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### **The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion**

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#### **Shiur #61: Chorev**

#### **Part 9: The First Encounter Between Eliyahu and Elisha (19-21) (continued)**

**By Rav Elchanan Samet**

#### **2. The Casting of the Mantle**

(19-20) "Eliyahu passed him by and cast his mantle towards him... and he ran after Eliyahu."

Eliyahu's casting of his mantle towards Elisha unquestionably signals his intention to take Elisha with him. The Radak comments:

"He made a sign for him that he should follow him. He did not tell him so explicitly, for he knew that [Elisha] would understand, for it is God Who makes a person a prophet, and he knew that God had put into Elisha's heart to follow him and serve him; therefore he merely gave the sign."

But why does Eliyahu choose this specific sign? Is it an arbitrary sign?

The Ralbag (commenting on verse 15 – a different explanation is provided in verse 19) writes as follows:

"He cast his mantle upon him so as to give him a sign that he would be a prophet, and would be garbed in the prophecy of Eliyahu, since the wearing of the mantle was the sign of a prophet. This is the meaning of the verse (*Zekharya* 13:4), '[And it shall be on that day that the prophets shall be ashamed, each one of his vision that he prophesies]; and they shall not wear the hairy mantle in order to deceive.'"

A mantle of animal hair was the typical dress of a prophet in Israel. In casting his mantle towards Elisha, Eliyahu is not only signaling that Elisha is going to become a prophet (as the Ba'al Ha-Metzudot, for example, suggests), but also implies that Elisha is destined to inherit Eliyahu's own role as the prophet of the generation – in the Ralbag's words, "And would be garbed in the prophecy of Eliyahu." The wearing of Eliyahu's mantle signifies the "garb of his prophecy."

The Malbim regards this act on Eliyahu's part as having even more profound significance, serving to connect Elisha - by means of the mantle - not only to Eliyahu the prophet, but also to his past and future actions:

"After Eliyahu cast his mantle towards him, his soul cleaved to Eliyahu's mantle for he sensed within it the spirituality that had radiated upon it since the time that [Eliyahu] spent in the cave [the reference here, obviously, is to verse 13 in our chapter: 'And it was, when Eliyahu heard it, that he covered his face with his mantle, and he went out and stood and the entrance to the cave...'], like the veil upon Moshe's face, and as we read further on (II *Melakhim* 2:2), that he split the Jordan with this mantle. The casting of the mantle was a sign that he would replace him and take his mantle; therefore he abandoned his work and ran after him."

We learn from this that these verses are an introduction to a unit that we encounter later on:

"He lifted Eilyahu's mantle which had fallen from him, and he returned and stood on the bank of the Jordan.

And he took Eliyahu's mantle which had fallen from him, and he struck the water, and he said: Where is the Lord God of Eliyahu? And when he had struck the water, they parted to the one side and the other, and Elisha passed through." (II *Melakhim* 2:13-14)

Indeed, the Abarbanel elaborates as follows, commenting on II *Melakhim* 2:

"There is no doubt that it [Eliyahu's mantle] did not fall from him [as he went up in a storm to heaven] by accident; rather, he cast it upon Elisha deliberately, for it was a vessel that could carry the Divine blessing and prophecy that had rested upon Eliyahu, such that Elisha would wear his mantle and his prophecy, and stand in [Eliyahu's] place. This was already hinted to him when Eliyahu found him plowing with twelve pairs of oxen, and he cast his mantle towards him – hinting that when he would be taken from this world, he would cast his mantle upon him, and [Elisha] would be garbed in his prophecy and take his place."

This connection between Eliyahu and Elisha, symbolized in the casting of the mantle, expresses just one aspect of their relationship: the aspect of the continuity between teacher and disciple.

### 3. "Go [and then] Return, For What Have I Done To You?"

The casting of the mantle towards Elisha produces its immediate and powerful effect:

(20) "He left the oxen and ran after Eliyahu, and he said: I pray you, let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I shall follow you."

But what is the meaning of Eliyahu's reaction – "Go, return, for what have I done to you"?

Rashi explains the literal meaning of the words as follows:

"'Go, return' – from after me, 'for what have I done to you' – that you should follow me."

But this fails to clarify the intention behind this incomprehensible utterance. Was it not Eliyahu's intention, in casting the mantle towards Elisha, that Elisha should follow him? Elisha understood this signal, so why is Eliyahu rejecting him and pretending as though he has done nothing?

Rashi's explanation, while not providing any insight into Eliyahu's intention, is still of great value: it is apparently intended to bar other interpretations that might seek to turn Eliyahu's words around.

