

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)  
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**Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings**  
**By Rav Alex Israel**

**Lecture #22: Chapter 18b – Eliyahu Prays for Rain**

The great contest at Mt. Carmel, the spectacular demonstration of God's power that we read about in chapter 18, concluded with an atmosphere of elation, of triumph. When the fire descended from heaven in God's name, the people fell on their faces and declared, "*Hashem hu ha-Elokim*." The throngs then proceeded to seize the prophets of the Ba'al and, following Eliyahu's instructions, they executed them. Eliyahu had succeeded in his quest to prove God's truth and power and the ineffectiveness of the Ba'al. He had brought the people to a moment of unadulterated commitment to *Hashem*, decimating the popular support for the Ba'al.

The chapter ends with an interesting story:

Eliyahu said to Achav, "GO UP, eat and drink, for there is the sound of much rain [approaching]." And Achav WENT UP to eat and drink. Eliyahu WENT UP to the top of the Carmel, crouched on the ground, and put his face between his knees. He said to his servant, "GO UP please and look towards the sea." He WENT UP and looked and reported, "There is nothing." Seven times, Eliyahu said, "Go Back." And the seventh time, he reported, "Behold! A small cloud, like a man's hand, is RISING from the west." And he said: "ARISE! Tell Achav: Hitch up your chariot and go DOWN before the rain stops you." Meanwhile, the sky grew black with clouds and wind, and there was a great rainfall; Achav rode towards Yizra'el. And the hand of God was upon Eliyahu. He bound up his loins and ran in front of Achav all the way to Yizra'el. (18:41-46)<sup>1</sup>

Here we are witness to a scene in which Eliyahu is deeply ensconced in prayer, in what appears to be a protracted, nail-biting wait for the advent of the rain. Repeatedly, Eliyahu anticipates a signal, some indication that the rain will indeed arrive. And we watch on as Eliyahu's servant moves back and forth, scanning the horizon desperately for the relief of a raincloud, to report back, in disappointment and frustration, each time, "There is nothing."

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<sup>1</sup> Through the use of capitalization, I have indicated the seven-fold repetition of the verb ALA, indicating ascent, and also YRD. The vertical axis of up and down plays a central role in all the Eliyahu stories. See *Melakhim* II ch.1, where all the drama revolves around who will go up and who will come down, as well as chapter 2, where there is also a vertical up and down motif, especially as Eliyahu is RAISED in a storm heavenwards.

This tension is surprising. After all, in *pasuk* 41 we have already seen Eliyahu absolutely confident in the prospect of imminent rainfall. He informed Achav that the rain is approaching, and encouraged Achav to "eat and drink," in other words, to make a feast in celebration of the termination of the national drought.<sup>2</sup> Second, we, the readers, presume that God's miraculous acceptance of Eliyahu's sacrifice – the fire from heaven – is a clear indication that he intends to bring the rain. Finally, we know precisely God's intent; chapter 18 opened with an explicit pronouncement by God regarding the arrival of the rain:

...In the third year, the word, of God came to Eliyahu: "Go, appear before Achav; then I will send rain upon the earth." (18:1)

Is Eliyahu fearful that God might not bring the rain in fulfillment of His word?

A second source of puzzlement is the time span of this scene. The story appears to begin as both Achav and Eliyahu stand at the stream of Kishon, where the prophets of Ba'al were executed. There, Eliyahu instructs Achav:

GO UP, eat and drink, for there is the sound of much rain [approaching].

Then, in clear compliance with Eliyahu (Achav following Eliyahu's instructions!):

And Achav WENT UP to eat and drink.

Eliyahu does not accompany Achav at this juncture. He makes his own way UP – in a parallel action indicated by the same verb, "ALA" – ascending to the mountaintop of the Carmel. His aim, it would appear, is to pray and to wait. One imagines that this takes a good deal of time.

Yet, after seven cycles of prayer, once the initial cloud is viewed, Eliyahu has enough time to dispatch his servant with a message of urgency to Achav. Achav is apparently still at the Carmel! Eliyahu manages to descend the mountainside in time to run as a herald before the chariot of the king.

Did Achav simply take his time? Or did Eliyahu's prayer, described in slow-motion, actually transpire with great speed? Do the timeframes match?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Different suggestions have been made as to the significance of Eliyahu instructing Achav to "eat and drink." Radak suggests that Achav was fasting due to the drought. The breaking of the fast reflects the breaking of the tension as the drought is over. For a more unusual explanation, see Uriel Simon in *Kriya Sifrutit Ba-Mikra*, p. 243, who claims that his eating represents Achav's approval of the killing of Izevel's prophets.

<sup>3</sup> One simple resolution mentioned as a second option in Radak is that when Eliyahu told Achav "Go up and eat and drink," that was to take place at the Carmel, and not at his palace in Yizra'el. While Achav was feasting, Eliyahu was praying. We shall follow an alternate direction.

And so, what does this episode add to the wider story? I ask this with particular awareness that we find ourselves in *pasuk* 46 at the same point in the storyline at which we were in *pasuk* 41. In both instances, Eliyahu is encouraging Achav to proceed to Yizra'el hastily because the rain is on its way. What is the purpose of this scene?

### **MEFARSHIM**

The classic commentators discuss this problem. In explanation of the need for Eliyahu's prayer, the Radak suggests the following (an approach shared by the Metzudot):

Eliyahu was sure that God would bring the rain as he had promised, "I will send rain upon the earth" (18:1)... but he prostrated himself [in prayer] before God so that God should expedite the rain **so it would fall when Achav was still there!** (v.41-42)

The Ralbag sees an educational motive:

Eliyahu needed to engage in all this [prayer] because [the people of] Israel were not, in fact, worthy in their own right to receive this great goodness in this miraculous fashion. Were it not for Eliyahu's prayer and his personal passion, the rain would not have arrived in this [immediate, miraculous] manner, but rather naturally... **Eliyahu wished that the rain should fall with immediacy so that they would understand that it was their sins that were the cause of the drought.** That is why the rain came at the moment at which they engaged in their return to God. (v.42)

So we have two approaches. Either Eliyahu wished to impress Achav or he wished to drive home his message to the nation.

The Radak answers our second question quite elegantly. We asked why Achav remained at Mt. Carmel for so long, throughout Eliyahu's prayer, not following the instruction to return to his palace in Yizra'el. Radak offers the following solution:

He did go up to his carriage to travel to Yizra'el to eat and drink. But when he realized that Eliyahu had gone to the hilltop of the Carmel to pray, he waited for him, not departing until he would see the outcome. (v.42)

Now, these answers are certainly feasible and correct, but I believe that there is an additional dimension behind this story.

### **VA-YIGHAR**

Let us begin with the very unusual verb “VA-YIGHAR,” which describes Eliyahu's prayer posture here.<sup>4</sup> This rather rare verb finds a twofold mention in the story of the Shunamite woman and Elisha's revival of her son:

**He stretched himself out** upon him; the boy's body grew warm. Elisha turned away and walked back and forth in the room and then got on the bed and stretched out upon him once more. The boy sneezed **seven times** and opened his eyes. (*Melakhim II* 4:34-5)

What is interesting is the sevenfold action along with this verb, which indicates the extension of the body. Why is this verb used only in these two stories?

What we are sensing is a certain parallel between the revival of a human child and Eliyahu's desperate prayer for rain.

But of course, it is not only Elisha's revival of the child that has connections with our story, but rather its antecedent, as Elisha's master Eliyahu's revives the son of the widow in Tzarafat (17:15-22). There, Eliyahu's actions are described in a similar way:

...he **stretched himself out** on the boy **three times**. (17:21)

There, the verb is “VA-YOTMODED” rather than “VA-YIGHAR.” We also see a threefold repetition, rather than a seven-fold one.<sup>5</sup> What do these connections intimate to us?

There are further points of contact between Eliyahu's revival of the child and our story.

- The verb ALA appears prominently in both stories. Eliyahu ascends to the attic to revive the boy; he ascends the mountain to bring the rain.
- Both instances involve prayer. In ch.17, the prayer is explicit. In ch.18, we are not privy to the content of Eliyahu's *tefilla*, but his posture of "head between his knees" would appear to be one of intense prayer.

What can we conclude from these associations?

### **GOD'S THREE KEYS**

Eliyahu prayed that God give him the key of the resurrection of the dead, but he was told from Heaven: Three keys were never entrusted to a

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<sup>4</sup> It would appear that first Eliyahu stretched himself out on the ground, and then afterwards, prayed with his head between his knees in a sitting position. See the Radak for this analysis of 2 different stages of prayer, each with its own posture.

<sup>5</sup> We might perceive the “seven” of Elisha, as opposed to the “three” of Eliyahu, as reflective of the fact that Elisha, Eliyahu's disciple, was on a lower spiritual level than Eliyahu, his master.

The sevenfold nature of the story is intriguing, especially as the number three dominates throughout the Eliyahu narrative: 3 years of famine, 3 pourings of water, and, as we shall discuss, Eliyahu stretching out over the son of the widow from Tzarafat 3 times. Chapter 19 also possesses series of three, (1.wind, 2.earthquake, 3.fire / 1. Hazael, 2. Yehu, 3. Elisha) as may be found in *Melakhim II* ch.1.

messenger but remained with God, namely: the key of childbirth, the key of rain, and the key of the resurrection of the dead. You already have the key of rain, and you [also] want the key of the resurrection of the dead? It will be said that two keys are held by the disciple and one by the Master! Give back the key of rain, and take the key of the resurrection of the dead. Accordingly, after Eliyahu revived the widow's son, the biblical text states (*Melakhim I* 18:1): "Go, appear before Achav; then I will send rain," because he had to return the key of rain and stop the drought (*Sanhedrin* 113a).

This fascinating *gemara* relates that three keys are usually held by God alone: those of childbirth, rain, and resurrection. The common factor between these three keys is that they each represent the keys of life and death. Human birth and the resurrection of the dead are quite obviously issues of giving or creating new life. However, the rain also shares this central feature in that it determines who will live and who will die.

At an initial level one may simply suggest that in this mirror image, Eliyahu is granting life to the earth by inducing the rain, in a reflection of the action that brought God to restore life to the widow's child. The drought was a stranglehold for the country, and now, Eliyahu was reviving the land.

But this is more than theatrics. According to this Talmudic *midrash*, Eliyahu had been granted the key to the rain. This relates to 17:1, in which Eliyahu pronounced:

There will be no dew or rain other than by my word. (17:1)

Not the word of God, but "MY word"! Does Eliyahu possess the independent power to incur rainfall? This, of course, is to be contrasted with 18:1, in which Eliyahu is commanded by God to appear to Achav:

...that I may send rain upon the earth. (18:1)

In other words, there is a tension here. Does the key to rainfall lie in God's hands or in Eliyahu's? The *midrash* suggests a drama taking place. When Eliyahu wished to revive the widow's son, he requested the key to *techiyat ha-meitim* – resurrection of the dead. God granted him that key only if he returned the key of rain. That is why God brought the rain! It was out of Eliyahu's control (and we may even suggest, against Eliyahu's better judgment!).

This *midrash* raises a question which lurks in the background throughout the Eliyahu stories, as Eliyahu seems to make pronouncements and enact miracles independently. We are always left wondering whether Eliyahu is acting by God's agency or whether he is instigating acts with which God somehow follows along!

The *midrash* proposes that, indeed, God lends his keys to Eliyahu! Eliyahu has unusual power, to a degree that is customarily in God's

jurisdiction. And yet, God makes it clear that Eliyahu's power has its limits. God is firmly in the driving seat.

This point is clear in that Eliyahu has to pray before reviving the widow's son, imploring God to restore the boy's life. The power belongs to God. Similarly, we have demonstrated that our image of Eliyahu arising to the mountaintop in order to stretch out on the ground in prayer, a sevenfold prayer, is in some way a recasting of that scene. Eliyahu's prayer on the mountaintop transmits the message that Eliyahu does NOT bear the keys to the rain. They are firmly in God's hands. Eliyahu has to pray for the rain to come.

The number seven, explicit in this story, is a number that finds its origin in *beriyat ha-olam*.<sup>6</sup> It is reflective of God's mastery of nature, his total control of the natural world. Eliyahu crying out to God comes to press home this understanding. Lest there be any doubt as to God's central role in the granting of the rain, this image – that the rain is dependent on God and not on the prophet, that the prophet himself must beseech God for the rainfall – teaches us that the keys are in God's hands.

## HERALDING THE KING

The scene ends with Eliyahu running before the king. This demonstrates a gesture of servitude towards Achav. We recall Avshalom<sup>7</sup> and Adonia<sup>8</sup> who each had "fifty people running" before their carriage. At the elementary level, it would appear that after Achav lent his royal sanction to the execution of the Baal prophets, Eliyahu now saw him as an ally in the furtherance of Avodat Hashem.

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<sup>6</sup> - Obviously reflecting the seven days of the week. The weekly Shabbat is testimony to God's control of nature. This finds reflection in the sabbatical, seventh year in which Israel desist from working the land, leaving it as a "Shabbat to God." In other narratives, the number seven would seem to express God's control, for example, the seven circuits around Jericho, in which the spoils of war belong to God – because ultimately, it is God that waged the battle.

<sup>7</sup> *Shmuel II* 15:1

<sup>8</sup> *Melakhim I* 1:5