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

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#### **Shiur #53: Chorev:**

#### **Revelation in a "Small, Silent Voice" (11-14) (Part 5)**

**By Rav Elchanan Samet**

(11) "He said: Go out and stand at the mountain before God. And behold, God passed by, and a great and strong wind broke apart the mountains and shattered the rocks before God; but God was not in the wind. (12) And after the wind – an earthquake; but God was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake – a fire; but God was not in the fire. And after the fire – a small, silent voice. (13) And it was, when Eliyahu heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out and stood at the entrance to the cave...."

Anyone who reads this chapter senses that its climax is the description of God's revelation to Eliyahu in the "small, silent voice," which comes after the wind, the earthquake and the fire. This climax, in verses 11-12, also stands at the center of the story: there are ten verses that precede it, and nine that follow. But the event itself, for all of its powerful impact, is shrouded in mystery. This is the most obscure part of the story. What is the meaning of this revelation, and how does it fit in with the story's broader message? What is the meaning of the repetition of the question, "What do you seek here, Eliyahu?" following this revelation? What new significance does this question assume in light of the revelation, and what is the significance of Eliyahurepeating the same answer afterwards?

Before addressing these questions, we must first clarify the primary, literal meaning of this excerpt. The beginning of verse 11 records God's words to Eliyahu: "Go out and stand at the mountain, before God." Where does the quotation of this direct speech end? Are the following words – "And behold, God passed (literally: "passes") over..." – still part of the direct speech, or are they part of the narrative? And what of the words, "A great wind... before God" – are they part of the narrative, or still part of God's speech? If they are part of the narrative, who is it that stays, "God was not in the wind"? The latter two questions apply to the earthquake and the fire, as well.

In verse 13 we read, "And it was, when Eliyahu HEARD IT, he wrapped his face in his mantle...." What did he hear? If we postulate that all of verses 11-12 are God's direct speech, we may explain that what Eliyahu heard was all of this speech, informing him of what awaits him when he emerges from the cave; Eliyahu listened until the end and then covered his face and went to stand at the entrance to the cave, as commanded. In there, in the middle of verse 13, as Eliyahu stands with his face covered, all that God told him while he was still in the cave indeed comes to pass. Pursuing this hypothesis we may suggest that, for the sake of brevity, the text does not repeat the description of the event itself. After the stage of the small, silent voice, Eliyahu hears a voice asking him, "What do you seek here, Eliyahu?"

But if, on the other hand, we explain the description of the wind, the earthquake, the fire, and the voice as part of the narrative, rather than as a quotation of God's direct speech, then what is it that Eliyahu heard? Was it the "small, silent voice"? How can that be? We may further ask, why did Eliyahu wait until the stage of the silent voice before emerging from the cave, rather than doing so immediately upon being commanded, at the beginning of verse 11, even before the wind came?

It is admittedly easier to explain verse 13 if we adopt the view maintaining that verses 11-12 record a continuous monologue by God, but this interpretation seems inappropriate to the literal meaning of those verses. Why would the text choose to present us with a description of this dramatic revelation in the form of God's "advance notice," rather than as a description of the event itself? Therefore it would seem more logical to suggest that God's speech to Eliyahu concludes with the words, "And behold, God will pass over" – meaning, "Go and stand at the mountain before God WHEN GOD PASSES OVER, NOT RIGHT AWAY" (which also explains the

words, "BEFORE God" – i.e., in the sight of God as He passes over). Eliyahu therefore waits IN THE CAVE for a sign that God is indeed passing over. Then he hears "a great, strong wind... before God" (this time "before" is meant in the sense of time – i.e., before God comes), and the description of its arrival is in the reported narrative of the text. The words, "God was not in the wind," may be the voice of prophecy that Eliyahu hears (as a continuation of God's previous words, "Go and stand... and behold, God will pass over," as though telling him, "Do not be mistaken; God is not yet passing over"). But it is also possible that these words are part of the narrative, representing a projection of Eliyahu's consciousness as he tells himself, "God is not in the wind." This combination between the narrative description of each of the natural phenomena and the reaction to it – "God was not in the ...," continues up until the description of the small, silent voice. Here the reaction (whether external or internal), "God was not in the small, silent voice," is absent; Eliyahu understands that the small, silent voice announces God passing over.

The words, "When Eliyahu heard it," may be understood, in light of the above, as a description of an inner sense of hearing. Following the series of sounds that preceded it, Eliyahu "hears" the "voice" that emerges from the silence. But the Aramaic translation offers a different interpretation, which is adopted by Rashi and other commentators; it suggests that this was a "voice of quiet praise."

In any event, when he hears this voice, Eliyahu understands that the time has come to emerge from the cave and present himself before God Who is passing over. Therefore he covers his face with his mantle (as we read concerning Moshe, in *Shemot* 3:6 – "Moshe hid his face for he feared to gaze at God"), and goes to stand at the entrance to the cave. Then, from the midst of the silence, God's voice suddenly emerges: "And behold, a voice came to him and said, What do you seek here, Eliyahu?"

We must also clarify a further question. From the description of the revelation here it would seem that the wind, the earthquake and the fire are not expressions of God's revelation; on the contrary, they are portrayed as being devoid of God's Presence: "God was not in the ...." But in several places in *Tanakh* the opposite would appear to be the case; God's revelation appears to come about specifically through (or even in the form of) wind, earthquakes and fire.

Actually, even in our case we do not read that there is no connection between the wind, the earthquake and the fire, and God. On the contrary. In our chapter, too, these phenomena serve as an introduction and preparation for God's appearance. This is stated explicitly in relation to the wind: "A great and strong wind... BEFORE GOD." Even though it is not stated explicitly concerning the other phenomena, it applies to them as well; it is noted in the case of the wind because that is the first of the list of natural forces that manifests itself here.

What, then, is the meaning of the three-fold repetition, "God was not in the ..."? It would seem that the text seeks to distinguish between God's emissaries and servants – the means at His disposal, testifying to His rule over the world – and God Himself, Who is infinitely above all the natural forces that He controls, and not identified with any of them.

Thus, although the description of the revelation here does not contradict the other sources, it is nevertheless different from them in that it emphasizes specifically the **DISTINCTION** between the destructive natural forces and God Himself. This perspective is not reflected in any of the other instances where these natural phenomena occur in the context of Divine Revelation.

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish