

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Dedicated in honor of Rabbi Ronnie and Yael Ziegler by Michael Merdinger and
Eliana Megerman

Shiur #29: Carmel

By Rav Elchanan Samet

Part 3: Eliyahu addresses the prophets of Ba'al (25-29) (continued)

3. "And Eliyahu mocked them"

(27) "It was noon-time, and Eliyahu mocked them, saying: Call out in a loud voice, for he is a god! Either he is musing, or easing himself, or he is on a journey; perhaps he is sleeping, and must be wakened!"

This offer that Eliyahu presents is not for a brief extension; it lasts "until midday was past... until the '*mincha*' offering" (verse 29). Radak explains, "until the time of the evening sacrifice"; Metzudot elucidates, "always offered at twilight." Thus, the false prophets were given an extension of several hours, until nearly nightfall.

Eliyahu's motives for this exceptional "generosity" are quite clear. It is a continuation of the generosity he has shown throughout, starting with the original suggestion to the nation that the test be held, followed by his proposal to the false prophets themselves with certain changes. So long as the possibilities for failure of the false prophets have not been completely exhausted, Eliyahu will continue to "give in" to them as much as he is able. He will encourage them to be first in everything, so as to have the maximum public attention focused on them for the longest possible time. Similarly, he encourages them to intensify their religious efforts even beyond what they originally performed. The greater and more resounding their defeat, the greater the victory reaped by Eliyahu – even before commencing his own actions. The false prophets become Eliyahu's unwilling allies in proving the non-existence of Ba'al. Through his

show of generosity and the "advice" that he offers, Eliyahu turns them into his active partners. In their constant obeying of his words, they are led as though hypnotized into the trap that he has laid for them.

If this is indeed Eliyahu's intention in all of his actions, he seems – out of an excess of self-confidence - to reach the point of endangering his own objectives in the type of advice that he offers them. What is the meaning of the expression, "Eliyahu mocked them (*va-yehatel bahem*)," and what does Eliyahu mean by describing Ba'al's various possible occupations that might cause him to miss the cry of his prophets?

The verb "*h-t-l*" is interpreted even by the earliest commentators as an expression of mocking and scorn. *Targum Yonatan*: "Eliyahu LAUGHED AT THEM."

But this interpretation raises an obvious problem. Surely the prophets of Ba'al, sensing the scorn in Eliyahu's words and seeing that he is making a mockery of them and their god in the eyes of the entire gathering at Carmel, would react in precisely the opposite manner to that intended by Eliyahu. They would likely abandon the test, ceasing their efforts at this noon hour, leaving Eliyahu without the fruits of the second half of their doomed endeavor. This would seem to be the most likely scenario, since derision and sarcasm usually have the effect of weakening the resolve of those to whom they are directed.

Furthermore, they would have good reason to give up at this point. Were they to continue in their efforts after Eliyahu's mockery of them, they would be seen to be following his scornful advice, thereby making themselves even more laughable in the eyes of the public.

Indeed, in the text's description of the continuation of their actions, there is an emphasis on their precise adherence to his advice. He tells them, "Call out in a loud voice" (verse 27), and they "called out in a loud voice" (verse 28). Is it reasonable to posit that they would act in this way, following his scornful advice and thereby turning themselves into the laughing stock of the nation?

Abarbanel and the Metzudot note this difficulty, but offer no solution.

Ralbag, in his first interpretation of Eliyahu's words in verse 27, adopts a different approach. He attempts to interpret Eliyahu's suggestion as a reasonable one from the point of view of the Ba'al worshippers. As such, "The prophets of Ba'al believed him, and cried out with a loud voice, for this was their way in such circumstances as those suggested by Eliyahu... this is a most acceptable explanation here." In other words, Eliyahu spoke to the false prophets not in a derisive way, but rather in accordance with their beliefs. Indeed, the prophets believed his suggestion that perhaps Ba'al was

sleeping or busy; they really believed that calling out with a loud voice would wake him and cause him to respond.

This exegetical approach to the verse is also to be found among some contemporary scholars, who find support for their thesis in mythological texts of the Ancient Near East which have been discovered in the last few generations. Indeed, anyone with even the most superficial familiarity with the mythologies of ancient peoples would agree that Eliyahu's words would not seem unrealistic to his listeners.

But this is not the case. What is the meaning of the word, "*va-yehatel*"? A. Simon notes that the principal meaning of the root "*h-t-l*" or "*t-l-l*" is "to lie," not "to scorn." He brings proof from all the appearances of this root in *Tanakh*.

Thus, it is not with scorn that Eliyahu addresses the prophets of Ba'al, but rather with guile - with a lack of straightforwardness. He tells them things that from his own point of view are laughable, but for them these words have meaning; his listeners will act on his suggestion, never suspecting that they are making themselves ridiculous in the eyes of the audience.

Still, we should examine this matter more closely. Were Eliyahu merely to mention Ba'al's various possible occupations, but nothing more, we may have sufficed with the conclusion that the background to his suggestion is ancient Canaanite mythology (which is known to us, to some extent, today). But Eliyahu prefaces his words with the phrase, "for he is a god!." This must be understood as being uttered with irony. Simon (*ibid.*) states:

"Eliyahu could not have said of Ba'al, 'for he is a god,' without the tone of his voice expressing clearly his meaning: 'to your view.' The word '*va-yehatel*' is therefore a literary substitute for a derisive tone of voice."

Simon then continues:

"Let us now try to paraphrase Eliyahu's words to the prophets of Ba'al: 'Shout out louder to Ba'al ('Call out with a loud voice'), for – according to what you say – he has the power to answer you ('for he is a god'). If he has not answered you thus far, it is because he is busy ('he is musing, or easing himself'), or far away ('or on a journey'), 'or perhaps fast asleep' - but if you raise your voices, he may answer you ('he will awaken').' The rationality of Eliyahu's words, from an idolater's point of view, assures that the prophets of Ba'al will comply: 'They called out with a loud voice' (verse 28). At the same time, the ironical derision allows God's prophet to address, at the same time, the congregation standing about,

preparing them for the imminent downfall of Ba'al, by exposing him for what he is. It is clearly meaningless to explain the embarrassing silence of this non-god – to whom four hundred and fifty of his prophets are crying out with all their strength – in terms of a temporary 'absence' or 'sleep.' The true God, who is going to respond with fire to his single prophet before your very eyes, does not slumber or sleep; He does not travel, He is never far away. It is only from His hand that evil and good come to you. When the prophets of Ba'al raised their voices, in the wake of Eliyahu's encouragement, they gave their (once again unwilling) approval to participate in this test of their faith. The Ba'al who has not answered the great cry of his prophets at such a fateful hour of need – he has , but does not hear!"

Translated by Kaeren Fish