

# The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

## The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

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### Shiur #35: Carmel

#### Part 5: Eliyahu's Prayer (36-37)

By Rav Elchanan Samet

#### 1. Prophets of Ba'al vs. Eliyahu in prayer

Our story is characterized by a duality of plot: the test that is held at Carmel is between two parties; Eliyahu demands a decision from the nation that is "limping between two options"; two oxen are brought for the purposes of the test; the process undergone by each participant in the test involves two stages, "action" and "prayer."

Twice the prophets of Ba'al attempt to draw down fire from the heavens. First, they call on Ba'al's name from the morning until noon; then, they cry out "in a loud voice" from noon until the time of offering the *'mincha'* sacrifice. In both cases they are unsuccessful: "There was no voice and no answer" (26); "There was no voice and no answer, nor any listening" (29).

Corresponding to this duality in the prayers of the false prophets – a duality that extends over most of the day – we also find a duality in the prayer that Eliyahu offers, as well as in the nation's reaction to the great miracle. But both of these are

highly "condensed"; they occupy a very short time –both in real time and in the record of events in the narrative. This phenomenon is clearly noticeable both in Eliyahu's repetitive call - "Answer me, God, answer me!" (37), and in the nation's repetitive cry of acknowledgment –"God is the Lord; God is the Lord!" (39)

The repetition/duality in both cases may be explained against the backdrop of the fundamental duality of the story of the test at Carmel – i.e., the stance of the false prophets against Eliyahu, and the need to side with one of the parties. This is reflected in R. Abahu's perception of Eliyahu's repeated call to God:

"'Answer me' – that fire will descend from the heaven... and 'answer me' – that You should occupy their attention, so that they will not say that this was an act of witchcraft." (*Berakhot 9b*)

The danger of the claim that "this was an act of witchcraft" undoubtedly emanates from the direction of the false prophets; this being the case, their presence is the reason for the repetition.

Malbim explains the repetition in the nation's cry of acknowledgment (verse 39) as follows:

"The first utterance is a positive assertion – that God is the Lord, which has become known to them from the descent of the fire. The second [utterance] is a negative statement – that ONLY God is the Lord, and none other; this has become known to them from having seen that Ba'al is a false god."

Aside from these obvious repetitions, there is a less apparent level of repetition in Eliyahu's prayer. His prayer in its entirety occupies two parallel verses:

Verse 36:

(Appeal to God) – "God, Lord of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yisrael

(Expected results) – Today LET IT BE KNOWN

THAT YOU ARE LORD in Israel

And I am Your servant

And I have done as You have spoken

All of these things."

Verse 37:

(Appeal to God) – "Answer me, O God, answer me

(Expected results) – Let this nation KNOW

THAT YOU ARE God the LORD

And You have turned their hearts backwards."

What is the purpose of this duality? Simon comments as follows:

"To highlight the contrast between the bloody gashes that the prophets of Ba'al inflict upon themselves and the verbal prayer of God's prophet, the text elaborates at length, relatively speaking, in quoting the prophet's words. Just as the fruitless efforts of the former are described in two stages (verses 26, 28)... so his prayer has two stages."

But of course there is a difference, and Simon notes it. The two stages in the efforts of the false prophets, lasting most of the day, "Are split by the words of their opponent, encouraging them to make a supreme effort (verse 27)," while the two parts of Eliyahu's prayer – which together represent a very brief prayer even when

joined together – "are not separated by any intermediary stage, which would emphasize the failure of the first stage."

Thus, it is specifically the similarity of the external framework – the duality – that emphasizes the fundamental difference between the prolonged cries of the false prophets and the brief, clear prayer offered by Eliyahu.

The difference between the prophets of Ba'al and Eliyahu is discernible in another important sphere, hinted at in Simon's words. The efforts made by the prophets of Ba'al to communicate with their god, in the two periods of time in which they were active, were composed of two elements: crying out to Ba'al and worship rituals. Their cry is conveyed to us in direct speech only in their first attempt, where it consists of only two words (in the Hebrew):

"They called in the name of Ba'al from the morning until noon, saying: 'BA'AL, ANSWER US!'" (26)

It appears that they repeated this cry over and over for many hours during their second attempt, too – from the noon until the time of the '*mincha*' sacrifice. The only change was that now they called out "in a loud voice." In contrast with the meager content of their verbal prayer, its active, ritual accompaniment is rich and varied. In their first attempt, we are told, "They capered around the altar that had been made" (26). In their second attempt, they introduce new and varied actions:

"They cut themselves, as was their manner, with swords and spears, until blood poured over them. (28)

... And they prophesied until the time for offering the '*mincha*' sacrifice." (29)

In its treatment of Eliyahu, on the other hand, the text makes no mention of any actions that accompany his prayer. This is emphasized in the introduction to his prayer:

"And it was, at the time for offering the '*mincha*' sacrifice, that Eliyahu the prophet approached and said...."

Where did he "approach?" The text is opaque in this regard, and Simon explains:

"'He approached' is a common expression indicating an intensification of engagement preceding an attempt at persuasion (*Bereishit* 44:18...) or prayer (*Bereishit* 18:23). The exceptionally brief, three-word (in the Hebrew) description – "Eliyahu the prophet approached" – amplifies the contrast with the extreme lengths to which the prophets of Ba'al were required to go in order to intensify their engagement with him [Ba'al]. In contrast to their capering and cutting [of their flesh], God's prophet needed to do no more than to approach his God; while their ecstatic cries are uttered 'in a loud voice,' he has confidence in the power of his words – 'and said....'"

This contrast between Eliyahu and the prophets of Ba'al is completed in the fact that it is specifically Eliyahu's prayer – accompanied by no magical acts or rituals of worship – that is complex and rich in content, in contrast with the simple cry of the false prophets: "Ba'al, answer us!" We shall address this aspect of Eliyahu's prayer later on.

2. Differences between the corresponding parts of Eliyahu's prayer

Having examined, in the previous section, the deliberate contrast between the description of the fruitless efforts of the prophets of Ba'al and the pure prayer offered by Eliyahu, we now address the contents of his prayer with a view to clarifying the similarities and differences between its parallel sections. Let us once again present a comparison between the two parts of the prayer:

Verse 36:

Appeal to God: Lord, God of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yisrael

Result A: Today let it be known that You are God in Israel

Result B: and I am Your servant, and by Your word I have done all of these things.

Verse 37:

Appeal to God: Answer me, Lord, answer me;

Result A: that this nation may know that You are God, the Lord

Result B: and You have turned their hearts backwards.

The two sections of the prayer are different from each other in two main respects: the status of the nation as expressed in each part, and the status of Eliyahu as expressed in each part.

Status of the nation:

i. In the appeal to God in verse 36, mention is made of the three forefathers: "Lord, God of AVRAHAM, YITZCHAK AND YISRAEL" (the name Yisrael appears again in the prayer as the name of the nation). In verse 37, the appeal to God is direct: "Answer me, Lord."

ii. In verse 37, the purpose of the descent of fire is to bring about a change in the consciousness of the NATION: "Let THIS NATION know..."; the content of their knowledge is "that You are God, the Lord..." (and not Ba'al). In verse 36, the purpose is to bring about a change in the consciousness of the entire world: "Let it be known this day" – to everyone. And the content of the knowledge is "that You are Lord IN ISRAEL." The Ba'al ha-Metzudot comments:

"When the fire descends, it will be known this day that You are Lord in Israel – in other words, THAT YOU REST YOUR PRESENCE AMONG ISRAEL."

What is common to these points of difference is that verse 36 emphasizes the national significance of the descent of fire; it is perceived within the framework of the historical connection between God and His nation. The knowledge by the entire world that "You are Lord IN ISRAEL" means widespread recognition of the relationship of chosenness between God and His nation, Israel.

#### Status of Eliyahu:

i. Eliyahu's status as God's prophet is highlighted only in verse 36, where it represents an important part of the prayer. Alongside his aspiration that it be known that God is Lord in Israel, the prophet asks that it also be known that he is God's servant, and that it is by God's word that he has done "all of these things."

In verse 37, this element is altogether absent. Here Eliyahu prays only for the nation to recognize God and His actions. A schematic presentation of the two verses highlights this difference:

VERSE 36	VERSE 37
Today let it be known that...	Let them know... that
You... and I...	You...
And by Your word I have done...	and You...

ii. A further difference is to be found in the introduction to each of the two parts of the prayer, in the appeal to God. At the beginning of the prayer in verse 36, Eliyahu starts speaking without mentioning himself: "Lord God of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yisrael...." His appeal to God at the beginning of verse 37, in contrast, opens with the words, "Answer me, Lord, answer me."

This difference does not have the effect of balancing the previous one, since his emphasis of himself in the first person at the beginning of the second section of the prayer does not in any way highlight the fact that Eliyahu is a prophet – a fact that is given great prominence in the first section.

The significance of this difference is that it serves to create a different atmosphere in each section of the prayer. The appeal in verse 36 lends a sense of dignity and calm; it projects quiet and unshakable faith that what Eliyahu prays for is going to happen. The appeal in verse 37 is emotional and highly personal; it expresses a lack of certainty as to God's response. In the words of *Chazal*:

"Answer me, Lord; answer me" – this is a cry. (*Ta'anit* 15a, 17a)

We shall discuss further the meaning of the differences between the two sections of this brief prayer in the next few *shiurim*.

(To be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish