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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #37: Carmel

Part 5: Eliyahu's Prayer (36-37) (continued)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

4. "You have turned their heart backward"

In the previous *shiur* we examined the two parallel sections of Eliyahu's prayer (verses 36-37) and the necessity of each, but we have yet to explain the final words that conclude his prayer. Let us now consider whether this concluding phrase - "And you have turned their heart backward" – matches the proposed overall framework for the prayer.

In *Massekhet Berakhot* (31b) we find a teaching that serves as the basis for several of the early commentaries:

"Rabbi Elazar said: Eliyahu made accusations against God, as it is written, 'You turned their heart backward.'"

Many commentators regard Eliyahu's words here as attributing to God the responsibility for the fact that Israel has been engaged in sin: "You turned their heart backward from You, such that they did not recognize You and did not serve You until

now." The interpretation of Eliyahu's precise intention here differs among the various commentators.

This interpretation, in all its variations, is difficult to accept. Eliyahu's aim in his actions, as well as in the prayer that he offers, is to prepare the hearts of Israel for *teshuva* – return to God, in the wake of the miraculous descent of fire from heaven. But according to the above interpretation, Eliyahu's assertion here - "You have turned..." – is likely to bring about the opposite result. By placing responsibility for Israel's grievous sin upon God, he is absolving them of responsibility and providing them with a claim that allows them to continue in their sin, even after the descent of the fire.

Let us therefore consider a different line of interpretation, which understands these words in the opposite way.

In his first commentary, Radak writes:

"Rav Sa'adya Gaon explained as follows: Their heart, which has been backward – You will now turn it towards You, if You answer me."

This interpretation is to be found in Rav Sa'adya Gaon's work, "*Ha-Nivchar be-Emunot u-Vede'ot*," at the end of the fourth article (Rav Kapach's edition):

"And you have turned their heart backward – in other words: If this fire descends and consumes the sacrifice, the hearts which are backward will be rectified. All that is missing from this sentence is the letter '*heh*'; it should say "*ha-achoranit*" ("which has been backward")."

Rav Sa'adya Gaon, then, interprets the word "*achoranit*" (backward) as an adjective describing "their heart": "their backward heart," meaning crooked, distorted.

What is interesting about this understanding of the verse is its perception of the tense of the verb, "You have turned" (*hasibota*). It is declared in the past tense, and the other commentators understand it accordingly. How, then, does Rav Sa'adya Gaon turn it into a verb in the future tense ("if the fire descends... the hearts that were turned backward WILL BE RECTIFIED")? The answer is simple. The past tense of the verb "You have turned" is in fact the "future past"; it indicates that at some certain time in the future, the action in question will already be done and completed. Thus, Rav Sa'adya Gaon's understanding of our verse is as follows: "Answer me, God, answer me; then, when You answer me (in the future), this nation will know

a) that You are God

b) that You have turned (previously, in the past, when You answered with fire) their hearts back."

In his second commentary, Radak writes:

"Some interpret: ...their hearts backward FROM BELIEVING IN BA'AL, and they shall know that it is false."

This interpretation follows immediately, in Radak's words, after Rav Sa'adya Gaon's interpretation, and it differs only in the understanding of the word "*achoranit*" ("backward"). According to this understanding, the turning back of the hearts is in relation to the prior situation. Since the hearts of the nation were previously turned towards Ba'al, the turning "backward" means abandoning belief in Ba'al for belief in God.

This latter interpretation is preferred by Abarbanel:

"The interpretation, 'You have turned their hearts backward' means, from worship of Ba'al, whom they followed; that their hearts should turn backward from that worship... this is the correct interpretation in accordance with the literal text."

In other words, God's response will cause Israel's heart to be turned backward from Ba'al worship towards worship of God.

Commenting on this interpretation, Simon writes as follows:

Concerning the possibility that "backward" is indeed meant here to indicate "back (in return)," attention should be paid to the fact that special orientation in the Bible does not necessarily rely on a fixed point of observation... thus it is said of Shem and Yefet, "they walked BACKWARD ["*achoranit*"] (i.e., opposite to the direction that they were facing) and covered their father's nakedness, and their faces were BACKWARD ["*achoranit*"] i.e., opposite to the direction in which they were walking" (*Bereishit* 9:23).

Simon brings further examples to substantiate his point, and then concludes:

There is hence nothing stopping us from interpreting the turning of Israel's heart "backward" in relation to the situation in which they are currently. And because they [previously] turned their faces from their God (compare II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 35:22), "turning their heart backward" [now] means turning them towards Him. Thus, what the text is saying is: When the fire descends upon God's altar, this nation will know not only that You are God, but also that You are their God, Who has turned their hearts towards Him."

Here we may ask: if this is indeed the meaning of our verse, why is such a simple statement formulated in a way that can so easily be misleading? Indeed, many commentators are led to understand the verse in exactly the opposite way! To this Simon answers:

Had the text read, "You have returned their hearts to You," it would all be clear and simple; we may perhaps posit that such a formulation is not adopted because it is too far-reaching. God will sever them from following after Ba'al, but the matter of returning to Him is still left to them...."

Of all the commentaries, the explanations of Rav Sa'adya Gaon and of Radak and Abarbanel sit best with the formulation of the text and with its context: With the formulation of the text – as we have quoted them at length; and with its context – because they suit Eliyahu's aim of bringing the nation back to God, *teshuva*. The descent of fire from heaven not only proves to the nation "that You, Lord, are God," but also proves to them that "You have turned their heart backward" - towards You. In other words, it proves not only "God's existence" (as the medieval sages defined it), but also His providence over man, His interest in them and their ways, in order to bring them back to Him.

These commentators also relieve our verse of various theological difficulties that arise in light of some of the other commentaries that are offered – such as the question of the nullification of free choice (see Rambam's Introduction to *Massekhet Avot*, Chapter 8, and his Laws of Repentance Chapter 6).

The final consideration that we shall discuss here concerning the preference for the commentaries of Rav Sa'adya Gaon, Radak, and Abarbanel, brings us back to the structure of Eliyahu's prayer, which we examined in the previous *shiur*. We demonstrated there that the two parts of the prayer (verses 36-37) parallel one another, but with fundamental differences between them (as discussed). We present here once again the parallel between the two parts of Eliyahu's prayer:

a. Appeal to God:

verse 36 - "Lord God of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yisrael"

verse 37 – "Answer me, God; answer me"

b. Result A:

Verse 36 – "Let it be known this day that You are God in Israel"

Verse 37 – "Let this nation know that You are the Lord God"

c. Result B:

Verse 36 – "And I am Your servant, and by Your word I have done all of these things"

Verse 37 – "You have turned their hearts backward"

The important difference, for the purposes of our discussion, concerns the conclusion of each verse. At the end of verse 36, Eliyahu highlights the fact that He is God's servant, that he acts as God's agent, and he asks that the imminent descent of fire strengthen faith in him and in the actions that he has performed by God's word. This appeal is entirely absent from verse 37. In this section Eliyahu asks only that the nation recognize God in a different way, as explained above.

Is there – despite this difference – any connection between the respective, concluding components of the two parts of the prayer?

According to the commentaries that we have adopted, the answer is affirmative, since it is only according to their explanation that the words, "You have turned...." refer to the result - fire descending from heaven – that Eliyahu requests in his prayer. This being the case, what causes the "turning of the hearts" in verse 37 is what Eliyahu refers to more broadly in verse 36 as "all of these things." Thus, according to this interpretation, in both prayers Eliyahu is addressing a dual result of the descent of fire. The first, immediate result is the awareness of God's presence (that He is "God in Israel"); the second is the awareness that God wishes to return the hearts of His children towards Him. But the description of the action to restore Israel to God is different in each section. In verse 36 God operates through His prophet-servant, who performs "all of these things" by God's word so as to bring Israel back to God, whereas in verse 37 God acts directly to turn the hearts of His children back. In verse 36, "And I... have done....," while in verse 37, "You have turned...." But even in 36

the source of the action is God, for "I" am "Your servant," and what "I have done" is "by Your word."

What is the source of this discrepancy between the two corresponding verses? Firstly, it arises from Eliyahu's attitude to different events. In verse 36 Eliyahu is speaking about "all the things" that he has ALREADY done. He refers to all the actions that were performed on his own initiative at Carmel: gathering the nation, proposing the test, causing the prophets of Ba'al to be exposed, rebuilding the altar, and the implied promise of fire descending. All of these actions were undertaken by Eliyahu as God's agent, with a view to bringing Israel back to Him. In verse 37, Eliyahu refers only to the descent of fire THAT IS STILL TO HAPPEN; this miraculous act is an act of God alone; no human has any part in it. But this very fact – Eliyahu's attitude towards his own actions thus far, in verse 36, or to God's imminent revelation, in verse 37 – is itself the result of a fundamental difference between the two prayers, which we discussed previously. Each of the two prayers reflects a different significance of the test at Carmel. Verse 36 reflects the national historical significance – and in this context Eliyahu's status as God's servant is highlighted; all of his actions have been performed by God's word. Verse 37, on the other hand, reflects the universal religious significance of the event; in this context God Himself and the sanctification of His Name are the focus, while Eliyahu has no special role.

Thus we conclude that the analysis of the structure of Eliyahu's prayer and the exegetical conclusions that we draw in fact reinforce one another.

Translated by Kaeren Fish