

The Eliyahu Narratives
Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #25: Carmel

By Rav Elchanan Samet

Part 1: Was Eliyahu commanded to act as he does in this story?

1. Do Eliyahu's actions conform with God's command?

(19) "Now, send forth and gather to me all of Israel, to Mount Carmel, as well as the four hundred and fifty prophets of Ba'al, and the four hundred prophets of the Ashera, who eat at Izevel's table.

(20) So Achav sent [messengers] among all of Benei Yisrael, and he gathered the prophets to Mount Carmel."

As in the opening of the story of the drought, with Eliyahu's first appearance (17:1), the reader is once again taken by surprise: Eliyahu is commanded to appear before Achav (18:1), and this he does. The meeting between the king and the prophet led, at first, to a sharp, brief altercation between them ("Is that you, O troubler of Israel?" - "It is not I who have troubled... but you"). Now it seems that the time has come for the remainder of God's command - (18:1) "And I shall give rain upon the face of the earth" - to be fulfilled. We expect Eliyahu to announce the imminent rainfall - or at the very least, some issue some pronouncement with some clear connection to it. But, to our surprise, we hear Eliyahu presenting a demand to Achav that has nothing to do with rain.

At first glance, we do not even understand the point of this demand in and of itself; we can only guess at the general direction of his intentions in light of Eliyahu's accusation of Achav for going after the Be'alim (verse 18), and his mention of the prophets of Ba'al and Ashera as being invited to the gathering at Carmel. The purpose of Eliyahu's initiative of gathering everyone at Carmel soon becomes apparent, when Eliyahu addresses the people in the following verses (21-24). But the connection between this and God's words - "And I shall give rain upon the face of the earth" - is not yet clear. What has all that is going on at Carmel got to do with bringing rain? Only at the end of the story, from verse 41 onwards, does this question begin to be answered, and the reader comes to understand that the point of all the preceding action was, in fact, to bring about the renewal of the rainfall. Thus, as we have noted previously, the story

begins with a surprise, and only during the course of the story, stage by stage, leading up to the conclusion, does the reader discover the intention behind the actions performed at the beginning.

Here we must ask: does Eliyahu's intention to postpone the rain, making it dependent on Israel's *teshuva* at Carmel, conform with what he was commanded by God? It would appear that not only does God's command contain no hint of the actions that the prophet proceeds to undertake, but that his actions actually contradict what God tells him. God sends him to Achav in order to tell him that God is about to bring rain, but Eliyahu makes no mention or even hint at this news, nor does he even reveal to the king that he was sent by God. Instead, he turns his encounter with Achav into a means of assembling the nation and the prophets of Ba'al for a test that he plans to hold at Carmel. We must therefore ask, what would Eliyahu do if the nation, or the prophets of Ba'al, were to refuse the test that he proposes, or if the nation would not engage in *teshuva* at the sight of the fire descending from heaven? Would the rain then be withheld? What, then, would happen to God's words, "And I shall give rain upon the face of the earth"? How can Eliyahu make the rainfall dependent upon the behavior of the nation, thereby placing God's promise of the rain's renewal in question?

A deeper and more precise analysis of God's words reveals that we have understood them inaccurately. Eliyahu is not told to "Go, appear before Achav and TELL HIM, 'So says God: I shall give rain upon the face of the earth.'" Rather,

(18:1) "Go, appear before Achav

and I shall give rain upon the face of the earth."

The implied connection between the two parts of this instruction, turning the second part - "And I shall give rain" - into an announcement that is supposed to be passed on to Achav, has no basis in the actual language of the text. Admittedly, it is clear that God's promise to give rain is the ultimate purpose of the appearance before Achav, but the act of appearing before him and the achievement of its purpose - rain - may be separated by several intermediate stages. Moreover, there may be different ways of connecting them.

On the question of the relationship between the two parts of God's command, Abarbanel comments:

"Go, appear before Achav in such a way that he will entreat you, and you will pray, IN ORDER THAT THE RAIN MAY BE BROUGHT ABOUT BY YOU."

What is the point of this? Why can the rain not be brought immediately? Abarbanel answers:

"Because I wish to give rain upon the land, BUT OUT OF HONOR TO YOU I DO NOT WISH TO GIVE IT EXCEPT BY YOUR HAND AND BY YOUR WORD."

Thus, God's command reflects consideration for the prophet's dignity; God is careful not to dishonor Eliyahu's oath concerning the drought. Although God wants to restore the rain immediately, He wants Eliyahu to be a full and active partner in that process, in order that the rain will come about by the prophet's word, as he decreed (17:1) "... except by my word."

Malbim, on the other hand, relates the two parts of the command differently:

"He commanded him to appear before Achav AND TO TRY TO CAUSE ISRAEL TO DO TESHUVA, such that they would recognize God's power, as in fact happened afterwards, when they said, 'God is Lord', as it is written (Yirmiyahu 14:22): 'Are there any, among the worthless gods of the nations, who can bring rain? [Or can the heavens bring showers? Are You not the One, O Lord our God - so we put our hope in You, for You have done all these things'] - and thereby, 'I shall give rain'."

It would seem that Malbim's interpretation is the more compelling approach. Firstly, the continuation of the story supports his explanation, as Malbim himself points out ("as in fact happened afterwards..."). Secondly, according to his view, it is not the prophet's dignity that is being taken into consideration in God's command, but rather the possibility of using the drought - which has already undoubtedly had some effect on the national psyche - to prepare the nation's heart for a new initiative by the prophet to lead them towards teshuva. Why not exploit this situation before restoring the rain? Is it proper that the rain be restored but the religious, moral state of the nation be left in its deplorable state?

This last consideration is discussed by Ralbag in his explanation of Eliyahu's actions in our story as not having been commanded:

(36) "And by Your word I have done all of these things" - Even if our understanding is that God did not command him concerning this, he may still claim that he did it by God's word, because He told him to appear before Achav and that He would give rain upon the face of the earth. BUT IT WOULD NOT BE RIGHT FOR RAIN TO BE GIVEN UPON

THE FACE OF THE EARTH WHILE [THE PEOPLE] STILL MAINTAIN THEIR WICKEDNESS, for then the cessation of rain would lose the whole purpose for which it came to be, that is, in order that they would return from their evil ways. If this were to be [i.e., that the rain would come while they were still wicked], they would say that [the drought] just happened, coincidentally, not as a result of their sins. THUS IT WAS NECESSARY THAT HE FIRST DO SOMETHING THAT WOULD CAUSE THEM TO DO TESHUVA, TO WHATEVER DEGREE POSSIBLE, AND THEN THEY WOULD ACKNOWLEDGE THAT IT WAS THEIR SINS THAT HAD BROUGHT ABOUT THE DROUGHT."

According to this view, God's command to Eliyahu was meant not only to overturn the prophet's oath and to make him change his own course, but also a hint to Eliyahu as to the NEW PATH that he was to adopt towards that purpose: to bring Israel to *teshuva*. This was not to be a complete nullification of Eliyahu's previous approach, but rather a command regarding a new tactic that would employ the results and achievements of the past for the purposes of the same ultimate aim.

Hence, Eliyahu was not commanded to perform the specific actions that he undertook; on the other hand, not only did his actions not contradict God's word, but they represent the realization of what was hinted at in the command: that the situation that had been created be used for a positive effect, and that Eliyahu cooperate with Achav, in order that God could give rain - as appropriate for Israel once they had repented. According to this conclusion, Eliyahu's actions in our story are similar to his actions at the gates of Tzarfat. Although Eliyahu acts on his own initiative in invoking a miracle concerning the jar of flour and the bottle of oil, he remains within the framework of the Divine command, which gives him a wide berth for independent action in order to fulfill it.

But there is an important difference between these two incidents. The purpose of Eliyahu's act of invoking the miracle at the gates of Tzarfat was to facilitate his own survival during the famine (as God promised him). But his actions here are aimed at fulfilling his prophetic mission for the benefit of Israel - to return them to God, and thereby restore the rain.

Eliyahu's actions as described in our story are therefore the most important of all his prophetic endeavors thus far. On the one hand, they reflect something of the prophet's own initiative; on the other hand, they are aimed at realizing God's word and fulfilling His aim - "And I shall give rain upon the face of the earth." Thus, these actions represent a partnership between God and His prophet, sharing the same purpose: to restore Israel to God and to restore God's kindness to Israel.

Translated by Kaeren Fish