

# Zera Shimshon

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## Chapter XVIII: Mishpatim (Ex. 21:1–24:18)

### Essay 12. “They beheld G-d”

**פסוק** "ויהי נא פי־שנים ברוחך אלי" וכו' "הקשית לשאול אם־תראה אתי לקח מאתך יהי־לך כן ואם־אין לא יהיה". הפסוקים האלו הם תמוהים, דאיך אלישע העיז פגיו לשאול מרבו כה, ומה ענין זה לאם יראה אותו לוקח וכו'.

There are **verse[s]**: “Elijah said to Elisha, ‘Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?’ Elisha answered, ‘**Please let a double portion of your spirit pass on to me.**’ And he said: ‘**You have asked a difficult thing; if you see me being taken from you, this will be granted to you; if not, it will not.**’”<sup>1</sup>

**These verses are strange, for how did Elisha brazenly ask his teacher this, and what relevance is there if he will see him being taken, etc.**

וידוע מה דאיתא בזהר ובמקובלים שגשמת נדב ואביהוא באו להתקן בפנחס פשעושה אותו מעשה שהרג את זמרי, ולכן שם באותו מעשה הנפירו תמיד הכתוב "פינחס בן־אלעזר בן־אהרן הכהן", כלומר שפנחס בן אלעזר חזר להיות בן אהרן הכהן על ידי גשמת נדב ואביהוא שהיו בניו של אהרן. ומשום הכי הרויח אז הכהונה לפי שנעשה בן אהרן. ולפי שהקריבו אש זרה לפני ה' משום הכי אליהו בחר הכרמל קדש ה' באש כנודע.

**It is known what is brought in the Zohar<sup>2</sup> and by the Kabbalists that the souls of Nadav and Abihu, the sons of Aaron who died after offering strange fire,<sup>3</sup> came to be corrected in Pinchas, i.e., their souls joining his soul, when he acted in killing Zimri. Thus, there in that incident of killing Zimri,<sup>4</sup> Scripture always refers to “Pinchas the son of Elazar, the son of the priest Aaron.”<sup>5</sup> This is as if to say that Pinchas the son of Elazar essentially changed to be the son of the priest Aaron. Aaron and his sons were elevated to the priesthood, which included descendants born after that time. However, that excluded Pinchas, who had been born prior to the elevation of his father and grandfather to the priesthood. It was only after the incident with Zimri**

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<sup>1</sup> II Kings 2:9–10.

<sup>2</sup> Zohar, Pinchas, III:217a.

<sup>3</sup> Lev. 10:1–2.

<sup>4</sup> Num. 25:6–8.

<sup>5</sup> Num. 25:7 and 25:11.

that Pinchas was rewarded with the priesthood.<sup>6</sup> That was **thanks to the sons of Nadav and Abihu, who were sons of Aaron**, whose souls had joined his soul. **Because of this, he gained the priesthood, as he was made a direct son of Aaron** instead of only being a grandson.

Furthermore, the Zohar teaches that Elijah was Pinchas.<sup>7</sup> Thus, Elijah also carried within him the souls of Nadav and Abihu. **Because [Nadav and Abihu] brought strange fire before G-d, because of this, at Mount Carmel, Elijah sanctified G-d with fire, as is known.**<sup>8</sup>

ומעתה אלישע הנה רוצה שאלו הנשמות יגמרו תיקונם בו בעצמו כל מה שלא נגמר באלהיו, ועל זה שאל "ויהינא פי" שנים", כלומר ראשי תבות נ"א נ'דב א'ביהוא. נאלהו השיב לו "הקשית לשאל", כלומר איך סלקא דעתך להיות אתה יותר חשוב ממני שיגמרו בך מה שלא גמרו אצלי.

Now, Elisha desired that these souls would complete correcting themselves within him, to the extent they had not completed the correction within Elijah. For this reason, he requested of his master, Elijah, **“Please let a double portion of your spirit pass on to me,”** as if to say the letters of the word **please** [נָא] [na], viz, *nun* and *aleph*, are representative of the initial letters of Nadav and Abihu.

Elijah answered him, **“You have asked a difficult thing,”** as if to say, **“How does it enter your mind that you are more important than me, that what has not been completed within me will be completed within you.”**

והיינו דגיש מחלוקת אם הצדיקים גדולים יותר מהמלאכים או המלאכים גדולים מהצדיקים, ובזה תלוי המחלוקת אם הארץ נבראת תחלה ואחר כך שמים דהיינו הצדיקים גדולים או שמים נבראו תחלה דהיינו המלאכים. והגם שרז"ל אמרו גדולים צדיקים יותר ממלאכי השרת, עם כל זה מפשט הכתובים נראה בהפך, שהרי הוושע שהיה נביא כשראה מלאך נפל על פניו. והתקועית אמרה "ואדני חכם כחכמת מלאך האלהים" ורבים כאלה, ועוד אמרו ז"ל שנדב ואביהוא הציצו בשכינה כדכתיב "ניחזו את האלהים", ומשום הכי מתו, וקשה איך אפשר שמלא לבם לעשות דבר כזה, והכתיב "כי לא יראני האדם וחי".

**There is an argument whether the righteous are greater than the angels, or whether the angels are greater than the righteous. This depends on the argument if the earth was created first and afterward the Heavens, which would mean that the righteous are greater; or whether the Heavens were created first, which would mean that the angels are greater.**

<sup>6</sup> Zevachim 101b; Rashi on Num. 25:13.

<sup>7</sup> Zohar, Ki Tisa, II:190a. Some understand that Elijah was a *gilgul* of Pinchas, while others understand that Pinchas had been made into an angel, and returned to Earth as Elijah.

<sup>8</sup> I Kings 18:19–39.

Even though our rabbis of blessed memory said that the righteous are greater than the ministering angels,<sup>9</sup> nevertheless the simple meaning of the Scriptures appears to show the opposite, for Joshua—who was a prophet—upon seeing an angel, fell upon his face.<sup>10</sup>

The woman of Tekoa said: “My lord is as wise as an angel of G-d,”<sup>11</sup> and there are many examples like these, and [the rabbis] of blessed memory also said that Nadav and Abihu looked at the Shechinah,<sup>12</sup> as it is written, “they beheld G-d,”<sup>13</sup> but it is difficult how it is possible that they dared to do this, for isn’t it written, “a human being may not see Me and live.”<sup>14</sup>

ויש לומר שהואיל שבעת מתן תורה היו ישראל כמלאכים, כדכתיב "אני-אמרתי אלהים אתם" וכי, שעדיין לא קטאו בעגל. משום הכי היו סוברים בדעתם שלא נאסר הבטת השכינה אלא באדם שסופו למות, אבל במי שהוא כמלאך שאין סופו למות לא נאסר, לפי שהמלאכים גדולים מהצדיקים ובהם גדול שיכולים להציץ בשכינה ומשום הכי "ניחזו את האלהים". אבל קשאנו רואים שנענשו צריה לומר שטעו בסברתם ואדרבא הוא להפך שהצדיקים גדולים, ואם נאסר הבטת השכינה באדם אף על פי שהוא צדיק מכל שכן שנאסר למלאכים ולא הנה להם להציץ.

It can be said that since at the time of the giving of the Torah, Israel was like the angels, as it is written, “I had taken you for divine beings, sons of the Most High, all of you,”<sup>15</sup> since they hadn’t yet sinned with the Golden Calf.<sup>16</sup> Because of this, [Nadav and Abihu] were of the opinion that looking at the Shechinah was only forbidden for a person who in the end will die. But for one who was like an angel, who in the end will not die, it is not forbidden, as the angels are greater than the righteous, and their strength is great, such that they are able to look at the Shechinah. Because of this, Scripture says, “they beheld G-d.”

But when we see that [Nadav and Abihu] were punished for gazing at the Shechinah,<sup>17</sup> it’s necessary to say that they erred in their opinion, and to the contrary it’s the opposite, that the righteous are greater. If looking at the Shechinah is forbidden for a man even though he is righteous, even more so it is forbidden for the angels, and it’s not proper for them to look.

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<sup>9</sup> Sanhedrin 93a.

<sup>10</sup> Joshua 5:14.

<sup>11</sup> II Sam. 14:20.

<sup>12</sup> Lev. Rabbah 20:10.

<sup>13</sup> Ex. 24:11.

<sup>14</sup> Ex. 33:20.

<sup>15</sup> Ps. 82:6.

<sup>16</sup> Avodah Zarah 5a: They were like angels and would have lived forever, had they not sinned.

<sup>17</sup> Rashi on Ex. 24:10, based on Midrash Tanchuma, Beha’alotcha 16, states that Nadav and Abihu made themselves liable to death when they caught a glimpse of G-d, but because He did not wish to disturb the joy caused by the Giving of the Torah, He delayed justice until the day the Tabernacle was dedicated.

והנה אלישע הנה יודע שאלהיה הנה מלאך, כמו שאמרנו ל"ל על "ותקח האשה את שני האנשים ותצפנו" וכו', ועיי"ש. ואמר לאלהיה אם הצדיקים גדולים מהמלאכים, הנשמות שבאו אצלך הוא במכל שכן שיכולים לבא אצלי שאני מלאך אלא צדיק. ואלהיה גער בו ואמר לו "הקשית לשאול", פלומר מי אמר שהצדיקים גדולים מהמלאכים, דאי מושם שנענשו נדב ואביהוא, ודילמא הצדיקים והמלאכים הם שניהם שונים, וכסברת חכמים בתגיגה דשמים וארץ נבראו פאחד, ופירושו של "כי לא יראני האדם וחי" מיירי בין באדם של מטה בין באדם של מעלה, דכתיב "ודמות פניהם פני אדם", ואם כן אף שאני מלאך ואתה צדיק לא יועילו הנשמות הנהן לבא אצלך יותר ממה שהועילו אצלי.

**Now, Elisha knew that Elijah was an angel.** After Pinchas killed Zimri, G-d told Moses that He was granting Pinchas a Covenant of Peace.<sup>18</sup> Targum Jonathan states that G-d transformed Pinchas into an angel, who would live forever, and who would announce the Redemption at the end of the days.<sup>19</sup> This is **as the [rabbis] of blessed memory said on** the verse in which Rahab hid the Israelite spies, **“The woman, however, had taken the two men and hidden them. ‘It is true,’ she said, ‘the men did come to me, but I didn’t know where they were from.’”**<sup>20</sup> Midrash Tanchuma, parashat Shelach, states that the two men were Pinchas and Caleb, and that Pinchas stood before the men of Jericho, but they did not see him because he was [invisible] like an angel. Thus, Elijah was an angel, because, as noted above, the Zohar teaches that Elijah was Pinchas.

**[Elisha] said to Elijah: If the righteous are greater than the angels, then the souls that entered into you are in any event able to enter into me, as I am not an angel, but rather a righteous man. Elijah scolded him and said to him, “You have asked a difficult thing,” as if to say, “Who said that the righteous are greater than the angels,” for if it’s because Nadav and Abihu were punished, perhaps the righteous and the angels are both equal, and like the opinion of the Torah sages in tractate Chagigah (12a), that the Heavens and Earth were created together, and the explanation of the verse, “for a human being may not see Me and live,” is talking about both a man who is below, i.e., on the Earth, and a man who is above, i.e., an angel in Heaven. This is as it is written, “Each of them had a human face,”<sup>21</sup> and if so, even though I am an angel and you are righteous, it won’t benefit those souls to enter into you more than what they benefited with me.**

ועם כל זה אמר לו "אם תראה אתי לקח מאתך" וכו', דאמרין בסוף מסכת שבת "כיהלך האדם אל בית עולמו" מלמד שקל צדיק וצדיק עושים לו [מדור] בפני עצמו שאין שום אחד רואה כבודו של חברו. ומעתה אם לא "תראה אתי לקח מאתך" יהנה מוכח שהמלאכים הם כמו הצדיקים, שגם הצדיק אינו יכול לראות בכבודו של המלאך, ואם כן אין תועלת כלום לנשמות הנהן שתבאנה אצלו.

