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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #60 - Chorev

Part 9: The First Encounter Between Eliyahu and Elisha (19-21)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

(19) He went from there and found Elisha, son of Shafat who was plowing – twelve yoke of oxen in front of him, and he with the twelfth. Eliyahu passed by him and cast his mantle towards him.

(20) Then he abandoned the cattle and ran after Eliyahu, and said: Let me kiss my father and mother, and I shall follow you. And he said to him: "Go and [then] return, for what have I done to you?"

(21) So he returned back from him and took a yoke of oxen and slaughtered them, and boiled the flesh with the equipment of the oxen, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he arose and went after Eliyahu, and attended him.

There are two aspects to the first encounter between Eliyahu and Elisha. On one hand, this description concludes the story in chapter 19 about Eliyahu at Mount Chorev, such that the circle is closed with Eliyahu returning to his land and to his people, and taking Elisha as his attendant instead of the servant whom he left in Be'er Sheva. It was from this perspective that we discussed their encounter in the *shiur* no. 58.

On the other hand, this first meeting between the prophet who is about to complete his task and the person who is destined to succeed him as the major prophet of Israel, is one that signifies the beginning of a new era: the era of Elisha's prophecy. The description of this meeting is instructive not only as to itself, but also concerning the root of the profound contrasts between these two radically different prophets. The scene of their meeting brings together, like a mirror, Eliyahu's past and Elisha's future. Therefore, every detail in this brief description is of great value in understanding the relationship between the two men and their respective eras.

The direct thematic continuation of the three verses above is to be found in the description of the final meeting between Eliyahu and Elisha – their parting encounter (II *Melakhim* 2:1-12). Despite what we read in verse 21 – "He arose and went after Eliyahu and attended him" – we do not encounter the two of them together again, until their final meeting.

1. Structure of the Unit

Although the meeting between Eliyahu and Elisha is not an independent narrative, but rather part of the story of Eliyahu at Mount Chorev, the description has its own special character, differing from that of the preceding narrative. This arises from the fact that in this unit – for once – Eliyahu maintains a mutual connection with another person, and this connection is the focus of the text. Thus the three verses above turn into a miniature story that is part of a greater narrative, and we are therefore justified in attempting to analyze the structure of this brief and semi-independent unit.

Like many other biblical narratives, our tiny unit may be divided into two more-or-less equal halves that correspond to one another. This is true in terms of content, style and the composition characterizing the unit. Let us first examine the two halves in relation to each other, and then we shall explicate them.

First half:

- A. (19) [Eliyahu] went from there, and he found Elisha, son of Shafat
- B. [Elisha] plowing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him, and he was with the twelfth
- C. [Eliyahu] passed by him and cast his mantle towards him
- D. [Elisha] left the oxen and **ran after Eliyahu**

Second half:

- a. (20) [Elisha] said: Let me kiss my father and my mother, and I shall follow you
- b. [Eliyahu] said to him: Go and return, for what have I done to you?
- c. (21) [Elisha] returned from after him and he took a yoke of oxen and slaughtered it, and boiled the flesh with the equipment of the oxen, and he gave it to the people and they ate
- d. [Elisha] arose **and went after Eliyahu**, and attended him.

The unit is characterized by rapid exchanges between Eliyahu and Elisha as the subjects of the brief, succinct sentences that make up the story. These successive alternations create a great deal of dynamic. We have divided the unit into eight "lines" (more-or-less corresponding to the syntactical division into sentences), each devoted to the description of an action with a defined purpose by one of the two characters. This style highlights the alternation of the subject in most of the pairs of "lines," and the transition back and forth, from Eliyahu to Elisha and from Elisha to Eliyahu.

But in the middle of the unit there is a turning point. While the first four "lines" follow the order Eliyahu-Elisha-Eliyahu-Elisha, the fifth line reverses the pattern and starts a new one: Elisha-Eliyahu-Elisha-Elisha. This reversal of the order of the subject supports the division that we proposed into two halves, each comprising four "lines."

The inversion is not a mere technical, extraneous matter; rather, it indicates a change in the nature of the story and in the mutual relationship between its two main characters. In the first half, the initiative lay with Eliyahu: it is he who comes to the place where Elisha is, while the latter is busy with routine activity, quite unprepared for what is about to happen (lines A-b). It is Eliyahu who all at once disturbs Elisha's routine by casting his cloak towards him (C). Elisha reacts as expected, taking off after his master who has just been revealed to him, and abandoning his work (D).

Attention should be paid to the nature of this half, which records only actions – no speech at all. The interaction that is created between the two characters requires no words – only powerful, highly symbolic actions. The verbs that the text uses in connection with each of them express the development of the plot towards the dramatic turning point at the end of the first half – Elisha abandoning his plowing and running after Eliyahu.

Eliyahu: "went"... "found"... "passed by"... "cast"

Elisha: "plowing"... "left"... "ran"

At the end of the first half of this unit it seems that everything is proceeding as it should: Elisha reacts as Eliyahu expects him to, and with the energy appropriate to the power of the message that Eliyahu broadcasts to him.

The beginning of the second half brings a surprise: the initiative passes from Eliyahu to Elisha. Unlike the previous order, Elisha is now the subject of the first line. And another surprise: a first utterance breaks the silent, intensive activity of the first half.

The change in the atmosphere of the story, at the beginning of the second half, expresses the change in reality: everything is not proceeding smoothly as we had thought (and as Eliyahu must certainly have believed). Elisha, who is running after Eliyahu, suddenly stops and addresses his master who has just appeared. The content of the speech that Elisha initiates and offers carries the plot a step backwards: Elisha is unwilling to join Eliyahu immediately, as we thought at the end of the first half ("he ran after Eliyahu"); rather, he wants to visit his father and mother (symbolizing normal routine) in order to take leave of them. This slight delay that Elisha intends to create causes Eliyahu, in turn, to speak (b). The person who has led the plot so far

now reacts to the initiative of the other. As we shall see below, Eliyahu's reaction is not an expression of agreement, but rather of reservation – to the extent that the connection between them seems to be in danger of being severed. This, then, is a complete reversal in the direction of the plot.

According to the established order (and taking into consideration the point of departure of the second half) it is now Elisha's turn to serve as the subject of the next line (c), and this is indeed the case. Elisha appears in the midst of a long list of actions which he undertakes in silence: "He turned back... he took... he slaughtered... he cooked... he gave." The relationship between this line and its predecessor is interesting. Linguistically, Elisha's activity looks like a positive reaction to Eliyahu's preceding words: Eliyahu had said, "Go [and then] return [or "turn back"]," and Elisha's actions start with "He turned back from after him." The nature of Elisha's actions, executed in silence, likewise seems like a return to the mute activity of the first half of the unit. However, as we shall discover, this is not so; quite the contrary, Eliyahu speaks with sharp criticism, and the (partial) linguistic match between Elisha's actions and Eliyahu's preceding words expresses the fact that Elisha ignores this criticism. Moreover, the string of actions that appear in this line do not match Elisha's previous words – "Let me kiss my father and my mother," and the Radak is correct in explaining that Elisha performed all of these actions **after** taking leave of his parents. In contrast to the verbs that characterize the first half, those that appear here are of a quieter, less dramatic nature. In this line Elisha's delay of the plot reaches its climax, and the tension increases. Does Elisha still intend to join Eliyahu, or has he changed his mind, and therefore adopted delaying tactics? Will Eliyahu tolerate the growing delay in Elisha's cooperation, or will he give up and leave?

The fourth line of the second half (d) resolves the tension with a single stroke. While we expect (in accordance with the fixed order) some action or utterance on the part of Eliyahu – and we fear for the tone of his reaction – there appears another line with Elisha as its subject. This deviation from the pattern of alternation from one line to the next – the only such instance in this unit, other than the change in order between the first half and the second – demonstrates that in the second half of the story Elisha is the main character (in contrast to the first half, where Eliyahu played this role). Elisha is the subject of three out of the four lines; he initiates, he speaks, and he acts in this half, while Eliyahu merely waits. Eliyahu's contribution to the second half of the story is limited to an expression of bitter protest over Elisha's delay in following him.

We may depict the structure of our story by presenting its two halves as paralleling one another in chiastic form:

A. [Eliyahu] went from there, and he found Elisha, son of Shafat

- B. [Elisha] ploughing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him, and he was with the twelfth
- C. [Eliyahu] passed by him and cast his mantle towards him
- D. [Elisha] left the oxen and **ran after Eliyahu**
- D1. [Elisha] said: Let me kiss my father and my mother, and I shall follow you
- C1. [Eliyahu] said to him: Go and return, for what have I done to you?
- B1. [Elisha] returned from after him and he took a yoke of oxen and slaughtered it... and he gave it to the people and they ate
- A1. [Elisha] **went after Eliyahu**, and attended him.

