

## The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

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### Shiur #23: Appendix: The Narrative Integrity of Chapters 17-19 and its Components

**By Rav Elchanan Samet**

Eliyahu appears for the first time at the beginning of chapter 17 in *Sefer Melakhim*. The story of this prophet and his doings is told in unbroken continuity over chapters 17, 18 and 19. The events that are recounted throughout these three chapters develop from one to the next, and they follow a continuum of time and place. This turns these three chapters into a single narrative body. The other three stories featuring Eliyahu in the main role (*Melakhim* I 21 - Navot's vineyard; *Melakhim* II 1 - confrontation with Achazya and his emissaries; and *Melakhim* II 2 - Eliyahu's ascent) are independent narratives, whose connection with one another (as well as with chapters 17-19) and with the surrounding events, is not immediately apparent.

Despite what we have said about chapters 17-19, it is difficult to regard them as truly a single story. They are more accurately described as a narrative body composed of three semi-independent units, which lead on from and complement one another (although the relations between them are not altogether simple). Each of the three units has its own unique subject, its own special literary nature, and its own structure. These elements give each unit an internal integrity and wholeness, but this is slightly marred by the impossibility of understanding any single unit properly without viewing it in the context of the literary body as a whole.

In light of the above, we have devoted a series of *shiurim* to each of the three stories in chapters 17-19, as we shall do for the rest of the independent "Eliyahu" narratives.

The three stories comprising the whole here are:

- a. The drought chapters 17:1-18:18 (42 verses)
- b. The test at Carmel 18:19-46 (28 verses)
- c. Revelation at Chorev 19:1-21 (21 verses)

One of the elements common to all three is the sudden and unexpected opening.

The first story starts with the sudden appearance of this unknown prophet, and the astounding oath that catches Achav - and us, the readers - by complete surprise.

The second story starts in an equally surprising way. Once Eliyahu has finally met Achav face to face again, we expect a speedy realization of the point of that meeting: "I shall give rain upon the face of the earth" (18:1). But Eliyahu presents Achav with a demand that at first makes no sense - to gather the entire nation, along with the prophets of Ba'al, at Carmel. This at first seems entirely unrelated to the matter of rain. Eliyahu's plan will gradually unfold, over the course of the story, with the connection between his plan and the rain becoming clear only at the end.

The third story also starts with a surprise: Izevel's threat to Eliyahu's life, and his flight from her to the desert. These developments are unexpected against the background of his preceding success at Carmel.

Since we have now completed our study of the first story, let us note the following introductory comments concerning each of the three stories - both as pertains to the boundaries that we draw between them and as pertains to their mutual connection.

#### 1. The drought (17:1-18:18)

This story - the longest in the collection - has a dynamic nature. Eliyahu, the central character, is continually moving from place to place. The story appears to begin in Shomron, with Eliyahu's appearance before Achav; it ends, once again close to Shomron, with another encounter between Eliyahu and Achav. In between the first meeting and the second, Eliyahu is located at Wadi Kerit, facing the Jordan, and in Tzarfat, which is part of Tzidon.

Just as the dimension of space in this story extends over great distances, the dimension of time is likewise characterized by the expression "many days" (years): the end of the story takes place in the third year after it starts (18:1). Alongside the various geographical units in which the action takes place, we can also trace the larger units of time that parallel them: Eliyahu spends a year at Wadi Kerit (17:7) and a year in the home of the widow of Tzarfat (17:15). In the third year (18:1) he returns to Shomron, where he meets Ovadyahu and Achav.

One of the most striking characteristics of the story of the drought is the clear distinction between its various composite sections. These units are separated by more than just the dimensions of time and space; the stages of the plot and the secondary characters also play an important role in defining these boundaries.

Another characteristic of this story, one which pertains directly to its unique subject, is the relationship between Eliyahu and each of the other characters. Following his "solo appearance" when he declares his oath before Achav, the story addresses the responses of the other participants. These express their attitude towards Eliyahu either covertly or overtly, and their attitude is either a direct or indirect result of his oath. In his first appearance, when he declares his oath, Eliyahu is the initiator; he is active. But for most of the remainder of the story, Eliyahu is activated either by explicit Divine commands or by the events themselves, requiring him to act as he does. The people who come into contact with him make various accusations, and there is continual misunderstanding between them and him. We may summarize all of these relationships as follows:

Eliyahu's oath (17:1)

God > Eliyahu (17:2-9)

The widow of Tzarfat > Eliyahu (17:12)

The widow of Tzarfat > Eliyahu (17:18)

God > Eliyahu (18:1)

Ovadyahu > Eliyahu (18:9-15)

Achav > Eliyahu (18:17)

The characteristics of the first story serve as an appropriate background for a distinction between it and the story of the test at Carmel - a story whose characteristics are different to, and even the opposite of, those of its predecessor.

## 2. The test at Carmel (18:19-46)

The boundary between the first story and the second is not very sharp. Clearly, in verse 21 - "Eliyahu approached the entire nation and said..." - we are already involved in the scene at Carmel. Verses 19-20 belong to the same subject, since they describe the preparations for the event: Eliyahu commands Achav to gather everyone to Mount Carmel (verse 19), and Achav does so (verse 20). On the other hand, Eliyahu's speech in verse 19 is a continuation of his speech in verse 18, which in turn is part of the dialogue between the prophet and the king that began in verse 17.

In between the two parts of this dialogue between Eliyahu and Achav we find a gentle formal distinction, which would seem to justify the "break" that we insert here: verse

19 opens with the words, "And now..." This expression indicates a halt to the fruitless discussion that preceded it, relating to the past, and a transition to a purposeful discussion orientated towards the future. If verse 19 were to begin with the words, "Eliyahu said to Achav: Send forth [messengers] and gather..." we would have no trouble at all asserting that this verse represented the beginning of a new story. The difficulty, then, arises from the intentional insertion of the beginning of the new story in the midst of the conclusion of the previous one. This reflects a facet of the collection of stories that we are currently discussing: There is continuity and flow among the constituent stories, to the point where the boundaries between them become blurred. Nevertheless, a reader who wishes to engage in literary analysis must determine the boundaries of each story in the collection; attention should also be paid to the fact that the structure of the story of the drought represents further proof of the proposed boundaries.

What characterizes the second story in the collection is the opposite of what characterized the first: it geographical stability. The story starts, admittedly, with Eliyahu speaking to Achav somewhere in the region of Shomron (verse 19), and it ends with Eliyahu running in front of Achav's chariot from Carmel to Yizre'el (verse 46), but the majority of the story is bound up with Mount Carmel and with Wadi Kishon, at its foot. It is there that all of the major events take place, and even the beginning and the end of the story are related to Mount Carmel as a destination (verses 19-20) or as a starting point (verses 45-46).

The dimension of time, too, is contracted into a single day (assuming that we leave out the preparations described in verse 20, which apparently took a few days, but this period is not mentioned in the text), unlike the lengthy time-frame of the previous story.

It is easy to see how this story may be divided into two parts. But, in contrast to the story of the drought, whose constituent units are clearly distinguished from one another in every respect, the two parts of the story at Carmel are a single continuum. The first part of the story, consisting of verses 19-29, has as its subject Eliyahu's proposed test and the failure of the prophets of Ba'al. The second part consists of verses 30-46, and its subject is the miraculous descent of the fire and its consequences.

The relationships between Eliyahu and the other participants in the story are different in nature from the relationships in the story of the drought. In the Carmel story, the prophet addresses his proposals, in most cases, to whomever is facing him, and they answer him with speech and, generally, with action. Only on one occasion is he met with unwillingness and silence. This contrasts with the nature of the relationships in the drought story, in which Eliyahu is generally on the receiving end of demands and

complaints, such that he is required to defend and justify himself. In the Carmel story, Eliyahu becomes active; he initiates and he makes demands of others:

Eliyahu (19) > Achav (20) response: action

Eliyahu (21) > the nation (21) silent unwillingness

Eliyahu (22-24) > nation (24) verbal agreement: "it is good..."

Eliyahu (25) > prophets of Ba'al (26) response: action

Eliyahu (27) > prophets of Ba'al (28) response: action

Eliyahu (30) > nation (30) response: action

Eliyahu (34) > nation (34) response: action

Eliyahu (36-7) > God (38) response: action

Eliyahu (40) > nation (40) response: action

Eliyahu (41) > Achav (42) response: action

Eliyahu (43) > his attendant (43-4) response: action

Eliyahu (44) > Achav (45) response: action

It should be noted that the nature of verses 19-20 at the beginning of the table above, in which Eliyahu makes demands of Achav and the king responds not with words but with action, proves that they belong to the second story rather than to the first. The two preceding verses (17-18), also containing dialogue between Eliyahu and Achav, are characterized by inverse relations: here it is Achav who "attacks," while Eliyahu is the defendant. This determines that verses 17-18 belong to the first story, in which the prophet is continually on the defensive.

All of these differences between the characteristics of the two stories arise, obviously, from their differing subjects. The subject of the first story is the debate over Eliyahu's path and his prolonged insistence on maintaining his oath. The prophet's unwillingness to revoke his decree of drought is what causes the story to drag on over "many days," and also requires Eliyahu to move to distant places where the "debate" can go on. The relationship between the prophet and those in his environment, in this story, is the result of that same debate. In each relationship in which Eliyahu is attacked or accused, we hear an additional claim in the argument

against him. Eliyahu is forced to defend himself all the time and to find solutions that will facilitate his survival during the drought, while maintaining his stance. Hence the nature of the story as a whole.

The subject of the second story, in contrast, is how Eliyahu brought Israel back to faith in God. This became possible only after a change in the prophet's policy (the way in which Eliyahu arrives at that change is the subject of the first story). In contrast to the "scattered" nature - in terms of time and space - of the ongoing debate and of most of the claims leveled against Eliyahu in the first story, the way in which he acts in the second story in his efforts to bring Israel back to God is through a great concentration of effort in one place and within a short time, in order to bring about a dramatic change in consciousness. Hence the "concentrated" nature of the second story. In this story Eliyahu is no longer attacked; he has no more reason to defend his position - neither before God nor before man, for now his prophetic policy towards Israel has changed. Now it is Eliyahu who makes demands, who initiates; everyone is required to obey him. Thus the nature of the relationships between Eliyahu and the other characters here is the opposite of what it was in the first story.

Translated by Kaeren Fish