

## The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

### **The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion**

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#### **Shiur #47: Chorev Part 2: Eliyahu's Flight (1-4) (continued)**

**By Rav Elchanan Samet**

#### 2. The journey to Be'er Sheva and the wilderness

(3) When he saw [this] he arose and went for his life, and he came to Be'er Sheva which is in Yehuda, and he left his attendant there.

(4) And he went a day's journey into the wilderness, and he came and sat under a broom tree, and asked for himself that he might die, and he said: Enough now, God; take my soul, for I am no better than my fathers.

(5) And he lay and he slept under a broom tree...

Eliyahu wastes no time: "When he saw [this] he arose and went..." (*va-yar va-yakom va-yelekh*) (verse 3). The three successive verbs give the impression of intensive activity. "He saw" – this indicates that he assessed the situation and reached his conclusion: "He arose and went...."

What is the meaning of the expression, "He went for his life"? The Ralbag explains: "He went TO ESCAPE for his life" Why, then, did he go specifically to Be'er Sheva? It seems that the verse itself may be pointing to the answer: "... which is in Yehuda." The Radak comments as follows:

"Meaning, he left the jurisdiction of Achav and his land, and took himself off to the land of Yehuda, out of fear of Izevel."

But Eliyahu's next actions do not sit well with our interpretation thus far. If Eliyahu's intention is simply to flee from Izevel and save his life, why does he leave his attendant in Be'er Sheva and go a day's journey into the wilderness – apparently with no food or drink? What is his intention in this journey?

It seems that Eliyahu means to meditate alone in the middle of the wilderness, under a certain broom tree (verse 4). But for what purpose? The rest of the verse answers the question:

(4) "... and asked for himself that he might die, and he said: Enough now, God; take my life, for I am no better than my fathers."

This, then, is the purpose of his flight to the wilderness of Be'er Sheva: he wants to ask God to take his life.

This, as we have said, does not sit well with our previous characterization of Eliyahu's actions as flight or escape. A person who flees for his life is trying to stay alive. How, then, are we to reconcile his intensive activity to save himself with the contradictory action of going out alone into the wilderness, with no possibility of survival - for the purpose of asking God explicitly to take his life?!

Let us review the answers proposed by some of the commentators. The first approach is presented by the Radak (representing several other similar opinions), who restricts himself to the literal level:

"'And he went... into the wilderness' – Even in the land of Yehuda he was not safe, for perhaps Izevel would send messengers to kill him there. Therefore he left habitation and went into the wilderness, a place where he would find no means of subsistence and would die, for he had chosen death over life, **OR SO THAT GOD WOULD APPEAR TO HIM AND TELL HIM WHAT TO DO.** 'And he said: Enough...' – In other words, I have had enough of this world, **I AM IN DANGER DAILY.**"

The Ralbag presents a fairly similar view:

"He chose to go into the wilderness so that no-one would see him and be able to report to Izevel. 'And he asked for himself that he might die' – **HE WAS SO HUNGRY** that he would prefer to die."

In other words, according to these commentators the transition from Eliyahu's determined flight to save himself to his despairing request that God take his life arises from the hopelessness of his situation - the constant danger that cannot be avoided - or from the hunger that threatens his life in the only place where he is not in danger of being caught. The Radak adds a positive alternative to our interpretation of Eliyahu's request to die: "**OR THAT GOD WOULD APPEAR TO HIM AND TELL HIM WHAT TO DO.**" This possibility does admittedly remove the contradiction between his two moods, but it has no support whatsoever in the text.

It is difficult to accept the view proposed by the Radak and the Ralbag, simply because if we assume their psychological explanation, Eliyahu's transition to wanting to die is too sudden. He has just embarked on his flight and already complains that he

is in danger "daily" (Radak); he is already so overcome with starvation (Ralbag) that he prefers to die?

Let us turn to the Malbim and his interpretation:

"'He went for his life' – for Eliyahu secluded himself most of the time, working on perfecting himself; only when it was necessary was he a prophet sent to the nation. After seeing that all the wonders that he had brought about had not had the intended effect, he saw that he had no business trying to perfect the nation, and therefore he arose AND RETURNED TO THE OCCUPATION OF PERFECTING HIMSELF... 'He left his attendant there' – so as to separate himself from human company, to go out into the wilderness to be alone, for this is what he now sought to do, as it is written (*Yirmiyahu* 9:1), 'If only I could be in the wilderness, a lodge for wayfarers....' He walked alone a day's journey into the wilderness, 'and came' – i.e., then he came to the place that he had sought. Having distanced himself a day's journey from habitation, he was where he wanted to be, for there he could be alone with God."

What the other commentators interpreted simply as a flight from Izevel, the Malbim regards as a QUEST TO PERFECT HIMSELF - isolation and meditation for the positive purpose of spiritual perfection. How, then, does the Malbim explain Eliyahu's request to die?

"'And he asked for himself' – For he saw that he had already achieved, on the individual level, that which he was supposed to achieve in his mortal life, and therefore it was proper that his soul should return to the Source of life and leave the material garb separating it from the radiant Light. This is the meaning of the expression, 'He asked for himself' (literally, 'for his soul') – i.e., for the benefit of his soul. Not dying would mean... that he had not yet achieved all that he was supposed to in his life, and it was concerning this that he said, 'Enough now, God' – he had already perfected himself and performed more than enough."

According to this understanding, even Eliyahu's request to die is to be interpreted in a positive light, without bitterness or despair, but simply as a well thought-out spiritual conclusion with a positive aim.

Let us now try to explain Eliyahu's flight to the wilderness of Be'er Sheva and his request to die there, in a way that departs from both perspectives that have been presented thus far. We shall start by borrowing from the Malbim the element of his explanation with which we must agree: Eliyahu went off into the wilderness "after

seeing that all the wonders that he had brought about had not had the intended effect." Relative to the exalted sensation and great success at Mount Carmel, described in the previous chapter, the current events represent, for Eliyahu, a descent from great heights to abysmal depths. Eliyahu's words to God at Mount Chorev, uttered twice (in verse 10 and in verse 14), testify to his overwhelming sense of failure and defeat with regard to all of his efforts, described in the previous chapters, to return the nation to God. In retrospect, his request that God take his life must be understood as an expression of despair over his prophetic role and the path that he has taken thus far. But what does it mean when a prophet despairs of his role? It can only mean that he despairs of *Am Yisrael*. The prophet's role is to be God's emissary to the nation, and the failure of his mission is in fact the failure of Israel to engage in *teshuva* and return to God. The Malbim wisely quotes the verse from *Yirmiyahu* ("If only I could be in the desert, a lodge for wayfarers") to explain that the wilderness is an appropriate place for the prophet to isolate himself and meditate. But the Malbim quotes only the first part of the verse and writes "etc.," instead of explicitly including the rest of the verse, WHICH IS THE CRUX OF THE PARALLEL TO ELIYAHU:

"I would abandon my people and go from them, for they are all adulterers, a gathering of treacherous people. ... they do not fight for the truth in the land."

Indeed, this verse sheds great light on Eliyahu's quest to be alone in the desert, out of despair over *Am Yisrael*.

Now we must find a different explanation for the reason for Eliyahu heading specifically to Be'er Sheva. "The end of the act" – going off into the desert in despair and asking to die – is thought out from the beginning. It is for that precise reason that Eliyahu chooses to go to Be'er Sheva, bordering on the wilderness and representing the outskirts of the inhabited area of *Eretz Yisrael* (as referred to in many places in *Tanakh* in the expression, "From Dan to Be'er Sheva").

Here we must ask a question that is raised by many of the commentators: what is the meaning of this despair? Are all the achievements of yesterday at Mount Carmel eradicated just because of the decree of Izevel, daughter of the King of Tzidon? Did Eliyahu then expect that even she would be included among those who would do *teshuva* and return to God? Why does Eliyahu despair of his mission and of the whole of *Am Yisrael* just because of the predictable behavior of the gentile queen?

The answer must be sought on two levels. On the objective level, we need an explanation that makes Eliyahu's response compatible with what is going on – Izevel's threat. On the subjective level, his response has to make sense in light of his personality as depicted in the previous chapters (and in the events to follow).

On the objective level it would seem that if the situation allows Izevel to act exactly as she would have done previously and to threaten Eliyahu's life so openly and brazenly, then the practical and national significance of the events at Mount Carmel has indeed, to some extent, been nullified. Seemingly, a huge spiritual revolution has taken place: *Am Yisrael*, who were recognized God as the only true God worthy of worship. The nation even expressed its readiness to translate this religious consciousness into action, by taking part in the slaughter of the 450 false prophets who ate at Izevel's table. The nation thereby demonstrated its readiness to confront Izevel, the powerful wife of the king.

But such revolutions are not completed if they are not given immediate political expression, close to the time of their occurrence. Eliyahu, it seems, had hoped that one of the following developments would follow: that the gathering at Carmel would not disperse, but rather would collectively head for Achav's palace with the demand that Izevel be banished; or – at least – that Achav, who had cooperated with Eliyahu in the previous chapter and was shown a gesture of reconciliation by the prophet, who ran before his chariot – would decide to limit her scope of activity so that her power would be lessened and she would not longer be an active incitement to idolatry in Israel (and, obviously, would no longer pursue the prophets of God).

But none of this happened. Izevel continues to act as she always has, and no-one objects. The political revolution undergoes no political translation into practical results. Achav has not only taken no steps against Izevel, but – in returning to the sphere of her influence – has returned to his old ways; it is he who causes her (whether intentionally or unintentionally) to act against Eliyahu by telling her of the slaughter of her prophets. How disappointed Eliyahu must be in the behavior of this fickle king, before whose chariot he ran but yesterday, in the driving rain, in order to award him honor. We noted in the previous *shiur* that Izevel's threat represents a declaration on her part as to her intention to have Eliyahu sentenced to death by an open, public court. But where are all the masses who were gathered at Carmel? Why have they all now deserted the prophet? Why are they not preventing the queen from carrying out her plan; why are they not rebelling against the royalty? Why are they not defending him with their very bodies? Only yesterday they witnessed the fire descending from heaven at Eliyahu's command, and the rain that came down in his merit. How this great prophet, who brought them back to the God of their forefathers, is forced to flee from their midst like a criminal trying to escape. Clearly, everything that was achieved at Carmel was external and temporary.

Aside from this objective perspective, relating to Izevel's threat, attention must also be paid to Eliyahu's path as a prophet thus far: he has acted (and, to some extent, will continue to act) in drastic ways, expecting immediate results. We see this in his

decree of absolute drought, in his encounter with the widow at the gates of Tzarfat, and in several aspects of the episode at Carmel. This path, involving harsh punishment of *Am Yisrael*, fails to meet with Divine approval; on the contrary, God gradually nudges Eliyahu away from it. But when the prophet's strict and demanding path turns into one that involves not punishment but rather a drastic awakening – as at Carmel – he seems to be granted Divine approbation and success in the mortal personal. But now Eliyahu experiences profound personal disappointment: his path is not bearing the fruit that he anticipated. Any words of comfort that we may imagine ourselves offering to him – that the seed sown at Carmel might eventually ripen at a later time, etc. – would not console Eliyahu, with his expectations of full and immediate success.

What Eliyahu sees now is what Moshe saw as he descended Mount Sinai: the nation that just weeks ago declared, as one man with one heart, "All that God has spoken we shall do and we shall hear" (*Shemot* 19:8), and that merited a Divine revelation and the gift of God's holy commandments, is now prancing around the Golden Calf.

Revelation and miracles exert power only for a short time, for they are essentially a form of external coercion, forcing man to attain the special spiritual level that their presence brings about. Hence the expression among *Chazal* concerning the experience at Sinai: "He held the mountain over them like a bucket" (*Shabbat* 88a). The experience of fire descending from heaven before the eyes of Israel gathered at Carmel brought about a great elevation of spirit and a realization that "the Lord is God." But a profound, thorough, long-term change in consciousness was not thereby achieved. This Eliyahu realized the very next day, and it caused him great despair.

It would seem that the story about Eliyahu going off to isolate himself in the wilderness of Be'er Sheva and seeking to die is, like the continuation of this chapter, meant as a criticism of the prophet. This moment, in which the lonely, despairing prophet sits under the broom tree, asking God to relieve him of his mission and of his life, in which he sees no further purpose, is the lowest point in Eliyahu's prophetic career.

(to be continued)

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