

**The Eliyahu Narratives**  
**Yeshivat Har Etzion**

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**Shiur #7: The Drought - part 6:**

**The Widow in Tzarfat (17:8-16) (continued)**

**By Rav Elchanan Samet**

4. Eliyahu's request of the widow and her refusal - shame and rebuke

Let us now sketch a more accurate depiction of the new dual experience that awaits Eliyahu at the gates of Tzarfat: the experience of PERSONAL hunger, which he senses for the first time, and the experience of an unmediated encounter with the hunger of the widow and the orphan, who are about to die of starvation.

At first glance, considering the woman's actions as they appear to Eliyahu, upon arriving at the city, it is not unreasonable for him to deduce that she does actually have some food: were this not so, why would she be gathering wood? Surely it must be in order to bake her bread. Nevertheless, he refrains from asking right away, "Bring me, I pray you, a MORSEL OF BREAD in your hand"; rather, he first asks: "Fetch me, I pray you, a little WATER in a vessel, that I may drink."

Only after she accedes to this request (even before she is actually able to fulfill it) he requests a more substantial favor - for a morsel of bread. Why does he do this?

R. Alshikh explains: "ELIYAHU WAS EMBARRASSED TO START OFF BY ASKING FOR FOOD, for food was dear at that time. Therefore he began by asking for water to drink, and even that - only 'a little.' When 'she was going to fetch' the water, 'he called to her and said: Bring me, I pray you, a morsel of bread in your hand.' In other words, since [drinking] water without first [eating] bread is harmful for the heart, therefore 'First please bring me a morsel of bread in your hand - before I drink.'"

According to this interpretation, in ordering his requests the way he does, Eliyahu reveals his own hunger pangs and the humiliation that he feels on their account. He is feeling what anyone who has lost his possessions and is forced to beg feels. But even greater is the shame of being forced to beg from a poor widow, who will not necessarily be able to give him what he is asking. Therefore, reluctantly, he begins by

asking for something that he is certain that she is able to give him: a little water in a vessel.

Eliyahu's embarrassment and careful attempt not to ask the widow right at the start for something so valuable as a morsel of bread are in vain. When he finally dares to express what he wants explicitly - "Bring me, I pray you, a morsel of bread in your hand" - he is met with an emotional refusal; a speech that he is certainly not expecting:

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

The woman is unaware of the identity of the man in front of her; she never imagines that this is the very the person who is responsible for her terrible hunger and suffering. But Eliyahu, who is aware of his responsibility for her state, hears in her words a most severe accusation. What contributes to this in particular is the widow's introductory oath. The sensitive reader is reminded - undoubtedly like Eliyahu himself - of Eliyahu's own oath before Achav:

Widow's oath:

(12) "AS THE LORD YOUR GOD LIVES,

I HAVE NOTHING (*im yesh li*) baked

BUT (*ki im*) a handful of meal..."

Eliyahu's oath:

(1) "AS THE LORD GOD OF ISRAEL LIVES,

THERE SHALL BE NO (*im yihye*) rain or dew in these years

BUT (*ki im*) by my word."

Just as Eliyahu expresses his special closeness to God, in Whose Name he takes his oath, so the widow expresses in her oath ELIYAHU'S special closeness to God, in Whose Name she is now speaking. She obviously does this out of a recognition of Eliyahu as a man of God. The continuation of her speech is likewise similar in structure to the continuation of Eliyahu's original vow. This linguistic connection

between the two declarations hints to Eliyahu - and to us, the readers - that it is Eliyahu's oath that has led to this speech by the widow. Eliyahu's words, keeping rain and dew away from the land, are what bring about the situation of this destitute woman - "that we may eat it, and die."

Eliyahu now faces a dual conflict: on the external level, he is in conflict with the widow - his request has been met with a justified refusal. Her life, and the life of her son, take precedence over the life of this stranger, even if he too is destitute and hungry for bread. She explains her refusal with an emotional and severe speech, thereby unconsciously serving as God's mouthpiece. Her mission here is not to sustain Eliyahu as he has been promised, but rather to hint to him, unknowingly, that the responsibility for her dire situation rests with him.

This is the second, hidden conflict - between Eliyahu and God: how is the contradiction between God's promise upon sending him here - "Behold, I have appointed there a widow to sustain you" - and the woman's justified refusal to fulfill her mission, to be resolved? We may formulate this question in sharper terms: this widow is meant to fulfill a double-edged, self-contradictory mission: on one hand, she is meant to provide Eliyahu with food (although she does not know this), thereby allowing him to maintain his zealous stance concerning the drought; on the other hand, she comes to rebuke him for this very stubbornness concerning his oath and his zealousness for God (this too, unknowingly) - and to achieve this she actually needs to refrain from sustaining him.

All of this is meant, by God, as a test for Eliyahu. The simple solution to this entire complicated situation would be for him to restore, at a single word from himself, rain and dew to the earth. This would alleviate the suffering of the widow and her son, and Eliyahu would no longer depend on the mercies of various Divine agents to sustain him. But he is not yet ready to do this, and the situation will continue for a long time before being resolved.

5. Eliyahu's solution of creating a miracle leads to the continuation of the argument

Previously, in section 3, we noted that in Eliyahu's move from Wadi Kerit to Tzarfat there is a change in the tactic that God uses in the argument against him. At Wadi Kerit, Eliyahu was tested in a situation of isolation from the fate of his people and the suffering of the drought, while in Tzarfat he is tested in the context of participation in this suffering. But this distinction, with its two components, is not quite accurate - as we shall see further on. Already at Wadi Kerit, Eliyahu begins to witness scenes of drought, as the wadi gradually shrinks and dries up before his eyes. We described this depressing process at the end of shiur no. 4. There Eliyahu encountered the ramifications of the drought as manifested on the LAND itself - its wadis, its plants,

and animal life. This affects Eliyahu personally - and not just as an observer. He is forced to leave his place and move to somewhere far away, in order to be somewhere where there is water (as Rashi explains the drying up of the wadi, in verse 7). But the suffering of the land on account of the drought and his own personal suffering - as a refugee who must roam about as a result of it - do not cause Eliyahu to budge from his stance. Now he will have a more shocking encounter with the suffering of the drought - the suffering of two unfortunate people, a widow and her orphan son, who represent many more like them: people who are on the brink of starvation. Perhaps the company of such people will soften the prophet's position.

Eliyahu's journey to Tzarfat and his meeting with the widow, including his embarrassing request of her to give him bread and her refusal, turns him into a partner in the suffering - but only for a moment. At the gates of Tzarfat, and likewise throughout the year that he dwells in this city in the woman's house, Eliyahu is still being tested - as during his year of dwelling at Wkerit - as to his ability to separate himself from the fate of his people, the fate of human beings who are wasting away from hunger, and thus the argument that characterized his year at Wadi Kerit continues. What is the test? It concerns Eliyahu's ability - for only he is able - to solve the conflict in which he is now involved, and which was described at the end of the preceding section in his invoking of the miracle:

(14) "For so says the Lord God of Israel: The jar of meal will not finish, nor will the bottle of oil be lacking..."

(15) She went and did as Eliyahu had said, and he [read: she] and she [read: he] and her household ate for a year.

(16) The jar of meal did not finish, nor did the bottle of oil lack..."

And so, it is not by nullifying his decree and returning the rain to the land that Eliyahu solves the contradiction that has met him, but rather by means of a local, personalized miracle that is meant to allow this widow to fulfill her mission to sustain him. It is not with a view to saving her and her son that Eliyahu acts - for in what way are they more important than the many other widows and orphans living throughout the drought-stricken land, who are equally hungry? It is for the sake of his own existence that Eliyahu acts, so that God's command may be fulfilled: "Behold, I have appointed there a widowed woman to sustain you." The widow is, for him, no more than a device by means of which Eliyahu will receive food. But since this involves unforeseen objective difficulties, Eliyahu seeks to solve them miraculously.

Above (section 2) we saw that to Radak's view, the very fact that God tells Eliyahu that he will be sustained by the widow includes within it the instruction that if

necessary, he should perform a miracle in her home. Indeed, the miracle that Eliyahu decrees is fulfilled "AS GOD'S WORD that He spoke, by Eliyahu's hand." But this very word of God itself, hinting at the possibility of Eliyahu performing a miracle that will facilitate his survival, is meant only to test Eliyahu's readiness to make use of this device. Will the prophet choose a lifestyle that will constantly emphasize his superiority over his surroundings? From this perspective it appears that this Divine command to Eliyahu resembles the command that led him to Wadi Kerit and his distinguished existence there, but the difference between the two commands is clear. In the second command God does not tell him EXPLICITLY to create for himself a framework for existence that is dependent on a miracle that will distinguish him from his surroundings; rather, it is a matter of choice. In choosing to solve the problem by miraculous means, Eliyahu reveals his concern for himself. This is hinted at by R. Alshikh at the end of the same excerpt that we quoted above:

"There [in Tzarfat] he will see that even he, by the merit of a widowed woman, IS SUSTAINED MIRACULOUSLY; WHAT, THEN, IS EVERYONE ELSE TO DO?"

In other words - what should regular people do, having no miracle to protect them from hunger and thus being threatened with starvation?

The egocentric basis of the miracle that Eliyahu performs for the widow is detectible in his directions to her:

(13) "Eliyahu said to her: Do not fear; come, do as you have said, but MAKE ME a small cake of it FIRST, and bring it TO ME, AND THEN AFTERWARDS MAKE FOR YOU AND FOR YOUR SON."

Why does Eliyahu ask that he be given preference over the owners of the meal and the oil - the widow and her son? The Ralbag seems to best answer our question:

"Eliyahu commanded her thus because it is OWING TO [the fact of] SUSTAINING HIM that the blessed God would bring blessing upon that meal and the oil; if she would prepare first for herself and her son, the meal and the oil would be finished."

In other words, the widow herself is not worthy of a miracle. Only on account of Eliyahu is her life saved, as well as the life of her son, and she merits that her provisions are miraculously extended only in order that she will be able to sustain the prophet.

This order, in which Eliyahu receives his portion first and only afterwards do the widow and her son eat of the remains, is maintained throughout that year. According to Ralbag, the continuity of the miracle depends on this order, and since the miracle does indeed continue throughout that year, its condition must also have been maintained. This is hinted at in the '*ketiv*' (the literal wording of the written text) in verse 15:

"He [to be read: she] and she [to be read: he] ate, as well as her household, for a year."

Concerning this textual formulation, the Midrash (*Shir ha-Shirim Rabba* 2:16) teaches:

"R. Yehuda bar Simon said: Did he then eat of her [food]? Was it not the case that both she and he ate of what was actually his? As it is said, "She and he ate" - but it is written, "he and she.""

According to the way in which the verse is READ, "She ate, and he," the verb, which is in the feminine form, corresponds with the subject "she": "the grammatical rule is that when a male and female are mentioned together, the verb follows whichever of them is mentioned first, whether male or female, for the first one is the more important and is therefore mentioned first" (Radak *ad loc.*, he also brings other examples). But it appears that even according to the way in which the verse is WRITTEN ("He ate, and she") we must conclude that the verb in its feminine form, referring specifically to the widow, comes to emphasize the widow's reward: since she believed what the prophet told her and did as he said ("she went and did as Eliyahu had said"), SHE merits to eat food that lasts all of that year by means of a miracle. This idea is expressed with greater emphasis in the way that the verse is READ because she is mentioned before Eliyahu.

In the widow's home, Eliyahu is tested in his ability to accustom himself to a privilege that distinguishes him - to his benefit - from all the other people living in the same city and ensures his survival. Even within the limited circle within which he is living, in the widow's house, this privilege is constantly emphasized: Eliyahu requires - and thus it is done - that at every meal held in the house and prepared from the meal and the oil upon which he invokes the miracle that they should remain permanently available, his portion should be served first - before the widow and before her son.

Can Eliyahu continue living in such a problematic situation, witnessing around him people who are collapsing from hunger, while ensuring his own survival by means of a constant emphasis on his own preferential status? The situation continues for an entire year.

(To be continued)

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