

# The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

## The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

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By Rav Elchanan Samet

Shiur #30: Carmel

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

#### 4. The second failure of the false prophets

(28) "They called out with a loud voice, and cut themselves according to their custom, with knives and lances, until blood poured out upon them.

(29) And it was, when midday was past, that they prophesied until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, but there was no voice, nor any answer, nor any regard."

The second effort on the part of the false prophets to extract some response from Ba'al - lasting "when midday was past... until... the offering of the evening sacrifice" - comprises two types of actions: prayer and magical-ecstatic rituals that characterize their form of service. In both areas there is a noticeable intensification of their actions in relation to their efforts in the morning:

Calling out:

First effort: "THEY CALLED OUT in the name of Ba'al... saying, 'Ba'al - answer us!'" (verse 26)

Second effort: "They CALLED OUT WITH A LOUD VOICE." (verse 28)

Actions:

First effort: "They capered around the altar which had been made." (26)

Second effort: "They cut themselves, according to their custom, with knives and lances, until blood poured out upon them." (28)

Following these activities, which have now gone on for several hours before a huge audience, the prophets of Ba'al achieve a state of ecstasy - the "prophesying" mentioned in the text in verse 29.

Just as their first efforts were in vain, so their present exertions bring no results. And just as we see a development in the description of their actions from the first effort to the second, so there is a development in the description of their failure:

First failure - at noon "There was no voice and no answer" (26)

Second failure - at the time of the evening sacrifice "There was no voice and no answer, AND NO REGARD." (29)

This "development" requires explanation: can there be any "progress" or "development" in the absolute lack of response on the part of an object that does not exist? It would seem that what the text means to convey to us is the development that takes place among THE PEOPLE PRESENT at Carmel, in the face of this twofold failure. First, the nation becomes aware of the empirical fact that the actions of the false prophets have not been met with any response. But what is the meaning of this? Is this clear evidence of Ba'al's non-existence? Perhaps now, with the false prophets having taken into account the possibility (as suggested by Eliyahu) that the previous lack of response resulted from Ba'al's various "occupations," and now that they have tried to overcome this obstacle by raising their voices - "with a loud voice" - and engaging in desperate rites - "until blood poured out upon them," if even now "there is no voice and no answer," then the nation is reaching its unequivocal conclusion: the reason for this is that "there is no regard." As Radak explains, "If there was anyone listening to them, he would answer them."

##### 5. Appendix: "Eliyahu's ox"

We mentioned in a previous *shiur* the ambiguity of the formulation of verse 26: "They took the ox THAT WAS GIVEN TO THEM" (or, literally, "which he gave to them"), implying that Eliyahu selected the ox that the false prophets would sacrifice - in contradiction of his proposals (to them and to the nation) that they would choose for themselves.

The Midrash offers a fascinating solution to this question which, despite its deviance from the literal text, masterfully explains the formulation of the verse and illustrates the situation as a whole:

"The Holy One said to them: Learn from [the example of] Eliyahu's ox. When Eliyahu told the Ba'al worshippers, 'Choose for yourselves one

ox and prepare it first, for you are the majority,' the four hundred and fifty prophets of Ba'al and the four hundred prophets of Ashera gathered together - and were unable to move [the ox's] feet from the ground. See what is written there: 'Let two oxen be given to us, and they will choose for themselves one ox and prepare it, and place it upon the wood, applying no fire, and I shall prepare the other ox, and place it on the wood, applying no fire.' He said to them: Choose two identical oxen born of the same cow, that have grown up in the same pasture... They chose themselves one ox, and Eliyahu's ox started following it. The ox that was supposed to be for Ba'al - all the prophets of Ba'al and the prophets of Ashera gathered together, but they were unable to [get it to] move its feet, until Eliyahu addressed it and said: Go with them!

The ox answered and said to him, before all the nation: My friend and I emerged from the same stomach, from the same cow, and we grew up on the same pasture. He is being dedicated to God, and the Name of the Holy One will be sanctified through him. But I am being dedicated to Ba'al - to make my Creator angry!

Eliyahu said to him: Ox, ox, have no fear. Go with them, and they will find no pretext. For just as the Name of the Holy One will be sanctified by the ox that is with me, so it will be sanctified through you.

[The ox] said to him: This is what you advise me to do? I swear that I shall not move from here until you [personally] hand me over to them.

As it is written, 'They took the ox that was given to them.' Who gave it to them? Eliayhu." (*Bamidbar Rabba* 23, 9)

The solution that the Midrash proposes for the difficulty in our verse is, then, that the false prophets did indeed choose their own ox, but nevertheless Eliyahu (and not Achav, or some anonymous "giver") was required to actually hand it over to them, thereby prevailing over the ox's (sworn!) refusal to budge. The lesson that the Midrash wants us to learn from "Eliyahu's ox" (which is actually the ox selected and slaughtered by the prophets of Ba'al, having been handed to them by Eliyahu) concerns the trait of loyalty to Divine service and distancing oneself from idolatry; even an ox was careful to observe this.

But what does this Midrash add to our story? It would seem that the story is intended to clarify for us the immense importance of Eliyahu's efforts to exploit to the very end the failure of the false prophets. This was not understood by the ox, being an ox (and hence the question: "Is this what you advise me to do?"). But we as human beings are

required to understand this from Eliyahu's words: "Just as the Name of the Holy One will be sanctified by the ox that is with me (i.e., the one upon whom fire is destined to descend from heaven), so it will be sanctified through you (when you are sacrificed by the prophets of Ba'al)."

Attention should be paid to the fact that God's Name is sanctified equally through the failure of the false prophets and the success of Eliyahu. The role of both oxen in "*Kiddush Hashem*" is equal in value. This is because the failure of the false prophets will magnify the impact of the victory of God's prophet when fire descends from heaven, and hence serves as a perfect psychological preparation.

The failure of the prophets of Ba'al also has important religious significance in its own right. The recognition of the nullity of the gods in itself is a precondition for pure faith in God. As R. Yochanan teaches (*Megilla* 13a): "Anyone who denies idolatry is called a Jew."

It is interesting to note the way in which various commentators deal with this Midrash. Rashi and the Metzudot quote it, in substantially abbreviated form, as the solution to the difficulty in our verse. In order to adapt it as far as possible to the literal sense of the text, they omit the dramatic dialogue between Eliyahu and the ox (which is so characteristic of the Midrash) and retain only the basic fact: (Rashi) "Which was given to them" - It ran away from them so as not to be involved in idolatrous worship; it fled and took refuge with Eliyahu. He said to it: "Go! God will be sanctified through both of you."

(Metzudot) "Which was given to them" - Our Rabbis taught: after they chose their ox, it did not want to go with them, until Eliyahu handed it to them.

But Radak, after both of his more literal explanations, writes: "A legend contains things that are far removed from logic..." Then he quotes the Midrash, at length. Why, to his view, is this story so far removed from logic? Because he understood the Midrash as meaning to recount things literally. If this is so, several questions arise concerning an event such as this, described in the Midrash. Indeed, during the course of the generations, many questions have arisen - including that of R. Y. Kara:

"I question the many oxen that were slaughtered for idolatrous purposes, without any one of them any making any problems. Why did this particular ox see fit to act differently from all of them? But one does not provide solutions concerning a legend."

Or, the question that is answered in the Responsa of R. David ben Zimra: "You have asked of me, so I shall tell you my view concerning

Eliyahu's act on Mount Carmel, concerning that which is explained by the Rabbis... It is difficult for you to accept this, for what need was there for this miracle [that the ox could speak]? And if this great miracle did indeed take place, why does the text not make it clear, as in the story of Bilam's donkey?"

But *Chazal* did not mean, in this Midrash, to describe a real situation or to reconstruct an event that is not mentioned in the biblical text. Their intention was to illuminate the text and its profound significance in a Midrashic light, which makes no pretense (in this case) to represent the literal sense of the story. Nevertheless, as we have noted above, this midrashic illumination hints at the profundity of the literal level of the text: the failure of the false prophets is an integral part of Eliyahu's success, and God's Name is sanctified through it.

Translated by Kaeren Fish