

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #11: The Drought - Part 10:

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

(continued)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

5. THE WIDOW'S SPEECH - THE ARGUMENT WITH ELIYAHU REACHES ITS CLIMAX

What is the meaning of the widow's accusation, "You have come to me to recall my sin and to put my son to death?" Has Eliyahu not saved her and her son from death by starvation for the past year?

The nature of Eliyahu's stay in the widow's home throughout the year ("Prepare ME from it a small cake FIRST and bring it out TO ME, and make for yourself and for your son afterwards") is ample proof for the woman that it is not out of compassion for her and her son that Eliyahu performs the miracle of the jar of meal and the bottle of oil. She and her son are serving merely as vehicles for Eliyahu's sustenance; the miracle is meant not for them, but for himself. It appears that the woman intuitively senses that the power of Eliyahu's personality, with the heavy demand that he makes of society, brings with it punishment and suffering for those around him. She makes no mention of what "sin" she has committed which has caused her son to die; perhaps she herself does not know what it was. But she feels that his death is somehow connected with the introverted personality of the strange, foreign man of God in her home.

Apparently the woman has no knowledge of Eliyahu's identity or the extent of his responsibility for the famine, which is causing her and her son and all the inhabitants of their city so much suffering. But without her knowing it, she is correct in what she says: Eliyahu is indeed the reason for the death of her son. It is his oath concerning the cessation of rain that has caused, directly or indirectly, the famine and death. Her intuition is not far from the truth. This being the case, the widow's speech in our unit - like her speech in the previous section - serves as an accusation against Eliyahu. In the

previous unit, at the gates of Tzarfat, her speech - in its simplest context - was one of apology over her inability to fulfill this stranger's request. Only to Eliyahu, who recognizes his responsibility for the situation that arises from her words (and to us, the readers), does her speech sound like an accusation. But in our unit the woman really means her speech as a prosecution. The difference between what she means to say and what Eliyahu (and we) are meant to hear in her words is merely the difference between someone who accuses based on an opaque intuition and someone who knows how justified the accusation really is - even more than the accuser believes it to be.

The widow's second speech resembles the first in another aspect, too. Here again, Eliyahu is faced with a practical problem: how is he going to carry on living in this woman's house?

Eliyahu has encountered this problem of survival already twice before. Faced with the dried-up wadi, he was exiled by God's word to Tzarfat. And at the gates of Tzarfat he invoked a miracle to maintain the jar of meal and the bottle of oil, in light of his understanding of God's command to him. Now, Eliyahu is faced for a third time with the crisis of the drought, threatening his own survival. This time the crisis is particularly severe, and it seems that Eliyahu has no escape, no way of solving it. This time God's word does not lead him to a new place where he may continue to exist, as was the case at Wadi Kerit. This time he also has no possibility of decreeing a miracle that will solve his troubles, as was the case at the gates of Tzarfat. There, God had promised that the widow would sustain him, and therefore Eliyahu could conclude that in order to overcome her inability to do this, he must perform a miracle that would make it possible. But the death of the widow's son is not a direct contradiction to that Divine word; it is also entirely unreasonable to imagine that Eliyahu would decree, on his own initiative, the resuscitation of the boy, as he decreed the preservation of the meal and the oil.

At this stage of the story, with the severity of the drought and famine in the third year, the argument with Eliyahu also becomes more acute. The new "claim" in this argument - the death of an orphan child because of the famine in the land - pushes Eliyahu into a corner from which there is no way out. What is Eliyahu going to do? Will he forego his oath and thereby bring the argument to its conclusion, or will he maintain his stance despite the boy's death and despite the mother's demand that he leave her home? Where could he go to and how will he survive the famine, with no word from God nor any promise as to his survival?

6. ELIYAHU'S RESPONSE

(19) "He said to her: Give me your son.

He took him from her bosom and took him up to the attic where he dwelled, and he lay him down upon his bed."

This verse and the following one describe Eliyahu's surprising reaction to the crisis. Eliyahu attempts to repair the injustice through a new miracle, greater than all of its predecessors, and to return the dead child to life. This act - unparalleled in *Tanakh* or anywhere else to this day - is as unexpected for us (the readers) as it is for the mother. It was not with this in mind that she brought her complaint to Eliyahu after her son died in her arms. Even after he instructs her, "Give me your son," she does not cooperate, and so "HE TOOK HIM from her bosom." It is Eliyahu who initiates this audacious endeavor; he performs the necessary actions himself, intent and decisive: "He took... he took him up... he lay him down..."

This intensive activity demonstrates that the prophet has a clear interest in solving the problem. But what could that interest be? Does it arise from his knowledge that the woman is correct in her accusation that he is responsible for the death of her son; is it his pangs of conscience that cause him to want to appease her? This is a difficult claim to maintain, since the son is not to be perceived as an individual phenomenon, but rather as representative of many other unfortunate children who are wasting away and even dying of starvation and the diseases associated with the famine. The resuscitation of this boy will not appease all the other heartbroken mothers, for whom the widow of Tzarfat is a mouthpiece when she accuses Eliyahu of causing death of her son.

Perhaps Eliyahu's interest is to restore the previous balance - the status quo - that allowed him to live in the widow's home. Perhaps he seeks a miracle similar to the one that maintained the meal and the oil, which would allow him to return to his previous calm by means of a "technical" solution to the problem. If this is so, then it is not for the sake of the mother and her son that Eliyahu is acting, but rather - once again (as in the case of the previous miracle) - for his own sake. But does Eliyahu believe that God will answer his plea for such a great miracle, allowing him once again to find refuge from the drought and from the ongoing argument concerning his approach?

The fact that God ultimately answers Eliyahu's prayer, such that the child is restored, alive, to his mother, does not necessarily answer our question. This outcome is achieved only after Eliyahu has undergone a complex development in his relationship with God. Only after a clarification of this process, with all its various stages, will we arrive at the answer to the question of Eliyahu's motivation.

7. WHY IS ELIYAHU'S FIRST PRAYER NOT ANSWERED?

(20) "He called out to God and said:

Lord, my God! Have You also done evil to the widow with whom I lodge, to put her son to death?!"

In order to understand Eliyahu's intention in this address to God, and perhaps even in order to understand God's lack of response to it (until Eliyahu calls a second time), we must first examine the meaning of a single, small word - "[have You] also" (*ha-gam*). In general, in most of the places where this word appears in *Tanakh*, it is used in order to include. If we interpret it here in its usual sense (and our verse gives us no linguistic nor substantive reason to interpret it in some other, rare, sense) then what Eliyahu means is something like: "I can deal somehow (or perhaps: agree) with the fact that You have done evil to so-and-so, but that You have done evil to the widow with whom I dwell, to put her son to death - this I cannot accept without questioning and objecting." The expositor is left with the task of supplying the missing variable: who is the "so-and-so" to whose loss Eliyahu now adds the loss of the widow's son? This is the key to the nature of the entire sentence; it is this that will help us understand why his prayer is not answered, as we shall see reflected in the various commentaries.

a. Radak:

"Have You also... to the widow' - meaning: "Have You punished the sin even of the widow, just as You have punished Israel's sin today in holding back the rains?"

And even if You have punished the sin of this widow by putting her son to death, will You not restore his life by my virtue, since I dwell with her?"

Radak's answer, then, is: "Have You done to the widow... AS (or IN ADDITION TO THAT WHICH) YOU HAVE DONE TO ISRAEL." Is it not the personal sins of the widow that have led to the death of her son (as she believes), but rather the sins of Israel, which are being punished by drought. Since the sin and the punishment are shared by all, even young children - like the widow's son - are affected by the famine. But here, Eliyahu claims, there should be a different way of doing justice. To his view, God is not taking him - Eliyahu - into consideration, in including the widow in the collective punishment. Eliyahu, according to Radak, refuses to accept the boy's death because it affects him personally. Radak deduces this from the "extra" words that Eliyahu utters in describing the widow, since they seem superfluous, adding no new information: "The widow WITH WHOM I DWELL." From this Radak deduces Eliyahu's claim: "Will You not restore his life BY MY VIRTUE, since I dwell with her?"

