

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #39: "To Whom Shall You Compare Me, That I Shall Equal Him? – Says the Holy One" (*Yishayahu* 40:25)

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1. Key Words

Our last *shiur* was devoted to verse 38 – the climax of the story. Now, attention should be paid not only to what is said in this verse, but also to what is not said in the adjacent verses.

From the very beginning of the story there are some words that have stood out; their frequent repetition and thematic importance in the story makes them "leading words." Let us list them and examine the contexts in which each of them appears, as well as the contexts where they are absent even though they would appear to belong there.

A. "*kol*" (voice, sound)

The word "*kol*" appears four times in the first part of the story (verses 19-29), in four consecutive verses:

- a. (26) "... no VOICE and no answer..."
- b. (27) "Cry out with a loud VOICE"

- c. (28) "And they cried with a loud VOICE"
- d. (29) "... no VOICE and no answer, nor anyone listening"

There are two "voices" here: the voice of man, and the hoped-for voice of Ba'al. The human voice here - that of the false prophets – grows stronger from the first attempt to call out to Ba'al to the second. But their attempts are futile: Ba'al's voice does not make itself heard in response to those calling out to him, because in fact there is no-one listening.

In sharp contrast to these "voices" – both of those who call out and the hoped-for response which is absent – this word is almost entirely absent from the second part of the story. Some of the technical preparations that Eliyahu undertakes in anticipation of the descent of fire are conducted in silence; the rest are accompanied by very few words. Eliyahu offers his prayer without lifting his voice: "Eliyahu the prophet approached AND SAID..." (verse 36), and God's response of sending fire from heaven takes place in silence, with no "voice" at all. Even in the reaction of the nation – its verbal component – there is no mention of lifting their voices: "THEY SAID, God is the Lord..." (verse 39).

This avoidance of using the word "voice" in everything pertaining to the descent of God's fire and the related prior and subsequent actions and utterances, is quite deliberate. The text differentiates between the pure and the impure and avoids any connection between them – not even in the form of contrast.

Nevertheless, we find that the word "voice" does appear once in the second part of the story:

- (41) "Eliyahu said to Achav: Go up, eat and drink, for there is the VOICE (sound) of gathering rain."

If we are correct in linking this "voice" to the voices in the first part of the story (and it would appear that there is reason to do so, since the expression "the sound of gathering rain" seems to emphasize the auditory aspect), then the veiled implication would seem to be the following: the Divine response to the mortal attempts to create a connection with that which is above and beyond him is manifest not in a direct Divine voice (as the false prophets expected to hear from Ba'al), but rather within the framework of the regular workings of the world. It is within this world that Divine Providence – that which God does for His servants – is revealed. God's voice is audible in His beneficence towards man within the natural world - in the rain that descends from the heavens.

It is appropriate that we conclude this part of the discussion with the following verses from *Tehillim* 29, whose subject is so close to our own:

"Ascribe to God - O mighty ones; ascribe to God glory and strength.

Ascribe to God the glory of His Name; worship God in the splendor of holiness.

GOD'S VOICE IS UPON THE WATERS, the God of glory thunders; God is upon many waters." (1-3)

B. "*k-r-a*" (to call/cry out)

This root is repeated six times in the first part of the story, in five consecutive verses:

1. (24) "YOU WILL CALL OUT in the name of your god
2. and I SHALL CRY OUT in the Name of the Lord...
3. (25) ... CALL OUT in the name of your god...
4. (26) ... and CALLED OUT in the name of Ba'al...
5. (27) ... CALL OUT with a loud voice...

6. (28) THEY CALLED OUT with a loud voice..."

Here again, this root is absent in the second part of the story. Despite what Eliyahu says in verse 24 – "I shall CALL OUT in the Name of the Lord," the text makes no mention of this root in its description of his prayer. We are told only, "Eliyahu the prophet approached and said..." (verse 36). And once again, the reaction of the nation that falls and prostrates itself is expressed in an utterance ("a-m-r"), not a "call" ("k-r-a").

The reason for this is also the same: so as not to compare – even by means of contrast – the "call" (with a "voice") of the prophets of Ba'al with Eliyahu's manner of prayer before the Lord God. The frequent use of verbs based on the root "k-r-a" in the first part of the story, concerning the prophets of Ba'al, "disqualifies" the verb for further use in the story for the purposes of describing prayer to God - "to distinguish between the impure and the pure...."

This distinction between the words "calling out" and "voice" (with respect to the prophets of Ba'al) and "saying" (in relation to Eliyahu and the nation) also has thematic significance – aside from the linguistic distinction, whose purpose lies in its very existence). "Calling out," in the context of our story, means "declaring," "appealing verbally." When, in addition to this, the "calling out" is also "with a loud voice," we have a hint of the enormous effort invested in these magic actions and "prophesying" to the point of ecstasy which are required for the service of Ba'al– and which ultimately bring no results. Eliyahu needs none of this. The Lord God of Israel does not slumber or sleep; He needs no "crying out with a loud voice." He hears the prayer of every individual – even when it is uttered in a low voice or even a whisper. (In fact, the Gemara in *Berakhot* 31a specifically teaches: "But her voice could not be heard – from here we learn that it is forbidden to raise one's voice during prayer.")

Indeed, in the first part of the story, five out of the six appearances of the root "k-r-a" are related to the prophets of Ba'al, and even the sole instance related to Eliyahu – when he says that he will "call out" in the Name of God (second appearance of the root) – is uttered only in the context of Eliyahu presenting the

conditions of the test to the nation for its approval, and here the conditions must be formulated in an equitable fashion.

C. "*a-n-i*" (to answer)

The most prominent key word in our story – both because of its ubiquitous presence throughout (from verse 21 until verse 37) and because of its repetition in different contexts a total of seven times (a characteristic of many key words in *Tanakh*) – is "answering," in various forms and in reference to various characters:

1. (21) "The nation did not ANSWER at all"
2. (24) "The God Who will ANSWER with fire – He is the Lord"
3. "All the nation ANSWERED and said, "the thing is well"
4. (26) "They called in the name of Ba'al from the morning until noon, saying, "Ba'al – ANSWER us..."
5. "But there was no voice and no-one ANSWERING"
6. (29) "No voice and no-one ANSWERING nor anyone listening"
7. (37) "ANSWER ME, GOD, ANSWER ME, that this nation may know that you are the Lord God...."

The verbs derived from the root "*a-n-i*" refer either positively or negatively (i.e., in some cases the addressee does answer and in other cases he does not) to four bodies:

- the public gathered at Carmel (appearance 1: failure to answer the demand that they decide; appearance 3: positive response to the proposal of the test);
- God (unknown at this stage), Whose answer will serve as proof of His existence (appearance 2);

- Ba'al (in the appeal to him by his prophets – appearance 4) and his lack of existence (appearances 5-6 – no-one answers)
- God (in the appeal to Him by Eliyahu – appearance 7).

A review of these uses of verbs derived from this root shows that the entire development of the story, and the change of heart that transpires in it, are expressed in the progression of these verbs.

Unlike the root "*k-r-a*" and the noun "voice/sound," which are generally employed to characterize the actions of the false prophets and are therefore eschewed in the second part of the story, the root "*a-n-i*" is not associated specifically with them. Only in appearances 4,5 and 6 is this root related to the false prophets and their failure. In appearances 1 and 3 it pertains to the nation, and in appearance 2 it speaks of "the God Who will answer with fire." Therefore Eliyahu does not shy away from this root in his prayer, and even repeats it: "Answer me, God; answer me."

Despite the above, attention should be paid to the fact that in verse 38, in the description of the fire falling from the heavens, the text does not state that "God answered." Had this been written, a parallel, or contrast, would be created vis-à-vis the "no answering" that appears twice in the description of the failure of the false prophets. Here again we are witness to the same attempt to keep God's Name far from the direct, coarse contest arranged by Eliyahu. The lack of any relationship or comparison between God and Ba'al – the latter being no more than the imaginary creation of his adherents – means that there is no place for God's response to be compared with the "no answering" in relation to Ba'al. It is only because man, in his weakness, finds himself in the contemptible situation of "dancing between two opinions," weighing up the true God and false gods, that Eliyahu's act of putting the inexistence of Ba'al to the test against the existence of God is legitimate and positive. But from the objective perspective of truth, there is no place at all for such a test. And in order to demonstrate this, the text systematically avoids any comparison between the Divine revelation at Carmel and that which preceded it: "To whom shall you compare Me, that I should equal him? – says the Holy One."

2. Structure of the Story

That which we discovered above, arising from an analysis of the style of the story – i.e., the use of key words – also serves to explain the unusual structure of the story. The principle that we established above is that the story means to reject any relationship or comparison – even contrast – between Ba'al and his ways, and God and His revelation. Therefore the description of the revelation of the Divine Presence on Carmel is almost severed from any linguistic connection to the description of the failure of the prophets of Ba'al that preceded it. This finds expression – as mentioned – in the structure of the story, too.

The biblical narrative usually follows a harmonious structure that is easily revealed: it is divided into two parts more or less equal in length, and they create some sort of parallel between themselves. Sometimes, at the heart of the story – in between the two halves – there is a verse, or a group of verses, that serve as a central axis for the story.

This pattern is difficult to apply to our story as a whole. The episode of Carmel is certainly divided into two parts, in accordance with the development of the plot, but they are of noticeably different lengths. The first part – verses 19-29 (the proposal of the text and the first of its results – the failure of the prophets of Ba'al) occupies eleven verses, while the second part – verses 30-46 (preparations for God's revelation, and its results) occupies a full seventeen verses. While some sort of parallel exists between these two halves, it is very general in nature.

The second half of the story, however – whose structure we have discussed above – is divided into two halves of equal length (eight verses each), straddling a clear central axis – verse 38, describing the miracle of the descent of God's fire. In the previous *shiur* we noted certain parallels between the two halves, creating a chiasmic framework. This structure, which characterizes many biblical narratives, tends to create the impression that this is an independent story, with its own internal integrity. But clearly this cannot be the case: this part is the conclusion of a story that began previously.

The explanation for the unusual structural character of our story is to be found in its unique aim of separating and distinguishing between its two halves. They are not presented as parallels – neither in terms of equality of the number of verses nor in the paucity of corresponding elements between the sub-sections that comprise each half. On the contrary: the second half of the story stands alone, with a clear, independent internal structure – as though cut off from the first half. This is another manifestation of the text cautioning the reader, as it were, lest he be misled by the events at Carmel that must necessarily come about, and conclude that there is a qualitative parallel between the prophets of Ba'al and their failure, and the revelation of God that follows it.

Thus, even the curious structure of the narrative here echoes the words of the prophet that serve as the title of this *shiur*: "To Whom Shall You Compare Me, That I Shall Equal Him? – Says the Holy One."

Translated by Kaeren Fish