

SEFER MELAKHIM BET: THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS
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Shiur #08: Chapter 6
A Floating Axe Head and a Blind Army

The sons of the prophets said to Elisha, "See, the place where we live under your direction is too cramped for us. Let us go to the Jordan, and let us each get a log there and let us make us a place there, where we may dwell." And he said, "Go." And one of them said, "Will you please come along with your servants?" And he said, "I will go." He went with them. And when they came to the Jordan, they cut timber. As one was cutting down a tree, the axe head fell into the water; and he cried, and said, "Alas, master! For it was borrowed." And the man of God said, "Where did it fall?" And he showed him the place. And he cut down a stick, and threw it there; and the axe head floated. He said, "Pick it up." And he reached out his hand, and took it. (6:1-7)

We rejoin Elisha and his followers, the *benei ha-nevi'im*, as they voice their discomfort with their cramped housing conditions and plan to create a new living space. Evidently the community is expanding, their ranks having burgeoned so considerably that they need to build a new settlement.¹ A careful reading yields the conclusion that beyond the problem of congested quarters, the group seeks a new location, singling out the Jordan as the ideal site. Where have Elisha's followers been living up to this point, and why are these places now deemed unsatisfactory? We have found Elisha and his disciples in Shomron² and Gilgal.³ Possibly, these locations have become logistically impractical because "the venue could not support the number of students."⁴ Alternatively, the Malbim proposes that the high cost of city living made it prohibitive for the poor students to join Elisha's group of students:

Elisha dwelt in Shomron, and city dwelling is harsh, for it is difficult to afford lodgings and food.

The Malbim, who points to financial distress as the motivating factor, is drawing his cue from the scene of the axe head, apparently borrowed due to its expense, and whose loss thrusts the student into sudden panic. From this

¹ In 2:16 we encountered this group numbering fifty men (although there would seem to be other groups in other locations), in 4:43 they number one hundred men, and now it would seem that their ranks are continuing to grow.

² 5:3

³ 4:38 and also 2:1

⁴ *Yerushalmi Sanhedrin* 10:2

and previous stories⁵ we may surmise that this group of prophets was exceedingly poor. The spacious rural environment of the Jordan would certainly resolve either of these issues.

THE GEICHAZI EFFECT

We may suggest, however, that the prophets' discomfort with Shomron, and their motivation to abandon the big city for the countryside, is not practical but ideological. Our starting point is the *midrash*⁶ quoted by Rashi, the Radak and the Ralbag on the chapter's opening verse:

The Rabbis said that when Geichazi was banished by Elisha, there was a surge in the number of students, because Geichazi was bad to them, and many feared to associate with Elisha due to the evil of Geichazi. (Radak)

Geichazi's negative personality deterred hordes of students who would have otherwise sought Elisha's prophecy, wisdom, and leadership. With Geichazi's departure, students could now engage with Elisha directly. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Geichazi was tempted to leverage the prophet's power as a means for personal gain. A subsequent scene vividly portrays Geichazi as a media publicist for Elisha:

Now the king was talking to Geichazi, the servant of the man of God, and he said: 'Tell me all the wonders that Elisha has done.'" While he was telling the king how [Elisha] had revived a dead person ..." (8:3-5)

Geichazi has access to royalty; he is well connected. Here he has been summoned to relate the miraculous stories of Elisha, even after having been rejected as Elisha's assistant. If we were to transpose this scene to the world of contemporary media, Geichazi would be the type of person to have published the bestseller, the insider "tell- all" expose of Elisha. He would be appearing extensively on all the talk shows, basking in the limelight as he discusses his career alongside Elisha. The Talmud, echoing Geichazi's flaws that are highlighted in the Na'aman episode, portrays him as a charlatan, unconcerned with matters of the spirit, such that when Elisha would teach or preach, Geichazi would not participate in the lecture:

When Elisha would sit and teach, he [Geichazi] would sit outside the door. The students would see him there and say: "If Geichazi doesn't enter, how can we enter?" (*Yerushalmi Sanhedrin* 10:2)

Geichazi guards the door, thereby controlling access to the prophet. He is the organizer and the personal assistant, but his commercial intent and non-spiritual persona deter the genuine students. On this basis we may suggest a dual effect of Geichazi's eventual departure. First, it generated a huge influx of new students to Elisha's prophetic circle. But second, it also

⁵ The penniless widow (4:1), foraging for food to cook (4:39)

⁶ *Sota* 47, *Sanhedrin* 107a and *Yerushalmi Sanhedrin* 10:2

sparked a desire on the part of certain students to abandon the city of Shomron, with its high society and temptation of power, and to head for the Jordan. These *benei ha-nevi'im* sought to leave the decadence behind, and to move to a simpler, more rustic environment, one that was likely more conducive to spiritual contemplation.

Interestingly, Elisha doesn't join them. He says "*lechu* – You go," and until he is explicitly requested to join the group, he is prepared to let them found their new center independently, without his participation. Elisha, in contrast to these followers, views residence in Shomron as an integral part of his work. True to his congenial personality, he is averse to spiritual seclusion. Beyond his personal proclivities, he seeks engagement with, and influence upon, the king of Israel, and he pursues involvement in national affairs rather than withdrawal from them.

HOW TO FLOAT AN AXE HEAD

A mishap occurred to one of the *benei ha-nevi'im*, precisely the student who requested that Elisha accompany the group. While chopping timber, his axe head became detached from the wooden handle, and the iron fell into the depths of the river. His cry reveals a deep moral sensitivity: "It is borrowed." More than the financial loss, he is concerned that he will not be able to return a borrowed object. Elisha "cut a stick, and threw it there; and the axe head floated." Why does Elisha need to specially cut a stick? After all, he could merely throw the handle of the axe into the water. The commentaries debate the mechanics of the miracle:

He took wood already cut and shaped it such that it would fit into the aperture of the axe head and would act as its handle. This is the miracle – that when he hurled it in, it fit directly into the hole and remained there firmly, as we have already established in the matter of wonders ... that they do not change the course of nature ... The wood was of a size that its buoyancy could counter the weight of the axe head and carry it to the surface. To this end, the piece of wood needed to be large and the handle was inadequate. (Ralbag)

He took wood and cut it such that it had a flat surface such that the axe head could float upon it ... "And it caused the axe head to float:" The word "*vayatze'*" is in the causative form ... the wood brought the axe head to the surface, such that this was a double miracle: wood, which naturally floats on water, sank, and the axe head was carried on top of the wood, such that they rose to the surface together. (*Daat Mikra*)

Both of these commentaries explains the need for a special carving of the wood, such that the axe head would be retrieved in a manner that does not contradict the physics of natural materials. However, their attempts to understand the miracle in a "natural" way result in the fanciful scenarios that they creatively construct. Abarbanel fundamentally rejects this approach:

The prophet, when shown the precise location that the axe head had fallen, took a small piece of wood in his hand and threw it to that place ... as if the piece of wood was "calling" the axe head to join it, and immediately, the axe head rose to the surface... and so it was that the wood which is light, sank into the water, contrary to its nature, and the axe head which is heavy, floated, to demonstrate that [worldly] events are determined by God's ability, and that nature reflects the order instilled by God, and when He so desires, He can alter [the natural] course.

Whereas the Ralbag sought to give a rational explanation for the miracle, however improbable, for the Abarbanel, miracles are such precisely because they interrupt the smooth natural order.

While we are convinced that a miracle has been performed here, note that Elisha never works as a magician, offering a rousing display of his miraculous power. The opposite is the case; in every instance of his miracles, he performs the wondrous act and then leaves the recipient of his miracle to complete the process that he has begun.

The axe head:

He said, "Pick it up." And he reached out his hand and took it. (6:7)

The miracle of the oil:

"Go sell the oil and pay your debt, and you and your children can live on the rest." (4:7)

The revival of the child:

He said, "Pick up your son." ... She picked up her son and left. (4:37)

Elisha doesn't perform a show or play to the admiring crowds. The miracle is executed functionally, without pomp, and then is passed along for further action by the beneficiary.

MILITARY INTELLIGENCE (6:8-23)

In this episode, Elisha functions as the national military intelligence, repeatedly warning the king of Israel about Aramean raiding parties. In the Na'aman story, we have already seen an isolated incident of a border incursion and the taking of captives by Aram. It seems that the attacks have become a matter of routine, as Aram wages a war of attrition against Israel. Elisha's regular briefings to the king of Israel ensure that Israel successfully evades the Aramean aggression, but the repeated military failures send the king of Aram into a rage, as he senses that he has a traitor in his inner circle.

As in the story of Na'aman,⁷ it is a servant who reveals that Elisha is the enemy's source of information. The king of Aram responds: "Go and see where he is; I will send and seize him"(6:13), and he deploys a heavily armed division of horses and chariots to Dotan where the prophet is located. The Malbim wonders:

He [the king of Aram] has been informed that the prophet knows everything, including that which relates to him, and he [Elisha] will certainly be fully aware that he [Aram] is coming to arrest him and will protect himself. Thus it would seem that he didn't wish to capture him to have him harmed but rather he thought that he could shower him with wealth and prestige so that he would reside with him [in Aram], and he thought that the prophet would agree.... The armed guard was for his [Elisha's] protection in case the king of Israel would prevent his leaving the kingdom.

This is certainly a possibility; we recall the Moabite king, Balak, showering the prophet Bil'am with wealth and honor to persuade him to employ his prophetic powers against Israel.

A second alternative casts this story in the mold of chapter one, in which King Achazyahu dispatched military forces to arrest Eliyahu. There, we supposed that the purpose was to kill Eliyahu, eliminating the threat that he posed to the king, and the king continued to send troops even after it was clear that they were ineffective. It is completely probable that, notwithstanding Elisha's powers, the king assumed that a powerful military force could overwhelm the prophet, however powerful he may be.

VISION AND BLINDNESS

Elisha's assistant is gripped by fear when he sees the military force encamped around the city. In contrast, Elisha is a paragon of calm: "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them" (6:16). Why is Elisha unfazed by the enemy? It is here that the text reveals the symmetry between the army that "surrounds the city, horses and chariots" (6:15) and the "horses and chariots of fire surrounding Elisha" (6:17). But in order to become aware of Elisha's protective retinue, Elisha must "open the eyes" of his assistant.⁸ Elisha prays to God, and suddenly his assistant can see the supernatural protection that surrounds Elisha. At this point we begin to understand how the structure of the story sets up a tension of opposites: supernatural perception against natural perception, vision against blindness, and the all-knowing prophet against the feckless and bungling kings of Aram and Israel.

⁷ The storylines (of Na'aman and this episode) follow a similar pattern: The border attacks by Aram, the suggestion by a servant that Elisha is the answer to the problem, the king of Aram dispatches a military delegation to Israel in search of Elisha, Elisha's miraculous resolution, and the return of the military force "in peace" back to Aram. Each story ends with the troops committed to avoiding any further belligerence against Israel.

⁸ Opening of eyes in *Tanakh* is found in the garden of Eden (*Bereshit* 3:5,7) and regarding Hagar (*Bereshit* 21:19).

- A Background – Aram's attacks against Israel, stopped by Elisha
- B King of Aram's proposal, the servant's correction, deploys troops to Dotan
- C God opens the eyes of Elisha's attendant
- D God blinds⁹ the Aramean army; Elisha leads them to Shomron
- C2 God opens the eyes of the Aramean army
- B2 King of Israel's proposal, Elisha's correction, dispatches troops to Aram
- A2 Conclusion/Consequence - Aram's attacks stop

At the center of this structure is the miraculous opening and closing of eyes, the awareness that true perception may be beyond that which meets the eye. As we have seen previously, Elisha rarely prays before enacting his miracles. And yet here, his amazing interventions - opening or blinding the eyes of those around him - are each prefaced, three times, by a direct appeal to God. The conclusion is that true vision belongs to God, and, by extension, that Elisha's remarkable knowledge of the intimate discussions that transpire in Aram is God's gift, ensuring the protection of His nation.

WAR ETHICS

Elisha leads the blinded troops to the capital, Shomron, and there he opens their eyes. The text fails to give us an insight into their emotions: perhaps confusion? Shock? Surprise? Fear? But our attention turns to the king of Israel. As in the opening scene in Aram, the king makes an assumption that will be challenged and overturned. The king, assuming that Elisha has directed the Arameans to Shomron in order to dispose of his foe, asks the prophet: "Shall I slay them, my father?"¹⁰ (6:21) To which Elisha responds:

"You may not slay them. Would you slay those whom you have taken captive with your sword and bow? Set bread and water before them that they may eat and drink and go to their master." (6:22)

What is Elisha's opposition to the killing of the Aramean troops? After all, they are the enemy! The classic commentaries offer two schools of thought:¹¹

"By what right do you slay them? Did you take them captive with your sword and bow?" (Radak)

⁹ The Hebrew term - *sanveirim* – that is used to describe the blindness is only found in this episode and in the story of the destruction of *Sedom* (*Bereshit* 19:11). There too, in the thick of night, the righteous man is surrounded by a large aggressive force threatening his life. In order to save him, his foes are also struck by blindness.

¹⁰ This term of endearment indicates a close relationship between king and prophet as evidenced throughout this story. The appellation "father," along with a reference to chariots and horses, is echoed by King Yoash of Israel in his visit to Elisha's deathbed. See // *Melakhim* 13:14. This echoes Elisha's identical depiction of Eliyahu (2:12).

¹¹ This is based on R. Elchanan Samet, *Pirkei Elisha*, Jerusalem 5767, pgs. 457-460 (Hebrew).

"Did you take them captive that you shall slay them? They were brought to you by a miracle! What rights do you have over them?"
(*Metzudot David*)

In war, the victor, the conquering force, wields power over his captives. In this case, it is God, not the king, who has captured these soldiers; the king of Israel waged no battle. These are God's captives, and the king has no right to slaughter them.

But the verse does not quite make this point. If read carefully it raises the question whether an army should be killed EVEN IF the king HAD captured them in battle. In this spirit, there is a second more radical interpretation:

"Is it your way to kill prisoners after you have taken them captive?"
(Rashi)

"Would you kill prisoners whom you have captured with your sword and bow? It is inappropriate! And it is all the more objectionable when God has taken them captive." (Ralbag)

Rashi and the Ralbag are presenting a view that objects to killing prisoners of war irrespective of who captured them. After all, the legitimacy of killing the enemy in combat results from the threat they pose to one's life. However, once they are prisoners, why would one be justified in killing them? The threat has been neutralized!

For the Radak and the *Metzudot*, the issue is a particular religious one; one may not benefit from God's victory. For Rashi and the Ralbag, this is a universal ethical issue: not to kill prisoners of war after the fighting has ended. It is quite astounding that Rashi and the Ralbag are able to present this ethical position many centuries before the Geneva Convention.

However, the king of Israel doesn't just grant them their lives, he hosts a huge feast before allowing them to return to Aram. This act of generosity makes a deep impression upon the Arameans: "The raiding parties of Aram came no more into the Land of Israel" (6:23). Regarding this kindhearted treatment, a *midrash* states:

Greater is the banquet that Elisha prepared together with the king of Israel than all the battles of Yehoram son of Ach'av, as it says in *Kohelet*: "Wisdom is better than weapons of war" (9:18). (*Eliyahu Rabba*, 8)

Wars are characterized by aggression and domination. The king of Aram sought to use his superior firepower to bludgeon Elisha into submission. In contrast, Elisha's way is not the path of confrontation, but rather the provision of food and drink, hospitality, kindness, and humanity. Ultimately, this makes a deeper impression than war.

CONCLUDING QUESTIONS

We read this chapter, and some loose ends remain. The protective fiery horses and chariots of Elisha seem to play no role in the story,¹² unless they are solely to allay the fears of Elisha's assistant.¹³ We have spoken of Elisha's altruism, and yet what are we to make of this potent image?

Finally, on the one hand, the story's conclusion resolves the enormous tension: the troops return to Aram, and the text assures us that "the raiding parties of Aram came no more into the Land of Israel" (6:23). Apparently, the Aramean threat has been eliminated. However, in the very next verse, we read how "Afterwards, Ben-Haddad gathered all his camp and they besieged Shomron, and there was a great famine in Shomron" (7:24-5). If Aram engages in a terrible siege of Shomron immediately following this episode, does this story resolve anything at all?

We shall explore these and other questions in our shiur next week.

¹² In modern Hebrew, the word *sanveirim* (rather than the standard term for blindness, *ivaron*) refers to being blinded by excessive light. Is it possible that the troops were blinded not by darkness but by light, and that light emanated from the fire of the horses and chariots?

¹³ Ralbag