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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #5: The Drought – Part 4: Wadi Kerit

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The brief unit describing Eliyahu's stay at Wadi Kerit (17:2-7) is composed of three parts:

(2-4) God's command to Eliyahu

(5-6) Eliyahu's fulfillment of the command

(7) the wadi dries up

In this shiur we shall devote a detailed discussion to each of the three parts of the unit, seeking at each stage the answer to one of the questions posed in last week's shiur.

1. God's command to Eliyahu

(2) "God's word came to him, saying:

(3) Go from here; take yourself eastwards, and hide at Wadi Kerit, which faces the Jordan.

(4) And it will be that you will drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there."

What is the meaning of this Divine command to Eliyahu, and for what purpose do we need this precise specification of the place to which Eliyahu must go? If the main reason for Eliyahu leaving the place where he made his oath is in order to hide from Achav and Izevel (as Abarbanel and other commentators maintain), isn't it obvious that he must go? And if so, what is the point of God's command? On the other hand, if the essence of God's command is the promise of sustenance for Eliyahu in his hiding place, then the second part of the speech would be sufficient; why do we need an indication of the exact place where he must stay?

R. Shmuel Laniado, in his commentary Keli Yakar on Nevi'im Rishonim prophets, explains that this command came to him from God because Eliyahu's oath was undertaken on his own initiative:

"Although Eliyahu meant [his oath] for the sake of heaven, for the glory of God and His service, nevertheless it was cruel to withhold from them even the dew, which does not cease ... AND IN RESPONSE TO THIS God says to him, "Go from here" – THAT HE DROVE HIM AWAY FROM THERE, or possibly, "Go from this (*mi-zeh*)" – in other words, [separate yourself] from this cruelty that you have achieved in withholding dew from the blessing."

THESE WORDS REVEAL A REVOLUTIONARY ATTITUDE IN THE PERCEPTION OF ELIYAHU'S OATH: ELIYAHU'S DECREE AROUSES GOD'S CRITICISM OF HIM, EVEN THOUGH IT IS GOD HIMSELF WHO ACTUALLY FULFILLS IT. THE REST OF THE STORY HERE IS MEANT TO HIGHLIGHT THIS CRITICISM.

The Keli Yakar detects a note of rebuke in the command, "Go from here." It is a sort of expulsion order to Eliyahu, aiming to "drive him away from there," from the center of the kingdom, from the company of his people. Eliyahu is banished from his people, and therefore he is not told, "Go eastwards (*lekh lekha kedma*)," but rather "go FROM HERE (*lekh mi-zeh*)."

The Keli Yakar's daring interpretation continues:

"Go – WANDERING AND ROAMING – and head eastwards, and hide yourself there at Wadi Kerit, for that is the [appropriate] place of your dwelling. [Your dwelling place] must be cut off, like the name of the place where you will dwell. 'Wadi Kerit' – derived from the word '*kerita*' (cutting off)."

It is not only the command to "go from here" that hints at rebuke of Eliyahu. The Keli Yakar also detects a rebuke in the direction in which God points him: "Go, wandering and roaming, heading eastwards." The indication of his intended destination, Wadi Kerit, likewise hints – through its name – at a criticism of Eliyahu whose words would cause the water of that wadi to be cut off – as indeed happened later on – and would cause food to be cut off from his people.

He continues:

"Thus we can understand why his sustenance came by means of the cruel ravens, rather than any other animal, because he acted in a cruel way."

Thus, even in what seems to be a gesture of concern for the prophet's well-being, as a miracle to keep him alive in a place where he was to spend a whole year, far from any human company, this commentator senses a reproach of Eliyahu. And indeed, why is it specifically the ravens that are commanded to supply his food? Based on the literal text we could answer that these birds will grab and eat anything, and hence they are suited to the task of obtaining meat and bread for Eliyahu. But considering that the raven is a highly symbolic creature, it is reasonable to seek some additional, symbolic significance to their selection as the agents to keep Eliyahu alive.

On what does the Keli Yakar base his description of the ravens as cruel birds? The source for this image is to be found in the teachings of *Chazal* in several places, deducing from two verses in *Tanakh* that the raven is cruel towards its offspring:

(*Tehillim* 147:9) "He gives the beast its bread; and to the ravens that cry out";

(*Iyov* 38:41) "Who prepares provisions for the raven, while its young cry out to God, wandering for lack of food?"

In light of these verses, we find the following teaching (*Eruvin* 21b-22a):

"'Black as a raven' (*Shir ha-Shirim* 5:11) – In whom do we find this borne out? ... Rava said: In someone who treats his children and the members of his household with cruelty, like a raven."

The fact that the birds chosen to be sent to Eliyahu are symbolic of cruelty (towards their own young) may be interpreted in different ways: The Keli Yakar perceives the ravens as symbolic of Eliyahu himself. Eliyahu demonstrates cruelty towards his people, like the ravens towards their young, and therefore it is they that are chosen to bring him sustenance.

Malbim offers a similar interpretation:

"[God] arranged for his sustenance by means of ravens, which are cruel by nature, in order that [Eliyahu] would remember that he acted in a similarly cruel way towards the nation, to have them die of starvation."

The author of the *Metzudot*, on the other hand, sees the lesson intended for Eliyahu in the fact that the ravens changed their nature in relation to him:

"'I have commanded the ravens' – in order to make him conscious that HE SHOULD NOT BE CRUEL towards Israel; when he would see that the cruel

ravens had mercy on him and sustained him, how could he then not have mercy on Israel?"

Perhaps the symbolic significance of the ravens can be understood in a third way: the ravens, which withhold food from their young, bring that food to Eliyahu, who is then nourished, as it were, from the food of the young ravens that cry out to God. Is the prophet prepared to survive miraculously at the expense of others? This food, which Eliyahu receives by means of the ravens, has been snatched from his people, who are desperate over the absence of rain. Will Eliyahu be prepared to eat "bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening," when the food in question is in fact the bread and meat of his suffering brethren?

2. Eliyahu's fulfillment of the command

(5) "So he went and did as God had said; he went and sojourned at Wadi Kerit which faces the Jordan.

(6) And the ravens would bring him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he would drink from the wadi."

There is an overall parallel between God's command in the preceding verses (2-3) and its fulfillment by Eliyahu in these following verses, as we see from the following comparison:

God's command:

(2) "GOD'S WORD came to him, saying:

(3) GO FROM HERE and head eastward, hide yourself at WADI KERIT WHICH FACES THE JORDAN

(4) And it shall be that YOU WILL DRINK FROM THE WADI

and I have commanded THE RAVENS to sustain you there."

Eliyahu's actions:

(5) "So he went and did ACCORDING TO GOD'S WORD;

HE WENT

And sojourned at WADI KERIT, WHICH FACES THE JORDAN.

(6) And THE RAVENS would bring him...

AND HE WOULD DRINK FROM THE WADI."

Attention should be paid to the three differences between these corresponding elements:

- i. As opposed to God's command, "HIDE YOURSELF at Wadi Kerit," what we are told about Eliyahu is that "he SOJOURNED at Wadi Kerit." This slight difference suggests that the hiding was not the main purpose of his actions.
- ii. The order of food and drink is exchanged: in God's command the water is mentioned first, while the description of Eliyahu's actions mentions the food first. The reason for this is simple: God mentions water first, for this is a more fundamental need even than food. When it comes to Eliyahu's actions, the text postpones the water in order to juxtapose his drinking from the wadi with the crisis that concludes this episode: the drinking arrangement cannot continue – "It happened, after some time, that the wadi dried up...."
- iii. God's offhand mention of His "command to the ravens to sustain him" turns into a reality that is quite different from what we would have expected, and this is perhaps the biggest surprise of the story: twice a day, morning and evening (the ancient custom was to eat two meals a day), the ravens bring Eliyahu bread AND MEAT. Eliyahu is thus living a life of luxury at Wadi Kerit.

Does Eliyahu's situation justify such a lifestyle?

(*Devarim* 12:20) "When the Lord your God expands your borders as He told you, and you say, "I shall eat meat" – because your soul desires to eat meat, then you shall eat meat to your heart's content."

From this verse *Chazal* deduce that it is proper to eat meat only in conditions of plenty and with appetite, not at times of distress or famine. To this we may add the words of the *Mishna* in *Massekhet Ta'anit* (1:4-7), describing the communal lifestyle that is appropriate during a dry winter – like the one experienced that year – characterized by fasting and curtailment of celebration.

Thus, while Am Yisrael is engaged in fasting over the harsh drought, Eliyahu – the cause of the drought – is served regular, daily meals of "bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening"!

What is the nature of the criticism hinted at here?

