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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #:56 - Chorev Part 7: The Mission (15-18)

1. The Difficult Question

(15) God said to him: Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damesek, and you shall come to Chazael and anoint him as King of Aram.

(16) And Yehu, son of Nimshi, you shall anoint as king of Israel, and Elisha, son of Shafat, of Avel-Mechola, you shall anoint as prophet in your place.

The mission that God entrusts to Eliyahu, following the indecisive conclusion of their protracted debate, appears at first to have no connection with what preceded it: what does the appointment of new kings (for Aram and for Israel) and a new prophet (Eliyahu's successor) have to do with the question of Divine policy towards the sinful nation of Israel? And what do these personalities have to do with the argument over Eliyahu's approach?

However, as we continue reading, and discover the purpose of these appointments, the connection becomes more apparent:

(17) And it shall be that whoever escapes from the sword of Chazael will be put to death by Yehu, and whoever escapes from the sword of Yehu will be put to death by Elisha.

(18) But I shall leave amongst Israel seven thousand: all the knees that did not bow to Ba'al, and every mouth that did not kiss it.

These three figures will assume positions that will enable them to terribly punish Israel. It seems, then, that it is Eliyahu's view that has prevailed in the argument. His call for revenge on Israel is being answered, and his aspiration for God's word to be effected amongst the nation "in a strong wind, in an earthquake and in fire" is about to be fulfilled. How is this possible?

2. The relationship between the mission and the preceding revelation as the answer to the question.

To answer this question we must re-examine our discussion of the significance of God's revelation in verses 11-12, and the connection between it and the mission

that is now being entrusted to Eliyahu. Let us consider the interpretation proposed by Prof. Y. Zakowitz, in his commentary on this chapter ("*Kol Demama Daka*: Form and Content in I *Melakhim* 19," in *Tarbitz* 51, 5742, pp. 329-346):

"Let us take note of the striking connection between the description of the revelation... (verses 11-12) and the mission that is given to Eliyahu (verses 15-18), both of which express God's response to the prophet's complaint and to his call for revenge. The two answers – the symbolic one, presenting the revelation that is perceived through the senses of sight and hearing (verses 11-12), and the one clarifying to the prophet what he needs to do – are related to one another like a riddle and its solution. The identical response by the prophet to God's repeated question ('What do you seek here?') testifies that the prophet did not solve the riddle the first time around; he needs further clarification... This relationship between the revelation and its interpretation is not unusual in *Tanakh*. M. Weiss writes: 'There are a few instances of revelations in which that which becomes known to the prophet by [Divine] voice seems to be nothing but a chronological succession, with no thematic connection to what was previously revealed to him in a vision – as though the vision was no more than a stage prop, and after that screen is in place the [Divine] Word comes... I intend to demonstrate a structural regularity that is created, and the consistent relationship between that which seen and that which is heard... The vision and the voice explain one another, and the mutual contact between them creates the message of that unit.'"

This correspondence between the revelation and the mission that follows is noted by the Malbim, in his commentary on verse 14:

"He told him that... He would punish the nation through Chazael and Yehu and Elisha; these [three personalities] would correspond to the three symbols of punishment that he had seen – the wind, the earthquake, and the fire."

We may elaborate upon the Malbim as follows: the order of the forces that Eliyahu sees in the revelation moves from the furthest to the nearest. The wind comes from afar and destroys everything in its path; the earthquake emerges from the depths of the earth – but only directly beneath the point where the destruction takes place; while the fire devours – in its place – whatever it takes hold of. The order of the personalities who will bring punishment upon Israel follows the same pattern: Chazael will come upon Israel from afar; he is King of Aram. The rebellion of Yehu will arise from the midst of the nation of Israel, revealing the profound popular dissatisfaction with the reign of the house of Achav. Elisha will act at the most overt and immediately layer: amongst the nation itself.

Prof. Zakowitz broadens this parallel and awards it deeper significance. Before returning to his article, let us first briefly address a literary model that is quite common in *Tanakh* – the "three and four" model. Zakowitz devotes an entire, important book to the discovery of this model and a clarification of its significance (*Of Three... And of Four*, Jerusalem 5739). At the beginning of his book he writes the following:

"There are literary units in *Tanakh* that consist of four layers: the first three echo one another; the transition from one element to the next does not usually entail any change or progress. The fourth element represents a sharp turning point; a change that is the crux and climax of the literary unit. This literary model... is extremely common in *Tanakh*. It appears in various literary genres and plays a role in the molding of many and varied topics."

Let us now return to our chapter and Zakowitz's article about it. The description of the revelation (verses 11-12) is arranged in accordance with the literary model of "three and four." Three destructive natural forces appear in the beginning, and the "small, silent voice" follows them, is a contrast.

Let us set out the description of the revelation in such a way as to highlight this model:

- (1) A great and mighty wind, breaking apart mountains and shattering rocks before God
 But not in the wind was God;
- (2) And after the wind – an earthquake,
 But not in the earthquake was God;
- (3) And after the earthquake – a fire,
 But not in the fire was God;
- (4) And after the fire – a small, silent voice.

Let us now return to the article:

"Despite the similarity between the elements comprising the description – each being preceded with the words, 'And after the...,' then a repeat of the words, 'Not in the...,' and then the closing word – 'God,' we see a deliberate variation. The narrator elaborates in the description of the first destructive power – the wind – and notes its manifestation in and effect on nature. No such elaboration characterizes the descriptions of the earthquake or the fire, so as not to interfere with the rapid and intense rhythm leading us to the appearance of

God Himself. Furthermore, in order to emphasize the connection between these destructive forces and God, the narrator links 'Behold, God passed over' and the description of the wind, by explaining that the wind precedes God's appearance: 'Before God....'"

The final element – the small, silent voice, the climax of this unit and its turning point – is different. Its title is longer than any of the destructive forces ('a small, silent voice' as opposed to 'earthquake' or 'fire'), and it also lacks the concluding phrase that characterizes the three preceding elements.... It is specifically the absence of this conclusion that serves to highlight the contrast, since the lack of the negative assertion implies the positive corollary: while God had not yet appeared, in the preceding destructive forces, He was present in the small silence."

Let us now move on to Zakowitz's analysis of the verses describing Eliyahu's mission (15-18):

"Chazael, Yehu and Elisha will bring destruction and death upon Israel; of the nation there will remain only those who are faithful to God and did not go after the Be'alim. The three people who will sow death are mentioned twice in this unit: first Eliyahu is commanded to anoint the two kings and the prophet, and the reader is left wondering what connection could exist between this mission and the prophet's harsh accusations. Then the three are mentioned again – and now the purpose of the mission and its connection with Eliyahu's complains becomes clearer. The three personalities – Chazael, Yehu and Elisha – parallel the three destructive forces that succeed one another in the description of the revelation: the wind, the earthquake, and the fire. And just as the narrator introduces some variation in the presentation of the destructive forces, so there is variation here, too, despite the almost word-for-word rhythmic repetition – to the point of creating the rather unusual expression of 'anointing' a prophet (verse 16). For the purposes of variation, the narrator gradually lengthens the titles of the three people whom Eliyahu must anoint: first simply 'Chazael,' then 'Yehu, son of Nimshi' (including the father's name), and finally 'Elisha, son of Shafat, of Avel-Mechola' (father's name and his city of origin)."

Now Zakowitz goes on to note the connection between the structure of the "revelation unit" and the structure of the "mission unit":

"Here we are witness to the final aspect of the correlation between verses 11-12 and verses 15-18. The mission is also built along the lines of the "three and four" model: here, too, the fourth element is a contrast to the first three. There,

God appeared after the forces of destruction, in the small, silent voice. Here, God appears after the revenge, after the slaughter; He has mercy and leaves a remnant of His people... The remnant is a sign of God's mercy and His positive relationship towards Israel."

In his final words above, Zakowitz is referring to the concluding verses of God's mission for Eliyahu:

(17) And it shall be that whoever escapes from the sword of CHAZAEL will be put to death by YEHU, and whoever escapes from the sword of YEHU will be put to death by ELISHA.

(18) AND I SHALL LEAVE of Israel seven thousand; all the knees that did not bow to Ba'al, and every mouth that did not kiss it.

Here the author refers us to several examples – principally from the Book of *Yishayahu* (see, for example, *Yishayahu* 37:31-32), demonstrating that "leaving a remnant" is an expression of God's mercy towards Israel. As further support for this idea we may add that the number "seven thousand" is not meant here in its exact, mathematical sense. R. Y. Kaspi notes this and comments: "'Seven thousand' – not necessarily [this exact number]. What it means is – few in number." Elaborating slightly, the Abarbanel writes: "The intention here is not that no more than seven thousand souls will remain throughout the land of Israel. Rather, [the idea is that] he should not think that after permission has been given to the Destroyer to wreak destruction... that he will make no distinction between the righteous and the wicked, for this will not be the case, for at all times 'an angel of God rests around those who fear Him, and saves them' (*Tehillim* 34:8)."

Why, then, does the narrator choose specifically the number seven thousand? It would seem that the number is chosen for its symbolic significance. What the text appears to be saying is that there will always be a SANCTIFIED CORE amongst the nation of Israel that will not become defiled through idolatry, and therefore there will always be a group of people upon whom God's mercy may extend.

What have we "gained" from this clear parallel between God's revelation to Eliyahu and the mission entrusted to him thereafter, in terms of our understanding of the significance of the mission? How does the parallel help us to answer our original question? Zakowitz answers:

"From the description of the actions of the anointed ones (verse 17) it would seem that God is acquiescing to Eliyahu's bitter accusation... Chazael, Yehu and Elisha will 'put to death by the sword' to avenge Eliyahu's claim, 'They

have put Your prophets to death by the sword'... It is Eliyahu who has asked for revenge, and it is therefore necessary that he himself go and exert effort and anoint those who will perform the revenge. His will is going to be fulfilled, but it is his own hands that will end up having spilled this blood. And what thereafter?... 'I shall leave of Israel seven thousand' – the attribute of mercy, 'I shall leave,' is the attribute of God."

The picture that arises from the parallel is therefore one that depicts Eliyahu's mission not as a comforting response on God's part to Eliyahu's demands, but rather as a PUNISHMENT TO ELIYAHU HIMSELF: he will now serve as an instrument in God's hand to carry out a policy that God Himself does not identify with; "God was not in these."

The instruction of the mission to Eliyahu serves to move the prophet from the theoretical argument, in which a person may demand of God the exaction of the attribute of strict justice towards Israel, to the practical level, in which that same person is required to realize the same demand that he made of God, through his own terrible actions. Will Eliyahu be capable of carrying out such actions against his people? Will his hands not tremble at the appointment of a Gentile king so that the latter may wave his sword over Israel and carry out a great slaughter among them?

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish