

Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings
By Rav Alex Israel

Lecture #21: CHAPTER 18 – THE TEST AT MT. CARMEL

The great test of faith at Mt. Carmel, depicted in Chapter 18, is one of the most famous Bible stories.¹ We witness the face-off between the king and the prophet as each addresses the other as "traitor of Israel." We are drawn to the dramatic tension of the nail-biting contest between the four hundred prophets of Ba'al and the lonely prophet Eliyahu² in the quest to induce fire to descend from heaven. Eliyahu's eventual triumph is a victory for God and Israel, a testimony to God's truth and the falsehood of the Ba'al.

This story is made up of shorter "scenes":

- v.1-19 Eliyahu's reappearance to Ovadia, the meeting with Achav
- v.20-40 The contest at Har Ha-Carmel
- v.41-46 Eliyahu waiting for the rain

We will attempt to grapple with the first of these "scenes", the long opening drama of Eliyahu and Achav's God-fearing servant, Ovadia, but before we get to that, let us discuss the central thrust of the great gathering that Eliyahu instigates.

THE NATION

It is as if the excruciating and devastating three-year famine has been orchestrated to lead specifically to this crescendo. But to whom is this spectacle directed?

Now, send and gather ALL ISRAEL to me at Mount Carmel. (v.19)

Even if this phrase represents something of an exaggeration (could the entire nation have been in attendance?), it certainly reflects the prime objective of the great assembly. At Mount Carmel, Eliyahu sought to broadcast a message to the entire nation, and it is thus to the people that Eliyahu directs his speeches and activities. Eliyahu seems uninterested in debating with Achav, the renegade king, nor in addressing a religious message to the prophets of the Ba'al. He virtually ignores these groups. His energy and actions are directed exclusively towards *Am Yisrael*.

But what does he wish to say? His opening line expresses his clear motive:

¹ It is the *haftara* for *Parashat Ki Tissa*.

² 18:22

Eliyahu approached the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Ba'al is God, follow him!" But the people said nothing. (18:21)

We should note a number of things about this *pasuk*. First, note the opening verb - "*Va-yigash*" – which will be echoed later in the chapter.³ Eliyahu deliberately approaches the nation. This approach is designed to generate a reciprocal movement of advance – the return of the nation to God.

The content of Eliyahu's challenge is a demand that relates to religious clarity and commitment. The people, possibly having adopted a polytheistic outlook, were content to dabble in the Ba'al while still retaining an Israelite identity that viewed God as their deity. This wavering or dual loyalty is anathema to Judaism, which sees the rejection of other gods as going hand in hand with belief in *Hashem*. In Judaism, there is only a single commitment.⁴ Any peripheral gods constitute idolatry.

Eliyahu is insistent that the people stop this flip-flopping, this flirting with the Ba'al. He uses the verb PS"CH, which indicates jumping or leaping.⁵ The people need to resolve their dual commitment, and pronounce an absolute and unequivocal commitment to God.

It is here that we must attention to the last phrase of this *pasuk*, which describes the response of the nation: "But the people did not answer at all." *Am Yisrael* is mute. They cannot express a clear identity. They are confused and passive.⁶ It is this lack of articulation, in essence a reflection of their religious confusion, which Eliyahu intends to shake and reorient.

OVADIA

The chapter begins with a lengthy description of the lead-up to Eliyahu's meeting with Achav. Eliyahu has been in hiding.⁷ Whether his disappearance was a sign of God's disengagement from the nation⁸ or a means of protecting Eliyahu,⁹ now is the moment for him to make his reappearance. It is Eliyahu's "word" that constitutes the key to the rainfall, as expressed in his original pronouncement (17:1). To that end, Achav has been desperately searching for the elusive Eliyahu without success:

³ See *pasuk* 30 (twice) and *pasuk* 36.

⁴ In an interesting piece, Nahum Sarna expresses the Israelite confusion regarding other gods and Moshe's message of the equivalence of adultery and idolatry. See *Exploring Exodus*, pp. 141-142.

⁵ Walsh in his commentary (Berit Olam) suggests a linguistic relationship between PISEACH – limping, or hobbling – and PESACH – leaping or jumping. That somehow, Eliyahu is accusing them of hobbling between the two poles rather than a more speedy oscillation.