**With all of this, [Elijah] said to him, “if you see me being taken from you, this will be granted to you; if not, it will not,” as it is said at the end of tractate Shabbat (152a): “ ‘When**

<sup>18</sup> Num. 25:12.

<sup>19</sup> Targum Jonathan on Num. 25:12.

<sup>20</sup> Joshua 2:4.

<sup>21</sup> Ezek. 1:10.

man sets out for his eternal abode<sup>22</sup> teaches that each and every righteous person is given a dwelling place [in the World-to-Come] in accordance with his honor.” Now we understand that if you do not “see me being taken from you,” it will be proven that the angels are like the righteous, that even the righteous, such as yourself, cannot see the glory of the angel, such as me. If so, there is no benefit to those souls who will come to you.

אָבֶל "אִם-תִּרְאֶה אֶתִּי לֵקַח מֵאַתָּה", אִזְ יִהְיֶה מוֹכַח שֶׁהַצַּדִּיק עָדִיף מֵהַמְּלָאָךְ, שֶׁהַרִי הַצַּדִּיק שְׂאִינוּ יָכוֹל לִרְאוֹת כְּבוֹדוֹ שֶׁל צַדִּיק חֲבִירוֹ, עֲכָשְׁיוֹ רוֹאֶה בְּכְבוֹדוֹ שֶׁל מְלָאָךְ, דִּהְיִינוּ אֱלִישָׁע רוֹאֶה בְּכְבוֹדוֹ שֶׁל אֵלִיהוּ שֶׁהוּא מְלָאָךְ. וְלִפִּי זֶה יִהְיֶה תוֹעֵלַת לְאוֹתָן הַנְּשָׁמוֹת לְבֹא אֶצְלָךְ, וְאִזְ יִהְיֶה לָּךְ כּוֹן. וְכֵן הָיָה שֶׁנִּכְנְסוּ גַם בְּאֱלִישָׁע כְּמוֹ שֶׁכָּתְבוּ הַמְּקוֹבְלִים, וְכֵן מְצִינּוּ דְכֵתִיב "וַיֵּרָם אֶת-אֲדָרְתוֹ אֵלִיהוּ אֲשֶׁר נָפְלָה מֵעַלָּיו", וְרִאשֵׁי תִבּוֹת אֲשֶׁר נִפְלָה הוּא אֲבִיהוּא נִדְב.

But “if you see me being taken from you,” then it is proof that the righteous man is superior to the angel, for the righteous is not able to see the honor of his friend who is righteous is now seeing the honor of the angel. That is, Elisha sees the honor of Elijah, who is an angel. Because of this, it will be beneficial for these souls to come to you, and thus it will be so for you.

Scripture continues that Elisha did see Elijah being taken away. “As they kept on walking and talking, a fiery chariot with fiery horses suddenly appeared and separated one from the other; and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw it, and he cried out, ‘Oh, father, father! Israel’s chariots and riders!’ ”<sup>23</sup> Thus it was, that [Nadav and Abihu] entered to Elisha, as the Kabbalists wrote,<sup>24</sup> and similarly we find that it is written, “He picked up Elijah’s mantle, which had dropped from him,”<sup>25</sup> and the initial letters of “which had dropped” [אֲשֶׁר נִפְלָה] are the same as the initial letters of “Abihu” and “Nadav.”

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<sup>22</sup> Eccl. 12:5.

<sup>23</sup> II Kings 2:11–12.

<sup>24</sup> Chaim Vital, *Sefer haLikutim*, I Kings, siman 19.

<sup>25</sup> II Kings 2:13.