

The Eliyahu Narratives
Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #31: Carmel

Part 4: Eliyahu's preparations for the descent of God's fire (30-35)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

1. The reason for the multiplicity and length of the preparations

In the last few *shiurim*, we addressed the first part of our story – describing the gathering of the nation, the proposal of the test, and the failure of the prophets of Ba'al. Now we move on to the second part of the story (from verse 30 until the end of the chapter), discussing Eliyahu's actions and their results. This section is constructed in a manner with which we are already familiar: two halves that are equal in length, on either side of a central axis.

Verses 30-37 (8 verses) – the six stages of Eliyahu's preparation for the descent of fire

Verse 38 – the central axis – fire descends from heaven

Verses 39-46 (8 verses) – the six results of the miraculous descent of the fire

The six stages of preparation in the first half of this section are: a. repairing the broken altar for God (verse 30); b. rebuilding it with twelve stones (31-32); c. digging a ditch around it (32); d. preparing the wood and the ox (33); e. pouring the water (34-35); f. prayer (36-37).

The six results described in the second half of this section are: a. The nation's recognition of God (39); b. slaughter of the false prophets (40); c. Achav's command to eat and its fulfillment (41-42); d. Eliyahu's forecast of rain (42-44); e. descent of the rain (45); f. Eliyahu runs before Achav's chariot (46).

In proposing the test to the nation (verses 23-24) and to the prophets of Ba'al (verse 25), Eliyahu maintained a distinction between the two stages of the activities to be performed by each party: the stage of technical preparations, including cutting up the ox and placing its meat upon the altar, while applying no fire; and the stage of "spiritual" preparation, calling out in the name of God.

Indeed, we find both of these stages described in the actions of both the false prophets and Eliyahu. Attention should be paid to the extent of the description of each of these stages in the text, its actual duration in the case of each party, as well as the relationship between the two parties.

The text describes the technical preparations of the false prophets with great brevity, in the first half of verse 26: "They took the ox that was given to them, AND PREPARED IT (in Hebrew, this is a single word: "*va-ya'asu*")." The term "*asiya*" (literally, "doing," or "making") is a concise summary of the carving of the ox and all the other actions involved in preparing a sacrifice; Eliyahu uses the same term in verse 25, where he tells the false prophets, "and PREPARE [it] first."

In contrast to this astonishing brevity, the text elaborates in its description of their call to Ba'al and the various worship rituals involved. All of this is presented in two stages: first in verse 26, and then (following the failure of their first cry) in verse 28.

It is not only in the narrative description that this stage is drawn out; even more strikingly, it also goes on and on in terms of the actual time involved. Both stages together last from the morning until the time of "offering the *mincha* sacrifice," near evening.

The relationship between these two stages is reversed when Eliyahu's turn arrives. The stage of the "technical" preparations goes on at length, occupying six verses (30-35). His prayer following this, occupying a further two verses, does not last any longer than the time needed to utter the words quoted in the text. In other words, the amount of time it actually took for him to say it is the same as the time described in the text – in contrast to the call of the false prophets, which is likewise described in two verses, but which actually lasted a full day. Needless to say, Eliyahu's prayer is not accompanied by any sort of magical or ecstatic rites.

What is the meaning of the opposite proportions between these two stages by the two parties participating in the test?

The stage of technical preparations as carried out the FALSE PROPHETS holds no special interest; it contains nothing beyond the norm in offering a sacrifice or in comparison with the description outlined by Eliyahu. Therefore, the text suffices with a single word: "*va-ya'asu*" – they prepared it.

The stage of calling out to Ba'al, on the other hand – along with the accompanying rites and rituals – is of great significance to our story. It is at this stage that the failure of the prophets of Ba'al becomes clear to the nation, and the deity is thereby nullified. The detailed description in the text – like the emphasis on the actual duration of this

stage – is important in and of itself; these represent a critical preparation for Eliyahu's own actions and the miracle of the descent of fire that is going to take place.

ELIYAHU'S actions are highlighted in the story – both the stage of physical preparation and the stage where he offers prayer. The brief duration of his prayer and the immediate response to it are, of course, a sharp contrast to the parallel stage in the false prophets' activities. But what is the function of the many tasks that Eliyahu performs at the stage of the physical preparations? Why are these actions described in such detail, over the course of six verses (this phenomenon itself a complete contrast to the description of the parallel stage in the false prophets' preparations)?

As we shall see in the following sections of the *shiur*, Eliyahu has several aims and objectives, and his various actions are meant to address them. But they all share the same general aim: to increase the tension and the nation's anxious anticipation of the miracle. Between the final failure of the prophets of Ba'al and Eliyahu's success in bringing down fire from heaven, some time must elapse – although it need not take the same amount of time as all the efforts of the false prophets. It would be a severe psychological mistake to allow the miraculous descent of fire to take place immediately after the failure of the false prophets; this would dampen the effect of the miracle. But this duration of time cannot be achieved by means of Eliyahu's prayer. The prayer must be brief, a contrast to the prolonged calling out by the prophets of Ba'al. Hence, Eliyahu "buys time," as it were, by prolonging his physical preparations.

The lengthening of the stage of physical preparations also has another general positive reason. In his calm attention to all the details, Eliyahu demonstrates his complete faith that God will answer him. He is not "pressured"; he is not in a hurry to pray. Rather, he acts calmly, like someone who has time on his side; he can allow himself a slight postponement of the most important stage – that of prayer.

Obviously, the dual reason that we have presented above would not explain an artificial lengthening of the preparatory stage if these actions did not have their own intrinsic value. But each action has an additional reason, as we shall discuss later on. At this stage, we shall focus only on one of Eliyahu's actions, which serves to prove the general explanation that we have proposed for his lengthy arrangements:

(33) "He laid out the wood and carved the ox into pieces, and set it upon the wood."

These actions are the only ones that he is committed to performing, on the basis of his proposal at the beginning of the story; they are, therefore, also the only actions that have a parallel in the actions of the false prophets ("*va-ya'asu*"). Here, there is no room to question Eliyahu's motives in performing his actions. They arise from the

necessity to prepare the sacrifice upon the altar in anticipation of the decisive test. Nevertheless, we may still comment on the LENGTH OF THE DESCRIPTION of Eliyahu's actions, in contrast to the extreme brevity of the description of the parallel actions by the prophets of Ba'al.

There appear to be two possible explanations. One, this discrepancy meant to express the difference between the actions of the false prophets and those of Eliyahu. The prophets of Ba'al act hastily and impatiently, because they want to move on as quickly as possible to the more purposeful stage in their efforts – the stage of calling out of Ba'al, with all the accompanying rituals. The cramming of all their preparations into a single word – "*va-ya'asu*" – is meant to express this impatience. The opposite is true of Eliyahu: every small action is described individually; the mood here is relaxed, the prophet has all the time he needs, and all the confidence to do what he needs to do calmly.

The other possibility is that the detail in the description of Eliyahu's preparation of the sacrifice on the altar arises from what comes afterwards, both concerning the pouring of the water - (verse 34) "Pour it upon the SACRIFICE and upon THE WOOD," and concerning the descent of the fire – (38) "it consumed THE SACRIFICE and THE WOOD and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the ditch." This order is (almost) the reverse of the order of Eliyahu's actions. He began at the bottom and worked his way upwards (from THE DUST of the foundation of the broken altar), concluding with the wood and the sacrifice upon it; the fire consumes first the sacrifice at the top, and proceeds downward until it reaches the dust. Thus the list of his actions comes to fix in our minds the order of the "layers," as a preparation for the description of the eventual descent of the fire.

Translated by Kaeren Fish