

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur 14: The Drought – part 13:

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

(continued)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

12. The structure of our unit vs. the structure of its predecessor

The symmetrical structure of our unit is important for yet another reason; it creates an interesting connection with the previous section which describes Eliyahu at the gates of Tzarfat. This connection goes beyond the fact that these adjacent units are structured in a similar, symmetrical way, each around its central axis. This fact is of little importance in itself, relative to the broader elements common to both – the dimensions of time, space and characters. But if we compare the symmetrical structure of these two units, we discover that they represent an interesting inversion: that which forms the core of the first unit becomes the outer framework in the second unit, while that which forms the outer structure in the first unit moves inward, close to the nucleus of the second unit. Briefly, we may summarize this inversion as follows (we shall explain in greater detail below).

God's speech to Eliyahu, introducing the unit about the gates of Tzarfat (together with Eliyahu's demands to the widow), corresponds to Eliyahu's first call to God, while standing over the widow's dead son. The widow's refusal, which represents the central axis of the first section, is echoed in the second unit in its introduction - her first speech to Eliyahu - and in its conclusion – her declaration of confidence and faith in him after her son is restored to life and returned to her. In the end, Eliyahu once again demands food from the widow, with his promise that the jar of meal and bottle of oil will not run out, and God's word to Eliyahu is realized (he is now able to be sustained by the widow, as God promised); this corresponds to Eliyahu's second call to God, and God's accession to his prayer.

The widow's adamant refusal, forming the central axis of the first unit (and representing her only opportunity to speak in that unit), is "transformed," in the

second unit, into her two speeches that encircle the unit, forming its framework. At first she speaks harshly to Eliyahu; ultimately she is appeased.

Eliyahu's demands of the widow in the first unit parallel, in the second unit, his actions in taking her son from her and later returning him to her. But in the first unit it is Eliyahu's demands that give rise to the widow's speech (which in turn gives rise to a reformulation of his demands); in the second unit it is the widow's introductory speech that leads to Eliyahu's actions. When Eliyahu says, "Give me your son," he is not "asking" for something from her; rather, he is reacting to her complaints against him. While Eliyahu is the "plaintiff" in the first section, making his demands, he is the "defendant" in the second section, reacting to the widow's accusations.

The outer framework of the first unit consists of God's opening words to Eliyahu, which are fulfilled without any further complication by the end of the unit. In the second unit, the relationship between Eliyahu and God "moves inward" towards the nucleus of the unit; it surrounds the central axis (Eliyahu stretching out three times over the boy) on both sides. But here, too, there is an internal difference. It is not God speaking to Eliyahu and fulfilling His promises to him, but rather Eliyahu who turns to God in prayer, and God eventually accedes to his request.

What is the meaning of these "inversions" between the two adjacent units – inversions that exist within similar literary structural frameworks, and which therefore appear to be meant to highlight themselves? The answer is that the "inversions of structure" hint at the fact that these two units are indeed inversions of one another, in terms of their common subject. This subject is none other than the drought and the argument with Eliyahu as to its continuation.

The MEANS for maintaining this argument are the same in both units: in both cases, the widow serves as God's agent to accuse Eliyahu of responsibility for her distress (even though she does this unknowingly, without understanding the profound truth of her accusation). The distress that reveals itself in both cases is a result of the ongoing drought, and the widow presents Eliyahu with a dual challenge: a moral challenge – by pointing to him as the party responsible for bringing the suffering, and a personal challenge – by obstructing Eliyahu's way of finding for himself a means of subsistence during the drought.

But despite this great similarity, the two units are diametrically opposed to one another in the most important sense: the RESULT of the argument in both of them. In the first unit, it is Eliyahu who "wins," as it were. The unit is arranged around the widow's refusal of his demand for food, and it demonstrates how Eliyahu OVERCOMES the "obstacle" of her speech, how he acts to achieve, for the duration of the year, a "balanced co-existence" with the widow and with God's word that has

presented him with the test. For this reason, in this unit it is Eliyahu who makes demands of the widow and maintains his demands even after her adamant refusal and accusation. In this unit Eliyahu "cashes in" his special merit before God, decreeing a miracle that will allow him to live through the drought and to continue evading the argument over his approach.

In the second unit, Eliyahu has no further possibility of evading the argument. The unit OPENS, this time, with the widow's accusation, and it comes to show how Eliyahu – who is now on the receiving end of her demands – gradually retreats from his unflinching position in the first section, leading up to his stretching out over the child and his second prayer to God. The central axis this time is not the accusation aimed at Eliyahu, but rather HIS SECCUMBING TO THIS ACCUSATION. And the framework of the unit this time is not the question of how Eliyahu manages to overcome the accusation against him, as in the previous unit, but rather WHAT LEADS TO THE CHANGE IN HIS POSITION, and the RESULTS of this change.

Once again we see how the literal structure of the narrative faithfully represents its themes and ideas. Whether the reader tackles the details of the story first and then moves on to its structural framework or considers first the form in which it is presented and then the content itself – either way he is led to the same conclusion.

Translated by Kaeren Fish