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

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#### **Shiur #94: The Storm Part 7: Eliyahu Lives On By Rav Elchanan Samet**

- (1) "And it was, when God took up Eliyahu in a storm to heaven..."
- (3) ... 'Do you know that today God will take your master from over your head...'
- (5) ... 'Do you know that today God will take your master from over your head...'
- (9) 'What shall I do for you, before I am taken from you?'
- (10) 'If you see me taken from you, it shall be so for you.'
- (11) ... And behold, a chariot of fire and horses of fire, and they separated the two of them, and Eliyahu ascended in a storm to heaven."

#### **1. "Did Eliyahu die, or did he not?"**

What is the purpose of the description of Eliyahu's ascent to heaven in II *Melakhim* 2 – a description so radically different from the account of any other death recorded in Tanakh? Are his "ascent" (mentioned twice) and his being "taken" (mentioned four times) meant as a euphemistic indication of his death, or are they telling us the opposite – that Eliyahu did not die?

If we are to remain loyal to the literal text, it must be acknowledged that it describes Eliyahu's bodily ascent. Elisha watches his ascent until he disappears from sight – "and he saw him no more" (v. 12). The only tangible evidence that remains after Eliyahu's ascent is his mantle, which has fallen from him. This tells us that Eliyahu ascends bodily, dressed in his clothes – except for his mantle. Indeed, the apprentice prophets, who comb the area for Eliyahu for three days, do not find him (vv. 16-17).

However, if this is so, and Eliyahu's ascent to heaven is meant to signify his transition from this world to that which lies beyond, to the Divine realm, then we are faced with a difficult theological problem. The *beraita* (*Sukka* 5a) teaches:

Rabbi Yosei said: "The Divine Presence never descended, nor did Moshe or Eliyahu ascend on High, as it is written (*Tehillim* 115:16), 'The heaven is God's heaven, and the earth He has given to mankind.'"

Rabbi Yosei draws an absolute and unequivocal distinction between the human realm and the Divine. (His categorical denial of any possibility of blurring the boundaries is doubtless directed towards the various pagan mythologies, up to and including Christianity.) The Gemara questions this assertion, citing instances that would appear to contradict it. The same response is used to counter each verse:

Did the Divine Presence not come down? But it is written (*Shemot* 19:20), "God descended upon Mount Sinai"!

- But higher than ten handbreadths.

But it is written (*Zekharya* 14:4), "His legs will stand that day upon the Mount of Olives"!

- But higher than ten handbreadths.

And did Moshe and Eliyahu not ascend on High? But it is written (*Shemot* 19:3), "Moshe ascended to God"!

- But lower than ten [handbreadths].

But it is written, "Eliyahu ascended in a storm to heaven"!

- But lower than ten [handbreadths]."

"Ten handbreadths" represents the boundaries of man's domain, while whatever exists above "ten handbreadths" belongs to God's domain. While there does exist some mutual relationship between God and man, as evidenced in the verses cited by the Gemara as well as many other sources, this connection never represents any blurring of the sharp distinction between the two realms.

The limitation of man, in his human, bodily state, from crossing this barrier is conveyed to Moshe, "master of all the prophets" (*Shemot Rabba* 21:4), during the Revelation at Chorev (*Shemot* 33:20):

He said, "You shall not be able to see My face, for no man shall see Me and live."

Only when a person's soul is separated from his body, when it departs from the world that is "under the sun" (*Kohelet* 1:3, et al.) and "below ten handbreadths" – only then can the soul rise up (*ibid.* 12:7):

The dust settles back upon the earth, as it was, while the spirit returns to God, Who gave it.

How, then, are we to reconcile Eliyahu's ascent to heaven with his human, material state? Furthermore, what is the meaning of the Talmudic solution to the question – that he went "lower than ten handbreadths"?

Let us compare the approaches of two commentators – the Radak and the Ralbag. Both introduce their discussion of our question in verse 1 of our chapter – "And it was, when God took up Eliyahu in a storm to heaven."

The Radak comments as follows:

The stormwind took him up from the ground into the air. As one lifts things that are light, so [the wind] lifted him, by God's will, to the fiery [chariot] wheel, which burned his clothes – except for the mantle. His flesh and his life were consumed, while the spirit returned to God, Who had given it."

The Radak returns to this image in his comment on verse 11, "And Eliyahu ascended in a storm to heaven:"

As I have explained... Eliyahu became a spiritual entity, with his body consumed in the Divine fire, such that each element returned to its source. Elisha witnessed his ascent from the earth, and when he became air, he saw the image of a fiery chariot, with horses of fire, which separated them from each other.

In the Radak's view, then, Eliyahu dies. It is only his spirit that "returns to God, Who gave it." What is special about the description of his death is the manner in which he died, which is different from any other death recorded in Tanakh. In Eliyahu's ascent in a storm to heaven there is a process whereby the body is separated from the soul. The soul (spirit) ascends to heaven, while the body and its garments are consumed, such that there remains nothing for burial.

This is the Radak's solution to the fundamental problem set forth above.

Is the Radak's explanation compatible with the language and spirit of the text? The Abravanel is skeptical:

Whether Eliyahu died or not, and where he is – we have no way of ascertaining these things through rational logic; we can only go by the tradition of our forebears and the Sages, and by their interpretations of the verses. Nowhere does the text actually mention "death" in connection with Eliyahu, as it does

concerning Moshe and all of the other prophets. This indicates that his body was not separated from his soul, in the manner of all people who pass away naturally. Although the commentators have asserted that it is impossible that human bodies dwell among the heavenly bodies and not upon them... Still, we need not accept their view that his body and his clothes were burned in that heated air or in the element of fire that was upon it, while the soul of the prophet is bound up with the bundle of life, with God, like the souls of the other prophets and the righteous men of God [as the Radak explains]. For if this were so, the text would not elaborate on this matter when Eliyahu was taken up, nor that he was taken up in a storm. Why is there no mention of death? Can we suggest that people who are burned do not die like those who are buried in the ground?

The Ralbag takes a different approach. After presenting the problem – "It is impossible to understand that he was taken up to heaven, for mortal bodies do not ascend there" – he explains:

What it means is, to mid-air. As it is written, "Great cities, fortified to the heaven" (*Devarim* 9:1); "A tower with its top in the heaven" (*Bereishit* 11:4). God's wind lifted him to an as-yet unknown place, and he remains alive there, as we have explained.

Again the Ralbag proves that Eliyahu did not die in his commentary on verse 3:

"Today God will take your master from over your head" – this explains that [Eliyahu] was taken only from over his head. Likewise, Eliyahu tells Elisha (v. 9), "before I am taken from you." This shows that God did not take him altogether, He only took him from Elisha.

According to the Ralbag, Eliyahu lives on, bodily, in some unknown place, where he waits for the day when he will be manifest again. Where is this place? Is it "in mid-air" (somewhere in the sky), or is it here on earth? This is "as-yet unknown."

The exegetical innovation, by means of which the Ralbag solves the question with which he introduces the discussion, is his interpretation of the word "heaven," indicating the place to which Eliyahu ascends. In his view, this does not refer to the Divine realm, that which extends "above ten handbreadths" (as referred to in several verses speaking of "heaven," including the verse cited by Rabbi Yosei in the *beraita* – "the heaven is God's heaven"), but rather to a high place in our world, "in mid-air," but still within the human realm – "lower than ten handbreadths." He then cites verses

in which the Torah uses the word "heaven" to indicate a great height, attained by humans, within the human realm.

The Ralbag's interpretation sits well with the Sages' teaching in several places. It would seem that this is what the Gemara means when it explains the verse, "Eliyahu ascended in a storm to heaven," with the words, "lower than ten handbreadths." Targum Yonatan on this verse, as well as on verse 11, would seem to tend towards the same idea. He translates, "Eliyahu ascended in a storm towards heaven." Likewise, the Ralbag's interpretation helps to resolve a debate between Reish Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan, recorded in *Massekhet Mo'ed Katan* (26a). Reish Lakish asks how the laws of rending clothes (for mourners) may be deduced from the actions of Elisha, who tears his garments when Eliyahu disappears from his view:

Reish Lakish said to Rabbi Yochanan, "Eliyahu lives on!"

He replied, "Since it is written, 'he saw him no more,' we deduce that, **for him**, Eliyahu was considered dead."

Both agree that "Eliyahu lives on," but Rabbi Yochanan's response points in the direction of the Ralbag's distinction: based on verses 3,5, and 8 we say that "God did not take him altogether, He only took him from Elisha."

A sort of compromise between the approaches of the Radak and the Ralbag is proposed in the Chatam Sofer's *Responsa* (Part 6, Ch. 98):

Eliyahu never ascended bodily more than ten handbreadths, but his soul was separated from his body there [in accordance with the Radak's view], and the soul rose up and still serves on High, among the ministering angels, while his body became fine-pressed and it lies in the lower Garden of Eden, in this world. On the day of God's redemption, may it be speedily in our days, his soul will be clothed in this holy body, and then he will be like any other of the sages and prophets of Israel... Likewise, every time that he is revealed and perceived in this world, he is garbed in his pure body; but when he is revealed [only] spiritually, as on the day of a circumcision [when he occupies the "seat of Eliyahu"], then he is not obligated by the commandments, as it is written (*Tehillim* 88:6), "The dead are free"... When he is revealed in this way, he is an angel. [Hence,] even though he studies Torah and reveals laws, the law is not determined in accordance with his words, since he is like a dream or a prophetic spirit, and (*Berakhot* 52a) "We do not take heavenly voices into account." However, when he is revealed in the garb of his body, he is like one

of the great sages of Israel, and (Tosefot Yom Tov, *Eduyyot* 8:7) "[Eliyahu] the Tishbi will resolve questions and puzzles."

Here the Chatam Sofer addresses a crucial question pertaining to Eliyahu. The image of this great prophet continues to manifest itself, in a most wondrous way, throughout the history of Israel and in its literature. In most places where Eliyahu is mentioned in rabbinical literature, Eliyahu's character is completely different from the way in which he is depicted in Tanakh. In these places he is described as conversing and debating with the Sages, or as one who is destined to appear in the future with the solutions to all unresolved halakhic questions. However, not only during the period of the Sages, but also afterwards, Eliyahu continues to appear in our tradition, in our customs, in legends that tell of his appearances, and even in his revelations to several Jewish sages and leaders. We shall devote a future *shiur* to this subject.

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish