importance of God's command that brings Eliyahu back to his people.

In our studies of the three units in chapter 17, we saw how the narrative serves to mold the Divine criticism of Eliyahu's stance concerning his oath, and how God arranges events and experiences that are calculated to cause him to renounce it. We also saw how, at the end of the third section, in the description of the resuscitation of the widow's son, there is a turning point in Eliyahu's position, and he is ready for the decree of drought to be changed. It is this turning point that leads to God's command to Eliyahu at the beginning of chapter 18. Why, then, is there still a need for a continuation of the "argument" with him within the framework of the present confrontation between him and Ovadyahu? At the end of the previous paragraph we hinted that this represents a retrospective comment on the importance of God's command that causes Eliyahu to return to his people. But we should not suffice with this answer.

At the beginning of our study of the present unit, we noted that Eliyahu's heart is torn as he sets off on his mission; he still needs some additional persuasion that what he is about to do is indeed the right thing. Ovadyahu, in his speech, joins in the previous criticism of Eliyahu, and his confrontation with him adds a human dimension to the previous Divine criticism. It is not only in the heavens but also on earth, among the select individuals and the loyal servants of God among the nation of Israel, that criticism is being voiced over the prophet's approach. With all due recognition of Eliyahu's greatness ("He recognized him, and he fell upon his face"), what we see here is a clear expression of disagreement with the extreme strictness that he has displayed towards his people.

Support for this view of the story about Ovadyahu (from its beginning, in verse 3, and up to verse 15) as another instance of confrontation, joining with the intention of the three sections comprising chapter 17, arises from a comparison between them, from various perspectives:

- i. Comparison with the first section - at Wadi Kerit:

The description of the severe drought in the Shomron region (verses 3-6) connects us to what we were told in the previous chapter (verse 7), "The wadi dried up, for there was no rain in the land." In the Shomron, too (where "the famine was severe"), the familiar wadis and streams have dried up, and Achav and Ovadyahu divide the land between them and go off (verse 5) "to all the springs of water and to all the wadis; PERHAPS we shall find grass to save the horses and mules." Just as the drying up of Wadi Kerit brought Eliyahu face to face with the meaning of the drought in terms of the ecosystem around it, the drying up of the wadis and streams in the Shomron area is likewise affecting the animal life and killing it off. And just as the drying up of Wadi Kerit causes Eliyahu to have to leave his place and to wander in order to find the place where he will be able to live, so the drying up of the springs in Shomron causes Achav and Ovadyahu to have to leave their place and travel all over to find a place that offers some grass for their livestock.

This connection between the two sections also finds expression in some vocabulary that is common to both: the noun "wadi" appears in both, and - more importantly - the root "k-r-t" (cut off, kill off) appears both in the name of the wadi where Eliyahu hides and which eventually dries up, and in 18:5 - "so that all our livestock will not die off."

In the description of the famine and drought in Shomron and the surrounding areas we find interwoven the figure and righteous acts of Ovadyahu (verses 3-4). This, again, connects back to the events at Wadi Kerit: like Eliyahu, who is forced to hide at Wadi KERIT because of his oath, the hundred prophets hid in caves "when Izevel killed (be-hakhrith) the prophets of God" - apparently an indirect result of Eliyahu's oath before Achav. Just as the ravens FED Eliyahu while he hid at the wadi, bringing him bread and meat, so Ovadyahu FEEDS the hundred prophets, bringing them bread and water.

The significance of all these parallels is that Eliyahu now relives his experience at Wadi Kerit - but this time multiplied by a hundred, both in terms of the scope of its influence (a hundred prophets as opposed to a single one, many wadis as opposed to a single wadi, a whole city as opposed to a single person), and in terms of the severity of the drought in its third year.

ii. Comparison with the second unit - at the gates of Tzarfat:

The description of the confrontation between Eliyahu and Ovadyahu (verses 7-16) is built in a manner that is most reminiscent of the confrontation between Eliyahu and the widow at the gates of Tzarfat (17:7-16). In both places Eliyahu reaches the environs of the city to which he has been sent by God's command, and there he unexpectedly ("behold" - 17:10; 18:7) meets the personality that he wanted to meet. In both instances he presents his partner in dialogue with a demand, which is met - in both cases - with refusal, as explained in an emotional monologue. Both monologues begin with a similar oath: "As the Lord your God lives..." (17:12; 18:10). Then the prophet clarifies his request, formulating it in such a way as to neutralize the opposition, and in both cases his partner in conversation is appeased. Following the prophet's clarification and explicit commitment that his request will not cause the other person any harm, his request is acceded to and is performed ("SHE WENT and did as Eliyahu had said"; "Ovadyahu WENT to Achav and told him").

In terms of the vocabulary that is common to both places, we discover the following: 1. WATER AND BREAD are what Eliyahu asks of the widow at the beginning of his encounter with her, and BREAD AND WATER are what Ovadyahu supplied to the hundred prophets, as he testifies himself in his monologue. 2. The widow and Ovadyahu introduce their oaths with the same expression, as noted above. 3. The widow concludes her speech with the word "*va-matnu*" (we shall die); Ovadyahu starts with "*le-hamiteni*" (to put me to death) and ends with "*ve-haragani*" (he will kill me).

This aspect of the corresponding sections again hints to us that Eliyahu is reliving an experience similar to the one at the gates of Tzarfat: his person and his request of his partner in conversation gives rise to a reaction of recoil and resistance. Here again, as in the previous parallel, Ovadyahu's resistance is stronger than that of the widow. The latter does not blame Eliyahu for the fact that she and her son are about to die of starvation (although to Eliyahu and to ourselves, the readers, she appears to do so, because we know something that she does not). But Ovadyahu explicitly accuses Eliyahu as being responsible for his anticipated death at the hands of Achav.

iii. Comparison with the third section - resuscitation of the widow's son

In both cases Eliyahu's partner in conversation accuses him unjustly. The widow claims that he has come to her to "make remembrance of her sin

and to put her son to death." On the literal level of the story, this accusation has no basis. Likewise Ovadyahu claims that Eliyahu is handing him over to Achav to be put to death without having sinned. In both cases the monologue starts with the word "*mah*" (what) (17:18 - "What have I to do with you..."; 18:9 - "What is my sin..."). In both cases Eliyahu refutes the claims against him, although in very different ways: in chapter 17 he revives the boy and restores him to his mother; in chapter 18 he commits himself with an oath to appear the same day before Achav.

The words that are common to both sections are "sin" and "death": "Have you come to me to make remembrance of MY SIN and to PUT my son TO DEATH" (17:18); "What is MY SIN, that you are giving your servant... TO PUT ME TO DEATH" (18:9). This parallel links with the previous ones to show that Eliyahu's confrontation with Ovadyahu is merely a continuation of the preceding confrontations at the beginning of the story.

The situation in which Ovadyahu confronts Eliyahu so sharply presents us with two world-views that differ over the question of how God-fearing people of their generation are meant to deal with the house of Achav. Eliyahu, the prophet of the generation, has chosen thus far the path of head-strong, fiery confrontation and conflict, followed by a cutting off of contact. Ovadyahu, a man who is "exceedingly God-fearing," has chosen precisely the opposite path: that of brave cooperation with the wicked king with an attempt to "influence from the inside." It is with this approach that he exerts himself to save whatever can be saved, placing himself on the front-lines against the influence of Izevel and her evil deeds.

From a PERSONAL point of view Ovadyahu nullifies himself before Eliyahu, the great prophet of the generation. He falls upon his face when meeting him, and he calls Eliyahu "my master" and himself "your servant," thereby expressing his subjugation to him. But despite his recognition of Eliyahu's greatness, he will not relinquish his contrasting position to that of Eliyahu; he even emphasizes its tangible achievements in front of the prophet, who negates it completely:

(13) "HAS MY MASTER NOT BEEN TOLD of what I did when Izevel killed the prophets of God, when I hid a hundred of God's prophets, fifty to a cave, and I fed them bread and water."

Ovadyahu's recriminatory speech in response to Eliyahu's demand of him, as he mistakenly understands it, is the speech of a person who is defending and justifying his approach before someone who he believes to be a strong opponent of it.

Translated by Kaeren Fish