

The Eliyahu Narratives
Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #09: The Drought - part 8:

Eliyahu revives the widow of Tzarfat's son (17:17-24)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

1. Comparison of this unit to its predecessors

Despite the obvious continuity of this unit in relation to its predecessor in terms of the characters, the time, and the place - all of which are common to both - it is difficult to define this section in the more general context of the story as a whole. Unlike the two preceding units (Wadi Kerit and Tzarfat), it does not address the problem of Eliyahu's survival and sustenance during the drought. The subject here appears to be something altogether foreign: the death and resuscitation of the Tzarfat widow's son - a boy whom we shall not meet again in the text (nor his mother). The appearance of the boy and his mother in the story in the previous section was only for the purposes of describing the actions and character of Eliyahu, who is at center-stage. Even the drought and famine themselves are not even hinted at in this section. It is no wonder, therefore, that most of the key words that link the two preceding units are absent in our section: the verb "to drink" is absent here, as is the expression "I have commanded... to sustain you"; we find no mention of the nouns "bread," nor "rain." In short, all the terms related to the drought and to the problem that it presents to people in general and Eliyahu in particular are nowhere to be found in this section.

Two further differences should be noted between our section and its predecessors, but these will serve as a bridge to our discussion of its integration into their theme:

a. The two preceding chapters are each constructed in similar form: they begin with God's word to Eliyahu (2-4; 8-9), and then go on to describe the way in which this Divine word is fulfilled - both by Eliyahu, who does as he is commanded, and by God fulfilling what He has promised to the prophet. Our section is not built according to this "pattern" at all. On the contrary, the event that stands at its center - the death of the boy - appears to contradict God's word at the beginning of the previous section, telling Eliyahu to remain in the Tzarfat widow's house and to be sustained by her.

This is because the widow's claims against Eliyahu (verse 18) bring their relationship to a crisis, threatening his continued stay in her home, as we shall explain below.

In our section God gives Eliyahu no instruction as to what he should do; rather, it is Eliyahu who asks God to perform his request; he pleads with him in prayer. In this section it is not Eliyahu who performs God's word, but rather God who listens to Eliyahu and performs his request (verse 23).

b. Each of the two preceding sections covers a period of one year. The event described in our section, in contrast, is a one-time occurrence.

These two differences between our section and its predecessors lead us to deduce that our section serves as the CONCLUSION of the previous section - in the form of a crisis - which actually creates a similarity between the events of Eliyahu's stay in the widow's house and the events of his stay at Wadi Kerit. The first section, "Wadi Kerit," ends in crisis:

(7) "It came to pass at the end of A YEAR, that the wadi dried up, for there was no rain in the land."

This conclusion is not part of the (general) structure that is common to Eliyahu's stay at Wadi Kerit and his stay in Tzarfat, for the latter concludes with the fulfillment of God's word without any problem or hindrance:

(15-16) "He [read 'she'] and she [read 'he'] ate, as well as her household, FOR A YEAR... according to God's word which He spoke by the hand of Eliyahu."

This conclusion to the second section could have facilitated the continuation of the situation indefinitely. Everyone, it seems, is now content: the widow and her son have been saved from starvation, Eliyahu has found a suitable place to stay and a source of sustenance - albeit meager, but in no danger of drying up. But this, of course, is an illusion: the subject of the story as a whole is not finding a satisfactory arrangement for Eliyahu, but rather the drought which the prophet has brought upon his nation. From the perspective of this main subject, everything here is temporary and must change. Eliyahu's "comfortable" conditions in the widow's home is not a "solution," in the context of the broader story, but rather the opposite: it is actually an obstacle to its flow and progression. It must therefore reach a crisis point that will not allow for Eliyahu's continued peaceful stay; it must involve a continuation of the action and the story. The need for such a device, and its imminent appearance, are hinted at at the end of the previous section:

(15) "She and he, and her household, ate FOR A YEAR."

Why is this time-frame stipulated for Eliyahu's peaceful stay at the widow's home? And what happens at the end of that year? The reader remembers that Eliyahu's stay at Wadi Kerit also lasted "a year," ending with a crisis that forced him to move to a new place and adopt a new lifestyle; we now expect a similar crisis to bring an end to Eliyahu's stay in Tzarfat. The third section comes to fulfill this expectation. But, in contrast to the crisis that concluded the period at Wadi Kerit - whose description covers a single verse - the crisis that concludes Eliyahu's stay in the widow's house represents the subject of a brief independent unit. This is because of Eliyahu's reaction to the crisis, as opposed to his lack of reaction to the previous crisis.

2. Proof from our section that it is a "crisis conclusion" of the previous one

How does this perception of the event described in our section arise from the text itself? It is hinted at in various ways. Let us pay attention to the text:

a. The opening words of our section, "It came to pass after these things," give rise to a question: after what things? In other words, to which previous event (or which detail of a previous event) is our section related? This question is justified here, since our section is closely related to its predecessor (in terms of the characters, the time, and the place, as noted above), and both together are part of the greater story. So after which "things" did "the son of the woman fall ill..."? It would seem that the key to this question rests with the last noting of time at the end of the previous section (verse 15) - "a year." It is after that year, then, that "the son of the woman fell ill." Clearly, then, the introduction to our section means to hint to a cutting off of that "idyllic" period of time described in the previous section.

b. It sometimes happens that the name or title given by the text (or one of the speakers) to some or other character undergoes a change during the course of the story. In general, these different titles reflect different views of that character. Sometimes the change in view arises from an exchange of people who face or interact with that character in the story; sometimes it arises from a change in circumstances. Let us pay close attention to the ways in which the text refers to the widow, who is one of the leading characters in both of the sections under discussion.

Twice in the previous section, the woman's title appears (at the beginning of the section, in verses 9 and 10); on both occasions she is referred to as the "widowed woman" (*isha almana*). This title describes her lowly socio-economic status, thereby preparing us for the great difficulty that is about to be revealed: as a widow (with a child to take care of), she is incapable of feeding even herself and her son adequately during the famine; she certainly lacks the ability to take care of a stranger.

The woman is referred to four times in our section; three times in the narration and once by Eliyahu. In each instance her title is different:

- i. (17) ". the son of the WOMAN, MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE fell ill"
- ii. (20) "... Have You also upon THE WIDOW WITH WHOM I LODGE..."
- iii. (23) "... He gave him to HIS MOTHER"
- iv. (24) "THE WOMAN said to Eliyahu..."

Interestingly, the title used in the previous section - "widowed woman" - does not appear in that exact form anywhere in our section. This shows that the fact of her widowhood (as an expression of her lowly socio-economic status) is not of importance at this stage. It is easy to understand why the text refers to her as "[the boy's] mother," in verse 23: her joy upon receiving her child back, alive, from Eliyahu is principally the joy of a woman who is once again the mother of her child. Her title at the end of the section - "the woman" - is likewise understandable: it is not as the mother of her son that she utters her final words to Eliyahu, nor as a widow, but rather as a "woman" (*isha*). In other words, as a person (*ishiyut*) expressing her conclusion from all that has happened: that the Divine word that Eliyahu speaks is true. We shall address the lengthy title that Eliyahu uses for her in his first prayer - "the widow with whom I lodge" - below, when we discuss the prayer in detail.

The first title used for the woman in this section - "the woman [who is] mistress of the house" - is somewhat surprising. For what reason does the text choose to emphasize the fact that she is the "mistress of the house"? Would it not be more suitable to emphasize the fact of her widowhood? This would surely amplify the tragedy of the death of her son. What has the death of the boy to do with his mother being the "mistress of the house"?

The answer appears to be that the son's illness and his death are treated, in the narrative, not in the sense of his personal, family relationship with his widowed mother, but rather in the sense of their practical ramifications with regard to Eliyahu. When the text tells us that the woman is the "mistress of the house," it means that she is the MISTRESS OF THE HOUSE IN WHICH ELIYAHU DWELLS as a secondary tenant, and therefore the death of the boy is significant also for Eliyahu. This becomes clear in Eliyahu's prayer, when he describes the woman as "the widow with whom I lodge."

But why does the text indirectly link the boy's illness and death to Eliyahu? The answer is clear: the illness and death represent a crisis in the relationship between Eliyahu and the mistress of the house. The boy's death threatens the continuation of Eliyahu's stay, as we shall explain below.

c. What does the woman mean when she says to Eliyahu (18) "What have I to do with you, o man of God"?

"What have I to do with you" is an idiom that appears in five other places in *Tanakh* (*Shoftim* 11:12, *Shmuel* II 16:10, *ibid.* 19:23, *Melakhim* II 3:13, *Divrei ha-Yamim* II 35:21). A study of these sources and their contexts reveals its exact meaning; what is common to all instances of this idiom is a call to break of contact. A person who utters these words to someone else means to say, "Let me be; leave me in peace and don't disturb me; there is nothing between us." In most of the cases it is addressed towards someone who intends to HARM the speaker (either intentionally or unintentionally).

We may explain the widow's words in our section accordingly: in telling Eliyahu, further on, "... you have come to me to recall my sins and to put my son to death," she is accusing him of being responsible for the death of her son. She does not mean to ask Eliyahu to revive him - which is in fact what happens thereafter. It appears that such a thought never entered her mind; it is Eliyahu who initiates the idea. On the other hand, she is not merely saying words, with no practical purpose. Her accusation of Eliyahu has a practical purpose, and this is expressed in the introduction to her accusation: "What have I to do with you, o man of God?" The intention behind this rhetorical question is the same as in all its other appearances in *Tanakh*: "Please, leave me alone. There is no connection between us; why have you come to me to cause me harm?" Quite simply: Since you have "come to me to recall my sins and to put my son to death," get out of my house!

Clearly, then, the death of the son represents a crisis that brings to an end Eliyahu's stay in the woman's house, for as a result of this event she asks him to leave.

(to be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish