

The Eliyahu Narratives
Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #12: The Drought - part 11:

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

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8. "HE STRETCHED OUT OVER THE CHILD THREE TIMES"

Chronologically, how are we to regard this action by Eliyahu? Is it the conclusion of his first cry to God, which was not answered, or is it the introduction to his second cry, which was answered? In other words: at which point did Eliyahu sense that God was not responding to his efforts to revive the child and that he must change his direction? Was it before he stretched out over the boy or afterwards? Does Eliyahu sense the lack of response before his stretching out - in which case we must regard the stretching out itself, and not only the second prayer, as the conclusion he draws from the failure of his first prayer? Or does he sense it only afterwards - in which case his stretching out is an act that is superfluous, that does nothing to make his first prayer effective, and is entirely unnecessary for his second prayer?

In what way is the second prayer different from the first? We shall provide a detailed answer to this question in the following section. Here we shall highlight only one point, which will help us clarify our view of Eliyahu's action. At the center of Eliyahu's consciousness in his first prayer are two elements: the widow and himself. "Have You done evil also TO THE WIDOW with whom I LODGE..." The implied request in this prayer - that the dead boy be revived - will bring benefit to both parties and repair the ruptured relationship between them. (We conclude this based on all the commentaries quoted in the previous *shiur*: while some perceive the crux of his prayer as being aimed at repairing the injustice caused to the widow, others perceive his own interests as the more important element.) In the second prayer, in contrast, there is no consideration of anything other than "this boy" himself. There is no benefit for the mother or for Eliyahu himself, nor the relationship between them; only "restore, I pray, the soul of THIS BOY within him" - because it would be better for the child to be alive than dead.

When does this transition take place? At what point does Eliyahu begin focusing on the child alone, rather than anything extraneous? It is when he stretches out over him three times. In the first prayer, Eliyahu thinks only of the boy's mother and his own

obligation towards her ("with whom I dwell"); his cry is not accompanied by any act that is related to the child. When his first cry is not answered, Eliyahu turns towards the boy, to stretch out over him; this signifies the change in perception. He now senses responsibility for the dead boy; he wishes to make life forces from his own body flow in the boy. Radak, in his first commentary, interprets the stretching out in this way:

"'He stretched out' - (*va-yitmoded*) - derived from the word "*midda*"... meaning, he placed himself in the child's measure when he stretched out over him, as it is said of Elisha (*MelakhimII* 4:34): "He lay over the boy and placed his mouth over his mouth, and his eyes over his eyes, and his hands over his hands.'"

Hence, this stretching out over the boy should be viewed as an act that takes place AFTER the failure of the first cry to God, as a conclusion drawn from the lack of Divine response. The act serves, then, as an introduction to the second prayer. We quote the continuation of the Radak's commentary on this matter:

"The meaning of this matter is that his prayer would be better focused upon the boy while he is lying upon him, stretched out over him. Similarly (*Bereishit* 25:21), 'Yitzchak pleaded to God in the presence of his wife' - meaning that his wife was before him at the time of his prayer, so that he would direct his prayer for her, 'for she was barren.'"

Let us attempt to support our claim stylistically. We discussed in the past how the change in title of a character during the course of a biblical story has significance. In general, the various titles testify to different points of view or different relationships towards the object of the title among the other characters in the story. But sometimes a change in title testifies to a change in ATTITUDE towards the object of the title on the part of just one character in the story.

In the previous section, the boy was twice referred to as the woman's "son." Once he is referred to thus by the mother herself – (12) "I shall prepare it for myself and for MY SON," and once by Eliyahu – (13): "Make for yourself AND FOR YOUR SON afterwards." (There is also an allusion to the boy in the narration – (15) "She and he and HER HOUSEHOLD ate.") At the beginning of our unit, he is again referred to as the woman's "son," for times:

- i. in the narrative - (17) "THE WOMAN'S SON fell ill"
- ii. by the mother - (18) "... to put MY SON to death"
- iii. by Eliyahu - (19) "Give me YOUR SON"

iv. by Eliyahu - (20) "Have You done evil... to put HER SON to death"

Following these four references, in which the mother, Eliyahu and the text all refer to the boy as her "son" in an altogether natural manner, there is a change, and he is then referred to as "the child" (or "the boy" - in Hebrew, "*ha-yeled*") four times:

i. in the narrative - (21) "He stretched out over THE CHILD"

ii. by Eliyahu - (21) "Restore the soul of THIS CHILD within him"

iii. in the narrative - (22) "THE CHILD'S soul was restored within him, and he lived"

iv. in the narrative - (23) "Eliyahu took THE CHILD"

It seems that what the text is doing here is more than simply introducing literary variation; the change is a deliberate, systematic phenomenon. What is the meaning of this change in title?

The reason for the change is clear: it expresses a change in the attitude of the main character in the story - Eliyahu - towards the child. Eliyahu ceases to relate to him as just "the son" of the mistress of the house where he lodges, and begins to relate to him as a person in his own right: a young "child" whose life has been cut short before his time, and this arouses his sorrow. And just as Eliyahu now refers to him as "this boy," the text refers to him in the same way in the description of the actions that bind Eliyahu and this boy. When does the change in title take place? Not in Eliyahu's second prayer, but in the action that precedes it: "He stretched out over THE BOY three times." In the next *shiur* (in section 11) we shall substantiate this point more fully, in the analysis of these words and their place in the structure of the literary unit.

9. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SECOND PRAYER AND ITS ACCEPTANCE IN TERMS OF THE SUBJECT OF THE STORY

(21) "He called out to God and said:

Lord my God; restore, I pray You, the soul of this boy within him.

(22) God heard the voice of Eliyahu; the soul of the boy was restored within him, and he lived."

In what way is Eliyahu's second prayer different from the first, and why is he answered this time? Furthermore, what is its significance in terms of the ongoing argument between God and His prophet?

No great effort is required to discern the profound differences between the two prayers. Their introduction is the same: "He called out to God and said: Lord my God..."; this invites us to compare them in order to emphasize the contrast between them.

i. Eliyahu's first cry to God - "Have You done evil also to the widow..." - is not a prayer of supplication, except by inference. On the literal level, it is Eliyahu's complaint against the evil that God has done in putting the widow's son to death. For this reason, it is formulated as a rhetorical question - for the purposes of expressing incomprehension at God's actions.

The second call to God is formulated quite clearly as an insistent plea, even on the most simple literal level. It does not conclude with a question mark, like its predecessor; the tone of supplication is apparent: "Lord my God; Restore, I PRAY YOU..."

ii. However we in Eliyahu's previous call, it is clear that the prophet places himself, to some extent, as the focus of the prayer. At the end of section 7. we saw that some commentators view the crux of the prayer as concerning himself, while others understand the prayer as being offered principally on behalf of the widow, asking that she be spared an injustice of which he - Eliyahu - would be the cause.

The situation in the second prayer is entirely different. Here, Eliyahu makes no mention of himself at all; he does not even mention the mother, whose accusation against him echoes in the first prayer. At the center of his prayer there is only "this boy." Eliyahu's request that the soul of the boy be restored to him is not justified on the basis of any external factor. The meaning of this prayer, then, is simply that it is better that "this boy" live than die, and so Eliyahu asks that his life be restored. The exclusive focus on "this boy" is expressed in the change in his title, as explained in the previous section.

What is the meaning of this request for life on behalf of the dead child? We have noted previously that the death of this particular child is meant to represent those who are suffering and dying from the famine and all its attendant distress; it represents a more severe version of the drying up of Wadi Kerit. The transition that Eliyahu makes

from an implied request to revive the child for Eliyahu's own sake and the sake of the mother, who is connected to the prophet in various ways, and a request for revival that is aimed only for "this boy" himself, is a drastic one in terms of the ongoing argument with the prophet. The moment that the request to revive the child no longer falls into the category of a request for privileges for the prophet, it becomes an implied request for an end to the drought! For now, any child that dies of starvation is presumably going to cause the prophet to offer an identical prayer. And what is the meaning of a prayer to restore life to the world, if not a request for rain?

In this prayer, and in God's favorable response ("God heard Eliyahu's voice"), we find the turning point of the story: the argument with the prophet reaches its conclusion after the prophet has been readied, step by step, for a nullification of the decree of drought. Now he will not need to be coerced from the outside; rather, the change will arise from his new view of the tragic reality that has been brought about as a result of his oath. Obviously, despite the fact that the woman is appeased by having her son restored to life, Eliyahu will not be continuing to lodge in her home. The woman's new recognition of Eliyahu - (24) "Now I have come to know that you are a man of God, AND GOD'S WORD IN YOUR MOUTH IS TRUE," requires that Eliyahu leave her home and return to the place that he originally left, in order to allow the rain to return.

Admittedly, the change that has come over Eliyahu is only implied. He is in a PROCESS of change; the process began not just now, but already at Wadi Kerit. The impressions are accumulating slowly in his consciousness, gradually influencing him to change his mind. More time will pass, and great acts will be performed, before Eliyahu will reach the point of PLEADING with God to bring back the rain. Meanwhile, his prayer that the boy's life be restored to him reveals that Eliyahu is ready to AGREE for the rain to return. But he still needs an external command to push him in this direction. This command follows immediately on in the text:

(18:1) "It happened, after many days, that God's word came to Eliyahu in the third year, saying: Go and appear before Achav, and I shall give rain upon the land.

(2) So Eliyahu went..."

Our reading of the account of the revival of the child follows the interpretation of *Chazal*; it is simply an attempt to translate the pictorial, exegetical language into a commentary following the literal text. Let us now examine *Chazal's* interpretation as it appears in an *aggada* in *Sanhedrin* 113a, the first part of which has been mentioned more than once in these *shiurim*:

"Eliyahu the Tishbi, among the residents of Gilad, said to Achav: As the Lord God of Israel lives, there will be no dew or rain during these years...': He asked for [Divine] mercy and the keys of rainfall were given to him; he stood and left. 'God's word came to him, saying: Go from here, head eastward and hide yourself at Wadi Kerit... and the ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning...', 'And it was, at the end of a year, that the wadi dried up, for there was no rain in the land': Since he [the subject here is ambiguous - it may refer either to God or to Eliyahu] saw that there was suffering in the world, it is written 'God's word came to him saying: Arise, go to Tzarfat...', and it is written, 'It happened, after these things, that the son of the woman who was mistress of the house fell ill...': he asked for mercy, that the key to resurrection would be given to him. They told him: "There are three keys that are not given to any agent [i.e., only God Himself holds them]: that of childbirth, that of rain, and that of resurrection. People will say, "Two are in the hands of the disciple [Eliyahu] while only one remains in the hand of the Rav [God] [and such a situation is unacceptable]. Give back the one [of rain] and take the other [of resurrection]. As it is written, "Go, appear before Achav, and I will give rain..."

The "three keys" are the keys to life in the world - life in its different manifestations in the life-cycle of man: his birth, his existence on the earth (his sustenance by means of rain, while makes it possible for him to work on the earth), and his return to life after death (which includes, in our contemporary situation, the healing of the sick). A person who takes one of the keys and prevents its use to open the treasure-houses of life, brings death to the world - not only in the specific area of that "key," but also in other spheres. Therefore, whoever desires life for himself and for the world in general, cannot prevent the use of any one of the keys for an extended time. The deposit of one of the keys in the hands of God's prophet, in order to lock the doors to God's abundant gifts, cannot go on for too long. When it becomes apparent that Eliyahu does not seek evil and suffering for the world, that he wants life to be restored to the dead child, then the key that he holds is exchanged: he is given the key of resurrection, and - quite naturally - the key that LOCKS AWAY the rain is taken from him. The concept of life cannot be divided: wanting life for the dead boy means wanting life for every person, and this will be possible only if rain returns to the land.

In conclusion, let us quote the commentary of the Malbim on the above teaching of *Chazal*:

"(18:1) "Many days passed, and God's word came to Eliyahu' - the teaching of the Sages is well-known - that when [Eliyahu] needed the keys to resurrection, he had to return the keys of rain. And my

explanation is... that at the time when he revived the child, he had to renounce his [previous] way of closing up and stopping the [Divine] abundance. On the contrary: he needed to bring down an abundance of vitality and life upon the boy, and thereby all the sources of life were opened, after having been closed up by the lack of rain which brings life to the world - upon the animals, the herbs of the field. And therefore God told [Eliyahu] that He would now give rain [in addition to giving life to the boy], for He has already said, '...to those that are bound up - an opening of the prison' (*Yishayahu* 61:1)."

Translated by Kaeren Fish