

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

This shiur is dedicated in honor of the birth of Shiri Sheinberg, son to Yehosheva and Dan Sheinberg.

May they and the entire Samet-Sheinberg family be zocheh to raise him le-Torah, le-chuppa u-le-ma'asim tovim!

Shiur #34: Carmel

Part 4: Eliyahu's preparations for the descent of God's fire (30-35) (continued) By Rav Elchanan Samet

7. Building in God's Name

"He built the stones as an altar in God's Name." (32)

Having clarified to the nation (in a way that is not explained in the text) his intention in taking the twelve stones to build the altar, Eliyahu uses the stones to build the upper part – the main part – of the altar, "in God's Name." What does this mean? The Malbim explains:

"[Eliyahu] said explicitly that he was building it for God's sake, so as to sanctify it with the sanctity of an altar."

Attention should be paid to the fact that God's Name is mentioned in every one of Eliyahu's actions here:

"HE REPAIRED GOD'S broken altar" (30)

"Eliyahu TOOK twelve stones... to whom GOD'S word had come, saying..." (31)

"HE BUILT the stones into an altar in GOD'S Name" (32)

The complete and finished altar, upon which Eliyahu arranges the wood and the parts of the ox, is a combination of old and new. As so the old – God's Name is upon it from ancient times. Everyone knows it to be "GOD'S ALTAR," but now it needs renewal; it needs to be given appropriate form, since it is "broken." The new, on the other hand, needs sanctification with the sanctity of an altar. Therefore Eliyahu builds it "in God's Name" – as Malbim explains.

A most appropriate summary of the symbolism of Eliyahu's actions here is to be found in the famous axiom of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak ha-Kohen Kook:

"The old must be renewed, and the new must be sanctified."

8. Digging the Trench

The next stage of Eliyahu's preparations consists of digging the ditch around the altar:

"He made a trench – such as would contain about two *se'a* of seed – around the altar."
(32)

Following this, Eliyahu arranges the wood and the meat, and instructs that water be poured upon the sacrifice and upon the wood, until the trench is full of water.

These two actions – digging the trench and pouring the water – are interrelated. The digging of the trench assumes its full significance only when the great quantity of water is poured upon the altar, so that it fills the trench. Why, then, does Eliyahu first dig the trench and then arrange the sacrifice, rather than the other way around, such that the purpose of the trench – to contain the water - would immediately be apparent? In the order in which the text presents the events, verse 33 – describing the arranging of the sacrifice – appears to be an unnecessary separation between two actions that belong together:

"He made a trench... around the altar. (32)

He arranged the wood and cut up the ox, and placed it upon the wood. (33)

He said: Fill four jugs with water..." (34)

The answer would seem to be that the trench has an additional purpose: to designate the perimeter of the sanctified area of the altar. Further on in the story, it becomes clear that this is indeed the limitation of the sanctified area, up to which the fire reaches when it falls from the heavens:

"God's fire descended and consumed the sacrifice... and licked up the water that was in the ditch." (38)

The digging of the trench therefore serves a dual purpose. It is meant to collect the water that is poured upon the altar, but it also represents part of the building of the altar and ITS DEMARCATION, in God's Name. Only after preparing the altar and demarcating the SANCTIFIED AREA, is it possible to arrange the sacrifice upon it. It is for this reason that the digging of the trench is mentioned immediately after the building of the altar in God's Name, and both of these actions are included within the same verse (32); only thereafter does the text go on to describe the arranging of the sacrifice (verse 33).

The area demarcated by the trench - "such as would contain about two *se'a* of seed" - is considerable. It equals a hundred cubits by fifty cubits (according to Rashi) – which is the area of the courtyard of the *Mishkan*.

9. Pouring the Water

"He said: "Fill four jugs with water, and pour it upon the sacrifice and upon the wood."

(34)

And he said: "Do it a second time," – and they did it a second time.

And he said, "Do it a third time," – and they did it a third time.

(35) The water ran around the altar, and the trench was also filled with water.

What is the purpose of this action? Rashi, commenting on verse 34, provides a laconic explanation: "To amplify the miracle."

But it would seem that we can detect another purpose in this action. Eliyahu is very concerned by the possibility that the performance of the miracle will be met with skepticism; that the audience will find explanations to deny the miracle. This would nullify the entire spiritual influence of the miracle. The Ba'al ha-Metzudot (taking his lead from Abarbanel) presents this explanation for the invitation to all the people to gather to Eliyahu (verse 30):

"To see that there was no deceit in what he was going to do."

A. Simon summarizes the idea in his article as follows:

"It is appropriate that we specify and highlight the precautions that the prophet adopts so as to preempt any possible claim against the veracity of the test... Eliyahu does nothing until all the people approach him and he has hundreds of eyes watching every one of his movements... It appears that it was for this reason that he dug the wide trench around the altar, but refrained from pouring the great quantity of water upon the sacrifice and the wood with his own hands, choosing instead to accomplish this through the agency of people among the audience. The highlighting of the punctilious fulfillment of the prophet's command is meant... [to teach us] of the prophet's decisiveness in his efforts to remove any doubt. He does not suffice with four jugs of water, nor even with eight; he is not satisfied until everything is sodden with water."

Translated by Kaeren Fish