

# The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

## The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

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### **Shiur #24: Appendix: The Narrative Integrity of Chapters 17-19 and its Components (continued-part 2)**

**By Rav Elchanan Samet**

#### 3. The revelation at Mount Chorev (19:1-21)

In the series of *shiurim* devoted to this episode, we shall address its structure, its unique content, and the problems regarding how it relates to the previous narrative. Here, we shall address only two issues: the transition from the second story (the revelation at Mount Carmel) to the third (Eliyahu's experiences at Chorev), and the connections between the third story and each of the preceding narratives.

The boundary dividing the third story from the second is clearer than the one marking the previous transition: the harmony achieved at the end of the previous story is instantly shattered at the beginning of this story, by Achav's report to Izevel concerning Eliyahu's actions (19:1) and her threat to Eliyahu (verse 2).

As in the previous transition, here, too, we find both geographic and thematic continuity between the two stories. The city of Yizre'el, where the previous story concludes (18:35), serves as the point of departure for this story; likewise, the events at Carmel - and especially the elimination of the prophets of Ba'al at Wadi Kishon - represent the background driving the events at the beginning of our story.

The story of Eliyahu at Mount Chorev is closely related to the two preceding narratives, but its connection to the story of the test at Carmel differs from its connection to the story of the drought. The connection with the story of the test at Carmel is anchored mainly on the level of plot; from this perspective, it represents a direct continuation of the previous story, to the extent that we cannot start at verse 1 (which is undoubtedly the beginning of the story) and understand properly what transpires unless we are already familiar with the previous episode. Both Achav's report to Izevel and her vehement response make sense only against the background of the events described at the end of chapter 18 (from verse 40 onwards).

The connection between this story and the first story – the drought – is mainly literary. A broad parallel exists between them:

- i. Both open with a sharp confrontation between Eliyahu and the royal house. At the beginning of chapter 17, this confrontation occurs as a result of Eliyahu's determined oath, while in the third story, the confrontation results from a vehement oath on the part of Izevel. But the underlying reason common to both clashes is Eliyahu's activity opposing Ba'al worship.
- ii. In both stories, the confrontation leads to Eliyahu's flight from habitation; at this point, each story focuses on what happens to Eliyahu during his period of solitude. Chapter 17 describes what happens to him in three distinct sections. The overt theme here is how God cares for him during the drought, such that he finds sustenance in the places where he hides. For this purpose, various miracles are performed in relation to Eliyahu's food. In the story in chapter 19, God once again ensures Eliyahu's sustenance in the wilderness to which he flees: He sends an angel to place before Eliyahu "a cake baked on the coals, and a container of water" (19:6). The appearance of these provisions in the heart of the wilderness is not only a one-time miracle; like the parallel miracles in chapter 17, it allows Eliyahu an extended existence in desert conditions: "He ate and drank, and continued – with the sustenance of that eating – for forty days and forty nights" (19:8).
- iii. In both stories, the section focusing on what happens to Eliyahu ends in the same way – God's instruction to His prophet to return to the "battlefield," and to act as a prophet. In the first story we read, "GO, appear before Achav, and I shall give rain upon the face of the earth" (18:1); in the third story, "GO, return on your way... and when you arrive, anoint Hazael... and Yehu... and Elisha" (19:15-16). Indeed, in both cases Eliyahu returns to within the borders of the kingdom of Israel and begins to act as he has been commanded, even though his method of fulfilling God's word raises exegetical questions in both cases.

Thus, both stories are characterized by a similar general progression, and this generalized parallel is at times also expressed in the details. Admittedly, there are differences in the nature of the transitions between one part of the story and another: in the first story, the transitions between the outermost, "framework" story and the events surrounding Eliyahu are extremely sharp, and even the events surrounding Eliyahu himself are composed of three well-defined sections. In chapter 19, by

contrast, there is a continuous flow of events which develop from one to another without any clear demarcation between them.

The parallel discussed above demonstrates that, thematically, the story in chapter 19 is related to the story of the drought, despite its clear continuity from the story of the test at Carmel in terms of plot. The similar literary form hints at a similarity of subject between the two stories: in both cases, the relationship between Eliyahu and God stands at the heart of the story (even though this is not always immediately apparent), and the subject under discussion is the prophet's policy concerning the nation.

#### 4. The connection between the three stories

Having discussed the independent and unique nature of each of the three stories that comprise the narrative collection in chapters 17-19, we shall now point out what prevents each story from standing entirely alone, requiring, rather, that all three be treated as a whole.

i. The first story cannot stand independently because its ending is left "open." The purpose for which Eliyahu goes to appear before Achav - "and I shall give rain upon the face of the earth" - has not yet been achieved, nor even begun. Therefore, it is impossible for a reading of this story to end with chapter 18 verse 18; we must continue to the next story to read of the realization of this goal.

ii. The drought is not addressed at the occasion on Mount Carmel, nor is it mentioned explicitly even at the end of that story, when the rainfall is renewed. Nevertheless, it would seem that the second story cannot be read as an independent unit: firstly, the circumstances surrounding the gathering at Carmel, and the demand that Achav bring about this gathering, are not clear to someone who begins reading only from the opening of this narrative. Secondly, the circumstances surrounding the rainfall at the end of the story, and the significance of this event, are likewise concealed from anyone reading this story separately from its preceding narratives. Only as a continuation of the previous story does the rain represent the end of the drought that was described there, and as a fulfillment of God's word to Eliyahu in chapter 18, verse 1. Thirdly, the image of Eliyahu running before Achav at the end of this story assumes its full significance only against the background of the harsh confrontation between them in the previous story.

iii. One could perhaps claim that the end of the second story represents the end of an independent unit (chapters 17-18), with no need to

continue further to the third story. But here, too, the end of chapter 18 is left somewhat "open." One of the characteristics of the formal conclusion of a narrative in Tanakh is the "dispersion of the characters": "So-and-so returned to his place, and so-and-so went to his place," or "all of Israel returned to their tents," etc. Here, the story of the test at Carmel concludes, instead, by bringing together the central characters, Eliyahu and Achav, in verse 46: "He ran before Achav until the entrance to Yizre'el." This unification is surprising and unnatural, even in light of the cooperation that prevailed previously between the king and the prophet. This situation arouses expectations on the part of the reader. Clearly, the story cannot conclude here, because the factors that led to the crisis described in chapters 17-18 - Izevel, the wife of Achav, and the house of Ba'al in Shomron - are still in place. Therefore, Eliyahu's running to Yizre'el, city of Achav, is interpreted not only as showing honor to the king and as a sign of appeasement, but also as a continuation of Eliyahu's prophetic supervision over him and his demand for complete repair and repentance. How, then, does the story end? Here we embark on the third story, which unexpectedly dashes the reader's expectations.

iv. The third story cannot be read in such a way that it can be understood alone, for the reasons already discussed. Eliyahu's flight at the beginning of the story makes sense only against the background of the two previous stories - and particularly in light of the events at Carmel. Eliyahu's despairing response, fleeing to the wilderness of Be'er Sheva and seeking death, can likewise be understood only in light of the preceding narrative.

The conclusion of the third story is also "open," to some extent. It fails to answer many of the reader's questions; several issues treated in the body of the story do not reach closure. But there is no continuation here - neither in the following chapter, nor in any future chapter. Therefore, the conclusion of chapter 19 should be regarded as the conclusion of the collection as a whole.

It would seem, then, that chapters 17-19 should be regarded as a single, lengthy, literary whole. At the same time, though, we should not ignore the fact that this whole is composed of three semi-independent units which differ from one another. The special nature of each unit justifies the need for a separate series of studies on each.

Translated by Kaeren Fish