

**Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings**  
**By Rav Alex Israel**

**Lecture #23 - Chapter 19 – Prophet in Distress**

I have acted zealously for the Lord, the God of hosts. Israel have forsaken Your covenant, destroyed Your altars, and killed Your prophets by the sword; and I only, am left, and they seek to take my life. (19:10)

With these desperate lines, an impassioned Eliyahu protests to God. What is agitating him? Is it his concern for his personal safety? Is he furious with the nation for their religious betrayal? Eliyahu had just experienced one of his greatest successes, bringing the nation to an unequivocal God-awareness on Mt. Carmel. Why is he so dejected?

How does God respond to Eliyahu?

And He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord."  
And behold the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountain and broke the rocks  
... but the Lord was not in the wind.  
And after the wind, an earthquake;  
- but the Lord was not in the earthquake.  
And after the earthquake, a fire;  
- but the Lord was not in the fire.  
And after the fire, a sound of thin silence.<sup>1</sup> (v.11-12)

What does this mean?

And how does Eliyahu respond to God's cryptic message?

When Eliyahu heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance to the cave...  
And He said, "What are you doing here Eliyahu?" (v.13)

When prompted by God as to his mode of thinking, of being, as to his mission and essence,<sup>2</sup> Eliyahu repeats those harsh lines verbatim, word for word:

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<sup>1</sup> This is a difficult phrase. Rashi speaks of "a voice emerging out of the silence;" Radak - a low-toned voice; Ralbag – a voice that is a mix of sound and silence.

<sup>2</sup> See the Radak to verse 10, where he suggests that this question is similar to when God engaged Adam with the famous question "Where are you?," or Kayin after the murder of Hevel: "Where is Hevel your brother?" It is a mode of "engaging in conversation to hear a response," in other words, a prompt so that the person will talk to God, as God seeks that man confront God and his own self.

I have acted zealously for the Lord, the God of hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant, destroyed Your altars, and killed Your prophets by the sword; and I only, am left, and they seek to take my life. (v.14)

This highly enigmatic "dialogue" stimulates many questions. What is Eliyahu trying to say to God? And what is God communicating to Eliyahu? What is the symbolism behind the wind, the earthquake, and the fire? And what is the small, still voice? Furthermore, when prompted by God, why does Eliyahu repeat himself?

One final question. If you read the chapter, you will see that God took the trouble to miraculously escort Eliyahu to a specific location - Mt. Sinai. Why Mt. Sinai? What is the connection between Mt. Sinai and this story?

I would like to explain this story in the following manner.

## **THE CHALLENGE AND THE FAILURE**

As we have mentioned, chapter 19 opens as Eliyahu is escorting Achav to the royal palace in Yizrael. Achav, after witnessing God's dramatic power at Mt. Carmel, had been swept up in the inspiration of the moment. The king had allowed the slaughter of the four-hundred prophets of Ba'al. And now, Eliyahu ran before his chariot as a loyal servant:

Once he [Achav] had allied himself with Eliyahu, he was accorded due honor as is befitting a king, for at that moment he had repented. He [Eliyahu] sought to draw him closer to the service of God. (Malbim 18:46)

At that moment, everything looked positive. The king had made a clear statement to the nation, leading them personally in the correct religious direction. However it was not so simple:

When Achav told Izevel all that Eliyahu had done and how he had put all the prophets [of Ba'al] to the sword, Izevel sent a messenger to Eliyahu saying, "Thus and more may the gods<sup>3</sup> do, if by this time tomorrow, they will not have made you like one of them. (19:1-2)

Achav returned to the palace excited, reporting the impressive events of the day - the contest and the fire from heaven - to his wife and court advisors. But Izevel, resolute and unimpressed, sent a message to Eliyahu that he was now subject to a royal death warrant.

Why Izevel? Let us not forget that the 400 prophets of Ba'al were described as "eating at the table of Izevel" (18:19) and that it was Izevel who

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<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew is quite deliberate in having Izevel refer to "the gods" in the plural form, as denoted by the verbs "yosifun... ya'asoun."

was zealous in banning God worship, executing any prophet to God (18:4). Izevel is depicted as religiously impassioned. It was she who set the spiritual tone for the kingdom. Her death threats were to be taken seriously.

## PERSONAL OR NATIONAL?

Eliyahu leaves the borders of Israel.<sup>4</sup> He ventures into the desert in order to die.<sup>5</sup> He has given up. At the initial level, we can demonstrate that Eliyahu is driven by a concern for his personal welfare and that his fear expresses itself in his desire to die. This is articulated clearly by the sevenfold repetition of the word, "*nefesh*" (life).<sup>6</sup>

19:2: "Your life (*nefshekha*) will be like the life (*nefesh*) of one of them."

19:3: Eliyahu flees "for his life" (*ve-yelekh el nafsho*)

19:4: "He wanted to die (*Va-yishal et nafsho la-mut*), saying, "Enough! Take my life" ("*kach nafshi*")

19:10,14: (twice) "...and they seek to take my life." (*nafshi le-kachta*)

In this regard, it is worthwhile noting the inversion of the verb "*kach*." Due to the fact that "they seek to take my life" (*nafshi le-kachta*), Eliyahu pleads with God that HE take his life: "Take my life (*kach nafshi*), for I am not better than my fathers."

Whereas this is certainly one factor that contributes to Eliyahu's loss of confidence, however, it fails to provide a full rationale for his behavior. After all, Eliyahu exhibited fearless confidence when confronting Achav. He had avoided Izevel's ban on God worship and her execution of prophets in the past. What changed? Should the death threat alone have prompted Eliyahu's collapse?

But there is a second dimension that relates to the state of the nation. Eliyahu clearly expected things to turn out differently. He assessed Achav incorrectly, anticipating a more enthusiastic and determined response - that Achav would act decisively, confronting and rejecting Izevel's religious stance. In contrast, he quickly discovered that in a mere few hours, Achav's mind had been swayed in the reverse direction.

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<sup>4</sup> Described as "from Dan to Beer Sheva" – *Shoftim* 20:1, *Shmuel* I 3:20; *Shmuel* II 3:20, 17:11, 24:2; *Melakhim* I 5:5. South of Beer Sheva, due to the sparse rainfall, agricultural sustenance becomes incredibly difficult. Only unusual desert societies, such as the ancient Nabateans could survive in those conditions.

<sup>5</sup> Reminiscent of the story of Hagar and Yishmael which takes place in the "Desert of Beer Sheva." Hagar leaves the faint Yishmael "under one of the bushes." See *Bereishit* ch.21

<sup>6</sup> In *Tanakh*, the word "*nefesh*" indicates "life," rather than "soul" or some particularly spiritual element of self. When we are told to afflict our "*nefesh*" on Yom Kippur (*Vayikra* 23:27), that is expressed by denying the body food, drink etc... not the soul. When on Yom Tov, we are allowed to do work for "*ochel nefesh*" (*Shemot* 12:16), which indicates food of the BODY and not the "soul." Likewise, in *Sefer Tehillim*, "*nefesh*" refers to one's life, not one's spiritual destiny.

“Izevel sent a messenger to Eliyahu”: She saw that Achav's heart was leaning towards Eliyahu and that he identified with his point of view. She didn't kill him immediately, for she knew that during the night, Achav would return to his evil ways. (Malbim 19:2)

Achav and the entire kingdom were religiously paralysed due to Izevel's overwhelming influence. Without removing Izevel, there was no hope.

Let us recall the wider context here. Eliyahu, in God's name, had orchestrated a three-year drought that had brought the nation to its knees. This had culminated in the decisive religious contest at Mt. Carmel that had exposed the falsity of the Baal, bringing king and country to proclaim faith in God alone. It had been an excruciating process, with Eliyahu living in exile for three years. Indeed, he had succeeded in turning the king around. But now the entire project, this huge educational endeavor, lay shattered, in ruins. It was not Izevel's death threat alone. Izevel's confidence highlighted the understanding that she was in control, and that the transformation of national priorities would be a more arduous, complex, and protracted process.

To demonstrate this perspective, listen to Eliyahu's words on Mt. Sinai:

I have acted zealously for the Lord, the God of hosts. Israel have forsaken Your covenant, destroyed Your altars, and killed Your prophets by the sword; and I only, am left, and they seek to take my life. (19:10)

In these words, Eliyahu paints the entire nation with the paintbrush of Izevel. Eliyahu equates the entire nation with the evil queen! From his perspective, if they are compliant, they are Izevel's accomplices.

## **THE CONVERSATION AT MOUNT SINAI**

This goes some way to explaining Eliyahu's accusation at Mt. Sinai. Why does he accuse Israel so harshly? Here is the Malbim's reading<sup>7</sup> of that episode:

“What are you doing here Eliyahu?”: As if to say, the role of the prophet is to be amongst the people, to rebuke and to prophecy, not to go into seclusion in the wilderness and mountains.

“And he [Eliyahu] responded”: Here I am! I cannot be a prophet who teaches and guides this nation, for my zealotry over their evil acts has killed me. I executed the prophets of the Ba'al and now they seek to kill me! I cannot continue with my mission.

... He showed him that God is not to be found in the wind, earthquake, and fire, but only in the voice of silence, and from this His messengers

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<sup>7</sup> Of course there are other approaches. Radak suggests that the revelation at Mt. Sinai is a reward to Eliyahu for his successes upon Mt. Carmel. However, then why does he relieve Eliyahu of his mission? Is there no more work to do? And if Eliyahu has succeeded so absolutely, then why does he seek to die?

should learn the lesson: not to sound a loud noise, nor to burn like fire, as did Eliyahu in his zeal for God, in his cessation of the rain and his execution of the prophets of Ba'al. God, instead, sends his messengers to approach the people with a quiet voice, to persuade the nation with bonds of love and gentle words.

Did Eliyahu accept God's message? It is clear that he did not. Eliyahu stands again a second time, at the entrance of the cave. God asks him:

“Why are you here Eliyahu?”: Why do you not return to your prophetic mission, to guide the nation without zeal and turbulence?

And he repeated a second time – **that he could not abandon the way of zeal for God, for he was zealous for God's name.**

... and regarding that he expressed his desire not to return to prophecy, due to his is zeal, He commanded that he should anoint Elisha.

Eliyahu is a person who speaks the language of fiery passion. He knows what is true, and when the world around him fails to correspond to the truth that burns within, he cannot accept the travesty. He cannot tolerate a government of Israel that expresses values antithetical to God. He cannot stand the fact that God will sit by and watch as the nation adopts the Ba'al as the national deity. If the Malbim is correct, we might say that Eliyahu wishes to hold God to a standard even higher than that which God demands of Himself!<sup>8</sup> God wishes to function in the world via the small still voice; Eliyahu wants fire, thunder, and earthquake! He cannot tolerate a world in which Izevel can rule with a free hand. He does not understand why God will not bring the world to order. And even when God DOES tell him what He wants, Eliyahu informs God that he cannot comply; he is made of different stuff. Eliyahu cannot do the small still voice!

And so, we witness the one time in Jewish history when a prophet effectively resigns. God accepts his resignation, and informs him that He is to appoint Elisha in his stead.

## ELIYAHU AND MOSHE

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### <sup>8</sup> Three prophets:

- one defended the honor of the father and of the son,
- one defended the honor of the father but not of the son
- and one defended the honor of the son but not of the father.

Yirmiyahu defended the honor of the father and of the son, as it says, "we sinned and transgressed. You did not have mercy" (*Eikha* 3) ... Therefore, his prophecy was doubled.

...**Eliyahu defended the honor of the father but not of the son, as it says, "I was exceedingly jealous for Hashem, the Lord of Hosts." What does it say [regarding this]? "You go back... anoint Elisha ben Shafat in your stead as prophet over Israel" (*Melakhim* I 19).**

Yonah defended the honor of the son but not of the father. What does it say? "And the word of Hashem came to Yona second time." [He spoke to him] a second time and no more. (*Mekhilta De-Bei Rabbi Yishmael, Messekhet De-Pascha* #1).

I am sure that in reading these chapters you have been struck by similarities between the persona of Moshe and that of Eliyahu.<sup>9</sup> In our *perek* alone, we have a series of contact points: The imagery of the vision of an angel in the desert (like at the burning bush), a miraculous forty days without eating or drinking, and of course Eliyahu's rendezvous with God at Mt. Sinai. Furthermore, the chapter ends with an appointment of Eliyahu's disciple, Elisha, who will succeed him, much like Joshua, Moses' student who becomes his successor. (Even the name Elisha – "God will save" - matches the meaning of Yehoshua!) The chapter is filled with hidden references to Moshe.<sup>10</sup>

But the central scene of the chapter is the most evocative. Moses also visited God in a cave, or a "nook" on Mt. Sinai.<sup>11</sup> It was at that site, that mysterious cave, that momentous debate raged between Moshe and God regarding the forgiveness of Israel after their great idolatrous sin of the Golden Calf. At that great epiphany, God's presence or essence also passed by Moshe:

And God passed over his face and proclaimed: The Lord, The Lord, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin. (*Shemot* 34:6-7)

Why did God lead Eliyahu to the cave at Sinai? Because it is at that location that God revealed His identity as a merciful God, Who practices forbearance. God wanted Eliyahu to learn from the great prophet Moshe, the defender of Israel, who, after the Golden Calf, invoked the covenant<sup>12</sup> in order to protect the nation.

How wide, then, is the gulf that separates Moshe and Eliyahu! Moshe pleads for the nation. Moshe knows how to present God's demands to the people – he rebukes the people for their part in the Golden Calf and kills the perpetrators. Yet it is Moshe who boldly stands before God to demand the nation's forgiveness. Moshe defends the nation. Eliyahu however, accuses the nation of abrogating the covenant. God directed Eliyahu to that cave at Sinai; it should have resonated with the legacy of Moshe, the mandate that

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<sup>9</sup> See a very lengthy list in *Yalkut Shimoni* on *Melakhim* #209 and the following comprehensive article: <http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/kitisa/hak.html>

<sup>10</sup> In previous chapters, Eliyahu has exhibited similar characteristics to those of Moshe: The building of the altar on Mt Carmel with its 12 stones reminds us of the altar and 12 stones at Mt. Sinai built by Moshe. At the inauguration of the *Mishkan* (*Vayikra* 9:24), Moshe, like Eliyahu, brings fire from heaven to consume the *korbanot*. In both cases, the people react by "falling on their faces." In chapter 18, Eliyahu kills the prophets of Ba'al much like Moshe executed the perpetrators of the Golden Calf. The chapter ends with Eliyahu fleeing the country because he has killed the prophets of Ba'al, much like Moshe fled Egypt because he had upset Pharaoh through an act of murder.

Later (*Melakhim* II ch.2), we will see Eliyahu splitting the Jordan river in imitation of the splitting of the Red Sea, and, of course, neither Moshe nor Eliyahu have a known burial place.

<sup>11</sup> It is worthwhile reading, at the very least, *Shemot* 33:17-23.

<sup>12</sup> Moshe talks about the oath to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, but using the language and imagery – "stars of the heaven" - of the *Brit Bein Ha-Betarim* (*Bereishit* ch.15).

the prophet defend the nation before God. Instead, Eliyahu chose to bemoan, malign, and accuse Israel for their breach of the covenant.

### THREE TASKS

And hence, God relieves Eliyahu of his mission. He instructs him to put three processes into action, each a response to his outrage at the religious sins of Achav's regime:

1. To anoint Chazael as King of Aram – a king who eventually devastates the Northern Kingdom.<sup>13</sup>
2. To anoint Yehu as king over the North – a king who eventually kills and replaced the royal House of Omri and Achav.
3. To anoint Elisha in his stead.

Clearly, these three actions represent a three-pronged response to Eliyahu's outrage. Chazael represents national punishment from an outside foreign direction. Yehu constitutes an internal reordering or correction. The appointment of Elisha resolves Eliyahu's personal breakdown.<sup>14</sup>

### THE APPOINTMENT OF ELISHA

The scene in which Eliyahu meets Elisha is a wonderful example of the contrast between these two men.<sup>15</sup> We meet Elisha as he is plowing with 24 oxen. It is apparent that Elisha is a member of the family who own the farm, which would indicate that we are dealing with a wealthy family. Elisha clearly works on the farm and pulls his weight with the agricultural responsibilities.

In typical Eliyahu fashion,<sup>16</sup> Eliyahu flings his cloak over Elisha and immediately, Elisha seems transformed, abandoning his work and running after Eliyahu.

But then Elisha stops, and says:

Let me kiss my father and mother goodbye, and then I will follow you... He turned back from him and took the yoke of the oxen and slaughtered them... and gave it to the people and they ate. Then he arose and followed Eliyahu and became his assistant. (20-22)

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<sup>13</sup> *Melakhim* II 13:7, 22-23

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, Eliyahu complies only with the final instruction. He appoints Elisha without delay, but he never anoints Chazael, nor Yehu. Malbim suggests that Achav's *teshuva* (see end of ch.21) caused God to delay the punishment of *Beit Achav*. Both Radak and Ralbag claim that Eliyahu had intended to perform the first two missions, but he met Elisha on his way and understood that rendezvous as a clear sign that Elisha was to carry out those missions as well. Other theories are also possible.

<sup>15</sup> For more on the contrast between these two prophets, see R. Adin Steinsaltz, *Biblical Images*, "Elisha." On the scene of the appointment of Elisha, see R. Elchanan Samet, <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/eliyahu/60eliyahu.htm>

<sup>16</sup> Eliyahu has a manipulative effect on people. See, for example, the widow of Tzarafat (17:15), and *Melakhim* II 1: 6.

See how Elisha talks about running back to "kiss" his father and mother goodbye. In fact, he doesn't go back and engage in a fond farewell to his parents. He gets "distracted." He ends up saying goodbye to the entire farm, taking the oxen and serving a feast for the entire community! One wonders what Eliyahu – the ultimate loner – made of this behavior. I presume that he was rather frustrated, puzzled by Elisha's penchant for social niceties, when the mission of God awaited. Elisha definitely shows a social sensitivity, an ability to understand that the divine calling must be balanced with a human approach, which Eliyahu lacks. In this sense, he is an apt replacement for Eliyahu, as he complements Eliyahu's uncompromising principled stance with a more congenial approach.

## EPILOGUE - PINCHAS AND ELIYAHU

We have already compared and contrasted Eliyahu with Moshe. However, in order to understand what Eliyahu might have been seeking, we would do well to explore the connection drawn by *Chazal* between Pinchas and Eliyahu<sup>17</sup> – both entitled as "zealots" by the *Tanakh*.<sup>18</sup>

Pinchas entered the national stage in a frenzy of mixed Israelite-Midyanite relationships, unions that lead directly to worship of foreign gods (see *Bamidbar* 25:1-9). His decisive, if violent, action stopped God's plagues and saved Israel. Pinchas killed an Israelite prince who was consorting with a Midyanite woman, and this zealotry is praised emphatically by God.

Back to the other "zealot," Eliyahu. *Sefer Malakhi* talks about Eliyahu's appearance in future times:

Behold, I am sending to you Eliyahu the prophet before the arrival of the Day of the Lord, that great and awesome day. (*Malakhi* 3:23)

What is Eliyahu's role in preparing Israel for that day, a day that is depicted in harsh terms, "burning as an oven; ... all the wicked will burn like straw"? One of the problems depicted in *Sefer Malakhi*, labelled as a "violation of the covenant of our forefathers" (2:11), is this:

Yehuda has broken faith; abhorrent things have been done in Israel and Jerusalem. For Yehuda has profaned that which is holy to the Lord – he has married the daughter of alien gods. (*Malakhi* 2:11)

The abrogation of the covenant, the "betrayal of Yehuda," is the marriage to non-Jewish women who follow alien gods. What is Eliyahu to do about this? What will he do to prepare for God's awesome day?

He shall reconcile fathers with their sons and sons with their fathers. (3:24)

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<sup>17</sup> Our chapter in *Sefer Melakhim* is actually the *haftara* for *Parashat Pinchas*.

<sup>18</sup> See *Bamidbar* 25:11-12 and *Melakhim* I 19:10, 14.

In other words, the children who were born to mixed marriages, in which the children have been raised in the tradition of the pagan mothers, shall be restored to their fathers, who will teach them to follow God!<sup>19</sup>

What was Eliyahu seeking from Achav? What was he hoping for? He was looking to detach Achav from Izevel. He was hoping to separate this king who had "married the daughter of alien gods" from his idolatrous wife. That is Pinchas and Eliyahu's legacy. Eliyahu led Achav all the way to Yizrael in the hope that Achav would take the next logical step and distance (or possibly kill) Izevel! But that didn't happen. Eliyahu's failure in his mission of obstructing Izevel's hold on her husband, meant that the infrastructure of the Baal was still in place, the government had not changed, and now the spectacle of Mt. Carmel was likely to be a fleeting episode. The change was insubstantial. It was this which caused Eliyahu's sense of frustration and despair.

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<sup>19</sup> See Rambam's *Laws of Kings* 12:2, where he discusses Eliyahu's role in establishing the correct lineage of children born to mixed marriages. I heard this explanation from R. Yaakov Medan.