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Parashat Vayera - #255

Ask Rav Aviner: [mororly@bezeqint.net](mailto:mororly@bezeqint.net)

Prepared by Rabbi Mordechai Tzion

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## Rav Aviner's Newest HEBREW Book: Commentary on Derech Eitz Chaim of the Ramchal

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### On the Haftarah... For or Against the King?

[Ashkenazim/Yemenite Jews: Melachim 2 4:1-37  
Sefardim: Melachim 2 4:1-23]

It clear from one of the verses of our Haftarah that the prophet Elisha had an excellent relationship with Yehoram, King of Israel, even though the king was totally wicked. It is told that the great woman of Shunam hurried to serve the prophet and to provide him with "a little upper room with a wall" in which she placed "a bed, table, chair and lamp" (Melachim 2 4:10). Out of respect and gratitude, he asked her: "What is to be done for you? Should I speak to the king or the commander of the army for you?" (13). Here we see that the prophet had carte blanche to visit the Prime Minister and the Chief of the General Staff, since he suggested that he could act on the woman's behalf before them.

At face value, this fact is extremely surprising because we know, to our distress, that King Yehoram was a cruel and corrupt man. "And he (Yehoram) did evil in the eyes of Hashem...he held fast to the sins of Yerovam ben Nevat who caused Israel to sin. He did not depart from them" (Melachim 2 3:2-3). It is impossible to find a more damning comparison than to Yerovam.

We would expect that the great prophet, who was responsible for the spiritual purity of the Nation of Israel, would diametrically oppose the King, and not have positive relationship with him - even for the purpose of helping others. We would expect Elisha to sever all contact with him and devote himself to the pure needs of the entire Nation.

But this is not so, and we should pay close attention to the prophet Elisha, a man obedient to the national government, even though he was a great zealot following the example of his teacher, the prophet Eliyahu. When Yehoram, King of Israel, went to war together with Yehoshafat, King of Yehudah, against a shared enemy, he turned to Elisha in a moment of despair. Elisha showed no mercy or love toward the king, admonishing him instead: "What do I have to do with you? Go to the prophets of your father and the prophet of your mother...If it were not for the presence of Yehoshafat, King of Yehudah, I would not look towards you nor see you" (ibid. 3 13:14), since Yehoshafat was a righteous king. The prophet Elisha did not fear rebuking the king of Israel with great forcefulness.

Furthermore, the prophet knew that the king saw him as a dangerous enemy who should be killed – he had already sent an assassin from the secret police to eliminate him: "But Elisha sat in his house and the elders sat with him, and the king sent a man from before him; but before the messenger came to Elisha, he said to the elders: 'Do you see how this son of a murderer has sent someone to remove my head. Look, when the messenger comes, shut the door and push him at the door. Is not the sound of his master's feet behind him?'" (ibid. 6:32). Yehoram learned this tactic from his father, the corrupt King Achav, who sent special agents throughout all of Israel and the surrounding states in order to find the prophet Eliyahu and kill him.

Knowing all of this, how can we understand what united Elisha and Yehoram, who were so vastly different from one another? The answer is simple: shared, infinite love for the Nation of Israel. Even if the king of Israel was an evil man, he still remained the king of Israel, and carried the incredible responsibility of saving the Nation. And while it is not the ideal situation, it is certainly preferable for the Nation to be ruled by the sinful government of Yehoram than to fall into the hand of the enemy and to suffer the decree of exile.

The prophet was therefore always ready to help the king for the benefit of the Nation of Israel, and the king, despite his ambivalence, could not refrain from expressing his gratitude to some extent.

When Yehoram was about to make a severe strategic error, the prophet Elisha warned him: "Beware that you not pass such a place, for Aram is hidden there" (ibid. verse 9). With this piece of advice Elisha saved the army of Israel, who went on to be victorious. Elisha followed precisely the path of his teacher, Eliyahu, who did not hold back even the harshest rebuke when it was justified (Melachim 1 18:17-18), but

also honored this same king of Israel when he displayed self-sacrifice to protect his Nation and the Land. "And the hand of Hashem was upon Eliyahu, so he girded his loins and ran before Achav until the approach of Yizre'el" (ibid. verse 46). Running from Mt. Carmel to Yizre'el valley! Is it possible to display greater honor for the king?

Achav was internally conflicted. On the one hand, he was influenced by his evil, non-Jewish wife, Izevel, daughter of the King of Sidon. On the other hand, he was influenced by the prophet Eliyahu. If the prophet were to abandon him, he would have fallen completely under the dominion of his wife - to the great detriment of the Nation of Israel. The influence of the prophet indeed secretly bore fruit. At the moment of truth, the king turned to him for advice and called him "my father" (Melachim 2 6:21). Furthermore, during the national tragedy, Achav was truly torn apart because of his pain; he ripped his garment, and while he was walking on the wall, "and the people looked, and he had sackcloth within on his flesh" (ibid. verse 30).

The heretic, the sinner, the anti-religious one was, somewhere within, a secretly repentant man, who wore sackcloth of mourning on his flesh.

## Rav Aviner on... Not All Who Wish to Become Jews May Do So - Part 1

[Be-Ahavah U-Be-Emunah – Lech Lecha 5773 – translated by R. Blumberg]

Some wish by a pen stroke to heal the wounds of our people, registering non-Jews as "Jewish" on conversion documents out of synch with Jewish law. They think that via this procedural step they can solve a profound problem of identity. Yet in reality they err and cause others to err, adding still more suffering to our Nation. Instead of toiling to bring near those far removed, they place an official stamp of recognition on the division of our people, creating two types of Jews: Jews according to Jewish law and Jews according to Israeli secular law. Heaven help us if tomorrow a boy proposes marriage to a girl he loves, but she answers, "I cannot. I am Jewish by Jewish law and you are Jewish by secular law. Leave me. I am forbidden to you."

True, there are circles of people, both religious and irreligious, seeking to separate religion and state. They do not understand that you cannot solve problems and conflicts by division of forces, but only by increasing love. They do not understand that they are leading us to a deep crisis. And who knows where it will lead?

We mustn't agree to there being two types of Jews in our midst, any more than we should agree to the establishment of two separate countries for the Jewish People.

Generations ago we were a dispersed people, scattered among various countries, but now we are a country ourselves, and the Torah too must manifest itself as a national institution.

You cannot have every group holding its own loudspeaker, thinking it represents Jewish law. The Chief Rabbinate must be the body that decides matters. When there is

no national conception of the Torah, fissures form that threatens to shatter the nation. Therefore we must increase unity and we must strengthen the Torah as an all-encompassing institution of the Jewish People, centered around the Israeli Chief Rabbinate. This will solve the problem of conversion both here and abroad, and put an end to all of the yelling, agitation and divisiveness.

As for the very question of “Who is a Jew”, I can recall what Yosef Schechter, a learned educator, philosopher and researcher, said to David Ben-Gurion: “Here is what a researcher does when he sets out to deal with a problem. First he examines all the material that has been published until now. Then he examines all the conclusions that have been amassed, and he builds on them, unless he discovers contradictions. The present question was deliberated upon by generations of our Sages. They pondered it in enormous depth and examined every detail with remarkable precision. Not only that, but we see with our own eyes the extraordinary result of their long, exhausting approach – the survival of a poor, persecuted nation throughout such a dangerous exile. True, in our own generation, novel and scientific research methods have been developed, but as far as spiritual problems, it is not only experimentation that should be the determining factor, but thought as well. And in this realm, we are forced to admit that civilization’s advance has only tainted the depths of our thinking. Who will dare, in our dark generation, in which the worst crimes against humanity were committed, to try to tailor the Torah of Moses to modern thought?”

A Supreme Court justice, the late Dr. Moshe Zilberg, wrote in his day that what we have here is not a minor, concrete question of registration, but a penetrating clarification of the essence of the concept of a Jew: “The one in the court docket is not the registrar of the State of Israel, or the Interior Minister, but the Jewish People down through the generations. Shall a ‘subjective test’ be what determines Jewishness? Is silent identification coupled with some ceremony that people have made up out of their heads based on their own understanding of the spirit of Judaism sufficient? Where is the boundary? Shall even the Christian who harbors deep affinity for the Jewish People be considered a Jew?”

One soldier said that the radio broadcaster who announced on June 7, 1967 that the Western Wall had been liberated was worthy of everyone’s thanks, ‘because he succeeded in making clear for us, all at once, how foolish is the pilpulistic argument over who is a Jew’ (Siach Lochamim p. 236). Yet the Jewish People were not born yesterday. Shall we desecrate the word ‘Jew’, cross out its hallowed, historic meaning, and deny all the values of the spirit to which we became accustomed daily during our long exile? Whether we are called “religious” or “secular”, we cannot cut ourselves off from our historic past, nor can we deny it. We are carrying on. Not everyone who wishes to claim the title of Jew for himself may do so.”

Now someone called “secular” may rise up and say, “What relevance do Jewish legal definitions have for us? After all, we don’t keep Jewish law, and those who do keep it sometimes insult us by calling us non-Jews. It turns out that we aren’t Jewish either according to Jewish law.”

Yet that is not true. The essence of a Jew is not measured by behavioral criteria, nor does it depend on Mitzvah fulfillment. A Jew, even if he be secular, is still a Jew. One’s very Jewishness is independent of one’s deeds. It should be borne out by one’s deeds, but it does not depend on them. It is an inner quality and a spiritual character.

We are plagued by a very deep crisis of loss of, and search for, identity, and this is bitterly painful for us. In these times, we cannot avoid this issue. We must remember what we are, what our lives are, what it means for us to be a special nation, distinct from all others. We constitute a unique component of mankind, a people with a

unique national psyche. We belong to a people that was not born recently, but in ancient times: the people of eternity, Eternal Israel.

## **Shut She'eilat Shlomo - Questions of Jewish Law**

### Laws of Mourning

#### One visit to the cemetery for both mother and father

Q: My parents died very close to one another on the calendar; can I visit the cemetery one time for both of them near their yahrzeits?

A: There is no problem. You can visit one time even if there is a week or month between their yahrzeits, since visiting the cemetery is not an obligation, but only a worthy practice, and as such, each person may choose the best way to perform it. They certainly would not want it to be a burden and especially when the dates are close to one another. Furthermore, there are times when you cannot visit on the yahrzeit itself, such as when it falls on Shabbat and you have to move the visit to another time. You see from this that it is possible to visit on a different day. You can therefore visit your mother's and father's grave on the same day. The Kaddish, however, should be said for each one of them on the proper day.

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**Yeshivat Ateret Yerushalayim** P.O.B. 1076 Jerusalem 91009 Tel.02-6284101 Fax.02-6261528

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