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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #22: Structure of the Story of the Drought (17:1 - 18:18)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

The "drought" story is the first in a collection of three semi-independent narratives that are differentiated from one another in their literary nature and subject, but which develop from one into the next in terms of plot. This collection stretches over chapters 17, 18 and 19. We shall address the nature of the collection and of each of its elements, as well as the flow between each of the constituent stories, later on, in the appendix to this series. For now, we shall suffice with a discussion concerning the dividing line between the first two stories in the collection, and we shall accept as a given that the first story - the drought - concludes in chapter 18, verse 18.

One of the characteristics of the story of the drought (distinguishing it from the other two stories) is the fact that it is composed of "closed," well-defined sections - to the extent that they may mistakenly be regarded as independent literary units. In these circumstances, can we still speak of the "structure of the story"? Can we indicate, in this lengthy and complex story, that its various parts are built in a harmonious manner in accordance with a guiding principle? In two of the sections that comprise the story of the drought ("Eliyahu at the gates of Tzarfat" and "Eliyahu revives the widow's son"), we noted that there is a common principle upon which their composition is based: the division of the unit into two equal parts, in terms of the number of verses, with a verse or verse fragment situated in between them and serving as a "central axis" for that unit, with the "limbs" arranged around it symmetrically. Can we detect the same pattern in the story of the drought as a whole?

According to this proposal, the story of the drought contains forty-two verses (17:1-24; 18:1-18). At the center of the story, in verses 21-22 of chapter 17, we find the essential turning point of the entire story: Eliyahu stretching himself out over the child. He offers his second prayer to God, as described in verse 21 and indicates the turning point in his approach, leading him to be ready to cancel his oath and restore life to the famine-stricken land. God's response to Eliyahu's prayer and the resurrection of the dead child, as described in verse 22, are the first signs of the cancellation of the decree of drought in reality. From the beginning of the story until this turning point there are twenty verses, and from after the central verses (21-22) to

the end of the story there are another twenty verses. Verses 21-22 themselves serve as the central axis of the story. The first part describes the various attempts to cause Eliyahu to relent on his vow. These attempts are unsuccessful up to verse 21, which reveals a turning point in the prophet's position - both regarding the reality around him, which is collapsing under the suffering of the drought and which is embodied in the dead child lying on his bed, and regarding his relationship with God, to Whom Eliyahu prays with humility to restore the child's soul within him.

God's response to Eliyahu in verse 22 opens the door to the tidings of rain, which follow soon after, in God's command to Eliyahu (18:1-2). In the second part of the story, the tension that characterized the first part is somewhat relieved. Already in verses 21-22, in the central axis of the plot, we view a relaxing of the tension between the prophet and God, following which there is an immediate relaxing of the tension between the prophet and the widow. Then comes God's command to Eliyahu to go to Achav and restore the rain, thereby relieving the remaining tension between the prophet and his nation and its king. Still, the second half of the story is not altogether without tension. On his way to fulfill God's word, Eliyahu experiences some tense encounters - first with Ovadyahu, Achav's officer, and thereafter with Achav himself. The function of these confrontations has been explained in several of the preceding *shiurim* as being aimed at a final softening of Eliyahu, making him recognize the failure of his approach to date and readying him for a change in policy towards Israel from this point onwards. Indeed, the measure of tension that characterizes these encounters is different from that characterizing the first half of the story. In the meeting with Ovadyahu, the tension dissolves immediately as Ovadyahu realizes that his evaluation of Eliyahu's intentions was mistaken, and the confrontation with Achav quickly turns to productive cooperation, which is already the beginning of the next story.

Having established that the story of the drought consists of two halves of equal length straddling a central axis, we need to investigate whether a parallel exists between the secondary sections of each half and the nature of that parallel. In previous *shiurim* we noted several such parallels; here we shall complete our discussion from the perspective of the story as a whole. The following is a schematic presentation of the structure of the story, followed by explanation.

A: (1) Eliyahu's oath before Achav concerning the onset of drought

B: (2-3) God's words to Eliyahu: "GO FROM HERE, head eastward, and HIDE YOURSELF..."

C: (4-7) The stay at Wadi Kerit, until it dries up

D: (8-17) Eliyahu and the widow of Tzarfat

E: (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?"

(19-20) Eliyahu takes the child from his mother

Axis: (21) "He stretched over the boy three times, and called to God, saying: Lord my God, restore - I pray you - the soul of this boy within him."

(22) "God listened to Eliyahu and restored the boy's soul within him, and he was alive."

e: (23) Eliyahu returns the boy to his mother

(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."

b: (18:1-2) God's word to Eliyahu: "GO APPEAR before Achav, and I shall give rain upon the face of the earth."

c: (3-6) Achav and Ovadyahu set off to find fodder in the dried-up wadis

d: (7-15) Eliyahu and Ovadyahu

a: (16-18) Encounter between Eliyahu and Achav, aimed at canceling the drought

On either side of the central axis we find the inverse parallel between the woman's accusation of Eliyahu and his taking of the child from her arms in order to nullify her claim against him, on one hand, and the restoration of the live boy to his mother, with her monologue acknowledging the truth of God's word in his mouth, on the other.

Surrounding the central axis as the outer framework, at the beginning and end of the story, we find another inverse parallel between the two meetings between Eliyahu and Achav. The first meeting is characterized by a unilateral rebuke of the king by the prophet; it is a declaration of imminent punishment for Israel. The second meeting, although also tense, is an open dialogue between the king and the prophet, aimed at restoring the rain to the earth; its immediate result is cooperation between the king and Eliyahu. The nature of the contrast between these two encounters resembles the nature of the previous contrast that we discussed - between the two monologues delivered by

the widow. But Achav, unlike the widow, does not change his attitude towards Eliyahu. A slight change in the king's attitude may be induced only from the fact that he walks alone towards the prophet and that he agrees to cooperate with him.

In between the sections whose parallels we have discussed above, we find several more parallels, this time direct rather than chiastic:

B-b: God's word to Eliyahu immediately after his oath is inversely parallel to God's command to him after he restores the boy to his mother and she expresses her acknowledgement:

(17:2-3) "God's word came to him, saying: GO FROM HERE, head eastwards, and HIDE YOURSELF at WADI KERIT whifaces the Jordan."

(18:1) "God's word came to Eliyahu in the third year, saying: GO, APPEAR before Achav, and I shall give RAIN UPON THE FACE OF THE EARTH."

In chapter 17, there is a command to hide from Achav; in chapter 18 there is command to appear before him. In chapter 17 there is a command that facilitates the fulfillment of the prophet's oath concerning the drought; in chapter 18 there is a command that comes to end the drought and annul his vow. In chapter 17 the prophet is banished - "Go from here" - to Shomron; he leaves his people for Wadi Kerit, whose name hints at the fact that it is destined to dry up. In chapter 18, God's command returns the prophet to his nation and to the capital of the kingdom, to the dried-up wadis and river-beds that are about to be showered again with rain.

C-c: The story of the drying up of Wadi Kerit (17:4-7), following immediately after God's command to Eliyahu, parallels the description of the journey undertaken by Achav and Ovadyahu "to all the springs of water and all the wadis" in the Shomron vicinity, in search of grass to feed the horses and mules. This description, in turn, follows immediately after God's command to Eliyahu to appear before Achav. This parallel is not an inverse one: the account in the second half is meant to intensify and broaden Eliyahu's own personal experience in the first half, at Wadi Kerit. This comes to teach us that God's commands to Eliyahu, which we have discussed above, also share the same purpose, despite their contrast. Both aim to lead Eliyahu to an encounter with the horrific effects of the drought and cause him to change his approach towards *Am Yisrael*. But while at Wadi Kerit this aim was not attained, when Eliyahu returns to Shomron he is already basically ready for this, psychologically; all he needs is a little persuasion and reinforcement.

D-d: The description of Eliyahu's encounter with the widow at the gates of Tzarfat (17:9-16) parallels the description of his encounter with Ovadyahu in the second half of the story (18:7-15). This parallel, once again, is not inverse. Both confrontations share the same purpose, with the second complementing the first and reinforcing the conclusion that Eliyahu has reached in the meantime.

Thus, the order of the parallels this time is B,C,D/b,c,d. This is a direct order, unlike the outer parallels which create a chiasm: A,E/e,a. These two compositional principles noticeable in the structure of the story of the drought (the chiastic parallel between the two halves in the outer sections, with the direct parallel between them in the internal sections) reflect an ambivalent relationship between the two halves of the story. On one hand, there is a relationship of contrast: in the first half, Eliyahu steadfastly maintains his oath, while in the second half he withdraws from this position and is prepared to change the decree. This contrast is expressed specifically in the chiastic structure. The definitive change in Eliyahu's position takes place at the central axis, and this is expressed in the contrast between the limbs surrounding the central axis and the contrast between the beginning of the story and its conclusion.

On the other hand, the withdrawal in Eliyahu's position in the second half of the story is not absolute. Eliyahu still needs further arguments to reinforce those that he faced in the first half; these include his encounter with the God-fearing Ovadyahu. This characteristic of the second half is matched by its direct parallel to the first half.

In any event, it would seem that both the direct parallel, illustrating the partial and gradual change that has taken place in Eliyahu's consciousness throughout the development of the story, and the chiastic parallel, illustrating the reversal in his position (as reflected in the widow's attitude towards him, and in the relationship between him and Achav), pave the way for Eliyahu's second appearance before Achav for the purposes of cooperation between them, in order to restore rain to the land.

Translated by Kaeren Fish