

The Eliyahu Narratives
Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #6: The Drought - Part 5: The Widow in Tzarfat (17:8-16)

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1. Comparison with the previous section

This section has two parts, corresponding to the first two parts of the previous section: verses 8-9 contain God's command to Eliyahu (corresponding to verses 2-4); verses 10-16 describe its fulfillment (parallel to verses 5-7). The third part of the previous section - the drying up of the wadi (verse 7), representing the crisis that concludes the stay at Wadi Kerit and the preparation for God's new directive - has no parallel in the episode of Tzarfat. This section would appear to conclude on a positive, symbiotic note: the widow and her son are saved from death by starvation thanks to Eliyahu, while Eliyahu finds in her home a safe haven where his sustenance is provided for; only Am Yisrael continues to suffer from the increasingly oppressive drought. But at the end of this episode the text hints that this situation, too, will end in crisis, and the solution that has been found will not last indefinitely:

(15) "So he [to be read 'she'] and she [to be read 'he'] ate, as well as her household, FOR SOME TIME."

As in the previous section, here too the expression "for some time" (*yamim*) refers to a year. This being so, we are to understand that Eliyahu's stay in the widow's home lasted a year, like his stay in Wadi Kerit. The reader asks himself, why only a year? What happened at the end of that year that prevented the continuation of this seemingly ideal situation? What is the parallel, in our section, to the words, "It was, after SOME TIME, that the wadi dried up..." in the previous section? The answers to these questions are to be found in the third section. There we find the crisis that brings Eliyahu's stay in the widow's house to an end, with the death of her son. But this "crisis" deserves a section all on its own, and the solution leads us, and the entire story, in a new direction. (This will be discussed at greater length in the next chapter, which will be devoted to this third section.)

There is a striking similarity between the previous episode (at Wadi Kerit) and our episode. Both share the same subject: the possibility of Eliyahu's continued existence during a drought, far away from his people. In both cases God commands Eliyahu where he should go, and in both He informs him how his sustenance will come to him

in the place where he has been commanded to go. Let us compare these two Divine commands:

First Command:

(2) "GOD'S WORD CAME TO HIM, SAYING:

(3) GO from here and head eastwards. Hide yourself at WADI KERIT WHICH FACES THE JORDAN.

(4) And it shall be that you shall drink from the wadi and I HAVE COMMANDED the ravens TO SUSTAIN YOU THERE."

Second Command:

(8) GOD'S WORD CAME TO HIM, SAYING:

(9) Arise, GO TO TZARFAT WHICH IS PART OF TZIDON, and sojourn there, And behold, I HAVE COMMANDED THERE a widowed woman TO SUSTAIN YOU."

There is also some similarity in what transpires following God's command: in both cases Eliyahu obeys God's command, and God fulfills that which He has promised.

The general similarity between the descriptions of the two events finds expression in a series of key words that appear in both. These phrases serve to sketch the outline of each of the two events, with the problems that each contains:

i. "God's word" - appears twice in each section (verses 2, 5 with regard to Wadi Kerit, and verses 8, 16 with regard to Tzarfat.)

ii. The verb "to go" (*h-l-kh*) appears three times in the first section (3, 5) and four times in the second section: twice with regard to Eliyahu (9, 10) and twice with regard to the widow (11, 15).

iii. The verb "to drink" (*sh-t-h*) appears in both cases (4, 6; 10).

iv. The word "bread" (food) appears twice in the first section (6) and once in the second (11), but further on we find also "baked goods" (*ma'og*) (12) and "a small cake" (13).

v. The expression, "I have commanded... to sustain you there" appears in both sections: first concerning the ravens (4), and then concerning the widow (9).

- vi. Eliyahu's stay in each case lasts "some time" (*yamim*) - i.e., a year (7; 15).
- vii. The word "rain" appears once in each section (7; 14).

To all of the above we may add that in both sections Eliyahu drinks water in a natural way, while his food comes to him miraculously, by means of an agent sent by God's command.

Aside from all of these parallels, we must also examine the differences between the two sections, for it is that which is unique to each that defines its specific subject.

2. The lengthy description of Eliyahu's doings in Tzarfat - and its significance

The reader is struck by the lack of symmetry in length between the two sections describing Eliyahu's activities in each of the locations: at Wadi Kerit the description covers only TWO VERSES (5-6), while his actions in Tzarfat occupy SEVEN VERSES (10-16). What is the reason for this discrepancy?

It arises from the difference between the agents appointed to feed Eliyahu in each case. At Wadi Kerit it is the ravens who are commanded to feed him, and the text reports them as doing so, without any discussion. This mission embodies the miracle presented in the first section, for it is not natural for ravens to forego the food that they have stolen, all the more so to do it with such regularity - twice every day. Eliyahu is not involved in the miracle; he simply enjoys its benefits.

The situation in the second section is different: here it is a widow who is commanded to take care of Eliyahu's sustenance, and with regard to her things are not so simple. First of all, Eliyahu must identify the woman whom God has appointed for this purpose. After he ascertains who she is, it turns out that she does not have enough food even for herself. Eliyahu encounters this difficulty in understanding God's command to the woman immediately upon asking for some bread:

(12) "She said: By the life of the Lord your God, I have nothing baked but a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in the bottle; and behold, I am gathering two sticks that I may come and prepare it for myself and for my son, that we may eat it and die."

How is God's promise with regard to this woman - "Behold, I have commanded there a widowed woman to sustain you" - to be fulfilled? Radak explains as follows: "When Eliyahu saw that the widow lacked food even to sustain herself - how much more so to sustain him - he knew that what God had told him, 'I have commanded there...', was meant to be fulfilled miraculously. For He promised that HIS COMMANDING

WORD AND HIS BLESSING would be upon the widow's house, that she would be able to sustain him. Therefore he tells her (14), 'SO SAYS THE LORD God of Israel: the jar of flour will not be finished, and the bottle of oil will not be lacking...'"

Thus, much elaboration concerning Eliyahu's actions in Tzarfat (about five verses out of the total of seven) are related to the need to identify, first of all, the human agent - the widow - and to become familiar with the problem that prevents her from being able to fulfill her mission. Thereafter Eliyahu must solve this problem both on the subjective level (to lead the widow to accede to Eliyahu's request) and on the objective level (by means of the actual miracle).

This difference between the two types of agents - the ravens and the widow - affects not only the length of the description of Eliyahu's actions, but also the nature of the miracle: what transpires in the widow's home is very different from the miracle that is recounted in the previous section. In both cases the miracle concerns Eliyahu's sustenance, but there is still great difference between them. In the first section, THE MIRACLE IS THE ACTUAL AGENT - i.e., the fact that ravens bring Eliyahu's food. The food itself, on the other hand, is in no way miraculous. It is snatched by the ravens, in their usual manner, from whichever table they happen to along the way. As we have said above, Eliyahu is not party to the miracle of the ravens. In the second section, in contrast, the mission is carried out in a natural way, with the destitute widow agreeing to share the little bread that she has with the stranger. In order to allow the widow to agree to this, and in order that her readiness will have some practical expression, Eliyahu is forced to call upon A MIRACLE WITH REGARD TO THE FOOD that is destined to sustain him, the widow, and her son.

Another difference between the two miracles: in the first section Eliyahu is provided with plentiful food, "bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening." In the second section a "small cake" (made from a spoonful of flour and a little oil) that hardly suffices as a meal for two, is meant to represent - once a day - the miserly meal for three throughout that year.

What is the meaning of these differences, in terms of what the story is teaching us? In what way do they contribute to its special meaning?

In order to answer these questions we must first ask a different one: is it imperative that the Divine plan concerning Eliyahu's stay in Tzarfat be fulfilled in this particular way? Are the difficulties that arise in Tzarfat an indispensable function of the transition that Eliyahu makes from Wadi Kerit with the ravens to sustain him there, to an inhabited place like Tzarfat and the widow? Not necessarily. If the main subject of our story is the way in which a solution is found for Eliyahu's sustenance, in order that he will be able to dwell far from the center of the kingdom and still survive during the

drought, we would expect a different chain of events in our section; a simpler arrangement: God sends Eliyahu to Tzarfat and informs him that He has appointed a widow to take care of his provisions (as we are told in verses 8-9). Upon reaching Tzarfat he could be welcomed by a WEALTHY WIDOW who would invite him to dine with her at her home. Eliyahu would accept the invitation and remain in her home for a whole year; she would take care of his meals. Such a description would be much shorter and would parallel almost perfectly what happened at Wadi Kerit. The lack of an apparent miracle in this scenario could be compensated for by having Eliyahu bless the widow that she would not lack anything even during the drought, and the widow would indeed remain wealthy, with the expansive hospitality that she extends to Eliyahu not affecting her property in any way.

Thus the problems that Eliyahu addresses in our section - the need to identify the widow and to persuade her to fulfill her mission - are not a direct consequence of the transition from reliance on birds who bring food to reliance on a human source of sustenance. They arise, rather, from the fact that the agent sent to Eliyahu appears unsuited to the task, and therefore there is a need to act in different ways in order to adapt the agent's conditions to the task at hand.

The meaning of the story would seem to hinge on the following question: why is it specifically this poverty-stricken widow who is sent to fulfill the mission of feeding Eliyahu? It seems as though Divine Providence has selected the wrong person solely in order that the story will be longer and more complicated. We must therefore invest some effort in defining precisely the subject of the section describing Eliyahu's stay in Tzarfat.

3. Continuation of the argument with Eliyahu

In our discussion of the previous section - Eliyahu's stay at Wadi Kerit - we saw how the commentators view the events recounted there as a dispute concerning Eliyahu's oath, with the purpose of causing the prophet to take back his promise. The most important among these is Rashi, who sees the drying up of Wadi Kerit and God's command to Eliyahu to move to Tzarfat, as a lesson to him:

"In order that he would recognize the need for rain and would be forced to move himself, for it was troublesome in God's eyes that Israel was suffering from drought."

Rashi regards the very fact that Eliyahu is forced to move from Wadi Kerit to Tzarfat, part of Tzidon, as an effort for him; it is a banishment to distant, foreign place, and hence an expression of God's dissatisfaction and an attempt to make Eliyahu take back his vow. Does the continuation of the story - the events in Tzarfat itself - also present

support for this exegetical approach, suggesting that God is conducting an "argument" with Eliyahu, and all that happens to him is meant only to express the "claims" that God makes against him?

In this sense, too, our section resembles the previous one: the commentators who understand Eliyahu's experiences in the previous section as an argument between God and His prophet, regard our section as a continuation of the same argument. But this time the claims are different and God's tactic in dealing with Eliyahu is also changed.

A commentator who was a contemporary of the Kli Yakar, R. Moshe Alshikh, in his commentary "*Mar'ot ha-Tzov'ot*," writes concerning the previous section that through the details of the story "God hints to Eliyahu... claims that he [Eliyahu] had, that he should be patient, for his intention was to sanctify the Name of God."

Concerning the conclusion of the stay at Wadi Kerit he writes:

"Here God wanted to uphold the word of His servant and not to give rain except by his word, but God wanted Eliyahu not to wait any longer in asking God for rain, and He hinted to him... the hints given to him through his sustenance by the ravens at Wadi Kerit. But out of zeal for the honor of God, Eliyahu did not ask this. Therefore God hinted to him further in the drying up of the wadi, such that he had no water to drink and was forced to move, IN ORDER THAT HE WOULD NOTICE THAT MANY DESTITUTE PEOPLE WERE SEEKING WATER AND THERE WAS NONE."

R. Alshikh views the crisis that concludes the previous section as teaching Eliyahu a lesson about the poor and destitute who, like him, were forced to uproot themselves and wander in their search for water. He hints at the words of the prophet (*Yishayhu* 41:17-18):

"The poor and the destitute seek water and there is none; their tongue is parched for thirst. I, God, shall answer them; [I,] the God of Israel, shall not abandon them. I shall open rivers on high places and fountains amidst the valleys; I shall make the wilderness into a pool of water and parched land into springs of water."

Will the prophet identify with the view of his Creator, and agree to "turn the parched land into springs of water?"

"Despite all this, HE DOES NOT ABANDON HIS ZEALOUSNESS, for his zealousness for God is great. Therefore our merciful God commands him to go to Tzarfat, which is part of Tzidon. By this He means to hint to him that Israel

has already been PURIFIED (*nitzrefu*) in the matter of the FOOD (*tzeida*) that they have lacked thus far, but the essence of the matter is IN ORDER THAT HE SHOULD SEE, IN THAT PLACE, THE SUFFERING OF A WIDOW AND ORPHAN, upon whom God Himself has mercy and concerning whom He warns against causing them suffering (*Shemot* 21:22). For were it not for him, the two of them would die, as she says to him: "that I may prepare it for myself and for my son, that we may eat it and die." FROM THEM HE WILL SEE THAT A GREAT MANY LIKE THEM, AMONG THE MASSES OF ISRAEL, WILL DIE OF HUNGER, because he is good and he will pray for mercy upon them, that there should be rain and dew by his word. And there he sees that if he, by the virtue of the widow, is sustained in a miraculous way, what are others to do? This is the meaning of, 'I have commanded there A WIDOWED WOMAN to sustain you.'"

Now it is clear what the true subject of the events in Tzarfat is: it is a new strategy in the argument with Eliyahu. The "technical" solution aimed at finding Eliyahu a new dwelling place in which he will have food to eat is no more than a framework in which to lead him to an unmediated encounter with the suffering and hunger of the weakest strata of society - a widow and orphan. Perhaps this encounter will teach Eliyahu about the magnitude of the anguish that he has brought upon his people, and from this individual example he may understand the general situation, in which "a great many like them" - widows, orphans, and the other downtrodden poor - "will die of hunger." Perhaps this encounter will lead him to soften his heart and he will "pray for mercy upon them, that there should be rain and dew by his word."

The question that we posed at the end of the previous section in this regard, concerning the purpose of the convoluted and lengthy description of events in Tzarfat, now finds a simple solution. The new subject of this section, the continuation of the argument between God and Eliyahu, an argument that began at Wadi Kerit, requires that Eliyahu come into contact with a poor widow who, together with her son, is about to die of hunger. It is specifically they who are appointed by Divine Providence to sustain Eliyahu, in order that he will be exposed to their misery, and so that this misery will affect him directly.

Hence, the move from Wadi Kerit to Tzarfat involves a change in the way that God conducts His argument with Eliyahu. At Wadi Kerit the prophet's stance was tested as to whether he was prepared to separate himself from the company of his people and from the bitter fate that he had brought upon them. But when this tactic did not achieve the desired effect and Eliyahu was not moved to retract his oath and his zealotry for God, and as the drought entered its second year, with its signs showing clearly among the weak elements of society, the tactic changes and moves to the opposite extreme. Now Eliyahu will experience the opposite of his lifestyle at

Wadi Kerit. He is sent to live among people, in a town whose poor are hard-hit by the drought. He will be forced to live in the home of a widow who can hardly support her own orphan child, such that both of them are in constant danger of starving to death. In their meager meal - a meal that is hardly sufficient for themselves - they will henceforth be joined by Eliyahu, once a day, and together with his hosts he, too, will suffer pangs of hunger. From now, the lives of all three of them will hover on the brink of extinction; they will depend daily on a miracle that will keep their supply of a spoonful of flour and a little oil steady, for tomorrow's measly meal.

According to what we have said, the purpose of having Eliyahu move to Tzarfat is not only for him to meet the widow, but more: it is to cause him to participate in the experience of hunger. Eliyahu himself lives the experience of lacking food during his year-long stay in the widow's home. This is the meaning of the drastic decline in his "standard of living" - the sharp transition from Wadi Kerit, with his twice-daily feasts of bread and meat, to Tzarfat and the meager once-daily morsel that Eliyahu must share with his widow hostess and her son.

(To be continued)

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