

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur 15: The Drought - part 14:

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

(continued)

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13. Appendix: Comparison between the "resurrection" stories of Eliyahu and Elisha

In this chapter we shall undertake at length a comparison between the two stories of resurrection recorded in *Sefer Melakhim* - the one in which Eliyahu revives the son of the woman of Tzarfat, and the parallel narrative (*Melakhim* II 4) in which Elisha, his disciple, revives the son of the Shunamite woman.

A. Relationship between the woman and the prophet in each of the stories

Both the woman of Tzarfat and the Shumanite woman accuse the men of God who lodge in their attics, and to whom they have shown hospitality, of responsibility for their sorrow upon the death of their only sons. But the obvious similarity between the narratives does not blur the fundamental differences between them.

i. The woman's view of the prophet:

The Shumanite woman accuses Elisha not of responsibility for her son's death, but rather for giving him to her without her asking, thereby leading indirectly to the cruel disappointment of his death:

"She said: Did I ask a son from God; did I not say - do not delude me!"
(*Melakhim* II 4:28)

The woman of Tzarfat, in contrast, accuses Eliyahu quite explicitly of responsibility for her son's death:

"You have come to me to recall my sin and to put my son to death!" (18)

The story of the Shunamite woman, from beginning to end, is a story of great faith in the man of God, of his holiness and his ability to bring about miracles. Her complaint to Elisha is not an expression of disappointment in him and a challenge against him, but rather a push for the man of God to feel some responsibility and act to repair the situation. Therefore she comes to him at Mount Carmel in order to bring him back to her home, so that he can do something to restore her son's life:

"The mother of the boy said: 'As God lives and as your soul lives, I shall not leave you.' So he arose and went after her." (*Melakhim II 4:30*)

The woman of Tzarfat, on the other hand, expresses, in her accusation of Eliyahu for her son's death, a lack of faith in him. We learn this from her final words, when Eliyahu restores her son to her, alive, and she declares:

"NOW I know that you are a man of God and God's word in your mouth is truth." (24)

Meaning: previously, when she complained, she did not believe that God's word in his mouth was truth (see section 10 in the *shiur* from two weeks ago).

The complaint-rebellion of the woman of Tzarfat against Eliyahu, who lodges in her home, is truly the opposite of the Shunamite woman's aim in her complaint. The former is meant to substantiate her demand that Eliyahu leave her house:

"What have I to do with you, O man of God..." (18)

We have already explained (in section 2c) that the significance of this declaration is a request that the offending party sever contact and leave.

In other words, these two stories present fundamentally opposite relationships between the bereaved woman-mother and the prophet to whom she addresses herself.

ii. The mother's actions

Let us now address the actions of the two mothers. The Shunamite woman, who anticipates Elisha's ability to restore her son to life and who directs her actions accordingly, reveals this at the very outset:

"She went up and lay him upon the bed of the man of God, and shut the door for him and went out." (*Melakhim II 4:21*)

The woman of Tzarfat, who comes to Eliyahu to ask that he leave her house, never imagines that this severe man of God is either able to or interested in reviving her son. She takes her dead son in her arms as deafening support for her complaint against the man of God as being responsible for his death.

Not only does she not ask Eliyahu to try to restore the boy to life; even when he wants to do so, his efforts are apparently met with mistrust on her part, perhaps even a refusal to cooperate:

"He said to her: 'GIVE ME your son,' and HE TOOK HIM from her bosom..." (19)

We are told not that "she gave him," but rather that "he took him" - meaning that the woman did not believe in Eliyahu and was in no hurry to hand over her son's dead body.

Further on we read:

"HE TOOK HIM UP to the attic where he lodged, AND HE LAY HIM UPON HIS BED."

The contrast with the story of the Shunamite woman, who performs these actions herself, is striking:

"SHE WENT UP AND LAY HIM UPON THE BED OF THE MAN OF GOD." (*Melakhim II* 4:21)

iii. The prophet's attitude towards the woman, and her reaction upon receiving her son, alive

In keeping with the difference that we saw in the attitude of the two women towards the prophets, there is a corresponding difference in the attitude of the two prophets towards the women, both prior to the resurrection and afterwards.

In the case of Eliyahu we notice a great effort to appease the widow and to regain her trust. We have already discussed the actions that Eliyahu undertakes on his own initiative: he takes the dead boy from his mother's arms, takes him up himself to the attic, and lies him down upon the bed. After he revives him through his prayer and actions, Eliyahu performs the reverse actions, once again on his own:

"Eliyahu TOOK the boy AND BROUGHT HIM DOWN from the attic into the house, AND GAVE HIM to his mother." (23)

The continuation of this verse records Eliyahu's words as he hands the boy to his mother, clear evidence of his great joy - or participation in her own joy:

"Eliyahu said: See, you son lives!"

Indeed, his efforts have borne fruit, and the woman rewards him with a response that expresses her renewed trust and a change in attitude towards him.

Elisha, who returns to the Shunamite woman's house because she has made him commit himself to do so (after his attempt to help her through the agency of Gechazi, without his own presence), he enters the attic of the house "And behold, the boy was dead, LAID OUT upon the bed" (verse 32). After reviving the boy, Elisha does not rush to restore him to his mother; in fact, he does not perform this action himself at all. The mother, who took her son up to the attic of the man of God, comes to take him down. Elisha does not descend from the attic into the house; rather, the Shunamite ascends to him:

"He called to Gechazi and said: Call out to this Shunamite. So he called, and she came to him." (*Melakhim II 4:36*)

The continuation of this verse also records the prophet's words, but in contrast to Eliyahu's joyful shout - "See, your son lives!" Elisha's chilly instruction stands out starkly:

"He said: Take up your son."

And unlike the woman of Tzarfat, who expresses her newfound recognition of Eliyahu after he returns her son to her alive, the Shunamite says not a word when she receives her son:

"She came and fell upon his feet and prostrated herself to the ground, and she took up her son and went out." (*Melakhim II 4:37*)

This is because nothing has changed in her basic attitude towards Elisha. She expected in advance that this would happen, and so she suffices with this silent show of thanks. (Elisha's attitude towards her may also explain some of her behavior.)

These contrasting elements of the respective relationships in the two stories arise from the fundamental difference between them: in our story, the woman serves unknowingly as God's agent in criticizing Eliyahu and attempting to change his position concerning the prolonged drought. Hence the tension that characterizes the

relations between her and the prophet, and hence the change in her attitude towards him after the change indeed takes place within him.

The Shunamite woman, on the other hand, is a central character in the story where she confronts Elisha. Her role in the story is not to effect change in the prophet or to criticize his actions; on the contrary, she is a great admirer of his and she believes in his wondrous abilities. Her role in the story is to change herself as regards her maternal relationship with her son.

B. Revival of the son by Eliyahu and by Elisha - the differences and their significance

For the purposes of comparing the relationships between the two prophets and the two women involved, we must examine the framework of the two revival stories. At this point we shall complete our task of comparing the nucleus of the two stories - i.e., the description of the actual resuscitation (verses 19-22 in our chapter, and verses 29-35 in *Melakhim II* 4). In both places the prophet secludes himself in the attic with the dead child who is lying upon his bed, while the mother remains in the house below. Also, in both cases the description of the resuscitation includes three elements:

- the prophet's prayer to God
- a physical act of contact with the dead child
- the resuscitation of the child

Yet another aspect common to both stories: in both cases the prophet's initial attempt to restore the child to life fails.

So far we have focused on the similarities between the two instances. What are the differences between them?

The two descriptions present opposite relations between the prophet's prayer to God and his practical actions to resuscitate the boy. As a result of this inversion, the nature of the third element - the description of the resurrection - is different in each case. In fact, this inversion determines the completely different nature of each of the two descriptions of resurrection in its entirety. Before discussing this idea, let us present it in the form of a comparative table:

ELIYAHU

- a. Prayer: (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?"

b. Action: (21) "HE STRETCHED OUT OVER THE CHILD three times

c. Prayer: HE CALLED OUT TO GOD AND SAID: Lord my God; restore, I pray, the soul of this child within him."

d. Resurrection of the child: (22) "God listened to Eliyahu and the child's soul was restored within him, and he lived."

ELISHA

a. Action: (31) "Gechazi passed over before them AND PLACED THE STAFF UPON THE BOY'S FACE, but there was no voice and no sound... He told him, saying: The child did not awaken."

b. Prayer: (32) "Elisha came to the house... (33) He went in and closed the door behind both of them, AND HE PRAYED TO GOD."

c. Action: (34) "He went up and LAY UPON THE CHILD. He placed his mouth over his mouth and his eyes over his eyes, and his hands over his hands, AND HE STRETCHED HIMSELF OVER HIM, and the flesh of the child was warmed. (35) THEN HE RETURNED and walked about in the house, to and fro, and he went up and stretched himself over him, and the boy sneezed - all seven times over."

d. Resurrection of the child: "The boy opened his eyes."

Admittedly, both prophets prayed to God. But in the description of Elisha, the text suffices with merely noting the fact that he prayed, devoting only three words to convey this information, with no mention of the content of his prayer. And from this point onwards the story does not come back to this issue. Apparently, Elisha's prayer is not a central element at all in the miracle of the resurrection; he offers it only as an introduction to the act of resuscitation - since such an extraordinary miracle certainly requires an introductory prayer. (This, perhaps, is one of the lessons of Gechazi's failure.)

How different the situation is in the story of the resurrection by Elisha! His call to God is the focal point of the entire miracle. Eliyahu offers not one prayer, but TWO. The first does not achieve its aim, and the child remains dead; for this reason Eliyahu formulates his second prayer differently. The text describes the two prayers as "CALLING OUT to God" (*keri'a*); this expression indicates a prayer that is not formal in character, but rather expresses the anguish of the supplicant. The text does not

suffice with a record of the fact that Eliyahu prayed, as it does in the case of Elisha; it records the wording of both prayers, in full. Thus, in contrast to the THREE words that the text devotes to Elisha's prayer, we find THIRTY words devoted to the two prayers offered by Eliyahu.

We find the situation reversed in the description of the actions that the two prophets perform. Eliyahu's actions with regard to the child are summed up in FIVE words (in the Hebrew): "He stretched over the child three times."

In the story of Elisha, in contrast, the text describes in great detail TWO actions with regard to the child. The first is the act that Gehazi performed, at his masters' orders - he placed Elisha's staff over the boy's face. This action does not achieve its aim; "The boy was not awakened." Therefore Elisha performs this act himself (after offering a prayer); this basically parallels Eliyahu's act in stretching himself over the child. But Elisha's action is described in the most minute detail, and it is described not once but twice:

"He went up and lay over the child... and stretched himself over him"
(*Melakhim* II 4:34)

"He returned.. and went up... and stretched himself over him." (35)

This repetition is a contrasting parallel to the duality of Eliyahu's prayer:

"He called out to God and said: Lord my God..." (20)

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

Eliyahu, in fact, performs his action THREE TIMES, but the text suffices with noting this number, omitting any detailed description of even one of the times that Eliyahu stretches himself over the child. Elisha's stretching over the child is described twice, in detail, along with the gradual results: first "The boy's flesh was warmed" (34), then "The boy sneezed (35)." The number of times that Elisha stretches is, as noted in the text, "SEVEN TIMES - and here again the number is striking in comparison with Eliyahu's three-fold stretching.

In light of these differences, we understand the reason for the discrepancy in the third element in the two stories - the resurrection of the child. Since, in Eliyahu's story, the prayer is the dominant element in the miracle, the resurrection of the child is described as GOD'S ANSWER TO ELIYAHU'S PRAYER:

"God listened to Eliyahu..." (22)

The actual description of the resurrection is likewise directed, linguistically, towards the prophet's (second) prayer:

Prayer: "Restore, I pray, the soul of this boy within him" (21)

Answer: "The soul of the boy was restored within him, and he lived" (22)

In contrast, in Elisha's resurrection of the boy there is no connection between the actual revival and Elisha's prayer, which introduced the process. On the other hand, the description here emphasizes the physical, practical element of the resurrection:

"The boy opened HIS EYES" (*Melakhim II* 4:35)

Thus the text clearly relates the resurrection to Elisha's ACTIONS in stretching out over the child: "He placed... HIS EYES OVER HIS EYES." The opening of the boy's eyes, as the final stage of his resurrection, relates back to the earlier stages of Elisha's ACTIONS: his first stretching over the boy brings about, "the flesh of the boy was warmed." His later stretches bring about, "the boy sneezed," and after the seventh time the process of resurrection is complete: "The boy opened his eyes."

What is the significance of such clear differences between the two descriptions of resurrection that exist within a similar general framework? It would seem that no great effort is required in order to arrive at the answer: each description is built around a challenge which the prophet must address by mobilizing all his energies. The difference between them concerns the question of WHO is challenging the prophet: Eliyahu is in conflict with God; Elisha is in conflict with the dead child himself.

The story of the resurrection performed by Elisha is not connected with any sort of tension between the prophet and God. Therefore, Elisha's prayer to God is not highlighted at all in the story. On the other hand, though, it is clear that Elisha bears a certain responsibility for the death of this boy, who was born at his decree and whose death was hidden from him by God (verse 27). The description of Elisha resurrecting him is the description of the prophet dealing with this responsibility towards the boy. When Elisha sends Gehazi to revive him, the servant has no success because he lacked the prophet's acceptance of responsibility for the child and for his existence. Elisha's ACTIONS in stretching over the child come to express his renewed attitude towards the child; they express an assumption of responsibility, a spreading of the prophet's patronage over the child. When he places "his mouth over his mouth and his eyes over his eyes and his hands over his hands," the prophet gives of his own living soul into the boy's body ("When anyone blows out, he is blowing from within himself"). Therefore this description emphasizes specifically the prophet's actions,

requiring considerable and prolonged effort on his part, because they express the confrontation with the problem of the story: the death of the child, arising - *inter alia* - from Elisha's deficient attitude towards this child and his mother.

The story of the resurrection by Eliyahu represents a confrontation between the prophet and God; therefore, the crux of the description of the resurrection centers on the prophet's PRAYERS to God. The problem depicted in this situation lies not between Eliyahu and the dead child, nor between Eliyahu and the child's mother (even though the description within the framework of the miracle of resurrection demonstrates Eliyahu's strong desire to appease her). The story tells of a clear tension between Eliyahu and God, and therefore Eliyahu requires a second prayer after the first goes unanswered. Only the second prayer merits, "God listened to Eliyahu." Indeed, the description of this actual response is related linguistically to Eliyahu's second prayer - as we have discussed.

Translated by Kaeren Fish