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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #83: The Storm

Part 2: Structure of the Story

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On the basis of the same principles that guided us in defining the boundaries of the story, we arrive at a division of the story into two halves of almost identical length. The story occupies twenty-five verses in total. The first half extends from verse 1 to verse 12, and its subject is Eliyahu's ascent to heaven in a storm. This is explicit in the introductory words and is repeated in similar language near the end of the first half:

And it was, when God took up Eliyahu in a storm to heaven... (1)

And Eliyahu went up in a storm to heaven (11)

Verse 12 describes Elisha's reaction of mourning to Eliyahu's disappearance. While this is the first verse in the story where Elisha remains alone, it should nevertheless be regarded as concluding the first half, because Eliyahu's presence is still felt at the beginning of the verse: "And Elisha saw (him)... and he saw him no more." The second part of the verse, "He took hold of his clothes and he tore them...", also describes Elisha's reaction to Eliyahu's ascent in the previous verse, and therefore it is still connected to the same subject.

The second half of the story includes 13 verses - from verse 13 to verse 25. The subject of this half is the beginning of Elisha's independent path as the prophet who inherits the role of Eliyahu, his master, and the measure of recognition that he receives as such. The words of the sons of the prophets, as they see Elisha crossing the Yarden in the same way that Eliyahu had done so previously, are an appropriate summary of this half: "The spirit of Eliyahu rests upon Elisha."

It should be emphasized that even in the first part of the story, which deals with Eliyahu's ascent, the subject of the second half – Elisha's succession – is given extensive treatment. Elisha is mentioned in every verse of the first half, not only as the disciple and loyal attendant of his master, but principally as the one who is destined to inherit him. This idea is addressed in different ways throughout the first half of the story. Both Elisha's accompaniment of Eliyahu on his way to the place of his ascent and the distinction in this regard between him and the other sons of the prophets hint to this idea. There is also an explicit reference to the question of succession in the dialogue between Eliyahu and Elisha in verses 9-10. Elisha sees Eliyahu's ascent, thereby fulfilling the condition, "If you see...", and its result – "then you will have it"; i.e., a double measure of Eliyahu's spirit that will rest upon him.

The second half of the story comes not only to tell us that Elisha did indeed inherit Eliyahu's role, but also thereby to clarify two matters that this new situation necessarily entails: a. What is the measure of recognition awarded to Elisha among the various social groups that he comes into contact with at the beginning of his new path, as the successor of Eliyahu and as the prophet of the generation, and what is done to strengthen this recognition and to overcome the opposition; and b. Does Elisha, as a prophet, set off in the path of his predecessor, or does he have his own, independent, different path?

Each of the two halves may be divided into four units. The main consideration for this internal division is the geographical location of the events. This consideration aside, the two halves of the story differ from one another in terms of their internal structure.

The first half of the story is built on the very common biblical literary model of "three and four." Three times in this half the dialogue between Eliyahu and Elisha is repeated, but the reader has no sense of progression or development over these three occurrences. However, these three units lead to the fourth, which represents the focus and climax of all that has happened up until now. This fourth unit is the dialogue between Eliyahu and Elisha on the other side of the Yarden, just prior to Eliyahu's ascent.

The four units comprising the first part of the story may therefore be set forth as follows:

1. 1-3 From Gilgal to Beit El – first dialogue
2. 4-5 From Beit El to Yericho – second dialogue
3. 6-8 From Yericho to the other side of the Yarden – third dialogue
4. 9-12 On the other side of the Yarden (Elisha's request, Eliyahu's reply, Eliyahu's ascent, Elisha's response).

In a future *shiur* we shall present a detailed analysis of this structure, and its relationship with the structure of the second half of the preceding narrative (Eliyahu and Achazia's captains of fifty – IIMelakhim 1:9-17), which follows the same literary model.

Unlike the first half, in which the use of the "three and four" literary model guides and directs the action towards the climax at the end of that half, the second half of the story has a complex structure that is full of contrasts.

Its four parts may be defined as follows:

1. 13-15 Crossing of the Yarden, the sons of the prophets recognize Elisha as the successor of Eliyahu
2. 16-18 In Yericho – failed attempt by the sons of the prophets to find Eliyahu
3. 19-22 In Yericho – the miracle of healing the spring water
4. 23-25 On the way from Yericho to Beit El, the bears maul forty-two children

These four units may be grouped in two different ways. One way is based on geographical location; the other is based on the people who are involved, vis-à-vis Elisha. Each approach serves to highlight the contrast between its corresponding pair of units in terms of the main subject of the story: the attitude towards Elisha and the level of recognition of him as the prophet of the generation.

Division on the Basis of Geographical Location

The four sections are arranged in chiasmic parallels, with unit 1 corresponding to unit 4 (in each case Elisha is in motion, on his return trip in the footsteps of his master), while units 2 and 3 find Elisha in a temporary stopover in Yericho.

In unit 1 Elisha is given recognition and honor by the children of the prophets who had previously emerged from Yericho to accompany Eliyahu and Elisha to the Yarden. They now prostrate themselves before him and compare him (favorably) to Eliyahu: "The spirit of Eliyahu rests upon Elisha." In contrast, in unit 4 Elisha suffers the scorn of "young boys" who come out after him from Yericho, as he makes his ascent to Beit El. They curse him, comparing him (unfavorably) to Eliyahu: "Go up, bald one; go up, bald one."

Units 2 and 3 correspond to one another not only in that Elisha is in Yericho in both cases, but also because in each case the people of the city request something of

him. However, there is a difference between the implication of the first request and that of the second, and this contrast is the inverse of the contrast reflected in the pair of units 1 and 4. Those who make the request, in unit 2, are the children of the prophets of Yericho, and here their request expresses a lack of reconciliation to the finality of Eliyahu's disappearance, implying also a lack of acceptance of Elisha as his successor. They thereby reverse their reaction of acceptance of Elisha in the previous unit. Their request is met with opposition by Elisha ("You shall not send"); even his eventual reluctant agreement – after they beseech him - is meant solely to bring them to a recognition of the failure of their efforts and the mistake underlying their request in the first place. In unit 3, those who make their request of Elisha are the (regular) "people of the city." Their request specifically proves their full recognition of Elisha as a prophet who is able to solve their critical problem. To them Elisha responds willingly, with no reservations, and their request is successful.

Division on the Basis of Characters

On the basis of the characters that have dealings with Elisha, the four units comprising the second half of the story may be divided into two pairs. In units 1-2 the characters are the children of the prophets of the city of Yericho, while units 3-4 introduce the "simple" people of the city – first the adults, in unit 3, and then their young children who emerge from the city, in unit 4.

This division likewise highlights a contrast between each corresponding pair of units in terms of attitude towards Elisha. Unit 1 contrasts with unit 2 in its depiction of the view in which Elisha, as successor to Eliyahu, is held by the children of the prophets. The contrast here involves the same people – the children of the prophets. Unit 3 contrasts with unit 4 in terms of the attitude of the "simple" inhabitants of the city towards Elisha, as the prophet of the generation who has taken over his master's role. Here, the contrast is between the adults and their young children.

This tumultuous structure of the second half of our story speaks to the complexity of the mission facing Elisha as he sets out on his independent path. He needs general recognition as the prophet of the generation, among all sectors and levels of the population, from the children of the prophets to the unruly youth. This is

no easy task and it is not easily accomplished. The socio-spiritual reality with its many contrasts that Elisha encounters and the measures that he adopts in his various interactions is what the second half of the story is coming to tell us.

We shall not address the second half of the chapter here beyond what is necessary for a discussion of the first half. The second half lies outside of the "Eliyahu Stories"; its proper place is in the "Elisha Stories," which will hopefully be a separate set of *shiurim*.

3. Characterizing the Story of Eliyahu's Ascent

A spirit of mystery and secret surrounds the part of our story that directly describes Eliyahu's ascent in a storm to heaven (verses 1-18). There can be no doubt that the text means to convey a powerful event of which more is left unsaid than that which is stated. Even the characters who are party to this event, whether directly (Eliyahu and Elisha) or indirectly (the children of the prophets) do not speak of it openly and give no explicit expression to its essence.

The following details together create the atmosphere of mystery:

- a. The very introduction (verse 1), "And it was, when God took up Eliyahu in a storm to the heavens," arouses tension in the reader. He expects to find an elaboration of this unexpected introduction: how and why does God take up Eliyahu in a storm, and what does this mean? At the end of the first half of the story (verses 11-12) an answer of sorts is given, but it is only a partial one.
- b. The appearance of Eliyahu and Elisha together on their way from Gilgal (after previous stories in which Eliyahu appears alone) is shrouded in questions: how did they meet, where did each of them come from, and what is the purpose of their common journey? Also – what is the meaning of Eliyahu's missions to Beit El and to Yericho?

- c. Eliyahu, who is on his way to the place where he will be taken up to heaven, does not tell Elisha this. On the contrary, he tries to take leave of him so as to head for the place of his ascent alone.
- d. Elisha, who solemnly swears over and over that he will not abandon his master, likewise makes no attempt to justify his stubbornness in light of his knowledge that "Today God would take his master from over his head," even though it becomes clear that he is aware of this.
- e. The children of the prophets, who encounter Elisha in Beit El and in Yericho, turn to **Elisha** with their question, "Do you know...." From their question we discern the emotion accompanying their knowledge of what is going on. They do not dare to approach Eliyahu.
- f. Elisha answers them, "Be silent!" This hints – or almost says explicitly – that the matter of Eliyahu being taken up is a secret one that should not be spoken about openly.
- g. The children of the prophets, who accompany Eliyahu and Elisha from Yericho to the Yarden, stand "facing them, from a distance"; they do not dare approach the two of them, much less make any attempt to cross over the Yarden in the footsteps of the master and his disciple. Their awe of the auspiciousness of the event holds them back.
- h. When, eventually, Eliyahu reveals to Elisha that he is about to be taken from him (verse 9), and the place and time are right for this to happen, he is not certain that Elisha will merit to see him being taken up: "If you see me being taken from you..." (verse 10). In other words, Eliyahu knows that the manner in which he will depart from Elisha is not the manner in which people usually die, and he believes that it will be so mysterious that it may be possible that Elisha, although he is standing right by him, may not "see" it.
- i. The description of Eliyahu's ascent (verses 11-12) gives an impression of breathtaking wonder, but it is opaque.
- j. The children of the prophets, who knew that "This day God will take your master from over your head," do not for a moment imagine how this actually happened, and therefore they beg Elisha to allow them to search for Eliyahu, "Let God's spirit has carried him and cast him upon one of the mountains, or in one of the valleys."

- k. Elisha does not correct them; he does not tell them explicitly that Eliyahu was carried up in a storm to heaven. Only after their three-day search yields no results does he allow them to conclude on their own that Eliyahu departed in a wondrous, miraculous manner, unlike the death of regular people. In other words, the matter of Eliyahu's ascent is not for public discussion – not even among the children of the prophets.

Translated by Kaeren Fish