To Eliyahu's view, the widow who is providing him with lodgings should be excluded from the regular rules of reward and punishment as they apply to all of Benei Yisrael. This should happen in Eliyahu's merit and for his sake, in order that he will have a dwelling place and a means of subsistence. Indeed, his claim has a solid precedent: through the miracle of the meal and the oil, too, Eliyahu excluded the widow and her son from the nation as a whole and from the suffering that would have been their portion during the drought, not because of the widow's righteousness, but rather in order that there would be someone to provide him with sustenance during the drought. Eliyahu proceeds, then, to expect a continuation of this preferential treatment towards himself, and, by his merit, towards whomever is meant to serve him.

According to this explanation, Eliyahu is hinting at the apparent contradiction between the miracle that happened for this widow and her son, "by God's word which he spoke by the hand of Eliyahu," with regard to the jar of meal and the bottle of oil, and the death of the boy from starvation.

In what way have the circumstances changed from what they were throughout the year? Why did God save the widow and her son then from starvation for Eliyahu's sake, but no longer take him into consideration now?

What has changed is that the ongoing drought is becoming increasingly oppressive, and the world is no longer able to bear it. Therefore the argument with Eliyahu over his oath continues and even intensifies. A situation in which Eliyahu dwells peacefully in the widow's home can no longer be tolerated. The preferential conditions that he has enjoyed for the last year have now expired - and therefore the widow and her son are likewise no longer different from anyone else suffering the effects of the drought. Now the events and the widow's speech are pushing Eliyahu into an inescapable corner. Against his will, Eliyahu is becoming party to the suffering of the drought.

But Eliyahu's call to God testifies (according to Radak's view) that he is not ready to recognize the "claim" represented by the death of the widow's son as a continuation of God's argument with him. He maintains his regular position, requesting for himself and those around him, even now, the right to a preferential existence. It is not surprising, then, that his request is not acceded to. His call to God is not heard, and the widow's son is not revived.

b. R. Shmuel Laniado, in his commentary *Keli Yakar*, explains Eliyahu's call to God differently:

"The word 'also' refers to what has already been mentioned: Wadi Kerit was cut off in order to cause sorrow to Eliyahu, such that he will also be

distressed together with everyone else. And this is the meaning of 'also': 'As You did to the wadi, which dried up BECAUSE I WAS THERE, will You likewise do evil also to the widow, to put her son to death ON ACCOUNT OF MY LODGING WITH HER? Such an act seems strange, for the opposite should be the case: it would seem proper [for You] to do good to all those who provided me with lodgings, for they were close to me when I fled from before Achav, on my Divine mission.'"

This commentator's perception of the boy's death as a clear parallel to the drying up of the wadi, and both events as stages in the argument that God is conducting with Eliyahu concerning his approach, sits well with what we have said above. But the Keli Yakar finds a source substantiating this parallel in the words of Eliyahu himself: "Have You done evil ALSO to the widow with whom I dwell - AS YOU DID EVIL TO THE WADI where I dwelled previously?"

Eliyahu is made to suffer two types of evil so that he will "be distressed together with everyone else": the first - the drying up of the wadi - he accepted in silence, firstly because no-one had to pay the price of the argument that God was conducting with him (only the wadi dried up), and secondly because God's command guided him to a new place where he would find a way to survive. But when it comes to the new evil that God has done to him - bringing death to the son of the widow - he is no longer prepared to remain silent. He calls out to God and presents two grievances. First his own: why should he have to suffer while he is trying to fulfill his Divinely-imposed duty? But he is also presenting the grievance of the widow, who has paid such a terrible price for the hospitality that she has offered him: "On account of my lodging with her - have You done this evil, to put her son to death?" In truth, she deserves a reward for her actions: "It would seem proper [for You] to do good to all those who provided me with lodgings."

The fact is that Eliyahu's claim is not justified. Wadi Kerit did not dry up because Eliyahu lived on its banks, but rather - as the text testifies - "because there was no rain in the land." Likewise, the widow's son did not die because Eliyahu was lodging with them. He, too, died because of the drought, which in turn brought about weakness and disease, and it was such a disease that took his life. This being the case, God is not directing any particular evil at Eliyahu; rather, He is showing him the results of the drought that he brought upon the land. It is clear, then, why God does not answer this prayer.

c. Certain commentators interpret the "inclusion" in Eliyahu's prayer ("also") differently from the ways we have discussed above.

Rabbi Moshe Alshikh, in his "Marot ha-Tzovot," writes:

"He called out to God and he said: Lord my God...' - If it is because of my zealousness against Israel for Your honor that I am exiled and am troubled [to move] from place to place, because I have punished Your nation Israel, still - "to the widow with whom I lodge" - because she is my hostess that You have done evil to her? For even if it is justified [that You should punish me for my zealousness], it is unacceptable that she is dealt a greater evil than mine. For "to put her son to death" is an evil greater than mine, despite the fact that I am the principal [object of punishment]."

To R. Alshikh's view, "also" means to include Eliyahu himself, for God desires to make him suffer for his oath. It must be admitted that this interpretation seems the most likely, both linguistically and thematically. In terms of theme and content, this interpretation is not far from that of Keli Yakar, quoted above. According to both commentators, Eliyahu refers here almost explicitly to his experiences since Wadi Kerit and up to now, all of which express God's displeasure with his approach and his oath. What we have tried to prove from hints in the text ever since the story of Wadi Kerit is expressed here explicitly, in Eliyahu's own words, according to the view of R. Alshikh (and others).

As opposed to the interpretation of Radak, who regards Eliyahu's speech as a complaint, the crux of which concerns the fact that he himself has been affected, the other two commentators whom we have quoted maintain that what really troubles Eliyahu is the lack of justice towards the woman from Tzarfat. This explanation appears to be correct, for the following reason: Eliyahu refers to the woman as "THE WIDOW with whom I lodge." This is the only time in our unit that the woman is referred to as a "widow" (in contrast to the previous section, where this was the only title by which she was known). This stands out particularly starkly against the background of her first title in our section: "THE WOMAN who was the mistress of the house." In keeping with this title, Eliyahu could have said, "Have You also done evil to THE WOMAN with whom I lodge" - and it seems that this is indeed what he would have said, had the point of his argument been his own suffering. In referring to her as "the widow," Eliyahu means to complain about the injustice done to a widowed woman whose only child has died.

On the other hand, even according to the Keli Yakar and R. Alshikh, there remains an element of personal benefit in Eliyahu's prayer: he wants to clear his conscience of responsibility for the calamity that has befallen the widow. We suggest this because the linguistic and thematic basis of Eliyahu's call to God is the hostility between

himself and the woman which precedes his prayer. The parallel between her words and his, in terms of both general structure and key words, bears this out quite clearly:

Widow's speech to Eliyahu:

(18) ".. man of God! HAVE YOU COME TO ME to recall my sins
AND TO PUT MY SON TO DEATH?"

Eliyahu's call to God:

(20) "Lord my God! Have You also done evil to the widow with whom I
LODGE, TO PUT HER SON TO DEATH?"

What is the meaning of this parallel? At the heart of Eliyahu's call to God is his discomfort about the harsh accusation that the widow directs at him. He "passes on" her complaint, addressing it to God in similar words. In this way he tries to remove the responsibility from his own shoulders.

In any event, it is clear that at this stage Eliyahu is still defending his position; he insists on maintaining it even now, and so his implied request - that the widow's son be resuscitated - is not answered.

Translated by Kaeren Fish