

## The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

### The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

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#### Shiur #43: Carmel

#### Part 11: Why is Eliyahu's Prayer Not Answered Immediately? (42-44)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

(42) ... Eliyahu ascended to the top of Carmel, and he crouched to the ground and put his face between his knees.

(43) He said to his attendant, "Go up, now, look towards the sea." So he went up and he looked, and he said: "There is nothing." Then he said, "Go again, seven times."

(44) And it was, on the seventh time, that he said: "There is a small cloud, like a man's hand, ascending from the sea." And he said: "Go up, say to Achav: Prepare your chariot and come down, that the rain not stop you."

(45) And in the meanwhile the heavens grew dark with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain...

In the previous *shiur* we noted that Eliyahu's promise to Achav – "There is the sound of rumbling rain" (verse 41) – was admittedly uttered on his own initiative, and therefore he had to pray to God for it to be fulfilled. But the promise was made with absolute trust that God would answer him, for he had given his word on the basis of the explicit prophecy, "I shall give rain upon the face of the earth" (verse 1), as well as Eliyahu's belief that Israel is now worthy of the Divine blessing and that the immediate descent of rainfall will reinforce their *teshuva*.

But, to our great surprise, God seems to be in no hurry to bring rain. The verses quoted above describe a drawn-out, lengthy process. This discrepancy between Eliyahu's promise to Achav – "There is the sound of rumbling rain" – and its realization only after three verses full of effort and activity aimed at causing the prophet's words to come about, demands some explanation. If the plot were to unfold in accordance with our expectations, then immediately after Achav and Eliyahu ascend once again to the top of Carmel, and as Achav is eating and drinking (as described in the first half of verse 42), we would hear what we are in fact told only in the middle of verse 44: "There is a small cloud, like a man's hand, ascending from the

sea. And he said... to Achav, Prepare your chariot and descend...." In other words, we would expect to find the promise fulfilled immediately, with no need for any further prayer, for any prolonged waiting, or for any attendant watching and observing.

We may postulate that Eliyahu's prayer has a function: to teach us that it was the prophet's own initiative to promise that the rain would come immediately, and therefore he had to pray. Still, we would expect a brief prayer that would be answered promptly, as in the case of the descent of God's fire upon the altar.

Attention should be paid to the great difference between Eliyahu's prayer here, for rain, and the previous prayer, for the descent of fire.

First of all, the circumstances are different. At the time of the great test Eliyahu prayed in front of the entire nation, while now he offers a silent, personal prayer in which he stands alone before God.

Secondly, the text told us what the words of the previous prayer were, but offered no clue as to the manner in which Eliyahu presented his prayer, other than the words, "Eliyahu approached and said...." (verse 36) – apparently because the prayer was accompanied by no outward pose. Now, the situation is reversed: we are told nothing of the content of Eliyahu's prayer; we have only a description of how Eliyahu behaved when he offered it: "He crouched to the ground and put his face between his knees."

It appears that this was how Eliyahu was positioned all along, until he was informed about the small cloud ascending from the sea. The Radak writes, "He did not yet want to get up from his prayer until he found out if there was some sign of rain. Therefore he told his attendant, 'Look towards the sea,' while he himself was still engaged in prayer."

What is this position, assumed by Eliyahu for his prayer, meant to express? The Ralbag writes:

"He bent his head downwards such that his face was between his knees, AND HE PRAYED TO THE BLESSED GOD WITH THIS SUBMISSION AND HUMILITY in order that his prayer would be better heard, and God would bring rain sooner, in His concern for the prophet THAT HE WOULD NOT HAVE TO MAINTAIN THIS DISCOMFORT."

This explanation by the Ralbag brings us to the third difference between the two prayers. In contrast to the confidence expressed in the prayer that Eliyahu offers prior to the descent of God's fire (at least in its first part, verse 36), here there is submission and self-effacement meant as supplication to God to answer the prayer speedily and not leave the prophet in prolonged distress. But in the meantime, it is to no avail. The Ralbag continues:

"Eliyahu would not agree to move himself from this uncomfortable position until he saw some sign that God had heard his prayer – but this Eliyahu himself could not see (i.e., the direction of the sea). And so he continued to pray in this position, and when he completed his prayer he would call to his attendant to look out towards the sea, if he could see any cloud, and he would tell him, 'There is nothing' – until the seventh time, when he told him that he could already see 'a small cloud like a man's hand arising from the sea.'"

This, then, is the most obvious difference between the two prayers. Previously, there was an immediate answer as Eliyahu ended his prayer, while here he is answered only after he offers his prayer seven times in an uncomfortable, self-afflicting position, with his expectation of God's response being dashed time after time.

This is most surprising. We would have expected exactly the opposite: a renewal of the rainfall is precisely the purpose for which Eliyahu was sent to do all that he has done. But now, as the moment arrives for the point of all of these activities to be realized (and indeed, this is the only thing that is mentioned explicitly in the prophecy of the mission that is entrusted to Eliyahu in 18:1) – specifically now there are delays, and it appears that God barely answers the pleading supplication of His prophet. But how we to explain this, seeing as the renewal of rain is more of a realization of Eliyahu's mission than the descent of fire, which was entirely his own initiative?

Fascinatingly, the commentators pay scant attention to this question.

Let us propose a way of resolving this problem. Perhaps it is not *Am Yisrael* who represent the reason for the delay in the acceptance of Eliyahu's prayer (as the Ralbag maintains), but rather Eliyahu himself. Eliyahu, after all, is the only person who is clearly aware of the delay, and thus it would seem that the message of the delay is directed towards him.

At this point in the narrative – when Eliyahu tells Achav, "For there is the sound of rumbling rain" and then prays for the rain to actually descend - we find the

connection between this story and the previous one, about the drought. It is through Eliyahu's "word" - his oath – that the rain ceased, at the beginning of chapter 17, and it is by his word that it is restored, as Eliyahu promised at that time: "Except by my word" (17:1).

The prophet's first "word" – his oath in the Name of God, "There shall be no rain or dew during these years" – has admittedly been realized, but it has created a conflict between the prophet and God, Who has applied different techniques in getting the prophet to retract his oath and to change his unbending position with regard to the nation.

As explained at length in the series of *shiurim* on the drought, Eliyahu is not forced to change his position through external coercion. God leads him to change one step at a time. The decisive stage where the change that he has undergone becomes apparent, is in his prayer for the resuscitation of the son of the widow of Tzarfat. Eliyahu's pleading there that the soul of the boy be restored includes an implied agreement to the restoring of rain. And therefore God commands him immediately thereafter, "Go, appear before Achav, and I shall give rain upon the face of the earth" (18:1). But Eliyahu still needs this command from God; he is not moved, on his own initiative, to restore the rain – as he was moved to halt it.

On his way to Achav and in his meeting with him, Eliyahu still encounters criticism of his position (both from Ovadyahu and from Achav himself). Thereafter begins the second unit within the overall literary narrative – the story of the test at Carmel. The focus of the story shifts away from the matter of the drought and the need for the renewal of rain, but it is clear to any reader of the story within its context that it is for the purposes of restoring the rain (which he has been commanded to do) that Eliyahu carries out all of his activities at Carmel.

The "argument" between the prophet and God concerning the need and necessity of allowing the restoration of rain has been forgotten in the course of the events at Carmel. After all, this argument was already decided, when Eliyahu prayed for life to be restored to the son of the woman of Tzarfat, and he was commanded immediately thereafter to appear before Achav in order that God would give rain. Nevertheless, the conclusion of the argument was not complete. At the end of the previous story, that of the drought, we did not sense an enthusiastic concurrence on the part of Eliyahu as to the renewal of rain. He carries out God's command to go to Achav with mixed feelings, not yet entirely reconciled to the annulling of his oath. In truth, he does not rush to cancel the drought and announce the imminent renewal of rain before orchestrating the awesome events at Carmel to lead the nation to *teshuva*. In our first *shiur* about Carmel we discussed the fact that Eliyahu was

justified in setting up this test, and that his actions were compatible with God's will. Nevertheless, the subject of the previous narrative – the "argument" between God and His prophet concerning the drought – has been left somewhat undecided, for the "parties" never reached any complete and harmonious accord.

Now, following the grand success at Carmel, the time has come for the purpose of the mission entrusted to Eliyahu, to be fulfilled; now he must announce that rain is on its way. Will Eliyahu still deliberate on this matter? Will he do this only because of the Divine word, "I shall give rain upon the face of the earth"? Were this the case, Eliyahu would suffice with notification to Achav that the rain would soon be renewed, and with this he would conclude his mission and disappear from the scene. In this case we would note that Eliyahu had fulfilled his mission in full, as one who is commanded and obeys, but perhaps we would be left with some lingering sense of the previous resistance, which characterized Eliyahu in his journey to Achav. We might suspect that the prophet, in his zealous defense of his original position, is not able to change his view and to truly desire good for Israel even now, when they have become worthy of it, and that his promise of rain here simply reflects a situation of being forced by Divine command.

But this is not the way the events turn out. Eliyahu does not make a laconic announcement that there will soon be rain, but rather DECREES, with full responsibility, that God is going to fulfill His promise; that rain is going to fall IMMEDIATELY: "For there is the sound of rumbling rain." In this he continues his prior prophetic approach, characterized by initiatives on his part meant to repair the state of the nation – initiatives in which God cooperated with him (as in his oath that rain would cease, and as in his proposal of the test at Carmel with its advance assurance that God's fire would descend from heaven and consume his sacrifice).

This already represents some degree of indication by Eliyahu that he wants to "correct" his prior oath and to act in the opposite manner from how he acted when he decreed that there would be no more rain. Just as he applied all of his prophetic weight in decreeing the drought, with absolute faith that God would fulfill his word, so he now acts for the opposite objective – the renewal of rain. In this manner Eliyahu expresses his OWN DESIRE for the renewal of rain, his full personal concurrence with the change in his prior oath, and he does this in connection with Achav, the king, just as his original oath of drought was announced to the king.

But this is not enough. The "argument" as to the renewal of rain was conducted mainly between Eliyahu and his Sender. In order for this argument to reach its conclusion, and in order that the complete harmony between the prophet and God in this matter may be clarified and revealed, there is a need for Eliyahu to appeal to God,

in supplication and prayer. There is a reversal of roles here: God, who until now "pressured" Eliyahu, with the intention of causing him to reconsider his oath and renew the rain, is now revealed as somewhat reluctant to actually make it happen. It is not, heaven forefend, a matter of God reconsidering His intention to give rain – "God is not a man, that He changes His mind, nor a mortal that He may regret: will He say and not perform; speak and not fulfill His word?" (*Bamidbar* 23:19). Rather, now God wants to allow Eliyahu to reveal his devotion to the nation and his complete retraction of his oath, in the wake of the nation's *steshuva*, and to express this in heartfelt prayer to God. Thus Eliyahu admits BEFORE GOD his full agreement and personal desire for the renewal of rain, and through this admission he give a sort of RETROACTIVE JUSTIFICATION to God's command, at the beginning of the current mission: "Go, appear before Achav, and I shall give rain upon the face of the earth" (verse 1).

This reversal of roles takes place in the verses that we quoted at the outset: God delays His response to Eliyahu's prayer for some time, thereby leading Eliyahu to a position of intense supplication, not moving from his earth-bound crouch with his head between his knees, until there is rain. The prophet who was being REQUESTED all along to change his oath, has become the one who REQUESTS this so passionately.

In praying for the renewal of rain, Eliyahu fills out his task as prophet. He no longer assumes the one-sided role that he has played until now, as God's emissary to Israel; he changes his position and becomes ISRAEL'S EMISSARY BEFORE GOD. This dual role – of emissary mediating between God and Israel and representing each "party" before the other, is the quintessential role of the prophet in Israel, as fulfilled by the greatest of prophets including Moshe, Shemuel and Yirmiyahu. In his prayer here to God, Eliyahu is revealed as a prophet like them.

In light of all of the above it appears that the final section of our story takes us back to the theme of the previous story. It is only owing to the success of the test at Carmel in our story that it is possible to bring the subject of the previous story – the "argument" between the prophet and his Sender – to a true and final conclusion. In this sense the plot of the first story is dependent on the plot of the second, just as a proper understanding of the conclusion of the second story requires the background of the first.

The situation in the previous story that is closest, thematically, to Eliyahu's prayer for the renewal of rain, is – of course – the prayer that God restore life to the boy (17:19-24). We may say that that first prayer serves as a preface and preparation for the second. In the first prayer, Eliyahu asks that life be restored to a single boy; in

the second – to an entire nation and its land. In the first prayer there is an initial, implied expression of Eliyahu's readiness to change his oath; in the second this is explicit and final (as shown above). Indeed, there are several noticeable parallels between the descriptions of these two prayers, as also between God's responses to the prophet in both instances:

- In both places Eliyahu ascends in order to offer his prayer: there we are told, "He TOOK HIM UP to the attic" (17:19), and here: "Eliyahu ASCENDED to the top of Carmel" (42).
- There Eliyahu's prayer was accompanied by action: "He stretched out over the child" (17:21), and here too his prayer is accompanied by action: "He crouched to the ground and placed his face between his knees" (42).
- God does not immediately answer Eliyahu's prayer for the boy: his first prayer (verse 20) meets with no response; only after stretching over the boy "three times" and offering a second prayer (verse 21) does he receive God's answer. Here, too, God does not answer Eliyahu right away, but only after Eliyahu has sent his attendant to look out to sea "seven times" (43), while he himself remains all the while crouching and praying.
- Eliyahu informs the mother of the boy that God has responded to his efforts: "See, your son lives" (17:23); here, too, he sends his attendant to tell Achav, "Prepare your chariot and descend, that the rain not stop you" (44).

And just as the widow reacted to the revelation of this new aspect of Eliyahu with the word, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that God's word in your mouth is true" (17:24), so we may say that here, too, Eliyahu has been revealed to Achav and to Israel as a prophet of Israel who walks in the footsteps of Moshe and Shemuel, and that God's word in his mouth is true.

Translated by Kaeren Fish