

The Eliyahu Narratives
Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #3: The Drought – part 2

Eliyahu's Oath: Commanded by God or on the Initiative of the Prophet?

By Rav Elchanan Samet

(*Sefer Melakhim* I 17:1) "Eliyahu the Tishbi, one of the residents of Gilad, said to Achav: As the Lord God of Israel lives, before Whom I stand,

There shall be no dew or rain during these years, except by my word."

Does Eliyahu make this decree, halting the dew and rain, because God has commanded him to appear before Achav and speak in this way, or does he act on his own initiative? This question, as we shall see in future *shiurim*, is of critical importance for an understanding of the rest of his story.

In the *midrashim* of *Chazal* and in most of the commentaries we find the unequivocal position that Eliyahu acted on his own initiative. Let us examine, in this regard, two *midrashim* and the opinions of two commentators:

"Achav, King of Israel, asked Eliyahu the Tishbi... Immediately Eliyahu was filled with great anger. He said to him: ... By your life, I JUDGE YOU only by your own words... ELIYAHU TOOK THE KEYS OF RAINFALL AND LEFT..." (*Eliyahu Zuta*, chapter 8)

"God created winter such that it would be winter, and summer such that it would be summer. ELIYAHU CAME ALONG AND MADE the winter into summer, as it is written, 'As God lives... there shall not be dew or rain during these years except by my word...' What is the meaning of the verse, ... 'a righteous man rules in the fear of God' (*Shmuel* II 23:3)? The righteous rule, as it were, by that with which God rules. How? Everything that God does, the righteous do. How... God halts the rain, AND ELIYAHU HALTED THE RAIN..." (*Devarim Rabba* 10:2)

Radak comments on our verse as follows:

"Here ELIYAHU MADE A DECREE CONCERNING THE RAINFALL IN HIS ZEALOUSNESS FOR GOD because of the idolaters. As it is written in

the Torah (*Devarim* 11:16-17), 'Lest... you turn aside and worship other gods and bow down to them, then God's anger will burn against you and He will shut up the heavens and there will be no rain.' HE TRUSTS GOD TO KEEP HIS WORD. And concerning him and others like him it is written (*Iyov* 22:28), 'You shall say a decree and it shall be fulfilled for you,' as Shmuel the prophet said (*Shmuel* I 12:17), 'I will call out to God and He will give thunder and rain.' And since [Achav] did more evil than anyone who had preceded him, Eliyahu decreed and announced to him that there would not be dew or rain, [so that] – perhaps he would change his ways. And God, Who is slow to anger, demonstrated patience with him as He did to those who preceded him.

And the words 'except by my word' mean: until he would see that everyone – or at least some – had returned from the path of idolatry."

Abarbanel (commenting on verse 3) writes:

"Eliyahu did this without a Divine command and without permission, but rather by his own will and choice, to pursue his zealousness for God."

Among the earlier commentators, a clear exception is Ralbag, who expresses his dissenting opinion only incidentally:

"Eliyahu exaggerated, BY GOD'S COMMAND, in withholding dew and rain from them altogether for all those years, except at the time that Eliyahu would order it, BY GOD'S COMMAND."

Ralbag is preceded in this view by a great many years, by Yosef ben-Matityahu in his "*Kadmoni'ut ha-Yehudim*":

"There was one prophet to the Great God from the city of Teshev in the land of Gilad; he came to Achav and told him THAT GOD HAD NOTIFIED HIM that He would not give rain in those years, nor would dew descend upon the earth, except for when he [the prophet] would appear [before the king]."

Are these two exegetical views of equal weight, or can we bring proof from the verse to support one of them over the other?

The fact that there is no description of a Divine revelation to Eliyahu preceding his appearance before Achav is no proof: it is quite common for prophets to be described as fulfilling a mission from God without any previous mention of a Divine revelation to them. From the mission itself the reader deduces, in such instances, that the

prophet's actions are performed as a Divine mission. A record of the actual command would create unnecessary repetition.

More significant is the fact that Eliyahu himself makes no mention of the Divine source of his mission. He does not introduce his declaration with the words, "So says God," nor does he formulate his oath in such a way that we may understand that it is God's words that he is speaking. A formulation clarifying in some way that Eliyahu's declaration is indeed God's word is particularly important in a case such as ours, where there is no preceding description of a Divine revelation to him. The lack of any description of a revelation, coupled with a formulation of an oath that makes no reference to its Divine source, are enough to attest to the prophet's independence of action.

But it is not only that which is not said when Eliyahu appears before Achav that strengthens this view; more importantly, we reach the same conclusion from Eliyahu's words: the very need to swear, together with the personal formulation of the oath, demonstrate that it is an independent initiative on the part of the prophet to withhold rainfall. A regular prophetic mission, in which the prophet foretells, in God's name, the punishment that will come upon Israel, requires no oath. But when the prophet decrees of his own will, and his listeners understand his words correctly, then his oath comes to strengthen their faith in the fulfillment of his decree; it states: Even though I am the one who is making this decree, it should not be taken lightly. I am certain that my decree will be fulfilled, and I am ready to swear thus by God's Name.

When we come to the conclusion of Eliyahu's oath, there would seem to be no further room for doubt as to what we have said above:

"Except by MY WORD."

This conclusion comes to limit the decree: the cessation of the dew and rainfall during "these years" is not irreversible; it depends on the discretion of the prophet, "until he would see that everyone – or at least some – had returned from the path of idolatry" (Radak). It is specifically this limitation that amplifies the power of human action in Eliyahu's oath: it leaves the prophet the option of changing his decree in accordance with changing circumstances. *Chazal* present us with an incisive "paraphrase" of this oath: "Eliyahu took THE KEYS OF RAINFALL, and went on his way" (*Eliyahu Zuta* chapter 8). The keeper of the keys will sometimes lock the door and at other times open it, in accordance with the circumstances and at his discretion.

Our discussion thus far has led us to agree with *Chazal's* conclusion - and that of most of the commentators - that Eliyahu is not commanded to announce the halting of the rain; he makes this oath of his own volition. As an experienced prophet, accustomed

to standing before God and serving Him, Eliyahu sees that what his generation and his prophetic mission require is a grandiose act, an act that will halt the situation in which Achav, serving idols all over the country, persists in this practice – and even stubbornly upholds it, in light of the plentiful rainfall that blesses the land.

God, Who includes His prophets in His counsel and entrusts to the greatest among them the role of leading the generation in accordance with their discretion and the needs of the hour, performs the will of those who fear Him, such that "there was no rain in the land" (verse 7).

Translated by Kaeren Fish