

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur 13: The Drought – part 12:

Eliyahu revives the widow of Tzarfat's son (17:17-24) (continued)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

10. The Woman's Reaction

(24) "The woman said to Eliyahu: Now I know that you are a man of God, and God's word in your mouth is true."

Is it really only now that the woman discovers that Eliyahu is a man of God? Did she not already declare in her complaint, before he revived her son, "What have I to do with you, O MAN OF GOD... (18)?"

And has she only just now realized that God's word in Eliyahu's mouth is true? Did she not witness how, throughout the whole year, "the jar of meal was not consumed, nor did the bottle of oil diminish, ACCORDING TO GOD'S WORD WHICH HE HAD SPOKEN BY ELIYAHU'S HAND (16)?"

As a result of the realization of God's word as spoken by Eliyahu, she and her son survived the entire year!

Indeed, the woman knew that Eliyahu was a man of God and that his decree in God's Name was being fulfilled. But in all of this she did not sense "truth." Not in the sense of fulfilling that which one has spoken, but in the wider sense of the term: meaning a person who bears "truth" as the stamp of God (see *Shabbat* 55a). God directs the world through a combination of two traits that are mutually contradictory: the trait of strict justice and the trait of mercy. But God, Who makes peace in the heavens, also makes peace between these traits and brings them together in His running of the world. It is the combination of both these traits that represents God's seal of truth.

Eliyahu has indeed been revealed to the woman of Tzarfat as a "man of God" – but only as a representative of the Divine trait of strict justice. His presence at the gates of Tzarfat, like his year-long stay in her home, has been a demanding one:

"Make ME from them a small cake FIRST and bring it out TO ME, and make for yourself and for your son AFTERWARDS (13)."

His decree that the jar of meal and the bottle of oil would not run out was admittedly fulfilled, thereby proving without any doubt that Eliyahu was a man of God and that God's word in his mouth was realized. But Eliyahu decrees this miracle not out of mercy and compassion for the starving widow and her son, but rather to facilitate the fulfillment of his demands. And these demands concern the man of God himself.

This sense of Eliyahu as a man of God representing only the trait of strict and demanding justice is expressed quite clearly by the widow when she tells him:

(18) "What have I to do with you, O man of God; you have come to me TO RECALL MY SIN AND TO PUT MY SON TO DEATH."

Thus far, Eliyahu has not represented God fully. He has represented Him in only one dimension, and therefore the stamp of "truth" does not emanate from God's word in his mouth; his representation is not complete.

But now, after Eliyahu resurrects the woman's dead son for the child's own sake ("please restore THE SOUL OF THIS BOY within him"), with no thought about any other benefit (as in the miracle of the jar of meal and the bottle of oil) and without presenting any demands, the man of God is revealed to her in a new light. He represents God's trait of compassion in the world, and he performs miracles through this trait. The fact that his decree on the jar of meal and bottle of oil was fulfilled proved that God's word in Eliyahu's mouth was indeed realized (and that he was indeed a "man of God"). The miracle of the child's resurrection proves that he is a man of God in whose mouth God's word is TRUTH. Eliyahu's personality is now revealed to the woman, through this miracle, as a genuine representation of his Sender, rather than a one-dimensional reflection of Him.

We may conclude this section by stating that the woman's reaction here also relates to the ongoing argument between Eliyahu and God. We saw above that both of the widow's speeches – at the gates of Tzarfat and in her bitter recriminations over the death of her son, before Eliyahu restores him to life – are harsh criticisms of Eliyahu. Without knowing it, the woman voices God's secret accusation against Eliyahu for maintaining his oath that has brought hunger and devastation to the world. We must also address this dimension of her final words to him. Her praise for Eliyahu as bearing God's word IN TRUTH, rather than in one-dimensional form, is a sort of Divine assent to what seems to be Eliyahu's new path – a path in which he represents his Sender both in strict justice and in mercy and compassion.

11. Structure of this unit

This unit consists of eight verses, divided into two equal parts of four verses each. The separation between the two parts, as in many other biblical narratives structured in similar fashion, is to be found in the dramatic turning point: not the resuscitation of the boy, in verse 23, as the reader might have assumed, but rather in Eliyahu's second prayer, which is preceded by his lying on top of the boy three times. It is not God's wonders that represent the crux of this section, and therefore it is not the miracle that serves as its focus. Rather, the subject concerns the prophet's path and his relations with his human environment, on one hand, and with God, on the other. For this reason it is Eliyahu's own actions that are the focus. The transition between his first call to God, representing an argument about himself at the center, and the second call, which focuses exclusively on improving the fate of "this boy," expresses a dramatic change in Eliyahu's path. This change (which we have discussed at length in previous sections) is what divides the two sections of the unit.

Let us note the contrast between the two halves of the unit. There is no phrase in the first half without a contrasting partner in the second half. We present the two halves below: for the sake of contrasting them we record the first half (I) in its proper order, each phrase with its corresponding contrast from the second half (II):

I(17) "... the son of the woman who was mistress of the house fell ill, and his illness grew exceedingly severe, until there was no life left in him."

II (22)"... the boy's soul was restored within him"

I (18) "She said to Eliyahu: What have I to do with you, O man of God; have you come to me to recall my sin and to put my son to death?"

II (24) "The woman said to Eliyahu: Now I know that you are a man of God and that God's word in your mouth is truth"

I (19) "He said to her: Give me your son"

II (23b) "He gave him to his mother, and Eliyahu said: See, your son lives."

I (19) "He took him from her bosom and took him up to the attic where he dwelled, and he lay him down on the bed"

II (23a) "Eliyahu took the boy and brought him down from the attic"

I (20) "He called out to God and said: Lord my God, have You also done evil to the widow with whom I dwell, to put her son to death?!"

II (21) "He stretched out over the boy three times, and he called to God and said: Lord my God, please restore the soul of this boy within him."

The contrasts between the two halves of the unit exist on several different levels of the story, all complementing one another. On the level of plot, the first half presents us with a death which is irreversible, a prayer that is not answered, bitterness and accusation on all sides; in the second half we have God's response and accession to the voice of the prophet, life that is restored, joy and appeasement on all sides.

On the literal level the contrast between the two halves is expressed in the fact that twice in the first half we find the root "*m-v-t*" (death – "to put my son to death," "to put her son to death"), while the second half makes mention twice of the root "*h-y-h*" ("he lived," "see, your son lives"). Moreover, the child is referred to four times in the first half as his mother's "son," and four times in the second half as "the child" (as discussed in the previous *shiur*).

The difference between the terms used to describe the woman in the two halves points to the contrast between them:

In the first half: (17) "the woman who was MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE," (20) "The widow WITH WHOM I LODGE." In the second half: (23) "his mother," (24) "the woman."

These references indicate a transition from the perception of the woman solely in relation to Eliyahu and his distress, in the first half, to a perception of her as an independent personality, whose situation as a MOTHER and whose independent recognition as a WOMAN are the subject of the second half (as discussed previously, in section 2.).

On the broader stylistic level, the first half is characterized by two rhetorical questions that express unresolved tension. The widow's address to Eliyahu and Eliyahu's address to God both conclude with the same question: "... to put my son to death?" and "... to put her son to death?." The second half, in contrast, is characterized by two calls, each in fact an exclamation. There is Eliyahu's call to God – "Please restore the child's soul within him!," and his address to the mother: "See, your son lives!" Each of these exclamations is a stylistic and thematic contrast to one of the two rhetorical questions in the first half, in chiasmic order:

A – "You have come to me... to put my son to death?"

B – "Have You also... to put her son to death?"

B1 – "Please restore the soul of this boy within him!"

A1 – "See, your son lives!"

Moreover, there is a significant difference between the respective endings of the two halves. The second half concludes with a contented statement that is neither a question nor an exclamation ("... and God's word in your mouth is truth"). This relaxed mood is a sharp contrast to the tension that concludes that first half (... "Have You also done evil... to put her son to death?!")

All of these contrasts between the two halves – on the level of plot, the appearance of key words, and style – are functions of a single phenomenon: the change that takes place in Eliyahu's thinking when faced with the dead child lying on the bed, realizing who and what has caused this death.

An examination of the comparison between the two halves of the section, as set out above, reveals that other than the first corresponding pair in the table, the order of correspondence of verses is actually inverse. In other words, an earlier verse in the first half corresponds to a later verse in the second half, while a later verse in the first half corresponds to an earlier verse in the second half. This raises the possibility that perhaps this unit, too – like its predecessor (see the *shiur* on part 5, section 7) – is built as a system of symmetrical parallels around a central axis. The presentation below demonstrates that this is, in fact, the case (except that the symmetrical structure is imperfect):

I: (18) "SHE SAID TO ELIYAHU:

What have I to do with you, O MAN OF GOD;

You have come to me to recall my sin and to put my son to death.

II: (19) "HE SAID to her: GIVE ME YOUR SON.

III: He TOOK HIM from her bosom and TOOK HIM UP TO THE ATTIC, where he lodged, and lay him down upon his bed.

IV: (20) HE CALLED OUT TO GOD AND SAID: LORD MY GOD

Have You also done evil to the widow with whom I lodge, to put her son to death?

V: (21) He stretched out over the boy three times

IVa: AND HE CALLED OUT TO GOD, SAYING: LORD MY GOD

Please restore the soul of this boy within him.

(22) God heard the voice of Eliyahu and restored the boy's soul within him, so that he lived.

IIIa: (23) Eliyahu TOOK the boy AND BROUGHT HIM DOWN FROM THE ATTIC to the house

IIa: AND GAVE HIM TO HIS MOTHER, and Eliyahu SAID: See, YOUR SON lives.

Ia: (24) THE WOMAN SAID TO ELIYAHU: Now I know that you are A MAN OF GOD, and God's word in your mouth is truth."

This symmetrical structure addresses four contrasting pairs:

I: the woman's complaint to Eliyahu at the beginning of the unit, while holding her dead son, and correspondingly – her words to him at the end of the unit, expressing her new appreciation for him after her son is returned to her alive.

II: Eliyahu's words to the woman while she is still holding her dead son ("Give me your son"), and correspondingly – his words to her when he returns her son alive ("See – your son lives!") The root "*n-t-n*" (to give) has a diametrically opposite meaning in these two places: "GIVE ME your (dead) son" as opposed to "HE GAVE HIM (alive) to his mother."

III: Eliyahu's actions leading up to the resurrection of the boy, and correspondingly - his actions leading up to returning him to his mother: "HE TOOK HIM (dead) from her bosom," "Eliyahu TOOK the boy (alive, from the bed)," "HE BROUGHT HIM UP (dead) to the attic," "HE TOOK HIM DOWN (alive) from the attic."

IV: Eliyahu's first call to God, which was not answered, and correspondingly – the second call, which is answered (both introduced with the same words: "He called to God saying: Lord my God...").

What does our discovery of this symmetrical structure add to what we already know about the structure of our unit? It highlights the inverse order of the events in the second half as compared to the first half. The crises that appear in the first half of our unit are gradually repaired and solved in the second unit in the wake of the change

that takes place within Eliyahu himself – but in inverse order. When the crises appear, they are ordered from the most innocuous to the most grave – from the crisis in Eliyahu's relations with the widow to the crisis in his relations with God, Who refuses to accept his first call. The second half, with the solutions, is ordered from the most significant down to the least significant: first there is a repairing of the severe rift between the prophet and God, Who now accepts his prayer and answers him. As a result, even the painful lack of confidence that the widow expresses towards Eliyahu is now repaired; it is replaced with a clear declaration of assurance.

Another significant contribution offered by the structure of the unit as we have presented it above is the highlighting of the central axis, giving it extra importance. We discover, then, that the five words (in Hebrew) – "He stretched out over the boy three times" represent the climax of this unit. Why is this so? Because this phrase, by its very appearance, testifies to the dramatic change that has taken place in Eliyahu's approach. This change is the key to the whole turnaround that unfolds in the second half of the unit - as we have also explained in previous sections.

Translated by Kaeren Fish