

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #20: The Second Encounter Between Eliyahu and Achav (18:16-18) (part 1)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

(18:16) "... and Achav went to meet Eliyahu.

(17) And it was, when Achav saw Eliyahu, Achav said to him: Is it you, O troubler of Israel?

(18) He said: [It is] not I [who has] troubled Israel, but you and your father's house, by abandoning God's commandments and going after the Be'alim."

1. Differences Between the First and Second Meetings with Achav

The present altercation between the prophet and the king closes a circle. This circle started with the prophet's first appearance before Achav, where he made his oath to stop the rain:

(7:1) "Eliyahu the Tishbi, one of the inhabitants of Gilad, said to Achav: As the Lord of Israel lives, before Whom I stand, there will be no rain or dew during these years, except by my word."

There are so many differences between the original confrontation and the present one that they may in fact be regarded as inversions of one another:

- i. Inversion of role: In the original confrontation, with which the story begins, Eliyahu appears to be the one who initiated the meeting with Achav; he appears before him as a prosecutor, bringing punishment. In the present confrontation the situation is reversed. Although we, the readers, know that Eliyahu has come in order to appear before Achav as God commanded him to do, Achav is unaware of this. From his point of view it seems that he finally happens to have an opportunity to meet the prophet whom he has sought so desperately. Therefore he goes to meet Eliyahu; it is he who initiates the encounter, and his

address is, astonishingly, a rebuke of the prophet and an accusation for what he has brought upon the nation of Israel.

ii. Reciprocity: In the first confrontation between them, Eliyahu's oath is met with no reaction on Achav's part - or, at least, if there was one it is not recorded in the text. Thus the description of that meeting is one-sided; it is the description of Eliyahu's one-man show. From a certain perspective, the second encounter between the king and the prophet contains Achav's delayed reaction to Eliyahu's oath, following years of drought and suffering, during which the severity of the oath has become apparent.

The present confrontation is of an entirely different nature. It is a dialogue; admittedly tense, but attention is given to both sides. Eliyahu responds to Achav's accusation and explains his position. Moreover, this dialogue serves as the introduction to the cooperation that Eliyahu demands of Achav, and to which Achav agrees (verses 19-20).

iii. Circumstances and results: The most important difference, of course, concerns the circumstances that have brought each of the parties to the meeting and, consequently, the results that each reaps from it. The first meeting is initiated by Eliyahu himself, with no preceding Divine command. Eliyahu's initiative of making an oath to stop the rain led to a period of severe drought in the land and terrible hunger in Shomron.

Eliyahu's second appearance before Achav takes place not on his own initiative, but rather as a result of God's command. Although Achav is unaware of this Divine command, we know of its existence. Another matter of which Achav is unaware at the beginning of this encounter, and which we know in advance, is the purpose of the meeting: a renewal of the rains. Indeed, the rest of this second encounter between the king and the prophet is conducted with cooperation, with an eventual return of the rain and an end to the drought.

Thus, from almost every possible angle, the two altercations between the king and the prophet are opposites of one another.

The present meeting represents the conclusion of the first narrative within the larger story that occupies chapters 17-19. Our story begins (apparently) in Achav's royal palace in Shomron with a confrontation between the prophet and the king; it concludes close to Shomron with another confrontation between them. The crux of the story that takes place in between these two confrontations (some forty verses) is the description of the events and circumstances that Eliyahu has experienced during the course of his wanderings from his starting point until his return (and, to some extent,

also the events that have been experienced by Achav and Israel during the same period). It is these events and tribulations that have facilitated the change in the respective stances of both characters. In other words, the story essentially comes to show how the two confrontations, at the bookends of the narrative, come to be the opposite of one another.

2. The Confrontation Between Eliyahu and Achav as a Link Between the Story of the Drought and the Story of the Test at Carmel

The meeting with Achav that now awaits Eliyahu has a dual purpose. On one hand, this event intertwines all the encounters that Eliyahu has experienced throughout the story, all of which were aimed at softening the prophet's stance and preparing him to agree to the renewal of rain, as we shall clarify below. On the other hand, the ultimate purpose of this encounter is spelled out at the end of God's command to him: "And I shall give rain upon the land." The appearance before Achav is a preparatory stage on the road to this objective. The road is still long from this encounter between them to the actual rainfall. Although in chronological terms it may not have taken more than a few days, it includes many actions which are described in the following narrative, covering twenty-eight verses.

Thus, the altercation between Eliyahu and Achav serves as the link between the two stories. On one hand, it concludes the chain of events that were aimed at bringing about a change in the prophet's view (which appears to be the subject of the story of the drought), and in this respect it forms part of that collection. On the other hand, this dialogue serves as the first in a series of actions by Eliyahu, described principally in the next story, actions aimed at changing the national reality such that Israel will be worthy of God restoring the rain. From the first perspective, the aim of the meeting is to bring the prophet closer to the experience of the king (who is the representative of the nation). From the second perspective, its aim is to bring the king closer to the position of the prophet. Thus the encounter between the two of them is meant to lead them to the point of consensus which will ultimately facilitate the restoration of the rainfall.

Let us now examine the encounter itself and see how it, like Eliyahu's previous encounters, promotes the conclusion that the policy undertaken by the prophet thus far should not be pursued any longer, and how Eliyahu directs matters, by means of the encounter, so as to lead to the rainfall with which the next story concludes.

3. Achav's "Rebuke"

When Ovadyahu comes to Achav and tells him, in accordance with Eliyahu's command, "Eliyahu is here," Achav is faced with two possibilities. One would be to

try to capture Eliyahu by calling for reinforcements from nearby Shomron. For this purpose Achav could even make use of Ovadyahu, who - by Achav's command - would call for the king's forces to block all escape routes, while the king spoke with the prophet. Achav has several reasons to choose this course of action:

- i. He has desperately sought Eliyahu in every possible location, as Ovadyahu testifies in his speech (verse 10). Now he has an opportunity to catch the elusive prophet. Can he allow him to get away again?
- ii. If Ovadyahu feared Eliyahu's sudden disappearance in order to irritate Achav, Achav himself must certainly be entertaining the same possibility.
- iii. Preservation of his own honor as king would likely have represented a barrier for Achav from going to Eliyahu. The sense of power invested in him by virtue of his office could easily lead him to seek a forceful conflict with Eliyahu.

But Achav chooses to avoid this path. Trusting the prophet's serious intentions, he chooses the opposite course:

(16) "Achav went to meet Eliyahu."

Close attention should be paid to these simple words, because they conceal a most significant picture: the king of Israel foregoes his honor and goes, alone and on foot, with no entourage and no trappings of royalty, to meet with the prophet. This is the downcast step of a person who understands the gravity of the situation and who, in his search for "some grass to keep the horses alive," is prepared to hold dialogue with the prophet and to recognize the supremacy of his path. It would seem that it is with a sense of submission that Achav approaches Eliyahu. The prophet's plan to appear before Achav in this mood appears to have been met with success, and we expect the flow of events to continue unchallenged in accordance with Eliyahu's plan.

But then we are surprised: the lowly spirit with which Achav approaches Eliyahu suddenly turns into an outpouring of anger:

(17) "Is that you, O troubler of Israel?!"

Was it for the purpose of expressing such words that Achav went to Eliyahu? Were we wrong in our description of his mood? Apparently not. The text uses a great many words to lead up to Achav giving vent to his anger:

(17) "And it was, when Achav saw Eliyahu, that Achav said to him...."

This introduction could be written in considerably fewer words; the end of verse 16 - "Achav went to meet Eliyahu" could be followed immediately by "He said to him." Had the text indeed been formulated in this way, we would have reason to think that it was for the purpose of this declaration that Achav went to meet Eliyahu. But the unusual foot-dragging of the text, postponing Achav's attack, conveys a clear message: this was a spontaneous outburst that boiled up in him at the sight of Eliyahu: "It was, when Achav saw Eliyahu..." It was at that moment that Achav's anger boiled up at the thought of what the prophet had caused to his nation, by means of his oath, and his previous mood of submission was suddenly replaced by a rage that finds expression in his invective: "Achav said to him: Is it you, O troubler of Israel?!"

This change in Achav takes place before the prophet's eyes. At first, Eliyahu sees Achav coming towards him alone, and he understands correctly the meaning of this gesture of submission and acceptance. But he also sees how, as the king comes closer and recognizes the prophet, standing firm in his stance, his facial expression changes; he becomes angry, and then finally bursts forth with his rebuke.

Applying the title "troubler of Israel" to Eliyahu is a harsh criticism. This expression appears in only one other place in all of *Tanakh*:

"The children of Karmi: Akhar, THE TROUBLER OF ISRAEL, who stole from the consecrated property." (*Divrei Ha-yamim I 2:7*)

What is the meaning of the inescapable comparison to the deed of Akhan (*Yehoshua 7*, where Akhan is described repeatedly as having troubled Israel)? It would seem that what Achav means to say is that, like Akhan, Eliyahu too has brought catastrophe upon his nation out of personal interests. It is specifically this emphasis on the human independence of Eliyahu's oath - the pretension of complete control over the rainfall, "except by my word," followed by the prophet's mysterious disappearance while his nation collapses with weakness from the "severe famine in Shomron" - that lead Achav to accuse him of "troubling Israel": i.e., as someone who insists on his view being upheld at any price, for the sake of preserving his own pride and honor, even at the expense of the national disaster that is thereby brought upon his nation.

This title for Eliyahu, "troubler of Israel," is expressed as part of a penetrating rhetorical question: "Is it you, O troubler of Israel?!" - just like the question of Ovadyahu who, recognizing Eliyahu and falling prostrate before him, asks: (7) "Is that you, my lord Eliyahu?!"

While Ovadyahu expresses an outward display of honor towards Eliyahu, with the criticism only hinted at in the rhetorical question, Achav dispenses with any form of polite veneer, leaving only the harsh, glaring criticism. But both questions have the same intention: to criticize Eliyahu for his prolonged absence and for waiting so long to come back.

Attention should be paid to the fact that Eliyahu does not respond to this rebuke - neither when it is presented by Ovadyahu (when he answers simply, "It is I," as though it were an informative question) nor when it is posed by Achav. He responds only to Achav's title for him, "troubler of Israel," with no comment on the reproach for how long it took for him to appear.

In the appendix to this section (at the conclusion of the next *shiur*) we shall compare the encounter between Eliyahu and Achav in our story to their encounter in the story of Navot's vineyard (chapter 21). One of the most significant differences between the two is the title that Achav uses for Eliyahu when he sees him. In our story he calls him "troubler of Israel," while in Navot's vineyard he asks, "Have you found me, MY ENEMY?" (21:20). In Navot's vineyard Eliyahu comes to rebuke Achav for his personal sin, and this rebuke is interpreted by Achav as an expression of personal aversion. In their encounter here, Achav emphasizes the damage that Eliyahu has caused to the entire nation of Israel through his oath of drought - to righteous and wicked alike.

As regards our story, this comparison is instructive concerning Achav's conviction of the justice of his moral cause as the representative of the nation of Israel. That which has only been hinted to Eliyahu in various ways during the course of the story thus far, by God and His agents - Ovadyahu and the widow of Tzarfat - is now presented most directly by Achav.

But it must be admitted that Achav is not the right person to accuse the prophet in this way. The fact that it comes from him opens the door for Eliyahu to defend himself by placing the responsibility squarely upon the shoulders of his attacker:

(18) "[It is] not I [who has] troubled Israel, but rather you and your father's house, by abandoning God's commandments and going after the Be'alim!"

(to be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish