

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #16: Eliyahu on his way to appear before Achav (18:1-16)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

1. "Go, appear before Achav, and I will send rain upon the earth!"

(18:1) "Many days passed, and God's word came to Eliyahu in the third year, saying: Go, appear before Achav, and I will send rain upon the earth.

(2) So Eliyahu went to appear before Achav..."

What is the meaning of God's command to Eliyahu, canceling the decree of the drought? The text offers no explanation for this command. If Achav and the nation had done *teshuva*, it seems certain that this would have been noted - either in the narrative, as a report of the fact, or in God's words, as a reason for the command to Eliyahu. And if they did not do *teshuva*, why in fact is the decree of drought being cancelled?

According to Radak's view, God's command may be explained in terms of a change: "And I shall give rain" - Since, owing to the famine, many had done *teshuva* and had mended their ways."

But nowhere is this written or even hinted at in the text, and the rest of chapter 18 would seem to give, if anything, the opposite impression: Izevel continues her attempts to cut off God's prophets who are hiding from her in caves (verse 4), and no-one voices any objection. When Eliyahu rebukes the nation, attempting to stop them from serving Ba'al, he is greeted with silence (verse 21). Radak's guess is based not on what we read in our story, but rather on the very fact that God commands that the drought be concluded. But further on in chapter 18 we discover that the cloudburst that ends the drought comes only with the *teshuva* of the nation at Mount Carmel. Meaning, that when God commanded Eliyahu to go to Achav, the nation was not yet worthy of having the rain restored.

Why, then, is the command to end the drought presented as an absolute command, seemingly independent of the nation's *teshuva*?

If we read the story from the perspective presented in the previous *shiurim*, we may understand God's command better. It is not Eliyahu's conflict with Achav or with the Ba'al-worship in Israel that is the subject of our story - the story of the drought. This battle is no more than the background to the action which is the true focus of the story: the behind-the-scenes argument between God and Eliyahu concerning the prophet's strategy in the battle that he wages against the nation and against its king.

The three previous sections describing Eliyahu are the framework in which this battle is hinted. In each of the three sections a new claim (or claims) is presented against Eliyahu. The event that Eliyahu experiences in each case (always set up by God) is supposed to illustrate for him the damage wrought by the drought and its injustice.

Although all three sections are meant to prepare Eliyahu for the Divine command that follows immediately after them - to change the decree of the drought - this command is related to and arises from, especially AND DIRECTLY, the story in the third section, describing the resurrection of the widow's son. God's command is simply a mirror reflection of the change that has taken place within Eliyahu himself; it represents a direct continuation of God's response to his prayer to revive "this child." In *Chazal's* terminology, what we have here is an "exchange of keys": the key to resurrection is given to Eliyahu in exchange for the key to rainfall, which he must now relinquish.

Thus, it is not the events in Shomron (as Radak imagines them) that lead to God's command at the beginning of chapter 18, but rather Eliyahu's readiness to cancel his oath. From the perspective of Achav and Israel, it is possible that no change has taken place such as would require a restoration of the rain, but it is not they who are the focus of the discussion in our narrative, and nor is it them upon whom a change in the decree depends.

Indeed, in *Midrash Tehillim* (on chapter 117) the author of the *midrash* sees the basis for God's command to Eliyahu in our chapter not as Radak teaches - "Since, owing to the famine, many did *teshuva* and mended their ways," but rather the very opposite:

"God SEDUCED Eliyahu into going and appearing before Achav, as it is written, "Go, appear before Achav." Eliyahu said to Him: "HOW CAN I GO; THUS FAR HE HAS NOT YET DONE *TESHUVA*?!" God answered him: "Once, when I watered My world, there was one single man in the world, and I watered the world for his sake, as it is written

(*Bereishit* 2:6), "A mist arose from the earth...." Likewise now: "Go, appear before Achav, and I shall give rain...."

According to the author of this *midrash*, then, the nullification of the decree of drought arose from the need experienced by the world and by man, in and of themselves, rather than because of any change that the drought had brought about in the actions of Achav.

What is the basis for the assertion in the *midrash* that God "seduced" Eliyahu into going and appearing before Achav? The verse that the *midrash* brings to prove this - "As it is written, "go, appear before Achav," contains no proof of any seduction; on the contrary, it is formulated as an absolute command. It would seem that the *midrash* means to refer to the argument that was maintained in the story preceding this Divine command; this *midrash* relies upon other *midrashim*, which regard God's command as resulting from Eliyahu's agreement to "exchange the keys."

But a reading of the introduction to God's command in verse 1 does not seem to sit well with our claim that this Divine command is the obvious conclusion from the previous three sections, and especially from the third one:

"MANY DAYS PASSED, and God's word came to Eliyahu in the third year, saying...."

The style of the introduction creates the impression that the text is now starting a new story, unrelated to the previous one. It is possible that this introduction hints at the reason for God's imminent command, but this reason is not a change that has taken place in Eliyahu and which was described in the previous sections, but rather a change in Divine policy. The introduction here is reminiscent of a similar instance of a change in Divine policy towards Israel:

"It happened, IN THE COURSE OF THOSE MANY DAYS, that the king of Egypt died. *Benei Yisrael* sighed as a result of their labor, and cried out, and their cry rose up to God, as a result of the labor. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant... and God knew." (*Shemot* 2:23-25)

In our narrative, verse 1 seems to have the same intention: "Many days passed - during which time the heavy drought continued, and the suffering of the nation grew, until in the third year their suffering reached God and He commanded Eliyahu to restore rain to the earth." The highlighting of the dimension of time, the continuation of the drought, through the use of two different expressions - "many days" and "in the

third year" - hints that God's command is His own initiative, similar to (*Shoftim* 10:16), "His [God's] soul grieved for Israel's suffering."

Is God's command then the upshot of the three preceding sections, describing the change that takes place in Eliyahu's thinking - as we concluded from our previous analysis, or is it a new element in the development of the story, arising from a change in Divine policy? In order to answer this question, let us go back and re-examine the *Midrash Tehillim* that we quoted above.

According to the description in the *midrash*, Eliyahu does not yet identify with the cancellation of the decree of drought; he claims, "How can I go...?" Therefore, a counter-argument is required in response to his claim. Indeed, this is exactly the situation in the verse upon which the *midrash* is based. First of all, it is God Who commands Eliyahu to go and appear before Achav; Eliyahu does not undertake this mission on his own initiative, as was the case when he made the oath that started the drought. Secondly, in God's command he is told, "I SHALL GIVE rain" - not "GIVE rain." Meaning, the rain will come not as a result of Eliyahu's DECREE or DECLARATION (as we may have expected, based on his oath - "Except by my word"), but rather as a result of his MESSAGE or NOTIFICATION. From here it appears that as one who is commanded, Eliyahu will carry out his mission, but not with a sense of full identification with it.

Eliyahu, according to the *midrash*, is NOT YET RECONCILED to the cancellation of his oath; he is READY for it, and therefore a Divine command is required, sending him to Achav - he will not go of his own accord. For this same reason the text obscures the special connection between Eliyahu's resurrection of the widow's son and this Divine command. (If the text were to highlight the connection, the reader would be led to think that the resurrection caused Eliyahu to be reconciled with the restoration of rain.) Instead, the text highlights the dimension of time accumulated over the course of the preceding events. This conveys to the reader in immediate terms the unbearable length of the drought, and hints at the reason for God's command. This is expressed in the *midrash* in God's response to Eliyahu's protest: "Once, when I watered My world, there was only one person in the world.... Likewise now...."

Thus the formulation of the introduction to God's command in verse 1 is indeed meant to emphasize the innovation of this command; this new direction arises not necessarily from the change that has taken place within Eliyahu. His way of thinking has not completely turned around; he is still in the stages of re-adjustment.

Nevertheless, this introduction itself, appearing as the opening to a new narrative, hints at the definite continuity of this section from the preceding one. A closer

examination of the text reveals a clear connection between the beginning of verse 1 and all of the preceding story.

The drying up of Wadi Kerit took place "after SOME DAYS" (verse 7) - i.e., after Eliyahu had lived there for a year. His stay in the widow's house likewise lasts "days" (verse 15) - again, a whole year. The addition of these two periods of time together leads us to the introduction to God's command: "MANY DAYS passed..." - those 'days' during which Eliyahu lived at Wadi Kerit, together with those 'days' when he lodged with the widow. The widow's son died "after these things" (verse 17), i.e. - after Eliyahu had dwelled in the widow's home throughout the second year of the drought, in other words, in the third year of the drought. And "in the third year" of the drought God's word comes to him, in verse 1. Thus the demarkations of time in verse 1 are explained by what preceded them; they thereby point to the direct connection between God's command and the preceding narrative.

Verse 1, then, expresses the ambivalence of Eliyahu's position. On one hand, the verse hints that God's command comes as a result of the events described in the three preceding sections; in this sense the command is related to the change that took place within Eliyahu, and especially the change that took place in him in "the third year" of the drought. On the other hand, the style highlights the independence of God's command from Eliyahu and the partial psychological change that he has undergone.

Despite all that we learn from the *midrash* and from the close analysis of the verse concerning Eliyahu's lack of full identification with God's command, we must also consider the opposite aspect. Eliyahu expresses no reservation, nor does he attempt to argue with his Sender (in contrast with the *midrash*, which - as is its way - brings out internal doubts, giving them voice and words). Hence, we conclude that Eliyahu is prepared to carry out this mission; he recognizes its justness.

In summary we may say that Eliyahu sets off to fulfill his mission with mixed feelings. His experiences over the past two years - at Wadi Kerit and, especially, in Tzarfat - lead him to recognize the unconditional necessity of rain for the world. On the other hand, he knows that "thus far [Achav] has not done *teshuva*." This ambivalence in his journey to Shomron is the key to the continued development both of this story (up until verse 18) and of the following one (the test at Carmel). Our story will see a continuation of the process of "seducing" and convincing Eliyahu of the justness of restoring rain to the world that needs it so desperately, because his strategy thus far has been ineffective. In the next story, Eliyahu will act on his own to change the religious state of the nation (and of its king, Achav) so that the problem of "thus far he has not done *teshuva*" will no longer present an obstacle.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

