

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #36: Carmel

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

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3. THE DUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TEST AT CARMEL

The events at Mount Carmel have a dual significance, and Eliyahu has given attention to both aspects in his words and actions thus far. Accordingly, there are two messages in the descent of the fire from heaven, and Eliyahu's prayer, too, has double meaning.

One significance of the test at Carmel is as Eliyahu proposed at the beginning of his speech to the priests of Ba'al; we shall refer to this as the "universal religious" meaning:

"If the Lord is God – follow Him; if Ba'al – then follow him." (18:21)

Eliyahu proposes this as a private individual: a religious test should be held to determine the true God Who should be followed. From the point of view of this test, there is no special significance in the fact that the "judge" here is *Am Yisrael*. The decision is to be objective, and is meant to be impressed upon the consciousness of anyone present to witness the test:

"The God Who answers with fire – He is the Lord.
And all the nation answered and said, 'It is well.'" (24)

Because of this universal aspect of the test, Eliyahu appears – in our eyes and in the eyes of his audience – to observe an apparently perfect balance between the two alternatives, both in his demand that they choose (verse 21) and in his proposal of the details of the test (verses 24-25). What we seem to have before us is a neutral question requiring an experiment and an empirical conclusion; these will be conducted with no prejudice in either direction. Any overt attempt to rebuke the nation and bring it back to the service of God would harm the deliberate even-handedness of the test.

But even at this stage, Eliyahu slips into his words a first hint at the national significance of his suggestion. When he declares, "I alone remain a prophet to God...," he is making oblique reference to the persecution of God's prophets by Izevel, the non-Jewish queen, and the nurturing of the foreign prophets of Ba'al, whom she apparently brought from her native Tzidon. Here we sense for the first time, that the issue that is about to be put to the test is not so neutral after all, but rather touches on the very essence of *Am Yisrael* as the nation of God, and the conflict between it and its neighbors – the pagan foreign nations.

That which was only hinted at thus far in a manner that was not forthright, is clarified quite pointedly in the actions that Eliyahu chooses to perform in silence – the detailed preparations that he undertakes prior to his prayer: the repair of the altar to God that was destroyed by the worshippers of Ba'al, and its rebuilding "in the Name of God," using twelve stones "as the number of the tribes of the children of Yaakov, to whom God spoke saying – 'Your name shall be Yisrael.'"

We have previously discussed at length the significance of these symbolic actions. Their meaning is conveyed to the nation in silence. The message that they broadcast is a highly particularistic one: Eliyahu means to place a wedge between the

Israelite nation present at Carmel and the foreign prophets of Ba'al, and to remind the nation of things it has forgotten: its former loyalty to the service of God, as symbolized by the broken altar; the covenant between the nation and God, forged by Moshe at the foot of Mount Sinai; Yaakov, forefather of the nation, who – in his struggle with the angel – "fought and overcame" him.

From this national perspective, the test at Carmel is an event that is meant to renew the covenant between Israel and God. It is not only the conclusion of the period of "dancing between two opinions"; it is the beginning of a new period in the covenantal relationship between the nation and its God. It is not only empirical proof that God is the Lord of the universe, but also a repeat of previous revelations of God through fire before His chosen nation, to have the Divine Presence dwell among them.

The descent of fire over Mount Carmel is related, in accordance with this latter aspect, to two previous events in the history of Israel. Firstly, we recall the descent of fire at the consecration of the *Mishkan* – (*Vayikra* 9:24) "Fire emerged from before God and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fats, and all the people were afraid, and they called out, and fell upon their faces."

The second related event is the descent of fire at the dedication of the Temple built by Shlomo:

"When Shlomo was finished praying, fire descended from the heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of God filled the Temple." (II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 7:1)

Just as in these places the descent of fire represented proof of the Divine Presence resting within the *Mishkan* and within the Temple, so too in our context the descent

of fire is a sign of the renewal of the covenant and of the Divine Presence dwelling amongst.