The Radak, who apparently accepts Rashi's comment, attempts to explain Eliyahu's intention:

"What he means by the words, 'Go, return, for what have I done to you' is to test him, to see whether he spoke wholeheartedly. And the meaning of the words, 'What have I done to you' is – if I dropped my mantle over you, therefore you go after me?"

This interpretation indeed suits the tone of rejection that we detect in Eliyahu's words. This rejection, explains the Radak, is simply a test that Eliyahu presents for Elisha. Still, we must ask: for what reason does Eliyahu see fit to test Elisha, who is already running after him, and who has just announced his readiness to leave his parents and his birthplace so as to follow Eliyahu? What reason does Eliyahu have to suspect his motives or integrity? Furthermore, we may ask: If Eliyahu's intention, in these words, was to test Elisha, then Elisha's response should serve to clear up Eliyahu's doubt and to prove that what he said was said in good faith. But in reality, he offers no response at all. He merely performs actions that follow his plan; in

addition, he also offers the yoke of oxen as a sacrifice and feeds the people. How does Eliyahu deduce, while Elisha is doing all of this, that Elisha's previous words were spoken in good faith? Why does he not demand a clear answer?

#### 4. Eliyahu vs. Elisha

Before proposing a different explanation for Eliyahu's words, we must first examine briefly the main personality traits of each of these two prophets.

Of course, the fact that the most dominant element in the personality and prophetic activity of Eliyahu is his zealousness for God needs no elaboration. This is abundantly clear throughout the chapters describing his activity, and we have discussed this matter at length in previous *shiurim*. In our chapter this trait reaches its climax, and after Eliyahu refuses to rethink his position and repeats his words, "I have been exceedingly zealous..." God commands him (15-16):

"Go, return on your way... and you shall anoint Elisha ben Shafat as prophet in your stead."

*Chazal* regard this command as a "dismissal notice," as it were: "Eliyahu fought for the honor of the Father (God), but not for the honor of the son (Israel)... for the words 'as prophet in your stead' mean, 'I have no desire for your prophecy.'"

This Divine command already indicates that God has chosen, as Eliyahu's successor, a prophet whose attitude towards the "honor of the son" – towards *Am Yisrael* – is different from that of Eliyahu. The selection of a successor for Eliyahu – who is zealous for God and who prosecutes His children – must certainly be meant to correct this "deficiency" in Eliyahu's approach. It is not enough that "I have no desire for your prophecy" because of your harsh criticism of Israel; there must be a corresponding "I desire" that applies to the prophecy of a different prophet, who is unlike you. This prophet is Elisha, whose actions are almost without exception acts of salvation and redemption for the nation as a whole or for individuals within it.

In truth, it is difficult to find so stark a contrast as that between the prophetic activity of Eliyahu – "Whose path is storm and wind" – and the prophetic activity of Elisha – "By still waters." The juxtaposition of the Eliyahu narratives to the Elisha narratives, and the closeness between these two personalities – the master and his disciple – merely serve to highlight this contrast.

Moreover, it is specifically in those places where there is some similarity between Elisha's actions and those of Eliyahu, and it starts to look as though the disciple is indeed walking in the footsteps of his teacher – and such instances are not

few in number – that we discern the independent approach of Elisha which is different – even opposite – to that of Eliyahu.

The difference between them, in nature and in attitude towards their surroundings, stands out clearly in their very first encounter, with Elisha's first appearance on the horizon of Eliyahu's life. Let us recall for a moment the first appearance of Eliyahu himself, as he bursts into the narrative:

(17:1) "Eliyahu the Tishbi, of the inhabitants of Gilad, said to Achav: As the Lord God of Israel lives, before Whom I stand – there shall be no rain or dew during these years, but by my word."

Who is this prophet? What is the background to his appearance? The omission of this information is not an oversight in the text. The blurring of Eliyahu's background – all that preceded his sudden appearance as a prophet – is meant to express the defining element of his personality: his absolute dedication to his task, his identification with his prophetic role to the point of nullification of any personal aspect. Nowhere is there any mention of Eliyahu's father, nor any other detail pertaining to his personal life.

Elisha, son of Shafat, in contrast, makes his first appearance even before he becomes a prophet, and he is named along with the name of his father. He appears before Eliyahu and before us, the readers, in the fields of his city of birth – Avel Mechola:

(19) "He was plowing, with twelve yokes of oxen in front of him, and he with the twelfth."

Beyond the symbolic significance of the number of yokes of oxen, the most literal level of the text presents us with the description of a young man living in a very wealthy home. As the Ralbag comments:

"It seems that this is mentioned in order to point out that Elisha's father was exceedingly wealthy."

And with what is his son, Elisha, occupied? With the "settling of the world" – plowing his father's vast field, and watching over his father's workers as they plow in front of him.

Could we imagine a scene in which Eliyahu is busy plowing a field?

(to be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish