

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Dedicated by Michal and Yeruchum Rosenberg, in honor of the birth of their son Yonatan Mordechai.

Shiur #27: Carmel

Part 2: Eliyahu Faces the Nation (21-24)

1. Rebuke and silence

Eliyahu's address to the people gathered at Mount Carmel consists of two stages. First, he issues a brief, harsh condemnation:

(21) "Eliyahu came near to the people and said:

How long will you go on limping between two options (*se'ipim*)?

If God is the Lord - follow Him;

If Ba'al - follow him.

And the people answered him not a word."

Many commentators address the question with which Eliyahu's rebuke opens; we shall follow the opinion of Rashi, Radak and others who interpret the word "*se'ipim*" as "thoughts." "Limping between two thoughts" means jumping from one to the other and back, believing alternately in God and in Ba'al. This would mean that Eliyahu's audience had not abandoned the service of God, but do not serve Him faithfully and exclusively. They have attached elements of Ba'al worship to their worship of God, oblivious to the contradiction inherent in maintaining both forms of worship simultaneously.

Eliyahu demands that the nation choose between these two contradictory opposites. As *Chazal* so aptly comment (*Midrash Tehillim* 119:113): "He said: YOU CANNOT HOLD THE ROPE AT BOTH ENDS; decide today Whom you want to worship."

Attention should be paid to Eliyahu's careful choice of language: the two alternatives that he presents are not formulated in precisely parallel terms. Only concerning God does Eliyahu mention the word "Lord"; he mentions no term of divinity when he speaks of Ba'al, even though the syntax of his sentence suggests the parallel. If a person is going to say something that is not true, even if the circumstances require that the words be uttered, he should still endeavor to whatever extent possible not to actually verbalize a false statement.

Helping the nation to make this decision is Eliyahu's task at Carmel, as the continuation of the story demonstrates. But meanwhile, his words of condemnation so far are not powerful enough to lead them to that decision - and Eliyahu is certainly aware of this. He is met with silence: "The nation answered not a word." Because, in all honesty, what could they say? Are these words alone enough to trigger a revolution in their thinking?

2. Suggestion of the test and its acceptance

Eliyahu's first monologue is merely an introduction to the test which he proposes in the second stage of his speech:

(22) "Eliyahu said to the people: 'I alone remain a prophet to God, while the prophets of Ba'al number four hundred and fifty men. (23) Let two bulls be given to us. They shall choose one bull for themselves and cut it into pieces and place it upon the wood, without placing any fire. I shall prepare the other bull, placing it upon the wood, without placing any fire. (24) Then you shall call out in the name of your god, and I shall call out in the name of the Lord. And the God Who will respond with fire is the [true] God.' All the people answered and said, 'Very good.'"

The people who have been alternating between the two options, unable to decide on their position, are now being called upon to judge the contest that Eliyahu proposes between himself - the sole representative of the prophets of God and those who have remained completely faithful to Him - and the four hundred and fifty prophets of Ba'al, representing the opposite view. The nation is called upon to accept the results in advance - whichever way the matter will be decided.

In the midst of his remarks to the nation, Eliyahu addresses the prophets of Ba'al directly for the first time, telling them, "You will call out in the name of your god."

Clearly, these words cannot be understood as an appeal to the nation: Eliyahu does not claim that the nation has exchanged God for other deities. He addresses the prophets of Ba'al in the midst of his speech to the nation in order not to appear to be forcing the challenge and its conditions upon his opponents by not discussing it with them first. He does not want to be perceived as making an agreement with the nation "behind the backs" of the prophets of Ba'al, and he therefore addresses them directly.

But in truth, this appeal to the false prophets is merely lip service. Eliyahu has no intention of endangering his plan with a possible refusal on the prophets' part to cooperate. Therefore, he makes a dual appeal: to the nation (verses 22-23), and, as a direct continuation of the first, to the prophets of Ba'al (verse 24). He foresees the nation's positive response, and indeed it comes quickly: "All the nation answered and said, 'Very good.'"

Following the nation's positive response, the false prophets' acceptance actually becomes redundant; it is taken for granted. How could they possibly refuse? All Eliyahu needs to do now is to arrange with them the details of the test (verse 25).

In this spirit, Abarbanel comments:

"The text does not record that the prophets of Ba'al gave the same response ('very good'); [in fact,] they did not answer at all. They thought it a bad idea to accept the challenge, but the nation had already answered, 'Very good.'"

Further on, Abarbanel continues:

"For what reason did the prophets of Ba'al agree to this test, given that it was dangerous for them? Because they were forced to. Once they saw that the entire nation had answered, 'Very good,' they had no way out; they could not argue and extricate themselves from the test, because the nation would stone them."

As in his opening words to the nation (verse 21), when proposing his test, Eliyahu is again careful not to disturb the "balance" between the two alternatives facing the people. But while in the first stage of his speech this technique was achieved through a simple rhetorical device, such that everyone understood quite clearly what Eliyahu meant when he said, "If God is the Lord... and if Ba'al...", here his intention is to ensure that the test remains fair. Therefore, the "balance" here is expressed in the emphasis on the egalitarian relationship between Eliyahu, who proposes the test, and the prophets of Ba'al, his opponents.

Moreover, in proposing his test first to the people (verse 22), and then to the false prophets themselves (verse 25), Eliyahu repeatedly highlights the numerical superiority of the false prophets in relation to himself. At the outset he presents the challenge with the words, "I alone remain a prophet to God, while the prophets of Ba'al number four hundred and fifty." For what reason does he say this? We understand the reason in light of his remarks to the false prophets later on: (25) "Choose yourselves one bull and prepare it first, FOR YOU ARE THE MAJORITY."

This, then, is a gesture of generosity; it is an open recognition on the part of the individual of a certain technical "right of way" to which the majority are entitled. Eliyahu therefore allows the false prophets to do everything first: to choose their bull, to prepare it as a sacrifice (verse 23), and to call upon their god (verse 24).

In so doing, Eliyahu ensures himself an image of fairness, perhaps even generosity. But it is doubtful whether this is his only aim - or even his principal aim. In inviting his opponents to perform all their actions first, Eliyahu actually prepares a trap for them: he needs their abysmal failure as a vital preface to his own dramatic success. His objective will be achieved by both stages - and specifically in the sequence that he arranges. His generous offer, which explains on the basis of the false prophets' constituting the majority, is simply a cover for his true intentions. We shall address this point in greater detail in future *shiurim*; here we shall pay attention only to the linguistic arrangement of Eliyahu's "fair presentation" to the people. He does not say, "I am the only prophet of God here, while the prophets of Ba'al number four hundred and fifty" - which would be an accurate description of the situation. Rather, he asserts, "I ALONE REMAIN a prophet to God..." In other words, Eliyahu not only makes note of the numerical discrepancy, but also hints at the circumstances of this discrepancy: "I am the sole prophet of God who remains, following Izevel's persecutions and elimination of the other true prophets in the kingdom. I am a persecuted prophet representing a suppressed path, while the four hundred and fifty prophets of Ba'al are representatives of the royal establishment, they 'eat at Izevel's table.'" A sensitive reading detects the blatant lack of equality between the two sides: between the many persecutors and the lone persecuted, between the complacent aggressors and the weak, isolated victim. This perspective serves only to intensify Eliyahu's victory and to amplify its significance.

3. Why does Eliyahu make no mention of the drought?

In truth, this question lurks throughout the story of the test at Carmel, which makes no mention of the terrible drought and famine. Even at the end of the story, when the rain finally descends, this is not described in direct and explicit connection to the drought and the suffering. But it is especially troubling in the context of the two-stage dialogue that Eliyahu conducts with the nation at the beginning of the gathering at

Carmel. Why does he not mention the drought? The drought and consequent famine are the background to Achav's agreement to cooperate with Eliyahu in gathering the people at Carmel, and it appears also to be the background to the nation's eager response to this invitation. Why, then, does Eliyahu not "exploit" the success achieved through the drought by mentioning it explicitly?

It would seem that despite the contribution of the drought towards the softening of the nation's stance - and particularly that of Achav - the subject is too sensitive for Eliyahu to enlist it in an attempt to draw near to the people, and to bring them closer to himself. The terrible suffering that the people have endured (and which, at this stage, shows no signs of abating), has given rise to harsh accusations and feelings of animosity towards the person responsible for the dreadful situation - Eliyahu himself. Eliyahu has inferred this state of affairs from all his encounters since the declaration of his oath, and throughout the story of the drought: with the widow of Tzarfat (who, admittedly, was unaware of the fact that Eliyahu was responsible for the famine), with Ovadyahu - representing the God-fearing public, and especially with Achav, who called Eliyahu the "troubler of Israel." Now, as Eliyahu embarks on a new path in bringing the nation to *teshuva* (which is what differentiates our story from the previous one), he does not want to open old wounds. His approach is now clearly a conciliatory one:

(21) "Eliyahu CAME CLOSE to all the people..."

Eliyahu's dual appeal to the people (verses 21-24) contains not a hint of the belligerence that characterized his attitude towards Achav in the previous story. His approach here takes into account the spiritual level of the people. Eliyahu does not come to them with complaints and accusations. Mentioning the drought here, at Carmel, would boomerang and sabotage his objective: to restore the nation to belief in God through what we might term, "ways of pleasantness," rather than through harsh condemnation and drastic measures.

Translated by Kaeren Fish