

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

THE ELIYAHU NARRATIVES

Shiur #2: The Drought – part 1: Eliyahu's Appearance

By Rav Elchanan Samet

Translated by Kaeren Fish

(17:1) "Eliyahu the Tishbi, one of the residents of Gilad, said to Ahav: As the Lord God of Israel lives, before Whom I stand,

There shall be no dew or rain during these years, except by my word."

With no background, with no introduction – as we would expect to find in the text when an important character is about to appear for the first time – Eliyahu bursts onto the scene, right into the midst of the action. A reading of the above verse would certainly not give the impression that we have reached the beginning of a new and great narrative, the introduction to a series of chapters; rather, we feel that we are in the middle of a plot where the characters are already familiar. But the reader has no such prior information. Who is this Eliyahu? And why does he make such a terrible oath?

1. Eliyahu – novice or experienced prophet?

This surprising verse nevertheless shows us some consideration and tries to compensate for the lack of introduction. In between the opening words, "Eliyahu said..." and the concluding, "to Ahav" we find three words (in the Hebrew) that describe Eliyahu, the subject of the sentence, and are meant to satisfy our curiosity: Eliyahu is a "Tishbi, one of the residents of Gilad." These words have given rise to extensive speculation and much commentary, which we shall not discuss here; suffice it to say that Eliyahu arrives at the center of the kingdom having hailed from Gilad, on the eastern side of the Jordan river. Is his visit to Ahav (apparently in Shomron) his first appearance as a prophet, or is he an established prophet whose words and actions are being recorded for the first time in *Tanakh*?

It is difficult to arrive at an unequivocal answer to this question, but the reader's impression is that Eliyahu is not a prophet whose career and role are just beginning. What is it that creates this impression? Firstly, the power of his appearance, in which he swears that the rainfall will depend on his word. Secondly, the formulation of his declaration, which would seem to bear out his veteran status: "As the Lord God of Israel lives, BEFORE WHOM I STAND (lit: "before Whom I have stood")."

What is the significance of these words? Radak interprets the "standing before God" here as standing in PRAYER. Abarbanel, on the other hand, maintains that this expression indicates that Eliyahu is a prophet who stands ready to SERVE GOD at all times:

"He says, 'Before Whom I have stood' – meaning, before Whom he prophesies and from Whom he receives the spirit of prophecy. This may be compared with what Yirmiyahu says (23:18), "For who has STOOD in God's counsel, and seen and heard His word."

It would seem that Abarbanel's interpretation is a better one, since the first part of his oath – "As God lives... before Whom I have stood" – appears to represent the support and justification for the second part – "there will be no dew or rain... except by my word." This support makes sense only if we assume that Eliyahu's "standing" before God expresses a special relationship on God's part TOWARDS HIM – i.e., his selection as a prophet, and not a relationship on Eliyahu's part towards God (i.e., the fact that he stands in prayer before Him).

In addition, the wording of his oath – "As God lives... before Whom I have stood" – appears another three times in the Book of *Melakhim* (and in the whole of *Tanakh*). An examination of these three sources reveals that all three are uttered in the context of the prophets' prophetic activity, and so it is reasonable to assume that the expression "before Whom I have stood" here is uttered in the same context.

Moreover, a review of the expression "standing before" (*amida lifnei*) in *Tanakh* reveals that it refers to a slave or servant standing before his master with a view to serving him.

It seems that Radak's interpretation – suggesting that Eliyahu stands before God in prayer – arises from the fact that we have no recognition of Eliyahu as a prophet prior to his appearance here. Radak therefore chooses to interpret the expression in a more limited way. But the wording of the oath, as well as its content, may specifically be meant to testify that Eliyahu is not a novice. Only by virtue of being a prophet who is always standing before God and who is ready to serve Him at all times, can he have the audacity to swear as he does.

2. The background to Eliyahu's oath

WHY does Eliyahu utter such a severe oath? And we must ask further: does his appearance before Ahav begin and end with this oath, or does this verse represent the conclusion of a longer speech or dialogue that is not recorded in *Tanakh*?

The reason for Eliyahu's oath becomes clear in the context that precedes his appearance, in the description of Ahav's kingdom at the end of chapter 16:

(16:30) "Ahav, son of Omri, did more evil in God's eyes than all those who preceded him.

(31) It was an easy thing in his eyes to walk in the sins of Yeravam ben Nevat: he took as a wife Izevel, daughter of Etba'al, king of the Tzidonim, and he went and served Ba'al and bowed to it.

(32) And he established an altar for Ba'al in the house of Ba'al which he built in Shomron.

(33) And Ahav made an *asherah*, and Ahav did more to anger God, the Lord of Israel, than all the kings of Israel who had preceded him."

Later on, in the story of the drought itself, we hear a belated justification for the decree of drought in the words of Eliyahu to Ahav. When Ahav accuses the prophet of being a "troubler of Israel," since he has brought famine upon them, Eliyahu answers:

(18:18) "He said: I have not troubled Israel, but [rather] you and your father's house, in abandoning the commandments of God and walking after the *Be'alim*."

This accusation against Ahav, King of Israel, for having officially introduced worship of idolatry in a city of his kingdom (inspired by the gentile wife whom he has taken) appears here for the first time in *Tanakh* and in the history of Israel. Concerning such actions the Torah warns: "Guard yourselves lest your hearts tempt you, and 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, nor will the ground give its produce..." (*Devarim* 11:16-17).

Thus, Eliyahu's oath is simply the realization of the Torah's warning. But did Eliyahu make this clear when he spoke to Ahav, or did he rely on his listeners' understanding

of the background to his oath? In the Midrash, Eliyahu's oath is depicted as the climactic conclusion of a heated and dramatic dialogue between Eliyahu and Ahav (Eliyahu Zuta chapter 8):

"Ahav, King of Israel, questioned Eliyahu the Tishbi; he said to him: 'It is written in the Torah, 'Guard yourselves lest your hearts tempt you...,' 'God's anger will burn against you and He will shut up the heavens....' Here I am, worshiping all the idolatry in the world – and see what good is coming about in my time....' Eliyahu was immediately filled with great anger against him. He said: 'Worthless man! You have despised He Who created all the world for His glory; He Who gave the words of Torah for His glory. By your life, I judge you only on the basis of your own words.' As it is written, 'Eliyahu the Tishbi, one of the residents of Gilad, answered Ahav: As God lives... there will be no dew or rain during these years except by my word.' Eliyahu took the keys of rainfall and left, and there was great famine throughout the whole world."

According to this *midrash*, there is no doubt that Eliyahu's oath followed a preceding dispute that took place between the prophet and Ahav, the king.

This conclusion is also borne out by the literal text. Even if no verbal dialogue took place, as described in the *midrash*, the *midrash* still reflects our impression that the verse recorded in the text is not an introduction to the events, but rather a vehicle to bring us into the midst of the action, so as to start the narrative concerning Eliyahu.

From the discussion above it turns out that Eliyahu, who appears in *Tanakh* for the first time in our verse, is an experienced, veteran prophet, but the *Tanakh* has told us nothing about him until now. From the present discussion we see that even his first appearance as a prophet is a somewhat fragmented one, since the text fails to record its introduction.

3. The reason for the fragmented introduction

If we assume that Eliyahu is an experienced prophet, our question concerning the fragmented nature of his introduction is highlighted, since we are faced with an exceptional literary phenomenon: with none of the "background" that would usually be presented in *Tanakh*, a central character enters the scene in *Sefer Melakhim* – a character who will stand at center-stage for the next several chapters and who will be the focus of all the reader's attention from this point onwards. Not only do we sense a lack of some general introduction as to the identity of Eliyahu as a prophetic

personality, the text even fails to provide background as to the specific incident that begins the text's recounting of Eliyahu's oath.

It seems that Eliyahu's surprising, sudden, and mysterious appearance at the beginning of his role mirrors his disappearance at the end, which is even more surprising and mysterious, although in a different sense. What is common to both is the unexpectedness of his presence and his absence. In *Midrash Devarim Rabba* the verse from *Sefer Nachum* (1:3),

"God's way is in the tempest and in the storm; the clouds are the dust of His feet" – is interpreted as follows: "'in the storm' – this refers to Eliyahu, as it is written, 'Eliyahu ascended in a storm to the heavens.'"

Indeed, this may be said to characterize Eliyahu's path in general – it proceeds in a storm. He appears in a storm, he acts in a storm, and he leaves the scene in a storm, leaving behind a "cloud of dust." The mystery surrounding him is one of his most distinctive characteristics, both as described in the text itself and as perceived by the people of his generation (to the extent that this is expressed in the *Tanakh*).

This, then, is the answer to our question: Eliyahu's sudden appearance at the beginning of chapter 17, without our knowing who he is or what circumstances preceded his adamant oath – and all of this added to our sense that he is an accomplished and respected prophet - is an intentional literary device calculated to create within us an attitude towards him that will match the attitude amongst the nation of Israel at the time.

Translated by Kaeren Fish