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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #81: Achazya

Part 10: God's Word and the Word of His Prophet vs. The Word of the King – Summary

As in many other biblical narratives where God's word stands the test of prevailing over its opponents, here too the root *d-b-r* appears often, either as a verb or as a noun, serving as the key word in the story. The repetition of this root is clearly emphasized (seventeen appearances within sixteen verses) since sometimes it seems to be superfluous, or selected deliberately instead of the more commonly used *a-m-r*. The following are two examples:

And he spoke (*va-yedaber*) to them: What was the appearance of the man who came up to meet you and spoke (*va-yedaber*) these things (*ha-devarim ha-eleh*) to you? (7)

And he spoke (*va-yedaber*) to him: Man of God, the king has spoken (*dibber*): Come down. And Eliyahu answered him and he spoke (*va-yedaber*)... (9-10)

The key word appears in our narrative in groups, usually with one *d-b-r* paired against another. There is "*devar Hashem*" (the word of God) as opposed to the "*devar ha-melekh*" (the word of the king), or "*devar ha-melekh*" contrasting with the word of Eliyahu, the man of God. A review of the appearances of this key word throughout the story will serve to clarify its messages.

Group A – First half of the story (verses 2-8)

God's word:

1. An angel of God spoke (*dibber*) to Eliya the Tishbi:
2. Arise, to up to meet the messengers of the king of Shomron, and speak (*dabber*) to them... (3)
3. Go, return to the king who sent you, and speak (*ve-dibartem*) to him... (6)

Thus God's word is conveyed from the angel to Eliyahu (1), from Eliyahu to Achazya's messengers (2), and from them to Achazya (3).

The king's word:

4. And he spoke (*va-yedaber*) to them: What was the appearance of the man who came up to meet you
5. and spoke (*va-yedaber*) to you
6. these things (*ha-devarim ha-eleh*)? (7)

Three appearances of God's word correspond to three appearances of the king's word. The king's word (4) comes to oppose the word of the prophet (5), which contains the word of God (6). The question that the king asks of his messengers is meant as preparation for his own "word" which will be revealed in the second half of the story.

Group B – the first captain of fifty (verses 9-10)

The king's word:

7. And he spoke (*va-yedaber*) to him:
8. Man of king, the king has spoken (*dibber*): Come down! (9)

The word of the man of God:

9. And Eliyahu answered and he spoke (*va-yedaber*)... and if I am a man of God... (10)

In the second half of the story, the initiative passes over to the king. His "word" precedes the "word" of Eliyahu, unlike the situation in the first half.

Group C – the second captain of fifty (verses 11-12)

The king's word:

10. And he answered and he spoke (*va-yedaber*) to him: Man of God, so says the king... (11)

Word of the man of God:

11. And Eliyahu answered and he spoke (*va-yedaber*) to them: If I am a man of God... (12)

While in the previous group (B) the "word" of the king (two appearances) prevailed over the "word" of Eliyahu (one appearance), in this group – following the descent of the fire onto the first delegation – the two parties are balanced out.

Group D – third captain of fifty (verses 13-15)

12. ... He bent down on his knees before Eliyahu and beseeched him, and he spoke (*va-yedaber*) to him... (13)
13. And an angel of God spoke (*va-yedaber*) to Eliyahu: Go to him.... (15)

In this group the two "*dibburim*" do not contrast one another, as in the previous groups, but rather form a relationship of cause and effect.

In groups B-C, the subject under discussion is not "God's word" concerning Achazya, as it was in the first half of the story, and as it becomes once again at the end (in group E – see below). Rather, the issue is whose word is going to prevail. Will it be that of the king to his messengers, commanding them to seize Eliyahu, such that he will be forced to come down from the mountain, or will it be the word of the man of God, punishing the messengers of the king and thwarting his plan?

Group D brings a surprising turnaround: the "word" of the captain of fifty no longer reflects the "word of the king," as it did in the previous groups. Rather, it now represents the opposite: complete submission to the prophet. Similarly, the "word" of the angel of God no longer reflects the word of the man of God, as we have seen it thus far. Rather, it too now carries the opposite message: it contains consideration for and mercy towards the captain of fifty, and it prepares us for the renewed appearance of the "word of God" in the next group.

Group E – ultimate victory of the word of God

14. And he spoke (*va-yedaber*) to him: So says God...
15. Is it because there is no God in Israel of Whom you can ask His word (*be-devaro*)? Therefore... but you shall surely die. (16)
16. And he died, according to God's word (*ki-devar Hashem*)
17. which He had spoken (*dibber*) to Eliyahu. (17)

These four appearances of "the word of God" join the three appearances in Group A. In Group E, the key word *d-b-r* is related to sin (appearance no. 15 - Achazya's failure to inquire of God, and his quest to inquire of Ba'al Zevuv, the god of Ekron); punishment (appearance no. 14 – "He **spoke** to him: So says God... therefore... you shall surely die"); and its fulfillment (appearances 16-17 – which is "according to God's word which He spoke to Eliyahu").

Let us now attempt to outline the progression of the narrative on the basis of the appearances of the key word, *d-b-r*, in its various contexts. Achazya's sin in sending messengers, in his illness, to inquire of Ba'al Zevuv brings God's word into the world, with a dual purpose: to stop the messengers of Achazya from continuing on their way, and to inform the king, by means of those same messengers, of his imminent death. The conveying of God's word from God's angel to Eliyahu, from Eliyahu to the messengers of Achazya, and from them to the king, cause the key word *d-b-r* (in the sense of "God's word") to appear three times. God's word is successful, and its dual objective is attained in full. However, already in the first half of the story it becomes clear that the king is not going to sit by idly in the face of this prophecy. He "speaks" to his messengers in an attempt to

discover the identity of the man who "spoke" such harsh "*dibburim*" (words) to them concerning him. The three appearances of the key word in the king's speech hint at the impending confrontation between the king and God's word and its bearer. The equilibrium – three appearances vs. three appearances – hints that at this stage, the question of who will prevail is still an open one.

In the second half of the story, the initiative shifts to Achazya. His attempt to sabotage the fulfillment of the prophecy against him is aimed at the bearer of the prophecy – the man of God. This is based on his belief that the fulfillment of the prophecy is dependent on the survival of its bearer. The king's "word," as revealed through the "words" of the first captain of fifty (two appearances) is meant to harm the prophet, who is ordered to descend from the mountain.

However, this is immediately followed by the contrasting "word" of the prophet, and despite the king's numerical advantage (echoed in the doubling of the appearances of the key word in relation to the sole appearance in Eliyahu's response), the prophet's "word" prevails, and his decree is fulfilled in the miracle of fire that descends from the heavens.

The arrogance of the second captain of fifty grows to compensate for the weakness of his appearance before the man of God. The "word" of this captain and the "word" of the prophet are placed here in equilibrium. The second delegation meets the same fate as the first. The "word" of the prophet has prevailed once again.

The victory of Eliyahu in the battle that the king wages against him reaches its climax in the arrival of the third captain of fifty: the "word" of this captain is nothing but an expression of submission before the prophet. Now there appears the "word" of the angel of God, commanding Eliyahu to accede to the captain's pleas and to go down with him to the king.

Following the victory of the man of God over those who seek his harm (the king and his messengers) through his "word," the "word of God" reappears, at the end of the story. The ultimate victory of the word of God comes in the wake of the victory of its bearer, the prophet, over his opponents. Eliyahu announces God's word to Achazya himself, and this word of God is soon fulfilled in reality, as the prophet had "spoken" it.

Translated by Kaeren Fish