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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #50: Chorev

Part 3: The Double Revelation of God's Angel to Eliyahu (5-8) (continued)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

2. To Mount Chorev

The angel who commands Eliyahu for the second time, "Arise, eat, for the way is still far off for you," does not explain the purpose of the journey. How, then, does Eliyahu know which direction to choose and which destination he must reach? The text keeps all of this concealed, describing only the bare facts:

(8) He went on the strength of that meal for forty days and forty nights, up until the mountain of God, at Chorev.

Commenting on verse 7, the Radak explains:

He did not know where he would be going; he simply walked, unquestioningly, for forty days and forty nights, up until Mount Chorev. And the path there was made straight for him, as it was for the Ark, as it is written (I *Shemuel* 6:12), "The cows walked a straight road." And when he got there he stopped, for he

thought that God's word would be revealed to him there, since at that same mountain He had first revealed himself to Moshe, and there His glory had been revealed when He gave the Torah to Israel.

The Radak's explanation seems to be correct; if we do not accept his explanation then we must posit that the angel told Eliyahu in advance about the purpose of his journey. But then the text would not have hidden that conversation. It would be recorded, at least in some brief form: instead of telling Eliyahu only that "the journey is still far off for you," the angel might just add the words, "to Mount Chorev." Besides this, the concealment of this information from Eliyahu sits well with the purpose of the journey, as the Radak explains, and which we shall now clarify.

Why is Eliyahu led to Mount Chorev?

Mount Chorev symbolizes, in the history of Israel, the covenant forged between God and the nation at that place, and the Divine Revelation to Israel at the giving of the Torah. Here, then, are to be found the historical roots of *Am Yisrael* as God's nation. The irony of the situation should not be ignored. Eliyahu had fled from his people and headed for the wilderness in order to be alone there: "If only I was in the wilderness, in a lodge for wayfarers, that I might leave my people and go from them..." (*Yirmiyahu* 9:1). But, against his will, his legs carry him to the heart of that wilderness, to the exact spot where the historical foundations of Israel lie. And so Eliyahu – who is fleeing from his mission and from his nation – finds himself suddenly face to face with the most powerful symbol of the beginnings of Israelite existence and identity – Mount Chorev. The desert – the place of flight and isolation from his nation, is suddenly the place recalled by the prophet:

So says God: I remember in your favor the kindness of your youth, your love as a new bride, WHEN YOU WALKED AFTER ME IN THE DESERT, IN A LAND THAT WAS NOT SOWN." (*Yirmiyahu* 2:2)

So says God: The nation of survivors of the sword FOUND GRACE IN THE DESERT, when Israel sought rest. (31:1)

The role of Mount Chorev, in light of these verses, is to remind Eliyahu of Israel's merit before God, for having accepted His Torah at this mountain and having entered into a covenant with Him. Does Eliyahu accept this lesson, hinted to him in the fact that he is led to Mount Chorev?

Midrash Eliyahu Zuta (chapter 8) views the situation as follows:

When the Holy One said to Eliyahu, "What do you seek here, Eliyahu?" Eliyahu should have answered: "Master of the universe, they are Your children, the children of Your faithful ones –Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, who performed Your will in the world." Not only did he not say this, but he said: "I have been zealous for the Lord God of Hosts, for the children of Israel have abandoned Your covenant...."

Thus, the Midrash emphasizes, the significance hinted to Eliyahu in the fact that he is led to Mount Chorev is not sufficient; he needs to be told explicitly what this mountain symbolizes. This is the function of the revelation that follows, according to this Midrash, to state that which has so far only been implied:

The Holy One began right away speaking words of comfort to Eliyahu. He said to him: "When I was revealed to give Torah to Israel, only the ministering angels were revealed with me, for they seek the welfare of Israel. As it is written (11-12), "He said: Go out. So I stood at the mountain before God, and behold, God passed over, and a great and mighty wind broke apart the mountains and shattered the rocks before God, but God was not in the wind. 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 still, small voice."

The Midrash is interpreted as follows by R. Shemuel Haida of Prague, author of "*Zikukin de-Nura*" (a commentary on the Midrash Tanna de-Vei Eliyahu):

All that is mentioned in this verse concerning the strong wind, the earthquake, the fire, and the still, small voice, which occurred at this mountain for Eliyahu – all of it also happened at that same mountain at the time of the giving of the Torah. Thus the Holy One reminded Eliyahu of the merit of the giving of the Torah to Israel, in order that Eliyahu would plead for mercy and stand up in defense of Israel.

As the Midrash sees it, the revelation to Eliyahu was meant to be a sort of reminder of the experience at Sinai and God's revelation to Israel there. The wind, the earthquake and the fire, which preceded the Divine revelation upon the mountain, are God's messengers, announcing His arrival. Although they usually signify forces of destruction in the world, in this context of their appearance at Mount Sinai at the time of the giving of Torah, with the intention of preparing Israel for God's revelation and to straighten the crookedness of their hearts, they are "ministering angels" that "seek the welfare of Israel." This is undoubtedly a hint to Eliyahu as to the proper use of these powers and how they should be turned into angels who seek Israel's welfare, rather than angels of destruction sent to punish them.

We have examined above one perspective on the purpose of Eliyahu being led to Mount Chorev. The Midrash that we have quoted does not suffice with noting that Mount Chorev is the place where Torah was given to Israel; rather, it goes further and depicts the revelation to Eliyahu there in this context of the Divine revelation to Israel at the time of the giving of the Torah. In this way, the Midrash attempts to solve the great mystery of our chapter – the significance of the wind, the earthquake and the fire, and the still, small voice, in a way that connects them with the central theme of the story as a whole - the argument between Eliyahu and God.

In the coming *shiurim* we shall explore other possibilities as to the significance of bringing Eliyahu to Mount Chorev, and concerning the revelation that he experiences there.

(to be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish