

Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings
By Rav Alex Israel

This shiur is dedicated
in memory of Mr. Harry Meisels, Elchanan ben R. Yitzchak, A"H,
whose yearzeit falls on the 26th of Adar.

Shiur #20: Chapter 17: Three Years of Drought; Three Miracles

Eliyahu fights the Ba'al with zeal, religious passion, and persistence.¹ Chapters 17-19 narrate a captivating and dramatic story that spans three years, as Eliyahu holds out against Achav and his regime of the Ba'al. The epic struggle begins with Eliyahu's fierce and bold announcement of a devastating drought. The story is described in three chapters:

Ch.17 – Three years of drought.

Ch.18 – Eliyahu's confrontation with Achav and the contest on Mt. Carmel; the advent of rain.

Ch.19 – Eliyahu at Mt. Chorev; the appointment of Elisha.

Several other episodes in *Sefer Melakhim*² feature the character of Eliyahu, but this story is a continuous narrative, relating a fascinating religious, national, and personal drama.

DID ELIYAHU INITIATE THE DROUGHT?

Eliyahu Ha-Tishbi, an inhabitant of Gilad, said to Achav: As the Lord lives, the God of Israel whom I serve, these years will have no dew or rain except at my word. (17:1)

With these words, Eliyahu proclaims a three year drought.³ As we read these lines, we are disoriented by the suddenness of it all. Who is this Eliyahu?

¹ Traditionally, Eliyahu retains a presence in our current lives, visiting every *brit mila*, having a fifth cup at the Pesach *seder* dedicated to him, and holding the enigmatic and auspicious role of herald to the Messiah himself. In the Talmud, Eliyahu is depicted as never having died, allowing him to mediate between heaven and earth, facilitating a sort of prophecy in generations beyond his time. We shall devote some time at the end of our study to these eternal images of Eliyahu, but for now, we will remain firmly rooted in the text of the *Tanakh* as we develop our impressions of Eliyahu as they emerge from this text.

² See ch.21 – the vineyard of Navot; *Melakhim* II ch.1 – the confrontation with the messengers of King Achazyahu of Yisrael; and ch.2 – Eliyahu's miraculous death.

³ Three years, as we see in 18:1

Usually in *Tanakh*, a central figure is introduced with some biographical information. Eliyahu's identity as "Ha-Tishbi" and his origin in Gilad hardly explain to us the identity of this dominant prophet.

But a second question plagues us. Is this mysterious prophet, Eliyahu, proclaiming this famine independently, or is commanded to act by God? On the one hand, the phrase "As the Lord lives... whom I serve" indicates a divine instruction. On the other hand, the central role of Eliyahu, indicating that there will be no rain "except at my word," seems to put Eliyahu in the key position.

ELIYAHU'S ZEAL

The commentaries are divided here:

Eliyahu did this without a Divine command and without permission, but rather by his own will and choice, to pursue his zealousness for God. (Abarbanel)

Eliyahu decreed concerning the rainfall in his zealousness for God because of the worship of idolatry, as it is written in the Torah, "Lest... you turn aside and worship other gods and bow down to them, then God's anger will burn against you and he will shut up the heavens and there will be no rain" (*Devarim* 11:16-17). He was sure that God would fulfill his pronouncement. About this type of action, it says: "You pronounced a decree, and [God] fulfilled it for you" (*Iyov* 22:28). (Radak)

The radical conclusion from these *mefarshim* is that Eliyahu, in his outrage over Achav's violation of God's law, decided that God Himself was failing to fulfill His own Torah. After all, God had decreed that when the nation turned to "other gods," God would "shut up the heavens" and withhold rain. Since God was not performing His role, Eliyahu instigated a religious pronouncement of a cessation of rainfall. Rather curiously, God listened!

R. Elchanan Samet,⁴ in his *shiurim* on Eliyahu, supports this view:

... Significant is the fact that Eliyahu himself makes no mention of the Divine source of his mission. He does not introduce his declaration with the words, "So says God," nor does he formulate his oath in such a way that we may understand that it is God's words that he is speaking. ... More importantly, we reach this very conclusion from Eliyahu's language. The very need to utter an oath, together with the personal formulation of the oath, demonstrates that this withholding of the rainfall is an independent initiative on the part of the prophet. A regular prophetic mission, in which the prophet foretells, in God's name, the punishment that will come upon Israel, requires no oath. But when the prophet decrees of his own will and his listeners understand his words

⁴ <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/eliyahu/03eliyahu.htm>

correctly, then his oath comes to strengthen their faith in the fulfillment of his decree.

His view is supported by the *midrash*, which states:

Eliyahu took the keys of rainfall [that should belong to God] and went on his way (*Eliyahu Zuta* chapter 8).

As we will see in our upcoming *shiurim*, this view sees Eliyahu as engaged in a quest to prove God's power beyond reasonable doubt, to obliterate support for Ba'al, and to demonstrate and publicize God's truth and the falsity of Ba'al worship. Eliyahu's decree aims to challenge the power of the rain god, Ba'al, and Eliyahu expects God to support him in this endeavor!

BY GOD'S WORD

But not all the commentators agree. The Ralbag states simply:

Eliyahu, **by God's command**, gave a most severe decree in withholding dew and rain throughout those years, until Eliyahu would allow them to fall, **as a messenger of God**.

R. Yosef Ibn Kaspi:

There is no doubt that his [Eliyahu's] words were from God.

Prof. Uriel Simon adopts this view in his reading of this story:

The uniqueness of the opening line becomes clearer in the light of the continuation of the chapter, in which it is stated explicitly that Eliyahu went to Nachal Krit (17:2) and from there to Tzarafat (17:8), and from Tzarafat to Shomron (18:1) via the "word of God" that was upon him. Can we indeed conclude from this contrast that the silence ... regarding God's command ... comes to say that Eliyahu brought a drought of such severe proportions on Israel by his own initiative? And that he was prepared to risk such an audacious oath independently?⁵

So we have two diametrically contrasting views. Is God commanding Eliyahu, or is Eliyahu issuing a decree that God agrees to? Is Eliyahu the zealous prophet of God – more zealous than God himself - or is he simply His loyal and obedient servant?

Let us continue through ch.17 and see two ways of reading this story.

THE STRUCTURE OF CHAPTER 17: THREE YEARS - THREE STORIES

Chapter 17 is critically placed between Eliyahu's decree of the drought (17:1) and God's command that he bring the rain (18:1). The chapter contains

⁵ Uriel Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives* (1997), p. 195

three miraculous stories, each connected in some way to the famine resulting from the lack of rain.

v.2-7 Nachal Kerit – ravens bring food to Eliyahu
v.8-16 Tzarafat – miraculous production of food
v.17-24 Tzarafat – the death and revival of the son

These three stories represent an ascending progression in Eliyahu's power and his use of miracles. In the first story, food is miraculously procured by the ravens for Eliyahu, but the food itself is natural and non-miraculous.⁶ In the second story, with the overflowing flour and oil pot, food is produced unnaturally. In the third story, after the death of the boy, it is not food that Eliyahu produces but life itself, as Eliyahu enacts the miracle of restoring human life.

But if we pay attention, we can discern other modes of progression. Let us chart the literary structure here:

Introduction

"...**these YEARS** will have no dew or rain except **at my WORD.**"

Nachal Kerit: Eliyahu alone

"And (*Va-yehi*) **the WORD OF GOD** came to him: **Go** from here
... and at the **end of A YEAR** (*yamim*) the wadi dried up, for there was no rain

Tzarafat: Eliyahu and the widow

" And (*Va-yehi*) **the WORD OF GOD** came to him: Get up and **go**
... And she and he and her household ate for a **YEAR** (*yamim*)... as the **WORD OF GOD** ...

Tzarafat: Eliyahu, the widow, her son

" And (*Va-yehi*) it was after these things ...
... and the **WORD OF GOD** in your mouth is true

Conclusion

"And (*Va-yehi*) after many **YEARS** (*yamim*), the **WORD OF GOD** came to Eliyahu in the third **YEAR** saying "Go, appear before Achav and I will give rain..."

⁶ Some tried to explain this in a completely non-miraculous manner - these were not ravens but people from a town called Orev (*Shoftim* 7:25). See R. Yosef Kra based on *Bereishit Rabba* 33:5.

There is an interesting discussion regarding the origin of the food that Eliyahu ate. One opinion sees it as being taken by the birds from Achav's table! The other sees it as being taken from the royal table of the Judean king Yehoshafat (*Sanhedrin* 113a). Perhaps one could argue that the opinion that views Eliyahu as eating from Achav's table is suggesting that Eliyahu is bringing the nation down, just like Achav – that he is, in some manner, also a party to the nation's misfortune and ruin.

This story is clearly divided into three scenes. An essential element of the story is the passage of time, as each YEAR is carefully measured.⁷ And as each year passes, each scene describes an intensification of the famine. At the start, there is water in the wadi and food that birds can bring. But at the end of the year, the wadi is dry, and Eliyahu has to move on. In the second "scene," he meets a woman who is eating her last meal. She is foraging for two simple pieces of wood, because she is eating her final provisions (v.12) – "we shall eat and then die." People are dying. The third story reveals the disease and epidemic that regularly accompanies famine situations: the woman's child falls sick and dies. Despite the fact that it is not explicitly recorded as a result of the famine, Eliyahu's language - "EVEN to this woman with whom I live, will you bring calamity and cause the death of her son?" - indicates that this boy's death is reflective of the wider disaster that befalls the nation. And so, the three scenes depict the growing severity of the famine.

A further sense of progression may be traced by Eliyahu's location. In the first scene, he is living in a wadi apparently out of the jurisdiction of Yisrael, and certainly out of the reach of Achav. Later (18:10), we read of Achav's desperate efforts to locate Eliyahu, and yet at this stage, Eliyahu eludes Achav, demonstrating his control and superiority over the king. His second location at "Tzarafat, which is by Sidon" is also outside the reach of Achav and beyond his borders - Eliyahu is still in hiding. But this location near Sidon takes him to the heartland of the territory of the Ba'al, to the locale of Etba'al and Izevel. Eliyahu's ability to produce food and create life in the environment in which the Ba'al was clearly helpless and unable to assist its population emphasizes further the triumph of God's word over the Ba'al.

But what is the message that this chapter wishes to communicate? How does it integrate into the wider story of Eliyahu?

THE RAVENS AND THE WIDOW

The choice of the raven as the conveyor of food to Eliyahu needs some probing. On the one hand, the raven is a large bird, which can transport food. There is a certain parallel here with Noach, who also sends out a raven (unsuccessfully), and the connection may point to the extreme disengagement from society and the wider environment.

However, the raven is an "unclean" bird, and widely viewed – even in wider society - as cruel. *Tehillim* (147:9) talks about the "children of the raven who call out" and *Iyov* (38:41) explains that the raven does not feed its offspring, and hence its children go hungry! Why should God choose the raven as his messenger? The Malbim offers an explanation:

He [God] orchestrated his sustenance through ravens, which are cruel by nature so that he [Eliyahu] should remember that he has similarly been cruel to the nation, killing them by famine.

⁷ Here the word "*yamim*" is indicative of a period of a year. See other examples in *Bereishit* 24:55, *Vayikra* 25:29; and *Shmuel I* 27:7.

Rashi adopts a similar approach regarding the drying of the water in the wadi:

The wadi dried up: So that he would understand the need for rain... for it was severe in God's eyes that Israel were dying by famine.

These commentators view Eliyahu as actively delaying the rainfall. God uses a variety of media to send him a message that he should exercise compassion, but Eliyahu is impervious to the message.

We can follow this line of thinking regarding the widow in Tzarafat as well. In that scene, we are witness to a dreadful image, as the widow collects a few twigs in order to cook her last meager rations of food – a little flour and oil. Eliyahu arrives and requests water, and then food. Eliyahu adds insult to injury by insisting that she "make me a small cake FIRST, and bring it to me, and for you and your son AFTERWARDS" (v.13). This churlish behavior makes us wonder how Eliyahu can act with such insensitivity. Can he not see that the woman is suffering? Of course, he knows that God was going to produce a miracle (v.14), but what is the need for this indifference?

... The main point of this so that he will see, in that place, the suffering of a widow and orphan, upon whom God Himself has mercy, and concerning whom He warns against causing them suffering (*Shemot* 21:22). For were it not for him, the two of them would die, as she says to him: "That I may prepare it for myself and for my son, that we may eat it and die." From them he will see that a great many like them, among the masses of Israel, will die of hunger. And because he is good, he will pray for mercy upon them, that there should be rain and dew by his word. (R. Moshe Alshikh – *Marot Ha-Tzovot*)

SAMET'S APPROACH

According to R. Elchanan Samet, the entire thrust of chapter 17 moves in this direction. Eliyahu has decreed a famine in his zeal for God. It is God who wants Eliyahu to express some compassion and to rescind the decree.

Eliyahu's first encounter with the results of the drought takes place at Wadi Kerit ... This demonstrated for him the destructive results of the cessation of rain WITH REGARD TO THE LAND - its streams and its plant and animal life. But the drying up of the wadi is also significant FOR ELIYAHU HIMSELF, since he is dependent on its water. Nevertheless, this does not **cause him to retract his oath**.

... The second encounter takes place at the gates of Tzarfat. Here, Eliyahu views the meaning of the drought on the HUMAN LEVEL - and specifically what it means to the weakest sectors of society: a widow and an orphan. But here again, the suffering of the woman and her child because of drought and famine, ALTHOUGH AFFECTING ELIYAHU HIMSELF - since his sustenance depends on them - **does not cause him to retract his oath**. In order to overcome the problem

that has presented itself, he invokes a miracle that will allow him to continue living for a whole year in the widow's home in Tzarafat.

Eliyahu's third encounter with the results of the drought takes place at the end of the year of lodging with "the woman who was mistress of the house," with the death of her son. Now Eliyahu is forced to contemplate the most tragic consequences of the famine: the death of a poor, orphaned child, illustrating the fate of many more like him. Once again, the event has an effect on Eliyahu's personal fate: the child's mother accuses him of responsibility for the death and asks him to leave. (Samet)⁸

The story of chapter 17 is aimed at dislodging Eliyahu from his stubborn intransigence. It fails to work, and in the end (18:1), it is God who orders Eliyahu to end the famine.

URIEL SIMON'S APPROACH

Uriel Simon's approach is diametrically opposed to that of Samet. As we have seen, Prof. Simon suggests that the initial oath was issued by God, and hence, we must understand the nature of this chapter differently. Simon sees it as charting three stages in the growth and development of Eliyahu as a prophet. Eliyahu begins the chapter as an unknown individual, possibly resembling the anonymous "*Ish Elokim*" of chapter 13. How is an untried, novice prophet going to have the wherewithal and the nerve to confront the king? Chapter 17 functions as a lengthy introduction to Eliyahu, as we follow him in his divine apprenticeship as God trains him for his forthcoming mission.

In the first scene, Eliyahu does not escape to Nachal Kerit. He is sent there by God "to hide." Note that throughout the entire chapter, it appears that Eliyahu functions in RESPONSE to God. God has chosen to use Eliyahu's WORD as the instrument of His WORD.⁹ And it is by God's WORD that Eliyahu goes to Nachal Kerit. Eliyahu's disconnection from Achav represents God's estrangement from the nation.

The second scene represents Eliyahu in contact with other people. God instructs him that "I have designated a widow to feed you," but Eliyahu has to locate the woman and convince her, by power of his personality and persuasion, that she should put the prophet's needs before her own. (Simon assumes that she identified him as a man of God – otherwise it would be strange for her to obey his orders; the proof is that she swears by the name of "Hashem YOUR God" (v.12) despite the fact that he has not yet mentioned God!)

Here, Eliyahu is not confronting a king, but rather a lowly widow, and yet he subjects her to a test of faith. The result of passing that test will be

⁸ <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/eliyahu/10eliyahu.htm>

⁹ The words "*devar Hashem*" come up 6 times in the chapter and act as a leitwort of sorts (also "*davar*" without reference to God). Moreover, the entire chapter revolves around proving that God's word in the mouth of Eliyahu is true.

ongoing sustenance. Here in Tzarafat, as in Nachal Kerit, God miraculously provides food for Eliyahu, but here, God provides food through the prophet for others - the widow and her son. Furthermore, Eliyahu is not merely receptive; he become active, commanding, convincing, and creating the miracle. This miracle is explicitly designated as "just as THE WORD OF GOD had spoken through Eliyahu" (v.16).

The third stage represents a crisis. Things go wrong. Despite her hospitality towards the man of God, the woman's son dies. The woman accuses Eliyahu, "What harm have I done you that you come here to recall my sin and kill my son?" Eliyahu doesn't debate the widow. Instead he takes her child and appeals to God. His prayer is received, and God restores life to the boy. Note the words of the widow that close this episode. In contrast to her fierce accusation, earlier, now she affirms:

Now I know that you are a man of God and the WORD OF GOD in your mouth is true. (v.24)

For Prof. Simon, the theme is the development of Eliyahu as a prophet during the famine period.

In his hiding at Nachal Kerit in response to God's explicit command, he subjugates his entire private life to the demands of his mission, the fate of prophets before him and after him. In Tzarafat, he is called to become increasingly active and independent. At the first stage, he functions as the vehicle for God's command, such that the recipient of the order (the widow) should express faith in the divine agent (Eliyahu) and trust him and obey his command. At the second stage, he becomes an address for the scalding protest of the widow and as her protagonist before his God. (Simon, p. 206)

After this rigorous training, Eliyahu is ready to meet Achav and the challenges that will befall him.

SUMMARY

We have clearly demonstrated the threefold progression of this story. The question is one of interpretation. Is this a story of Eliyahu's religious indignation and his insistence that divine truth be upheld? Is chapter 17 a tale of how God tries to break Eliyahu's principled stand? Or alternatively, is Eliyahu God's ultimate representative and mouthpiece?¹⁰ Perhaps this is a story of introduction to Eliyahu, wherein we begin to understand the roots of this towering spiritual figure as we witness God guiding and training the young prophet so that he may have the faith and confidence to confront the most threatening of kings.

¹⁰ Simon returns time after time to the parallels between Moshe and Eliyahu. We hope to discuss this at a future point. In the meantime, see: <http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/kitisa/hak.html>