The outer framework of the story (A-A1) comprises its two decisive facts, which complement one another: Eliyahu goes and finds Elisha, and Elisha goes after Eliyahu to attend to him. All the other parallels within the unit describe the process that lead to this outcome, such that it develops from the original intention. The process itself is full of contrasts and inner tension, as expressed in the relationship between each pair of corresponding lines. Only in the introduction and conclusion to the story are the subjects of the corresponding lines exchanged, from Eliyahu (A) to Elisha (A1), with Eliyahu's action in A finding its appropriate response on the part of Elisha in line A1. All the other corresponding lines describe the same subject, with a clear contrast between the two halves.

The most important contrast concerns lines D and D1, with Elisha as their subject. In D Elisha offers an immediate response to Eliyahu casting his mantle towards him; he abandons his oxen right away and runs after Eliyahu. But in D1 he halts and delays his continued following of Eliyahu for a renewed embrace of normal life, which he has just abandoned: "Let me kiss my father and my mother..."; only then "I shall go after you." This sudden delay – and what it expresses – is the reason for the contrast in the more outer pair – C and C1.

The subject of C and C1 is Eliyahu. While in C he casts his mantle towards Elisha, in C1 he negates his action: "What have I done to you?" As the Radak comments: "In other words, just because I lowered my mantle in your direction, therefore you run after me?" This contradiction in Eliyahu's behavior towards Elisha arises from the preceding contradiction in Elisha's own behavior: just as Elisha's words at the beginning of the second half seem like a sobering up and a halt to his running after Eliyahu at the end of the first half, so Eliyahu's words in the second half express a sobering up and regret over his actions in the first half.

The subject of lines B and B1 is Elisha. In B he is absorbed in the routine work of plowing behind a yoke of oxen, in B1 he "destroys" this activity by slaughtering the very oxen that he has just been following, using the equipment of the oxen to make a

fire upon which to boil the meat. This contrast hails Elisha's parting with his previous way of life, as preparation for going after Eliyahu; it serves as a bridging stage between the previous contrasts (D-D1; C-C1) and the complete solution to all of these contrasts and tensions (both in the behavior of each character alone, and with regard to the mutual relationship between them) – a solution that is achieved only in the closing sentence of the unit, completing its outer framework (A-A1). As noted, the pair A and A1 not only contain no tension, but they express mutual completion between Eliyahu's aim and Elisha's full and complete cooperation.

But here we must ask: is the point of conclusion of the story not somewhat lower than the corresponding point of conclusion of the first half? There we find, "He **ran** after Eliyahu," while the unit ends by stating simply that he "**went** after Eliyahu." Is this meant to imply that Elisha's delays in joining Eliyahu express some cooling of his original enthusiasm – thus justifying Eliyahu's criticism?

This is not the case. We learn this from the words of the prophet: "Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall rise up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not tire; they shall walk and not faint" (*Yishayahu* 40:31).

Commenting on this verse, Nechama Leibowitz writes:

This verse raises a question: as we know, the model of biblical poetry is for the two corresponding parts of the verse to move from the simple to the more intensive. Seemingly, the verse here should read: "They shall walk and not faint, [and] they shall [even] run and [nevertheless] not tire." Why is the verse formulated in the reverse order? I have found the following in the commentary on the *Haftarot* [the reference here is to the commentary found at the end of *Sefer Bereishit*, in English, by Rabbi Yosef Tzvi Hertz, Oxford 5689]:

"At moments when we are carried upon waves of enthusiasm, we are all capable of one-time acts of heroism. We are able to raise ourselves high, to race forward. It is far more difficult to fulfill daily obligations, to do what we have to even when the original enthusiasm has worn off, when the radiance of the vision has dimmed, even when obstacles and challenges present themselves. It is difficult to face these consistently without becoming weary. Therefore the verse is correct: 'They shall run [with the energy of enthusiasm] and not faint' – but even when they have to walk, to continue without racing, 'They shall not grow weary.'

Thus – [the verse moves] from the simple to the more intensive!"

The first half of the unit, then, presents Elisha overcome with initial, uncontrolled enthusiasm. The second half of the unit is meant to move the plot

forward by having Elisha undergo a process that readies him for his role: he stops himself in mid-run to think about whom and what he is leaving behind, and where he is headed. Only after this necessary delay can there be serious, committed meaning behind his decision: to **go** after Eliyahu and attend him.

Translated by Kaeren Fish