

The Eliyahu Narratives
Yeshivat Har Etzion

**Shiur #4: The Drought – part 3: Eliyahu's Experiences During the Drought –
For What Purpose Are They Recorded?**

By Rav Elchanan Samet

(18:1) "MANY DAYS passed and God's word came to Eliyahu IN THE THIRD YEAR, saying:

Go and appear before Achav, and I will give rain upon the earth."

What has happened in the meantime, in the course of these "many days" that have lasted more than two years, while severe drought has prevailed throughout the country?

As regards Eliyahu, although he has been out of Achav's sight, he has not disappeared from the reader's consciousness. A chain of three literary units describes what he has been doing during these years, thereby filling in the void between his first appearance before Achav (17:1) and God's command that he appear before him a second time (18:1).

As regards the events in Shomron during this time, we learn about what has happened only incidentally, in retrospect, from what we are told in the first half of chapter 18 (up until verse 18). Let us gather the details that are available to us from those verses and try to organize them more or less chronologically:

- i. Achav undertakes intensive measures to try and discover Eliyahu's hideout; he even goes so far as to send messengers to neighboring nations and kingdoms to seek him, making them swear that Eliyahu has not been offered asylum within their borders (18:10).
- ii. As a result of the failure of these search missions, Eliyahu's disappearance is perceived as miraculous: It is God's spirit that has suddenly carried him off to an unknown place, thereby leading Achav and his men astray (based on 17:12).
- iii. Izevel has attempted to destroy the prophets of God, and Ovadyahu, who is in charge of the royal household, has saved one hundred of them (18:4).

Although this is not stated explicitly, it seems that Izevel's act is meant as a vengeful response to Eliyahu's oath and his disappearance.

iv. In "the third year" of Eliyahu's oath, "the famine was severe in Shomron" (18:1-2).

v. Achav and Ovadyahu divide between them the land (around Shomron) at the end of this period in search of a little fodder for their livestock, so that they will not starve to death (18:5-6). This is a graphic description of the situation in the land following two years of drought.

vi. Eliyahu is perceived by Achav, in light of the severe national crisis, as a "troubler of Israel" (18:17). But inwardly Achav is planning to cooperate with Eliyahu to change the religious situation (18:20 and onwards).

Let us now return to the chain of units describing Eliyahu. They parallel, chronologically, the period described above in the Shomron. The continuation of our chapter may be divided as follows (chapter 17):

(2-7) Eliyahu at Wadi Kerit

(8-16) Eliyahu's meeting with the widow at the gates of Tzarfat, and his stay in her home

(17-24) Eliyahu's miraculous revival of the widow's son

What is the thread that binds these events into a single unit – if such a unit exists – and how do all three connect to the story that serves as their framework – i.e., Eliyahu's two meetings with Achav, one to announce the imminent drought and the other to end it?

At first glance it would seem that no special effort is required to answer these questions. These three sections are connected to each other as well as to the literary framework surrounding them on several different levels.

A. Timeframe:

The dimension of time in the story as a whole is what unites all that we read in chapter 17 and the beginning of chapter 18. The three brief events, as noted, fill in the time between Eliyahu's two appearances before Achav, thereby updating us as to what Eliyahu has been up to during this time. This significance of the events, in terms of

time, features prominently in the description of the events themselves, in the emphasis placed on when they took place or on their duration:

(17:7) "It was, AFTER SOME TIME, that the wadi dried up, for there was no rain in the land."

This indicates the conclusion of the period of a year during which Eliyahu resided at Wadi Kerit.

At the end of the second unit, we read:

(17:15) ... "He and she and her house ate FOR SOME TIME."

The third unit begins:

(17:17) "It was, after these things..."

In other words, it is only after "some time" that Eliyahu spends at Wadi Kerit and "some time" that he spends in the home of the widow that we find a more specific indication of time:

(18:1) "MUCH TIME passed, and God's word came to Eliyahu IN THE THIRD YEAR, saying:

Go and appear before Achav, for I shall give rain upon the land."

B. Plot:

All the events narrated in chapter 17 are units that lead from one to the other from the point of view of the plot: after Eliyahu swears before Achav that the rain will cease and will return only by his word, it is reasonable to expect that Achav and Izevel will plot against him in some way. For this reason God commands him to go to Wadi Kerit. But about a year later the wadi dries up because of the drought, and so Eliyahu is forced to wander to some place of habitation outside of the boundaries of the kingdom of Israel – to the home of the widow in "Tzarfat of Tzidon." This widow's son takes ill and dies, and by means of a most wondrous miracle Eliyahu restores him to life.

But this perception of the narration in our chapter, as a continuous plot whose only purpose is to describe Eliyahu's activities, fails to provide a satisfying answer to the questions posed above. We are left with the following difficulties:

i. The concept of circumstantial development of the story from one unit to the next does not apply to the connection between the collection of three units describing Eliyahu's activities and the Divine command that follows them. The group of three units is connected properly to its framework at the beginning, but not at the end.

ii. Even where the circumstantial connection between links in the story is clear and logical, this does not answer the question of WHY the text tells us about all these things that happen to Eliyahu during this time. In what way does the description of these events contribute to the principal narrative, which begins with Eliyahu's oath as to the cessation of rain and continues in chapter 18 with his second encounter with Achav?

If the story intends simply to fill us in as to what took place during the period between Eliyahu's two appearances before Achav, would it not be better for the text to describe what was taking place in Shomron at the time? The events there are directly related to the central plot, for they relate to the influence of the drought on the Shomron and its king, both materially and psychologically. Eliyahu's doings could be summarized in a single verse, indicating that he hid for two years. But instead the text adopts the opposite approach: We hear about what is happening in Shomron only incidentally, while Eliyahu's activities are described at great length, covering twenty-three verses whose contribution to the main subject of the story is not clear.

iii. The third unit is entirely unrelated to the subject of Eliyahu's HIDING. Even in the first two units, this is not the main subject – in terms of both subject and style. Although in the first command to Eliyahu, in verse 3, he is told, "YOU SHALL HIDE YOURSELF at Wadi Kerit which faces the Jordan," we find that in the description of his fulfillment of this command we read something else: "He went and did according to God's word; he went and SOJOURNED at Wadi Kerit which faces the Jordan" (5). In the second unit, the concept of "hiding" vanishes even from God's command: "Arise, go to Tzarfat of Tzidon, and SOJOURN there" (9). Anyone reading this verse in isolation from its context would never imagine that the situation involves someone hiding from someone else.

We may say, then, that the central subject of these two units is the problem of Eliyahu's physical survival during the drought, rather than the matter of his hiding. An examination of the worcommonthese two sections confirms this view: the expression "I have commanded... to sustain you" appears in both sections, as does the word "bread," the verb "to drink" and the word "rain."

We may say, in summary, that neither the dimension of time binding together the narrative in our chapter with the beginning of chapter 18 nor the narrative that

connects some events with causal links, can provide sufficient explanation for the need for these three sections to be written let alone answer our questions.

This approach to explaining the significance of the three units does answer some of the questions we raised, and obviates the need to deal with others, but this is also its weakness: it assumes that there is no direct connection between the three units and their framework and that their contribution to the main plot is secondary. Hence we cannot adopt this approach as the resolution to our main question.

We conclude this chapter, then, with a question mark. To the question posed at the outset we have attempted to suggest three answers, and none of them has proven satisfactory. A more preferable answer will occupy the next three *shiurim*, each of which will be devoted to one of the units. As a result, we will arrive at the answer to our question here.