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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #89: The Storm Part 4: The Dialogue on the Other Side of the Jordan (9-10)

1. "Ask what I shall do for you before I am taken from you"

The change in Eliyahu's attitude towards Elisha, following the latter's thrice-repeated oath before they pass over the Jordan (as discussed in the previous *shiur*), finds even clearer expression after they have passed over:

"And it was, when they passed over, that Eliyahu said to Elisha: Ask what I shall do for you **before I am taken from you**" (9). It is important to note that this is the first time that Eliyahu gives explicit voice to his "secret." The purpose of Eliyahu's journey had been clear to Elisha, as it had been to the apprentice prophets, but it had remained a secret which was not discussed openly – and certainly not mentioned in front of Eliyahu himself. It is for this reason that Elisha does not formulate any reason for his firm oath not to abandon Eliyahu on the way, even though both of them are quite well aware of his motivation. For the same reason, the apprentice prophets, full of emotion aroused by the knowledge of what is going to happen, approach Elisha rather than Eliyahu, and for the same reason he tells them, "Be silent." Here, however, in this final dialogue between the master and his disciple, close to the place where Eliyahu will be taken up, the veil of secrecy is lifted and he talks openly with Elisha.

Even more important than the fact of the open conversation is its content: "Ask what I shall do for you." A gentle, fatherly attitude is manifest here in the master's words to his disciple before they part. It seems that Eliyahu is inwardly pleased by the display of Elisha's loyalty, and seeks to provide him with some reward that he can take back with him on his return journey. Had Elisha acceded to Eliyahu's pleas – "Remain here, I pray you..." – he would not have deserved this largesse on Eliyahu's part.

What sort of request is Eliyahu expecting from Elisha? It is difficult to know, because it immediately becomes apparent that Elisha's answer does not match what Eliyahu meant. Nevertheless, a close analysis of his offer – "What shall I do for you"

– tells us that he had some specific action in mind; perhaps the granting of a blessing or giving Elisha some object.

2. "I pray you, let a double portion (*pi shenayim*) of your spirit be upon me"

In his answer, Elisha is once again revealed to his master (and to us, the readers) as having his own, different view of things. He requests something that Eliyahu would never have imagined to offer:

And Elisha said: Then, I pray you, let a double portion of your spirit be upon me (9)

What is the meaning of this request? The commentators offer various interpretations.

a. Some understand the term "*pi shenayim*" as meaning "double" (as in contemporary usage, and as we have translated thus far), such that Elisha's request is – as formulated by Ba'al ha-Metzudot – that "let the spirit of prophecy rest upon me at twice the level that it rested upon you."

It would seem that Rashi, too, understands the request thus. Although he writes nothing on this verse, he comments on Eliyahu's words, "You have asked something difficult," as follows:

It is impossible to give you more than what I myself have.

This interpretation raises some difficult problems. The Zohar questions (*Vayeshev*, part 1, 191b):

What is the meaning of the expression, "a double portion of your spirit upon me"? Could he possibly have thought to ask two (i.e., double) from someone who had only one? How could he ask Eliyahu for something that Eliyahu himself did not possess?

Abarbanel poses the same question at the beginning of his commentary on our chapter (eighth question), adding a more critical dimension:

This is a grave and most inappropriate request – both towards Eliyahu, who would not be able to give double of what he had, and in terms of Elisha himself – for having the great arrogance to ask of his master that he [the disciple] be greater and more elevated than him. And although our Sages teach that a person

does not feel jealousy towards either his own son or his disciple, it seems strange that Elisha would ask not only to be like Eliyahu, his teacher, but that he should have double of what he had.

b. In some places, *Chazal* interpret Elisha's request as asking for the power to perform twice as many wonders as his master had performed. The earliest formulation of this view is to be found (in rhyming verse) in *Sefer Ben-Sira*, in the section entitled, "Praise for the Forefathers of the World":

Eliyahu was concealed in a storm
And Elisha was filled with his spirit
He increased signs two-fold
And all that his mouth spoke were wonders.

The same view is expressed very concisely in the Beraita of the 32 *middot, midda* 1:

"Then, I pray you, let a double portion of spirit be upon me" – thus we find eight wonders performed by Eliyahu, and sixteen performed by Elisha.

In several places *Chazal* assert that Eliyahu revived one person who had died, while Elisha – by virtue of the "double portion" – revived two: the son of the Shunamite woman (4:34-35) and the dead man who got up when he touched Elisha's bones (13:21) – or, alternatively, Naaman, whose recovery from *tzara'at* is comparable to revival from death (a person suffering from *tzara'at* considered like someone who is dead).

However, it seems difficult to accept either variation of this view as a satisfactory interpretation of the literal level of Elisha's request. Firstly, is the number of miracles performed by the prophet any indication of his prophetic spirit? After all, what Elisha asks for is a double portion of Eliyahu's spirit. Secondly, is Elisha a "miracle collector"? The miracles performed by Eliyahu and by Elisha were not for their own sakes; rather, they were needed for the generation as a whole, they were necessitated by the times and by the prophetic role that they fulfilled. It is difficult to imagine that what Elisha asks of Eliyahu is a multiplication of the number of miracles that he performed! Thirdly, as Abarbanel comments on this interpretation: "Based on these views, I cannot understand why Eliyahu would answer him, 'You have asked something difficult.' Did it seem unlikely that Elisha would perform more miracles than Eliyahu?"

c. Without changing our understanding of the expression "*pi shenayim*" as meaning "double," Ralbag nevertheless manages to arrive at a different interpretation of the verse as a whole. To his view, the basis for doubling is not Eliyahu's spirit, but rather that portion of his spirit that is bestowed on each of the apprentice prophets. He writes:

This means: Out of what you bestow of your spirit upon all of the apprentice prophets, let that which is bestowed upon me be double that of all the others. This is reminiscent of what is written (*Devarim* 21:17): "Rather, he shall acknowledge the son of the less loved [wife], to give him double of all that he has."

The difficulty inherent in Ralbag's explanation is that he introduces into our verse an element that is not hinted at anywhere: the apprentice prophets and their status as inheritors of Eliyahu's spirit. The example that he brings from the inheritance of the firstborn is not the same as our case. There, the text is explicitly comparing the son of the most-loved wife to the son of the less-loved wife for the purposes of inheritance: "And it shall be, on the day he bequeaths to his sons that which he has, he cannot show preference to the son of the most-loved wife over the son of the less-loved wife if [the latter] is the firstborn." Therefore we may say, in that case, that the basis for calculating the double inheritance to be received by the eldest son is that which is received by the son of the most-loved wife. In our case, however, there is no mention at all of the apprentice prophets in relation to Elisha.

d. The earliest proposal of a different interpretation of our verse, based on the understanding that the expression "*pi shenayim*" cannot mean double, was the grammarian R. Yona Ibn Janach, in his *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*. His view is adopted by Ibn Ezra in his commentary on the Torah as well as Rabbi Yosef Kimhi, whose explanation is cited by his son, Radak, on our verse.

Before examining what these commentators have to offer, let us review the only three places in *Tanakh* where the expression "*pi shenayim*" occurs. Aside from our verse and the aforementioned discussion of the inheritance of the firstborn in *Sefer Devarim*, it appears once in *Sefer Zekharya*:

And it shall be throughout the land, promises God, that two parts (*pi shenayim*) of it shall be cut off and shall perish, while the third part (*ha-shelishit*) of it shall remain. (13:8)

It is clear from the context here that "*pi shenayim*" does not mean "double," but rather "two-thirds." This conclusion arises inescapably from the end of the verse –

"while the third part of it shall remain." This interpretation would also make sense in the context of the inheritance of a firstborn who receives a double portion in relation to an (only) brother: "To give him '*pi shenayim*' of all that he has" – i.e., to give him two-thirds of the entire inheritance.

Now let us return to the commentators, starting with R. Yona Ibn Janach, in his discussion of the root "*p-h*" (*Sefer Ha-Shorashim*, Bakhar Edition, p. 395):

"*Pi shenayim* of all that he has..." – similar to "two parts of it will be cut off and perish"; "let two parts of your spirit be upon me." The meaning of "*pi shenayim*" is two parts. Sometimes it means two thirds of the total, as in "two parts of it will be cut off and perish, while the third part shall remain," and likewise, "I pray you, let two parts of your spirit be upon me." Then there are another two-thirds of the total, when it says, "two parts of all that he has" – when he divides between only two, in other words, between the elder son and one other son. But when he divides among more than two, then it refers not to two-thirds of the total, but rather double of what each of the other inheritors receives....

"*Pi shenayim*", then, means two parts of the total – whether the total is divided amongst three (in which case the expression means "two-thirds") or more than three equal parts. Rabbi Yona Ibn Janach understands our verse, "I pray you, let a double portion of your spirit rest upon me," specifically in the sense of two thirds – i.e., Elisha requests "two-thirds" (obviously meaning the greater part) of the spirit of Eliyahu. That which, according to the first interpretation of his request, would have been "arrogant," in the words of Abarbanel, now become an expression of the true humility of a disciple who makes no pretense of being even as great as his master, but rather aspires to have only "most" of his spirit.

Let us now look at Ibn Ezra's commentary on *Devarim* 21:17 –

"To give him *pi shenayim* – that he should take two parts. If there were three (sons), they should calculate as though they were four, and he takes two parts. If there were two sons, they should calculate as though they were three, and so on. As I understand it, this is also the meaning of, "let two parts of your spirit be upon me," as I have explained.

Ibn Ezra's commentary on *Sefer Melakhim* is no longer extant, but another commentator who offers a similar interpretation of our verse is Radak, citing his father:

My father, of blessed memory, interpreted "*pi shenayim*" as meaning that he asked for two parts of Eliyahu's spirit. Similarly, the Torah says, "two parts of all that he has" – two parts of his estate, for the firstborn takes two portions of the estate, while the other brother takes the third part.

The comparison drawn by these three commentators between what Elisha is asking and the law of inheritance by the firstborn can help us understand what lies behind Elisha's request. Abarbanel poses the following challenge to all of the views that we have examined thus far:

It seems to me that Elisha did not ask Eliyahu for a double portion of his spirit, neither in miracles nor in prophecy (as *Chazal*, Rashi, and Ba'al ha-Metzudot would have it), neither from him nor from the other prophets (as Ralbag suggests), for this would be in the hands of God, Who "grants wisdom to the wise" – *Daniyel 2:21*); Eliyahu could not have granted this even if Elisha asked it of him.

The double inheritance of the firstborn son is a positive commandment: "He shall acknowledge the firstborn son... to give him a double portion...." However, this does not mean that if the father refuses to acknowledge his firstborn son and regards him as equal to his other children, the firstborn son loses out. The father is commanded to recognize and acknowledge that which the Torah states – that the firstborn has a preferential status in relation to his brothers, and receives a double portion. The father's bequeathing of a double portion of the inheritance to the firstborn may be defined as a formal act of recognizing him as the firstborn. However, the law itself is set down by the Torah, and the father is powerless to change it. The significance of this law is a recognition of the fact that the firstborn is the "primary" son, who continues his father's personality and leads the family after his father's death.

On the basis of the parallel between the law of the firstborn in *Sefer Devarim* and Elisha's request we may say that the same applies in our case. The measure of the prophetic spirit that will rest upon Elisha, as inheritor of Eliyahu's role, is indeed up to God; it is not in Eliyahu's hands – as Abarbanel correctly argues. What Elisha is asking of his master is that Eliyahu acknowledge him as his main successor, as the prophet who continues him. In this respect Elisha does answer Eliyahu's question, "Ask what I shall **do** for you."

The attitude that Eliyahu displays towards Elisha, during their joint journey as far as Yericho, is – as we have seen – somewhat similar to his attitude towards the other apprentice prophets: "He tried to get him [Elisha] to remain [in Beit El and in Yericho], like one of them," as Abarbanel defines it. Of course, Eliyahu has not

forgotten God's words – "and Elisha... you shall anoint as prophet in your stead." Both of them are well aware that Elisha will inherit Eliyahu's role as the prophet of the generation. The question that remains to be clarified is whether Eliyahu will acknowledge and recognize Elisha as his successor, as his continuation, or whether Elisha's rise to the status of the prophet of the generation will be the result of an independent process that will take place after Eliyahu's death. Will Elisha be a prophet who starts a new path, or will his path be an unbroken continuation of that of Eliyahu? This is the crux of the covert conflict between Eliyahu and Elisha with regard to Elisha's accompaniment of his master on his journey to the place where he will be taken up.

It is this, then, that Elisha now asks for openly: he wants Eliyahu's recognition of him as his successor and the continuer of his path amongst *Am Yisrael* – in precisely the same way that a father acknowledges and recognizes his firstborn son as his successor in leading the family, expressed through the act of giving him a double portion of the inheritance. "Of all that he has," in the case of Eliyahu, means neither silver nor gold nor a piece of land; it means his prophetic spirit. When Eliyahu's spirit rests upon Elisha then everyone will recognize that Elisha is the successor and continuer of the path of his great master, who is also his spiritual father.

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