

## The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

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

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#### **Shiur #69: Navot**

#### **Part 7: Achav's First Response vs. Second Response**

**By Rav Elchanan Samet**

It remains for us to clarify the reason for the change in Achav's reaction, from his response to the first part of Eliyahu's speech – "Have you found me, my enemy?" – to his manifestation of submission to God when he hears the second part.

We have already arrived at a partial answer to the question, on the basis of the last couple of *shiurim*: the transition between Achav's two reactions is, in fact, not as sharp as it might appear at first glance. The first response is not meant as an evasion of responsibility so much as an implied acknowledgment of his sin (see part 5), and as such it represents an appropriate prelude to his second reaction. Likewise, the second reaction does not tell us that Achav has undergone complete, profound repentance. It is submission before God in view of the threat of the terrible punishment that Eliyahu describes (see part 6). The psychological transition between these two reactions is gradual and well within the bounds of what we can accept as being rational, normative behavior. Thus the question is rendered less acute.

Nevertheless, the discrepancy between the two reactions remains, and it changes Achav from a complete criminal into a partial penitent, who is granted some degree of Divine pardon. What causes this development? Is this the accumulated effect of Eliyahu's words, where his first speech (verse 19) was not sufficient to break Achav's stubborn, unrepentant attitude, but his following words (verses 21-24) finally achieved this aim?

Perhaps this is indeed the answer. However, it seems that the distinction between what Achav says following Eliyahu's first words and his reaction after the rest of what Eliyahu has to say (see part 4[3]), may hint at a deeper explanation for the change.

Eliyahu's first prophecy concerns Achav's personal punishment, measure-for-measure, for the murder of Navot. The second prophecy, on the other hand, concerns Achav's royal household, his dynasty. Specifically in this context, Achav is not

personally judged (unlike Izevel). Usually, what affects a person most is personal punishment and suffering: harm to himself in person (and indeed, Achav is told that he will die an unnatural death, followed by a desecration of his remains.) Punishment of those around one – and even of his own family – usually has less of an immediate effect. This is the very claim that Satan makes in *Iyov* 2:4-5, when Iyov passes the first test in maintaining his faith after losing all his children and all of his property:

"... Skin covers skin; a person will give all that he has for the sake of his life. But put forth Your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh; (see) if he will not then curse You to Your face."

Achav's reactions, however, are the opposite.

To explain this phenomenon, let us broaden our perspective so as to survey Achav's kingdom against the background of its history. If we review the history of the Kingdom of Israel, from the time of its establishment by Yeravam ben Nevat up to the ascent of the House of Omri, its most outstanding feature is the acute deterioration in its political stability, with a dizzying turnover of royal houses at its head. While the Kingdom of Yehuda is governed exclusively by descendants of the Davidic dynasty, as a fact that is accepted without question, and the total number of kings during this period is three (Rechavam, Aviam and Assa), the Kingdom of Israel witnesses a series of political assassinations where each new king wipes out his predecessor and all of his dynasty. Achav was the seventh king to rule over Israel, and a member of the third dynasty to have risen to power, following four murders of kings or personalities aspiring to the crown – all within a period of a little over sixty years!

Following all of this, it was the House of Omri – and especially King Achav himself – that restored national and political stability to the kingdom. In terms of politics, the military, and settlement of the land, there is no comparison between the House of Omri – and especially Achav – and any of the kings who preceded them. This conclusion may be drawn from the biblical text, from *midrashei Chazal*, and from archaeological evidence.

We may unquestionably assert that the restoration of national order in all spheres, with the establishment of a stable royal house for future generations, in order to prevent the sort of upheavals that had characterized the kingdom in the past, was a vision and aspiration shared by Omri and Achav; one to which much of their effort and action was directed.

Indeed, Omri and Achav are given credit for this aspiration – both in the *Tanakh* itself, in other places (see below) and in the teachings of *Chazal*, in their

explanation for why this royal dynasty merited to produce four kings who ruled for some fifty years – double the length of time that any other royal houses had lasted until then.

Now Eliyahu appears in Navot's vineyard, and employs the language of two previous prophets – Achiya ha-Shiloni (who had prophesied the downfall of the House of Yeravam) and Yehu ben Chanani (who had foretold the end of the House of Basha). Eliyahu adds his voice to theirs in vilifying the House of Achav and prophesizing its destruction, using exactly the same words with which the previous two prophets had berated the two dynasties that had preceded the House of Omri. Moreover, these two dynasties are portrayed in his words as a precedent and basis for comparison with what is destined for the House of Achav (verse 22). Let us compare the three prophecies:

Prophecy of Achiya ha-Shiloni concerning the House of Yeravam (14:7-16; not in chronological order):

"Since I have lifted you up... you have done worse than all who came before you"

"Therefore, behold, I shall bring evil upon the House of Yeravam, and I shall sweep away the House of Yeravam"

"I shall cut off all males, and any that is shut up or abandoned in Israel"

"Who sinned and caused Israel to sin"

"He who dies of Yeravam in the city shall be consumed by the dogs, and he that dies in the field shall be consumed by the birds of the sky"

Prophecy of Yehu ben Chanani concerning the House of Basha (16:2-7, not in chronological order):

"Since I have lifted you up... You have gone in the way of Yeravam"

"I shall sweep away Basha and his household"

"I shall make your house **like the House of Yeravam ben Nevat...**

"In provoking Him to anger with the work of his hands"

"You have caused My people, Israel, to sin"

"He who dies of Basha in the city shall be consumed by the dogs; and he that dies of him in the field shall be consumed by the birds of the sky"

Prophecy of Eliyahu concerning the House of Achav (21:20-24):

"Since you have devoted yourself to doing evil in the eyes of God"

"Behold, I shall bring evil upon you"

"I shall sweep you away"

"I shall cut off for Achav all males, and any that is shut up or abandoned in Israel"

"I shall make your house **like the House of Yeravam ben Nevat, and like the House of Basha ben Achiya**, for the anger to which you have provoked Me, in having caused Israel to sin"

"He who dies of Achav in the city shall be consumed by the dogs, and he that dies in the field shall be consumed by the birds of the sky."

It is specifically this comparison that hurts Achav, since it implies that the House of Achav will be nothing but a brief episode, devoid of influence, in the stormy history of the Kingdom of Israel – like the House of Yeravam and the House of Basha. All of the enormous efforts at which Omri and Achav had excelled – the creation of the new capital city, Shomron (16:24); the building of other cities and of the royal palace (22:39); forging of courageous political ties with the former enemy Kingdom of Yehuda (chapter 22) and with the Kingdom of Tzidon, the old ally from the days of David and Shelomo (16:31); the reinforcement of Israel's army and leading it to victory against the principal enemy in that generation – the Kingdom of Aram (chapter 20) – all of this will be counted for nothing, and the royal house that has achieved all of this will be cut off! All of Achav's aspiration and all of his plans, all of his positive qualities as the king of Israel, seeking the welfare of his nation (as he saw it, even if at times his view was distorted), were dealt a mortal blow with Eliyahu's message that his royal line was about to end.

Therefore, it is when Achav hears of the imminent collapse of his life's work that he breaks down and mourns. Verse 27 is very precise in its wording: "And it was, **when Achav heard these things**" – i.e., this prophetic speech that joined the fate of the glorious House of Achav to the House of Basha and the House of Yeravam – "Then he rent his clothes and he placed sackcloth upon his flesh and he fasted and lay upon sackcloth and he went about softly."

What emerges, then, is that it is not only the actual submission of Achav that is credited to him in God's speech to Eliyahu. The reason for it (the content of Eliyahu's second speech), too, is counted in his favor, lending depth to the significance of his mourning and his submission and endowing it with a more elevated nature than simple fear of his own death.

The easing of the Divine verdict is likewise suited to the punishment that had led to Achav's submission: the cutting off of the House of Achav is postponed until the days of his son (a period of seventeen years). But Achav's personal punishment, for the murder of Navot and the inheritance of his vineyard – the punishment that did not lead Achav to submission – is not eased, since there is no repentance that can shield him from it.

Rashi summarizes by commenting on verse 29, on the words, "I shall not bring the evil in his days":

"The evil **for his household** [is what] I shall not bring in his days, but the decree of 'the dogs will lick his blood' cannot come in the days of his son; it can only be at the end of his own life."

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The story of the vineyard of Navot is a shocking one, but it does not end with the harsh words, "I shall bring evil upon his household" (as the later division into chapters would have it), but rather, in accordance with the traditional division into *parshiyot*, with the words, (22:1) "They dwelt three years with no war between Aram and Israel."

These three years of quiet, with even Achav's personal verdict being postponed, represent a further easing in addition to the postponement of the punishment to his household until the next generation. This is how *Chazal* and several of the commentators understand it. *Chazal* derive from this verse (*Yerushalmi Sota*, chapter 3 law 1, 18):

"There is some merit that serves to postpone the punishment – for Achav - for three years: 'They dwelt for three years with no war between Aram and Israel.'"

Thus, with a spirit of submission in the face of the verdict, on one hand, and God's postponement of the punishment, on the other, the prophecy brings the secret encounter between the king and the prophet to at least some partial closure.

Translated by Kaeren Fish