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

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SHIUR #64: NAVOT

Part 2: "Have You Murdered And Also Inherited?!" – Achav's Responsibility  
By Rav Elchanan Samet  
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Eliyahu's words, quoted in the title, are his introduction to the prophetic rebuke that stands at the center of the second half of our chapter (verses 17-29), where the final dramatic confrontation between Eliyahu and Achav takes place.

In order to fully understand this rebuke we must consider the following: it is not Achav who orchestrates Navot's murder; rather, it is Izevel. Achav never considered such an idea in the beginning (verse 4), after Navot refused to sell him the vineyard, and when Izevel promised to "give" the vineyard to him, she gave no indication of how she intended to do this.

Admittedly, on the last point, Abarbanel disagrees:

"Arise, eat bread, and let your heart be merry; I shall give you the vineyard of Navot the Yizre'eli' (verse 7) – Undoubtedly, she immediately told him what she intended to do, for she wrote letters in Achav's name to the elders..."

But if this is so, why does the text conceal this vital link in the plot? Does this detail not fully justify Eliyahu's rebuke, "Have you murdered and also inherited"?

As the narrative develops, too, and Izevel brings about the murder of Navot, there is no indication that she shares what is going on with Achav. She receives the

news of Navot's death alone, and when she tells Achav (verse 15), "Arise, take possession of Navot's vineyard... for Navot is not alive, but dead," she does not divulge the circumstances of his death, and Achav asks no questions.

Obviously, we should not go out of our way to protest Achav's innocence: he should have asked, at the various stages of the episode, what Izevel was intending to do, or what she had done. Nevertheless, can lack of clarity and ignorance – grave negligence as they may be – be equated with murder? Would it not be more accurate to accuse Achav with the words, "Have you inherited him who your wife Izevel murdered"? Why is Achav the main culprit, while Izevel is only second on the list – "Also to Izevel God spoke..." (verse 23)?

Let us analyze the structure of the first half of our chapter (verses 1-16). It presents five images, each defined by 1) the characters who are active in it and 2) the place where it happens:

- A. Achav's request (2-3)
  - 1) Achav – Navot
  - 2) Yizre'el
- B. Izevel's promise (4-7)
  - 1) Achav – Izevel
  - 2) Shomron
- C. The "trial" (8-14)
  - 1) Izevel – the elders
  - 2) Shomron/Yizre'el
- D. Fulfillment of Izevel's promise (15)
  - 1) Achav – Izevel
  - 2) Shomron
- E. Realization of Achav's desire (16)

- 1) Achav – Navot's vineyard
- 2) Yizre'el

Clearly, this structure serves to emphasize the importance of image C. – which is the heart of the narrative and the point of reference for all that precedes and follows it.

In other words, Achav's desire for Navot's field is what leads to Izevel's promise. This promise necessarily leads to the false trial. It is the false trial and the murder that then allow Izevel to fulfill her promise, and which allow Achav to realize his desire.

In between the second and fourth image, in which Izevel is the main actor, we find the third – the "trial," which is her initiative and her doing. But these three images are included in a wider sphere – the sphere of Achav as the main character, in images A. and E. In other words, everything that happens in the internal part of the story takes place for the sake of the realization of Achav's desire, and it is therefore Achav who is responsible for the entire episode.

But is his responsibility immediate, to the extent of guilt for the murder of Navot, or is it merely overall responsibility?

From the scheme of the structure as presented above we see that the character who appears in four of the five images – Achav – is absent from the central one, where the "trial" takes place. Not only is he not active in this scene, but also in the preceding image there is no indication that he is party to knowledge of what is going to happen; likewise, in the following image, he is not told about what happened.

This might seemingly lead us to conclude that Achav is innocent of tangible, direct collaboration in the murder of Navot. However, the matter is not as simple as that. In light of the fact that Achav is a central figure in all of the four outer images (A,B,D,E), and in light of his surprising "disappearance" from the middle image (C) – which is the heart of the narrative – we discern a deliberate attempt on the part of the active characters (Achav, Izevel, the elders) to leave Achav "out of the picture" of Navot's murder, to keep his hands clean. He is to enjoy the final achievement without being involved in the process that leads to it.

Their intention, of course, is conscious, although it is not formulated explicitly (indeed, how could such a thing be stated explicitly!). It arises from that which is not said in the second and fourth image, although the reader expects to hear it: Izevel's presentation of her plan to Achav, and her report following its execution. Likewise, from the fact that the elders report to Izevel after carrying out her instructions – even though she had stamped these instructions with Achav's seal – we discern a purposeful attempt to leave Achav out of the picture.

This being the case, Achav's lack of active cooperation and his ignorance of Navot's murder do not testify to good faith; rather, they are the result of a conscious and deliberate strategy among all those involved, not to include him and not to inform him.

Still, we must ask: after all of this, did Achav really not know – could he not have guessed – what was going to happen, or was he able to guess Izevel's intentions, such that the fact of his lack of active cooperation and his ignorance are nothing more than an attempt to relieve him of formal responsibility for the murder?

To answer this question, we must first clarify an important detail in the plot: how does the murder of Navot enable Achav to take possession of his vineyard? This matter is discussed in a Beraita quoted in *Sanhedrin*, 48b:

"Our Rabbis taught: Those sentenced to death by the king (Rashi: such as those who rebel against the king) – their assets belong to the king. Those sentenced to death by the Beit Din – their assets belong to their heirs."

Further on in the Beraita, proof for this law is brought from our chapter, where Navot is accused of blaspheming God and the king, and therefore Achav goes and takes possession of his vineyard – in accordance with the law concerning one who rebels against the sovereignty of the king. This clarifies for us how Izevel intended to carry out her promise: "I shall give you the vineyard of Navot, the Yizre'eli" – by exploiting the Israelite legal system.

But what was Achav thinking when he heard this promise? How did he think that Izevel was going to bring this about? It was obviously clear to him that whatever he could not legally do, Izevel was likewise unable to do. Therefore he must have known that her intention was to act in an illegal way in order to obtain the vineyard. But such means still have to appear outwardly – to the nation – to be legitimate and anchored in law.

Within these limitations, it appears that there really was only one way of obtaining the vineyard – and that was the way that Izevel chose. And Achav could have made this same calculation himself. Further on we shall see that Achav did indeed understand Izevel's unspoken intentions. But he asks no questions and shows no interest; he is silent.

His silence continues even when Izevel tells him:

(15) Arise, take possession of Navot's vineyard... for Navot is not alive, but dead.

He does not ask why or how Navot died. But there can be no doubt here that he understands the circumstances of his death, for the possession of the vineyard is now possible only by virtue of the fact that Navot died as a rebel against the crown; there is no other possible explanation for Izevel's words!

Indeed, this is what Achav had been waiting for – Navot's death as a rebel – paving the way for him to take possession of the vineyard. The text gives us an inkling of his expectation, with the words:

(16) And it was, when Achav heard that Navot had died  
That Achav arose to go down to the vineyard of Navot the Yizre'eli, to take possession of it.

The moment he hears of Navot's death, he immediately goes off to the vineyard. He acts silently, but surely; this is what he has been waiting for, things have turned out as planned. This behavior represents verification and proof that from the outset Achav knew what was going to happen, and silently acquiesced.

Now, let us add additional weight to Achav's responsibility:

(8) She wrote letters in Achav's name, and stamped them with his seal.

From this verse we see that it is Achav's authority that lends support to Izevel's base plan. Admittedly, she does not consult him, nor does she receive his approval to do what she does. Even the elders understand who is really behind what is written in the letters. But all of this is part of the conspiracy of silence that joins them all, with the intention of distancing Achav from formal responsibility for the murder.

Thus Achav becomes a hidden but necessary partner – even in that image from which he is absent as an active figure. Only in body is he absent from that scene, but his name hovers in the air, in the form of his silent agreement, representing the formal source of authority for the entire horrible scene.

Following this description of the chain of events in our chapter, we have a better understanding of why Eliyahu is sent to bring God's word to Achav only when he goes down to take possession of Navot's vineyard. There Achav's responsibility for the murder is revealed in all its clarity. So long as Achav does not take possession of the vineyard, he could evade responsibility for the act of murder, and attribute it to Izevel. He could claim that he did not know, that he could not have known, what Izevel was planning. But now that he is there, in person, his partnership in the crime is revealed retroactively; it is now clear that it is he who was really behind the murder.

What is the lesson of our chapter, in light of the analysis of Achav's responsibility?

Achav is accused not only on the basis of his overall responsibility - for an act of murder that was committed by his wife Izevel, without his knowledge – as a superficial reading might initially have suggested. At the same time, he is not charged with active responsibility, with advising and giving the order – as Abarbanel maintains. He is charged with a despicable attempt to evade real responsibility, pretending instead a less onerous overall responsibility.

The attempt to enjoy the fruits of wickedness without dirtying one's hands with the actual deed, thereby evading responsibility and punishment, is common practice among people, and especially among kings and heads of state. While it may work in

relation to other people, who can judge only what they can see, it cannot work in the real reckoning between man and God. Before God nothing is hidden; He knows a person's innermost thoughts and emotions, understands his silences and inferences. Before God, the sinner's true measure of responsibility is clear – as is his attempt to hide himself and escape punishment.

"The heart is most deceitful of all, and terribly weak – who can know it? I am the Lord, Who searches hearts and examines innermost parts, to give to every man in according with his ways and the fruits of his actions." (*Yimiyahu 17:9-10*)

Despite all that we have said above concerning Achav's responsibility for the murder of Navot, we must take the following reservation into account: the idea of killing Navot in order to take possession of his vineyard was not thought up by Achav. In fact, at first the idea did not occur to him at all. Achav - lying on his bed, refusing to eat, helpless in the face of Navot's refusal to sell him the field – seems far removed from any murder plot. The plot is thought up by Izevel. Achav's partnership and responsibility arise from his silent acquiescence, born of convenience. If we look closely, we see that his level of responsibility for the crime gradually rises over the course of the chapter:

At the beginning of image A., he lacks any intention or plan. Thereafter, in B., he receives an unexplained promise from Izevel – a promise whose process of realization he could have foreseen. In C., the trial and murder are already being carried out in Achav's name and with his seal – i.e., they are inspired by him, even though he is still unaware that this is actually taking place. In D. Achav already knows about Navot's murder, and he offers no objection – meaning that he agrees. And in E.,



his responsibility reaches (retroactively!) its climax, when Achav goes down to take possession of the vineyard of the murdered Navot.

Here we must ask, how is it that Achav degenerates to such behavior? How does he make the transition from a situation in which he never dreamed the slightest hint of murder, to partnership through acquiescence – and ultimately even in deed – in an actual murder that is carried out?

Rambam, in his Laws Pertaining to Theft and Loss 1:11, writes as follows:

"Desire brings a person to coveting, and coveting leads to theft. For if the owner (of the object that one desires) is not willing to sell, even though one offers a hefty sum and pleads with them, then he will come to steal, as it is written: 'They have coveted fields and stolen' (*Mikha* 2:2). And if the owner confronts him, so as to save his property, or to prevent him from stealing, then he will come to shed blood. This we learn from the story of Achav and Navot."

Translation by Kaeren Fish