

The Eliyahu Narratives
Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #10: The Drought - Part 9:

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

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3. CONNECTION BETWEEN THE BOY'S DEATH AND THE DROUGHT

As we saw in the previous *shiur*, the death of the widow's son turns out to be the cause of a crisis in the relationship between the woman and Eliyahu - a crisis that cuts short the possibility of Eliyahu's continued stay in her home. Now we must go back and compare the crisis that ends his stay at Wadi Kerit with the crisis that ends his stay in the widow's house.

At Wadi Kerit:

(7) "AND IT WAS at the end of A YEAR that the wadi dried up, for there was NO rain in the land."

At the widow's house:

(17) "AND IT WAS, after these things [after "she and he and her household ate FOR A YEAR"] that the son of the woman who was mistress of the house fell ill, and his illness was exceedingly grave, such that NO breath was left in him."

In both instances, the crisis itself does not stand in the way of a continuation of the miracle by means of which Eliyahu is fed in each place. The ravens could have continued to bring Eliyahu bread and meat twice daily even after the wadi dries up; and, the jar of meal and the bottle of oil were not diminished even after the boy's death. It is rather the continuation of his "natural" existence in each place that is cut short by the respective crises: his drinking from the water of the wadi and the continuation of civil relations with the widow hosting him in her home in Tzarfat. We could say, that in both places, the lodging "rebels" against its guest, preventing him from continuing to dwell there. The wadi - Eliyahu's lodging place in the first section - ceases to exist, thereby ceasing also to serve as his lodging. In Tzarfat, Eliyahu has a

human hostess, in the form of a widowed woman, and therefore her "attack" on her guest is verbal: "What have I to do with you, O man of God..."

In both cases, the crisis that arises is not a sudden one. It is the outcome of a prolonged process that precedes it, and this is noted in both of the verses quoted in the table of comparison. The reason for the drying up of Wadi Kerit is that "there was no rain in the land." The drought, which has continued throughout that year, has slowly weakened the flow of the wadi; by the end of the year, it dries up completely. The death of the widow's son is preceded by an illness that becomes increasingly acute: first "the son of the woman fell ill," then "his illness was exceedingly grave," and eventually "such that [until] he had no breath left in him."

What is the meaning of these parallels between the two crises that cut short Eliyahu's stays at his two lodgings? It would seem that they lead to the unavoidable equation of the CUTTING OFF of the water of the wadi, its drying up, with the CUTTING OFF of life from the boy.

The drying up of a wadi is not like stopping the flow of water in a closed pipe. It is a process of slow death for the plant and animal life on its banks. Therefore, the process of cutting off of the water from the wadi represents, in a certain sense - beyond the metaphoric - a process of perishing and death. Water is the source of life in the world. When its regular supply ceases, it is as though the living soul is cut off from existence: from plants, from animals, and from man.

We discover, then, that the episode of the death of the widow's son is tightly bound up with the subject of the story as a whole: the drought. Eliyahu comes to realize, through this episode, that the cessation of rain from the land, by his own word, has cut off life from the land. And when it reaches its most severe stage, even human life is cut off because of the drought. The way of the world is such that the first whose lives are endangered and lost at such a time are the weakest: orphaned children.

The fact that the boy's death is a direct or indirect result of the drought arises not only from the parallel between the cutting off of the wadi and the cutting off of his life, but also from the information that the story provides. The woman and her son are admittedly saved from immediate death from starvation by the miracle that Eliyahu invokes on the jar of meal and the bottle of oil. But their existence throughout that year in Eliyahu's company is a minimal one: they remain constantly on the brink of starvation, sharing their meager, monotonous rations with a third party. A young child cannot grow healthy and strong under such conditions. When there is drought and famine, weakness prevails and outbreaks of disease and plague are common. It comes as no surprise, then, that the widow's weak and hungry child also falls ill: "His illness became exceedingly grave, such that there was no breath left in him."

Previously we noted that the words linking the first two sections, indicating the drought and the problems that it creates, are absent from our unit. But we have just argued that this unit is nevertheless likewise connected to the drought. Are there words linking our section to the previous one that would support this claim?

The words linking our section to the previous one are "death" and "life." This pair appears for the first time in the previous section, in the widow's speech (verse 12). She starts off with an oath: "As the Lord your God LIVES, I have nothing baked..." and she concludes with the words, "I shall prepare it for myself and for my son, that we may eat it AND DIE."

The contrast between her first words - "As ...God lives" - and her closing words --"and die" -- hints that only He Who lives eternally and Who holds in His hand the lives of all, only He can save the starving from death.

In our unit, each of these two key words appears twice. At the start of the section the find the root "*m-v-t*" (death) appearing twice:

(18) "You have come to me to recall my sin AND TO BRING DEATH to my son"

(20) "Have You also done evil to the widow with whom I dwell, to BRING DEATH to her son?"

These two questions, which are actually protests, are eventually answered, following a complex process which we shall discuss later, in inverse order:

(22) "God heard the voice of Eliyahu and restored the boy's soul within him, AND HE LIVED"

(23) "He gave him to his mother, and Eliyahu said: Behold, your son LIVES"

This linguistic connection between the two sections is more than just syntactical. The widow's fear, in the previous section, expressed in the word "*va-matnu*" ("that we may die"), is half realized in our unit. She feared that starvation would lead to her death and the death of her son, and the partial realization of this scenario in our unit tells us that it is indeed the famine that ultimately leads to the boy's death, as his mother predicted. This is not a sudden, chance disease that attacks the boy, but rather a death that was foretold, based on a realistic evaluation of the terrible situation. The miracle that Eliyahu performed did allow himself and the widow to survive, but ultimately did not save her son from death.

This death, which has come about because of the drought, must be healed and removed. The world needs life!

4. THE THREE-STAGE ARGUMENT BETWEEN GOD AND THE PROPHET: HOW IS IT POSSIBLE THAT ISRAEL WILL BE HARMED BECAUSE OF IT?

During the course of the three sections describing Eliyahu's existence during the drought, he has encountered three very serious results of the drought in the world. These phenomena, becoming increasingly acute, affect Eliyahu himself in that they oblige him to act and react in different ways.

Eliyahu's first encounter with the results of the drought takes place at Wadi Kerit, which dries up "for there was no rain in the land." There he watched the wadi's gradual shrinking until it dried up altogether at the end of the year. This demonstrated for him the destructive results of the cessation of rain WITH REGARD TO THE LAND - its streams and its plant and animal life. But the drying up of the wadi is also significant FOR ELIYAHU HIMSELF, since he is dependent on its water. Nevertheless, this does not cause him to retract his oath. And so he has to move to somewhere else, where he will be able to stay alive. God's command sends him to Tzarfat, where further encounters with the results of his drought await him.

The second encounter takes place at the gates of Tzarfat. Here Eliyahu views the meaning of the drought on the HUMAN LEVEL - and specifically what it means to the weakest sectors of society: a widow and an orphan. But here again, the suffering of the woman and her child because of drought and famine, ALTHOUGH AFFECTING ELIYAHU HIMSELF - since his sustenance depends on them - does not cause him to retract his oath. In order to overcome the problem that has presented itself, he invokes a miracle that will allow him to continue living for a whole year in the widow's home in Tzarfat.

Eliyahu's third encounter with the results of the drought takes place at the end of the year of lodging with "the woman who was mistress of the house," with the death of her son. Now Eliyahu is forced to contemplate the most tragic consequences of the famine: the death of a poor, orphaned child, illustrating the fate of many more like him. Once again, the event has an effect on Eliyahu's personal fate: the child's mother accuses him of responsibility for the death and asks him to leave.

These three encounters are all part of the on-going argument between God and His prophet. We find ourselves asking, if "it was grave in the eyes of the Holy One that Israel was mired in famine" (as Rashi explained on verse 7), why does He not bring an end to the famine, unilaterally? So long as the argument with the prophet goes on, the famine continues - causing the deaths of innocent children! We have seen above that

the death of the widow's son is a result of the drought that is now in its third year. Is it proper that the boy's death serve as a "claim" in the argument?

This question brings us back to our discussion, in the Introduction to this book, as to the measure of the prophet's independence in choosing the policy according to which he acts amongst Israel. Eliyahu is one of the greatest prophets whom *Tanakh* describes as trying to lead Israel to *teshuva*. He is entrusted with the task of being the prophet of the generation; he tries to correct his generation in accordance with his own discretion.

This broad authority vested in the greatest among the prophets by God turns their actions into actions performed by God's word, even when they are not commanded explicitly. However, as we noted at the end of the Introduction, this freedom of action enjoyed by the prophet may lead to a situation in which he performs some act that is not in accordance with God's intentions; in this case, we cannot say that the prophet's actions are performed in God's Name.

In extreme cases, where the prophet's action is absolutely opposed to God's will, he is told explicitly that he must undo what he has done (see examples in the Introduction). But where the prophet's action is neither altogether mistaken nor altogether desirable in God's eyes, there may be a situation in which God will fulfill the prophet's word, but still try to cause the prophet himself to change his view and his actions, so that they will be better aligned with those of his Sender.

Had Eliyahu made his oath to bring a drought upon Israel at a time when the nation had not degenerated into the grave sin of idolatry, at a time when they were altogether not deserving of such a harsh punishment, God would certainly have commanded him to retract his oath, or at least He would not have fulfilled it. But the situation in our case is different: Eliyahu's decree of drought is not unjustified. After all, the Torah warns that as a punishment for idolatry God will close up the heavens and not give rain, and the earth will not give its produce; in his oath, Eliyahu simply realized this warning. Obviously, when there is a heavy drought, as described in the Torah, it is not only those who have sinned and engaged in idolatry who are affected; the drought affects everyone, including innocent widows and orphans.

Hence, Eliyahu's oath represents the measure of justice of which the Torah warns. And nevertheless, for reasons that are not made explicit in the story, this act of Eliyahu does not reflect God's will, for "it was harsh in the eyes of the Holy One that Israel was mired in famine." The longer the drought goes on, the worse it is in God's eyes. We may propose various hypotheses as to why God had mercy on this sinful generation and why the ongoing suffering of Israel because of the famine was so harsh

in His eyes, but none of this makes the path that Eliyahu has chosen a completely mistaken one.

We may express this idea more explicitly, as follows: the power given to a prophet to act so as to rebuke and guide his generation may indeed entail a situation whereby his policy brings suffering to his people. And in cases where this suffering is not unjustified, God will not prevent it, for it is He Who gives the prophet the authority to guide the nation.

This, then, explains the situation in our story. Eliyahu's oath, which creates the drought, is admittedly not commanded by God's word, but rather uttered on the prophet's own initiative. Nevertheless, it is just, and is based on Eliyahu's calculation that the destruction wrought by the drought will bring Israel back to God. It appears that this did not happen as Eliyahu expected, and God was not pleased that Israel was suffering from famine. Nevertheless, God does not force Eliyahu to retract his oath until the prophet himself agrees to it - until it becomes harsh in his own eyes that Israel is suffering from famine.

Translated by Kaeren Fish