

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #08: The Drought - part 7:

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

By Rav Elchanan Samet

6. THE EFFECT ON ELIYAHU OF THE ENCOUNTER WITH THE WIDOW

Neither stage in the ongoing "argument" - neither at Wadi Kerit nor in Tzarfat - succeeds in altering Eliyahu's rigid stance. But can we perhaps identify, in his deeds and words, any sort of response to the tests that he faces? Perhaps there is some kind of objection to the "claims" that are activated against him, with a hardening of his intransigence, or perhaps the opposite - a reaction of hesitation and shrinking back from his unequivocal position.

We have noted previously that the text conspicuously avoids any description of Eliyahu actually eating the bread and meat delivered to him by the ravens twice a day at Wadi Kerit. Our assumption was that Eliyahu did indeed react to this hinted criticism by refusing to "cooperate" with the peculiar lifestyle forced upon him during the first year of the drought.

What about his stay in Tzarfat? Can we point here, too, to some reaction on Eliyahu's part to the complex pressures that are being applied to him? There can be no doubt as to the answer to this question: Eliyahu displays signs of softening. While not retracting his oath, he cannot remain indifferent to the widow's suffering. This predicament finds expression several times in Eliyahu's words:

- i. At the very outset of his encounter with the widow, Eliyahu hesitates in asking for a morsel of bread, preferring first to request some water "since Eliyahu was embarrassed to start off by asking for bread, since it was dear," as R. Alshikh explains. We note something of a lack of confidence in his stance, faced with the hunger that he has encountered and for which he is responsible.
- ii. We previously highlighted Eliyahu's difficult request of the woman in verse 12 - that he first be served his portion of the measly meal. This request is admittedly

necessary, since the miracle depends on it, as Ralbag explains, but this in no way softens the shocking impression that it makes. What does go some way towards softening the blow of his request is Eliyahu's introductory words:

(13) "Eliyahu said to her: FEAR NOT, come, do AS YOU HAVE SAID, but make me from it..."

These reassuring words, coming in response to the widow's despairing monologue, testify to Eliyahu's sensitivity towards her torment and his attempt to present what he wants in the gentlest possible way. To this we must add the contraction of his request - "a SMALL cake" (as opposed to the PIECE of bread that he originally asked for), likewise indicating the influence of the widow's speech.

c. In order to persuade the widow to do as he has asked, Eliyahu attaches a fiery declaration in God's Name:

(14) "For so says the Lord God of Israel: the jar of meal will not run out, nor will the bottle of oil be lacking, until the day that God gives [written '*titen*,' read '*tet*'] rain upon the face of the land."

The final clause here is most surprising: why does Eliyahu make mention of this "target date?"

The answer provided by the Ba'al ha-Metzudot - "For then there will be no need for a miracle" - fails to explain this phrase adequately. How can Eliyahu be so certain that his stay in the widow's home will continue until the end of the drought? And why does he make the rainfall dependent on God's hand? It is not Eliyahu himself who holds the "key to the rainfall"; it is not by his word that the rain is meant to return - "except by my word!"

As in many other instances in *Tanakh*, the WRITTEN form reveals an important level of significance in understanding the story. The written form in our verse exposes what lies hidden in the heart of the speaker: "Give [or "You will give"], O God, rain upon the face of the land." It is almost a plea that Eliyahu expresses: "Please, O God, may it be Your will to give rain upon the face of the land." In other words: "Take back the responsibility for the rainfall; release me from [the task of] holding the key to the rain."

In this sentence Eliyahu reveals, for the first time, some hesitation in his position. Anyone who is unfamiliar with Eliyahu and the background to the story (like the widow) hears in these words a clear expression of his wish that God should soon send rain.

The suffering of the widow and Eliyahu's need to share her food in a way that causes him discomfort lead the prophet, for the first time, to express in words a new attitude. Nevertheless, he is not yet ready to cancel his vow. The words, "until God will give rain upon the face of the land" are uttered immediately after his invocation of the miracle, whose entire purpose is to facilitate Eliyahu's existence in Tzarfat as the drought continues.

When the conditions become ripe for a nullification of the decree of the drought, as a result of a change in Eliyahu's stance (following the next episode), God will eventually repeat Eliyahu's words here, giving him the job:

(18:1) "Go, appear before Achav, and I SHALL GIVE RAIN UPON THE FACE OF THE LAND."

Here Eliyahu tells the widow:

(17:16) "... until the day when GOD WILL GIVE RAIN UPON THE FACE OF THE LAND."

7. STRUCTURE OF THIS SECTION AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

As we noted previously, in terms of content, this section is comprised of two unequal parts: there is God's command to Eliyahu in verses 8-9 and its fulfillment in verses 10-16. But in terms of literary form, the section is structured as a single unit of nine verses, with the fifth verse (verse 12) serving as the central axis, with the other sections formed from pairs of verses around the central axis in a developing chiasmic structure, as follows:

Part I: (8) "God's word came to him, saying:

(9) Arise, go to Tzarfat which is part of Tzidon, and dwell there; behold, I have commanded there a widowed woman to sustain you.

Part II: (10) So he arose and went to Tzarfat, and when he came to the entrance of the city... he called to her and said: Bring me, I pray you, a little water in a vessel, that I may drink.

(11) So she went to bring it, and he called to her and said: Bring me, I pray you, a little bread in your hand.

Part III (central axis): (12) She said: As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked but a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a 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.

Part IIa: (13) Eliyahu said to her: Fear not; come, do as you have spoken, but make me from it a little cake first, and bring it out to me, and make for yourself and for your son afterwards.

(14) For so says the Lord God of Israel: the jar of meal will not run out, nor shall the bottle of oil be lacking, until the day that God gives rain upon the face of the land.

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

(16) The jar of meal did not run out, nor was the bottle of oil lacking, in accordance with the word of God that He had spoken by Eliyahu's hand."

The first pair of verses (part I, verses 8-9) contains God's command to Eliyahu and the promise of the possibility of his survival in the widow's house in Tzarfat. This pair corresponds to the final pair of verses (part Ia, verses 15-16), in which we discover how this Divine word was fulfilled. "SHE AND HE ATE, and her household, FOR A YEAR" corresponds to "YOU SHALL DWELL THERE; behold I have commanded there A WIDOWED WOMAN TO SUSTAIN YOU." The innovation in the second pair is that "the jar of meal did not run out, nor was the bottle of oil lacking," but even though this was not mentioned explicitly at the beginning of the story, it certainly happens by virtue of that command: "... in accordance with the word of God that He had spoken by Eliyahu's hand."

Thus, the section opens with the words, "GOD'S WORD came to him," followed by a detailing of this Divine word, and it concludes with a description of the miracle that represents a fulfillment of "GOD'S WORD that He had spoken by Eliyahu's hand."

The next pair of verses - part II (verses 10-11) - corresponds to part IIa (verses 13-14). In both of these pairs Eliyahu speaks to the widow, and in each instance there is a double statement. In the first pair he presents two requests. In verse 10 he asks for a little water - a not unreasonable request, which is accordingly answered in the affirmative. In verse 11 Eliyahu requests a little bread - an impossible request to fulfill in the existing circumstances. In the corresponding pair, Eliyahu first repeats his request for food from verse 11. Corresponding to "BRING ME, I PRAY YOU, A LITTLE BREAD," he promises the widow, in verse 14, a miracle upon her jar of meal and bottle of oil; he thereby turns his request of her (his request in both of these parallel pairs simultaneously) into one that may be fulfilled. He concludes this

promise with a mention of rain, corresponding to his original request for water upon his first encounter with her. There, in the first pair of verses, Eliyahu first spoke about water and then about bread; in the corresponding pair he starts with food and concludes with water - rain. The water and the bread in the first pair are requested from the widow's hand, while in the corresponding verses they are given from God's hand: "for so SAYS GOD... THE JAR OF MEAL will not finish... until the day THAT GOD GIVES RAIN upon the face of the land."

In between these two sections, with their chiastic parallel, we find the widow's emotional outburst, declaring her situation to be desperate - hence her inability to accede to his request. This monologue is the most dramatic in the story, as well as the most surprising. We, the readers, do not expect such an outburst; nor does Eliyahu. Up until verse 11 events move along more or less predictably. Then, suddenly, along comes the widow's speech and upsets the orderly progress. It confronts both Eliyahu and the plot of this section with a severe conflict. The part of the section that follows the speech (parts Ia and IIa) comes to solve the problem that has been created by it. The solution lies not in a withdrawal of the original request of the widow, but rather the opposite: a repetition of the same request, accompanied by a promise that what she currently lacks will be given to her by God's hand. At this point the woman agrees to Eliyahu's demand - as we expected her to do at the very start - and God fulfills Eliyahu's word.

What molds the structure of the unit as we have described it above? The answer is simple: the crux of this unit stands out in the "central axis," in verse 12. This represents the dramatic climax of the section and the key to all its developments. All that precedes this speech is built up with a view to having it "crash" as it becomes apparent, in the wake of the widow's speech, that it is all irrelevant. And all that follows the speech is an attempt to turn the first part of the unit - all that preceded the widow's speech - once again into a relevant and possible situation, despite what she has said. The chiastic structure around the central axis, as we have demonstrated it here, represents an artistic-structural rendering of this idea.

Thus the crux of this unit is not the description of the solution that is found for Eliyahu during the drought - a solution that will allow him to live in an inhabited area and find food with no difficulty - but rather THE CONSIDERABLE DIFFICULTY INVOLVED IN FINDING THIS SOLUTION. This difficulty finds sharp expression in the widow's monologue, which is located precisely at the center of the unit, drawing all of the reader's attention. This speech is also the focus of the plot. Eliyahu is therefore sent to Tzarfat not in order to "live there peacefully," but rather in order to hear the widow's words, to be forced to deal with the challenge that her outburst presents. At the gates of Tzarfat Eliyahu is presented with the question of WHETHER

he will be able to "live there peacefully," and following the widow's speech, HOW he will do this - as we have explained.

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