From this perspective, Eliyahu's role towards Israel also undergoes a change. He is no longer a person coming to propose an objective test to clarify faith in the true God, with careful preservation of neutrality in every step of the process. Rather, he is a messenger from God, and all of his actions at Carmel are performed in God's service. His purpose is not a decision between his view and the view of the prophets of Ba'al, but rather the fulfillment of the classical role of the prophet in Israel: to make peace between Israel and their Father in heaven. In this context Eliyahu stands before the people with no connection to the foreign prophets of Ba'al.

Now it is easy to see how Eliyahu's two parallel prayers express quite explicitly the two different meanings that the prophet attaches to the test at Carmel. The order of these prayers is the inverse of the order of his actions, thereby creating a chiasmic structure. His first prayer, in verse 36, is a direct continuation of his actions in rebuilding the altar – actions focusing on the national, Israelite aspect of the test. The prayer expresses in words what his actions only hint.

The connection between these symbolic actions and the prayer in 36 is obvious. By gathering the twelve stones, Eliyahu hints at "the number of the tribes of the children of Yaakov," while in his prayer he mentions all three forefathers. The name "Yisrael" echoes both in his actions – "to whom the word of God came, saying: Your name shall be Yisrael," and in the prayer in verse 36 – "that You are God in Israel."

In his prayer in verse 36 Eliyahu emphasizes his role as prophet in Israel, the expression "I am Your servant" in this context means, "Your prophet," "Your messenger." "By Your word I have done all of these things" means that, despite the

seemingly neutral nature that Eliyahu attributes to the test that he initiates at Carmel, he is in fact acting "by God's word" – as a prophet who is being sent for the purposes of bringing Israel back to God, on one hand, and restoring the Divine Presence among them, on the other.

From the point of view of this aspect of the test at Carmel, Eliyahu's prayer is uttered firmly and with complete faith, for there is no doubt as to God's response. In fact, this verse is not a supplication, but rather advance notice of what is about to happen: "This day it shall be known...." But this notice is uttered as a declaration, as a direct appeal to "the Lord God of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yisrael." The certainty expressed in the first prayer arises from the fact that Eliyahu acts here as God's agent, as His servant, and the descent of the fire itself is performed "by God's word." Hence, there is no room for any doubt.

Eliyahu's second prayer, in verse 37, is very different. This prayer goes back to the objective contest that is going on between Eliyahu and the prophets of Ba'al. In this test Eliyahu is not playing the role of a prophet in God's service, but rather that of a person who wants to put his faith in God to a test against the faith of the prophets of Ba'al in their idol. Hence the tone of the appeal here is personal – "Answer me, God, answer me" – and highly emotional and tense. As a private person acting on his own initiative, Eliyahu has no assurance that God will answer his prayer; he must plead with God and explain clearly his request. The explanation relates entirely to the issue of sanctifying God's Name: "They shall know... that You... and You..." Eliyahu himself has no role here – neither in the act that is about to be performed (the descent of fire from heaven) nor in its result (faith that God is the true Lord, not Ba'al).

Owing to this universalist-religious nature of the test at Carmel, no mention is made of the name "Israel" in verse 37. Instead, Eliyahu speaks of "this nation." He himself is not referred to in this verse as a prophet. The linguistic connection between his prayer in verse 37 and the test that he proposes to the nation at the

outset - as well as the cries the prophets of Ba'al – is obvious. Corresponding to the call of the false prophets, "Ba'al – answer us!" (at two different stages), Eliyahu cries out, "Answer me, God, answer me." Corresponding to his words to the nation – "If (*im*) the Lord is God..." he now prays "Let this nation know that (*ki*) you are the Lord God."

Now we must answer the question that arises from the above: are these two aspects of the test at Carmel not mutually contradictory? How can two such different prayers be uttered together? If Eliyahu is speaking as God's messenger, certain that his prayer will be answered, then why is there a need for any further plea to God, as a regular individual filled with uncertainty? Furthermore, if the significance of the gathering at Carmel is a renewal of the covenant between God and His nation and the bringing down of the Divine Presence to dwell amongst Israel, then of what value is a test between faith in Ba'al and faith in God? In other words, Eliyahu, in his actions related to the rebuilding of the altar and in his first prayer, raises the event to such a lofty level that its first aspect – a religious test – now appears trifling and redundant, along with its corresponding, second prayer.

The answer is that not only is there no contradiction between the two aspects, but they are in fact interdependent. The dependence of the "higher (national-historical) significance" of the occasion upon its more basic level – a religious test – is quite clear. So long as the nation has not yet made its decision between two options, so long as the people do not yet recognize the exclusivity of belief in God and His service and the non-existence of Ba'al, there is no room to renew the covenant between the nation and its God, so as to have the Divine Presence dwelling amongst them. Therefore, the order of events must necessarily be that first Eliyahu calls upon the nation to make its decision, proposing a test that will help them to recognize that the Lord is God and that Ba'al is worthless; only afterwards does Eliyahu perform the actions that hint at the renewal of the covenant between the twelve tribes of Israel and the Lord God of Israel.

On the other hand, not every person and not every nation is worthy of the opportunity to set up the sort of test that Eliyahu proposes, and to have God respond with fire descending from heaven. It is only God's love for Israel and Eliyahu's status as God's faithful servant that allow him to initiate this test, with

confidence that God will answer him. In other words, it is only the historical connection between Israel and their God – the covenantal relationship – that permits the actions that are performed at Carmel on the universal religious level. Therefore, at the prayer stage, Eliyahu starts with the covenantal relationship between God and Israel – as a basis for his confidence in God's response; only afterwards does he attach his own emotional prayer that God answer him in the actual test that he faces.

The two aspects, then, are interdependent. It is the covenantal relationship between Israel and God that makes it possible for the test against the prophets of Ba'al to be held, while God's response to this test, initiated by Eliyahu, is what will bring about the renewal and reinforcement of the covenant. This explains the reversal of the order between Eliyahu's actions and his prayers, in the chiasmic structure that we noted previously. In Eliyahu's words to the nation and in his actions, he charts a practical educational course: first the indecision of the nation must be resolved; afterwards it will be possible to renew the covenant with them. But in his prayer, Eliyahu mentions first the merit by which he dares to carry out the test: the merit of the forefathers and the covenant that God forged with them and with their descendants.

The above analysis of the dual nature of Eliyahu's prayer serves to explain a fascinating Midrash in *Shemot Rabba* 44:1 –

"You will thus find that Eliyahu offered up many supplications on Mount Carmel, for the fire to descend, as it says, 'Answer me, God, answer me,' but he was not answered. As soon, however, as he mentioned the dead, and said, 'Lord God of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov,' he was immediately answered. For who does it say? 'God's fire came down....'"

This Midrash raises an obvious problem: at first, in verse 36, Eliyahu prays: "Lord God of Avraham...." If he was not answered (and there is nothing in the text that would indicate this), then it is specifically this prayer that was not answered. But afterwards, when he prays in his own right – "Answer me, God, answer me!" – he is answered immediately!

The answer is that the Midrash is not recalling the actual sequence of Eliyahu's prayer – for in truth there was no stage at which Eliyahu was not answered. What the Midrash means to do is to explain the duality of the prayer: why was it necessary for him to offer two prayers? The answer is that the second prayer, "Answer me" alone would not have been answered were it not for the fact that Eliyahu had introduced it with his first prayer. It was only the mention of the forefathers of the nation, and their merit that extended to their descendants, that made it possible for Eliyahu to hold the test at all and to expect that his personal prayer – "Answer me, God, answer me" – would receive a Divine response. Indeed, the mood of each of the two prayers indicates which was uttered with uncertainty and anxiety, and which was offered with complete faith and trust.

(to be continued)

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