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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #42: Carmel

Part 10: "Arise, eat and drink, for there is the sound of rumbling rain" (41)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

1. Meaning of the instruction

What is the meaning of this instruction that Eliyahu conveys to Achav at Nachal Kishon – "Arise, eat and drink," and how is it related to the reason he gives – "for there is the sound of rumbling rain"?

The Radak explains as follows:

"'Arise, eat and drink' – it appears that [Achav] fasted because of the lack of rain, now [Eliyahu] told him that he could eat and drink, for the rain was on its way.

'For there is the sound of rumbling rain' – it was not yet heard; what he meant was 'now you will hear the sound of rumbling rain.' For Eliyahu had faith in God, that He would give rain as He had told him: 'And I shall give rain upon the face of the earth,' and even more so now that [Eliyahu] had put the Ba'al worshippers to death and had removed idolatry."

We may ask: how is it that there has been no mention, thus far, of the fact that this day, when the great ceremony at Carmel was held, was declared as a day of fasting? Simon answers: "This assumption, that we are being told about the nullification of a fast without anything having been said about its institution, is reasonable in and of itself, for it sits well with our conclusions concerning the elliptical manner of the text."

Nevertheless, it is worth noting the explanation of the Ba'al ha-Metzudot, who adopts Radak's explanation without making the assumption that the day had been declared a fast day because of the drought:

"'Arise, eat and drink' – meaning, as it were: Since all have done *teshuva* and declared, 'The Lord is God,' therefore arise now and "eat your bread joyfully

and drink your wine with a content heart" (*Kohelet* 9:7), for the sound of rushing rain is about to be heard."

This *shiur*, which is a continuation of the previous one, may appropriately be concluded with Simon's original interpretation of Eliyahu's instruction here to Achav. First, Simon proves that the instruction is given to Achav at Nachal Kishon – for immediately after the text notes that the King listens to the prophet ("Achav went up to eat and drink"), it continues, "And Eliyahu went up to the top of Carmel." Eliyahu certainly ascended to the Carmel from Nachal Kishon, where he had slaughtered the prophets of Ba'al. Hence, the King and the prophet proceeded to ascend to the Carmel from the same starting point. If this is the case, and the prophet gave his instruction to the King down below, in the wadi, then we may propose that it was also said in relation to what had just happened there. Simon writes:

"But it seems that we may propose a different explanation for Eliyahu's words to Achav, relating them more powerfully both to the immediate context and to the structure of the story as a whole. Just as we find, in *Tanakh*, that refraining from eating and drinking on a day of trouble is meant to express profound identification with those who are affected by it (II *Shemuel* 1:12; 3:35), so hard-hearted indifference to the plight of others is expressed by purposeful eating and drinking: Yosef's brothers sit down to eat after casting him into the pit (*Bereishit* 37:24-25); King Achashverosh and Haman sit down to drink while the city of Shushan is plunged into anxiety (*Esther* 3:15); and Yehu eats and drinks immediately after his horses trample Izevel (II *Melakhim* 9:33-34). It is possible, then, that Eliyahu's message of imminent rain carries with it a sort of command to the King to remove any question as to his complete identification with the killing of the prophets of Ba'al, by eating and drinking in public (just as David asks Yoav to admit to the injustice of the killing of Avner by joining the mourning and eulogizing – II *Shemuel* 3:31). But instead of relating this explicitly to what has just happened, the prophet binds up his instruction with the reward that will come to those who have returned to worship God alone – the end of the drought. In his characteristic manner, the author here emphasizes here, again, the King's acquiescence by repeating the words of the command: "Achav went up to eat and drink" (verse 42); this emphasis would seem to convey a reinforcement of the assumption that this is not a mere announcement, but rather another test of faith with which the prophet challenges the King... Achav is required to gather all of Israel and the idolatrous prophets at Carmel, without having this demand accompanied by any explicit promise, but now that he is required to complete the action by demonstratively rejecting the slaughtered prophets of Ba'al, he is promised: 'FOR there is the sound of rumbling rain.'"

This interpretation is the opposite of the previous ones in explaining the relationship between the two parts of Eliyahu's statement. According to the early commentators, "*ki*" ("for") here means "since"; "the sound of rumbling rain" is the cause, or reason, and "arise, eat, and drink" is the result. According to Simon's interpretation, the reverse is true: Achav's eating and drinking are going to be the reason for the rain that is destined to fall. This interpretation does not necessarily contradict the previous ones (especially not the Ba'al ha-Metzudot). The formulation of the verse may hint at its intentionally multi-vocal message.

2. "For there is the sound of rumbling rain" – from where?

When Eliyahu commands Achav to ascend from Nachal Kishon to Carmel in order to eat and drink there, the sky is quite clear. There is no noticeable sign that the drought is about to be broken. What, then, is the source of Eliyahu's confidence that "the sound of rumbling rain" is about to be heard, within a short time – even the same day? This question is posed by the Malbim:

"How could he say, 'For the sound of rumbling rain' – while there was not yet any sign of the rain, as he says afterwards?"

The Ralbag, in his customary manner with regard to our narrative, raises two possibilities (he raises two similar possibilities concerning Eliyahu's actions at Carmel for the purposes of bring fire from heaven). First he writes:

"Eliyahu trusted God that He would do this."

In other words, Eliyahu is making another oath here – this time, concerning the immediate descent of rain, even as Achav is still at Carmel, and he trusts that God will do as he has decreed.

But the Ralbag immediately goes on to propose another possibility:

"Or, he knew this through prophecy."

Concerning the possibility that Eliyahu does all that he does in our story based on prophecy, we must ask: why, then, does Eliyahu offer a prayer that God will answer him with fire, and that He will answer him with rain? After all, God Himself has told Eliyahu that He will bring fire from the heaven, and that He will bring rain upon the face of the earth!

There is no reason here to abandon the approach that we have followed throughout our *shiurim*, and to attribute to Eliyahu an explicit prophecy that conveyed to him the message that he now tells Achav. The text offers no hint of the existence of any such prophecy – neither in its description of the events, nor in Eliyahu's words to Achav. Despite this, the Radak – commenting on this verse – relates Eliyahu's words here to a previous prophecy:

"Eliyahu trusted God that He would give rain, JUST AS HE HAD SAID TO HIM (1) 'AND I SHALL GIVE RAIN UPON THE FACE OF THE EARTH.' Furthermore [he expected Him to do so] since he had killed the worshippers of Ba'al (meaning- the prophets of Ba'al!) and had removed idolatry."

Thus, on one hand we do have in the background an explicit prophecy as to God's intention to restore the rainfall. But this prophecy was not speaking about the specific event that we are witnessing. At the time of the prophecy, God did not tell Eliyahu exactly when the rain could be expected – whether it would come that same day, or maybe a few days later. Eliyahu promises immediate rainfall on his own initiative, out of "faith in God" that He would do this. Why does Eliyahu believe this? Because, quite simply, there is no longer any reason to withhold the rain. God wants to give rain, and all the conditions have been fulfilled by means of the actions at Carmel and at Nachal Kishon. Why, then, should rain not come immediately? Moreover, only immediate rainfall will have the effect of demonstrating the direct connection between the *teshuva* of the nation and its results. Any delay – even of a single day – may cause great educational harm in its influence on the nation and their king.

The Radak's approach here actually nullifies our question as to why Eliyahu had to pray for rain. Since Eliyahu had NOT been promised that the rain would fall now, immediately, at the time when HE felt that it would be most effective, from a religious, educational perspective, he had to pray that God would indeed send the rain at the time when he decreed so, on his own initiative.

Once again we witness the partnership between the prophet and his Sender. Eliyahu operates within the framework of an explicit prophetic mission, which defines only the final objective: "And I shall give rain upon the face of the earth." The way to achieve this, the exact circumstances in which the rain will come – all this God leaves to His prophet. It is Eliyahu who evaluates the situation and the methods best suited to the time and place. Within this framework he initiates various actions which, although they have not been specifically commanded, nevertheless fall within the scope of his prophetic mission. But some of these actions are meant not only for the nation, but also for God, and it is for the success of these – such as the descent of fire and the

rainfall – that he prays. Indeed, his first prayer (verse 37) is interpreted by *Targum Yonatan*, in such a way as to reflect both aspects:

"Answer me, God, answer me' – Accept my prayer, God, with fire; accept my prayer, God, with water."

Now that Achav is busy eating and drinking, by command of the prophet, Eliyahu is standing atop Carmel, removed from everyone: "He bent to the ground and placed his face between his knees." He offers a prayer for God's IMMEDIATE response – for the final purpose to which all of his actions thus far have been directed: the restoring of God's kindness towards Israel and towards the land upon which they dwell - "And I shall give rain upon the face of the earth."

Translated by Kaeren Fish