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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #74: Achazya

Part 3: "A Hairy Man With a Girdle of Leather About His Loins" (7-8)

(7) And he said to them: What sort of man was it who came up to meet you and told you these things?

(8) So they said to him: A hairy man with a girdle of leather about his loins. And he said: He is Eliya the Tishbi.

This dialogue, conducted between Achazya and his messengers, has dual significance: it guides us towards a proper understanding of the messengers' act in deciding to return to the king and fulfill Eliyahu's mission, and it also helps us understand Achazya's motives in questioning his messengers.

In the previous *shiur* we addressed the praiseworthy decision of the messengers, who became emissaries of Eliyahu and conveyed his message to their sinful king. But one could argue and say, did Achazya's messengers have any idea that it was Eliyahu who was rebuking them for their journey, and that it was he would be demanding that they become his emissaries on their return journey to their king? It is clear that they were not familiar with him at all! "A man came up to meet us" – it is with these words that they report back to Achazya in verse 6. Thereafter they give an external description of him: "A hairy man with a girdle of leather about his loins." When Achazya immediately identifies him, on the basis of this description – "He is Eliya the Tishbi" – we understand that the messengers did not know him.

In truth, even if they did not know him, it was clear to them that this "man" was a prophet of God – both because of the content of his message (a prophecy in God's Name) and because of his external appearance, which apparently was typical of prophets. (Some commentators understand the expression "a hairy man" as meaning that he wore a mantle of hair – which was characteristic of prophets, as explained in *Zekharya* 13:4. Alternatively, the expression may be understood as meaning that he had long hair – which would certainly hint to the fact that Eliyahu was a *nazir*, as many other prophets probably were; see *Amos* 2:11). But the fact that they failed to recognize him is most surprising, as Radak notes (commenting on verse 8):

"This is surprising: how could the messengers of the king of Israel not recognize him? Did he not regularly appear before Achav, and in Shomron?"

This question leads us to conclude that the messengers certainly did recognize the man in front of them as Eliyahu, the prophet. Even if they had never met him or seen him in person, they would certainly have heard about him and could have identified him by his powerful presence and by the prominent signs which they used to describe him to Achazya. However, they also knew that mentioning the name of Eliyahu would arouse their king's anger, since he was the prophet's archenemy, and they might be endangering their lives by revealing that they had obeyed him and become Eliyahu's emissaries vis-à-vis Achazya. Therefore, they pretend ignorance and report to the king as though they have no idea who Eliyahu is. They have returned speedily, as it were, since there is no longer any need for them to go on all the way to Ekron. Their king's question, "Will I recover from this illness?," has already received an answer – "You will surely die." What difference does it make to the king whether he receives this answer from a "local man of God" or from the Philistine oracle? After all, Eliyahu did demand of Achazya's messengers that they fulfill his mission, but he did not require of them to give up their lives or to endanger themselves unnecessarily. Hence, they had the sense to convey God's message to the king without arousing his anger against themselves. But in this play of innocence, they take care to ensure that Achazya himself concludes that the man who spoke to them – and through them, to him – "He is Eliya the Tishbi."

Let us now clarify the significance of this dialogue from the point of view of Achazya's intentions in questioning his messengers. Why is it so important to Achazya to know "What sort of man was it" who sent him a message via his messengers? What does he gain from a description of the man, and why does he think that he will be able to identify him on the basis of his messengers' description?

It seems likely that Achazya was not familiar with all of the prophets who were active in Israel at the time. However, he certainly knew the most prominent among them, the main prophet of his generation – Eliyahu. His heart told him that this prophet, who had "hounded" his father, Achav, on several occasions, and who had been persecuted by Izevel, his mother, was the same one who had revealed himself to the messengers and sent the prophecy of destruction. This prophet was already known for his manner of catching the king "red-handed," as it were, rebuking him with a piercing rhetorical question, and ending off his rebuke with a prediction of terrible punishment. This is what Eliyahu had done to his father, Achav, at the threshing-floor of Navot, at the exact time when Achav had gone down to take possession of it:

"Have you then murdered and also taken possession?!... In the place where the dogs licked the blood of Navot, the dogs will lick your blood, too."
(I *Melakhim* 21:19)

Here, too, the same man of God arises to meet Achazya's messengers just as they make their way to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv. He sends, through them, his rebuke in the form of a rhetorical question ("Is it for lack of... that you send to inquire...?") and the imminent punishment ("Therefore...").

It is with great and barely concealed anxiety, then, that Achazya directs his question towards his messengers: "What sort of man was it..." In response he hears an exact description of the characteristic signs of Eliyahu. What he suspected has turned out to be the truth: "He is Eliya the Tishbi!"

It is with these dramatic words that the first part of the story ends. This dialogue between Achazya and his messengers lays the foundation for the second part of the story, where it becomes clear that Achazya's questioning is intended not only to confirm his suspicions, but also for a practical purpose: to try to lay his hand on the prophet in hiding, who so embitters the lives of the royal family.

Translated by Kaeren Fish