Eliyahu has to separate himself from his people and from the suffering that he has brought upon them. His isolation facilitates a test to see whether he is capable of living alone for a year and experiencing, twice a day every day, his "differentness" - his separation from them and their fate. This year-long stay at Wadi Kerit conceals a rebuke aimed at the prophet: in his decision to withhold rain he has brought suffering on his people; he fails to sense their distress. The Divine command therefore forces him to leave them, to go and try to live a lifestyle of stubborn disregard for their suffering, a lifestyle that expresses his lack of involvement in their fate. Perhaps this lifestyle at Wadi Kerit will lead him to want to return to his people, to feel their pain, and to share their fate. Such a step – were he to take it – would be a first step towards the cancellation of his oath.

Eliyahu appears to respond to this veiled criticism. In the description of his sustenance, the lack of symmetry between his food and drink stands out prominently:

"The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening –

and from the wadi he would drink."

We are not told that Eliyahu ate of the food that the ravens brought; the verse describes him only drinking from the wadi. Perhaps this is meant to hint at his anguish over the meat that is delivered to him twice a day. But has the covert criticism achieved anything beyond this?

3. The Wadi dries up

(7) "And it was, after some time, that the wadi dried up, for there was no rain in the land."

A whole year, with its entire cycle of seasons, passes by while Eliyahu lives at Wadi Kerit. He does not experience the results of his oath – the drying up of the wadi – all at once. Following the dry winter, the water is less abundant, and during the summer months the supply steadily decreases. The wadi that was a green ribbon of life in the heart of the parched wilderness, slowly withers. As the supply and force of the water diminish, the green banks of the wadi begin to dry up and the vegetation yellows. As the wadi withdraws, the surrounding desert takes over. And Eliyahu, who lives off this wadi, feels himself slowly perishing; he senses how his stubborn maintenance of his oath is cutting off life and giving reign to the blazing heat of the summer and the desolation of the

desert. Until... the logical conclusion of the process: "the wadi dried up." And why? "Because there was no rain in the land...."

Eliyahu remains steadfast in his views and in his oath; he is not prepared to retract, to restore with a word the rainfall. Hence, God's "dispute" with him continues. But it will not take place here, at Wadi Kerit, nor will it continue through these means, these "pressure tactics" – ravens full of symbolic meaning, feeding the prophet who dwells in isolation at Wadi Kerit (a name that is also symbolic), bread and meat morning and evening. This strategy has not brought results. The prophet must be moved to somewhere else and a new strategy of persuasion must be adopted: a new experiential test will be presented to the prophet; perhaps this will soften him and change his stance.

It is for this purpose that the year-long stay at Wadi Kerit ends in crisis: the desiccation of the wadi, the inevitable result of Eliyahu's oath, forces the prophet to seek a different place to live out this difficult time. God's command will lead him to his new home and to a new mode of existence there, in order to continue the argument.

Attention should be paid to the fact that although God takes care of Eliyahu's sustenance through miraculous means, only his food is provided in this manner, while his water supply is natural (both at Wadi Kerit and in the next section, in Tzarfat). When the water in the wadi is gone, God does not help Eliyahu to find water through some miraculous procedure – neither in the wadi nor elsewhere. The Malbim explains this as follows:

"It shall be that you will drink from the wadi' – The outpouring of Divine Providence descends upon a person according to the measure of his preparation. Since Eliyahu prepared himself, through this act [his oath], to stop the Supreme blessing from descending, it was also prevented from descending to him as well. Therefore it was impossible for him to subsist through... the water that he drank to be blessed, for this would be counter to his own preparation... [God] showed him that it was impossible for him to draw a new outpouring from the Source of life; he would therefore drink from the wadi that already contained water, and which would ultimately dry up – just as he had stopped up [the blessing of rain] from the nation, such that they would have to live only from the food and water that was in existence prior to his curse."

Rashi likewise states explicitly that the drying up of the wadi represents an element in the "argument" between God and Eliyahu, but to his view it is not

the drying up itself that represents the "claim" but rather its result: the fact that Eliyahu must move to a new place in order for the argument to continue:

"The wadi dried up' – so that he would recognize the need for rain and **WOULD HAVE THE TROUBLE OF UPROOTING HIMSELF FROM HIS PLACE.** For it was harsh, in God's eyes, that Israel was experiencing famine."

Rashi is already hinting here at the direction that becomes characteristic of the argument with Eliyahu during his stay in Tzarfat, and it is the opposite of what we have demonstrated in the description of his stay at Wadi Kerit. Now Eliyahu's stance will be tested through an unmediated encounter with the suffering that his oath has brought about. He will experience first hand the exertion that people must undergo during a time of famine: the need to uproot themselves from their place and to seek somewhere else where it will be possible to exist. Then he will be forced to go among the famine-struck people and witness their hardship.