⁶ In a similar vein, see R. Soloveitchik, "Redemption Prayer and Talmud Torah," in *Tradition* (1978), pp. 23-42

⁷ 17:3

⁸ Eliyahu's "hiding" as God's servant is symbolic of God hiding His face (*Devarim* 31:17,18; 32:20)

⁹ 18:13

...there is not a nation or kingdom where my master has not sent someone to look for you. (v.10)

Now, God instructs Eliyahu to end the famine. The text emphasizes the length of time¹⁰ and the destructive effects of the drought:¹¹

After a long time, in the third year, the word of the Lord came to Eliyahu: "Go and present yourself to Achav, and I will send rain on the land." ... And the famine was severe in Shomron. (18:1-2)

We expect to hear about Eliyahu's meeting with Achav, but quite surprisingly, we now read a description about one of Achav's senior courtiers:

Ovadia feared God greatly. When Izevel killed God's prophets, Ovadia took one hundred prophets and hid them in two caves, fifty in each, and supplied them with food and water. (18:3-4)

Not only Ovadia's actions, but his very name is indicative of his religious orientation; he serves God – "*oved yah*." What follows is a detailed description of the way in which Eliyahu meets Ovadia to demand that he announce Eliyahu's arrival, including the lengthy dialogue that ensues between them. Here the reader naturally asks why we need to hear about Ovadia at all. Why does Eliyahu insist on meeting Ovadia as a prelude to his encounter with Achav? The encounter with Achav numbers a mere four *pesukim*, in contrast to the description of Ovadia's discussion with Eliyahu, which is a full eleven *pesukim*. What is the nature of the preoccupation with Ovadia? Some claim that the aim is to increase the tension in the lead-up to the drama at Har Ha-Carmel. Others suggest that it is important from the prophetic perspective for Achav to come to Eliyahu rather than the prophet being summoned as a subordinate to the king.¹² But we will suggest a different approach.

TWO MASTERS

Ovadia greets Eliyahu and recognizes him:

¹⁰ This phrase is reminiscent of the phrase in *Shemot* 2:23, "And it was in those many days, the king of Egypt died." The commentaries there point out that the term "many days" is indicative of the slow passage of time when under duress.

¹¹ The scene that is described in v.5, in which the two senior governmental figures are foraging for food for their animals, represents the extreme desperation that the kingdom is confronting. In typical prophetic choreography, the prophet confronts the king precisely in an environment or situation that is central to the crisis or a circumstance that condemns him. See, for example, *Melakhim* I ch.13, in the context of Yeravam at the altar, the story of Achav and the Navot in ch.21, and possibly Moshe's approach to Pharaoh by the riverside, the source of Egypt's strength.

¹² <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/eliyahu/17eliyahu.htm>

He bowed down to the ground,¹³ and said, "Is it really you, my master (*adoni*) Eliyahu?" (v.7)

This is a reflection of Ovadia's *yirat shamayim*. As opposed to the approach of Achav, who addresses Eliyahu as a "betrayal of Israel," Ovadia has a different assessment of Eliyahu. Immediately, Eliyahu responds:

Go tell your master (*adonekha*), "Eliyahu is here." (v.8)

The same word, "*adon*," is used to describe Eliyahu and Ovadia's other master, Achav. The phrase recurs throughout the next few verses (*pesukim* 10, 11, 13, 14), sometimes in reference to Eliyahu and other times in reference to Achav. Ovadia is caught between conflicting commitments and allegiances. Eliyahu seeks to send Ovadia as his messenger to Achav to summon him, but Ovadia is concerned that if Eliyahu disappears, Achav will kill him. In order to reassure the frightened Ovadia, Eliyahu swears in God's name that he will indeed meet Achav that day.¹⁴ This is enough to transform

¹³ Literally, "He fell on his face." This is echoed later (18:39) - "The people fell on their faces and said: 'The Lord – He is God.'" This shows us that Ovadia is at that high level of faith even at the beginning of the story.

¹⁴ This is just one small example of the manner in which this chapter is connected to the previous one. There is a complex relationship between chapter 17 and 18. Even as we begin reading, we identify a connection between certain phrases.

a. The parallel between Ovadia and Nachal Kerit:

17:3 - Nachal Kerit / 18:4 – When Izevel killed (*be-hakhrith*) God's prophets

17:4 - The ravens to provide for you (*le-khalkalekha*) / 18:4 - He provided them (*ve-khilkelam*) with bread and water

17:4 - You shall drink from the stream ... and bread / 18:4 - bread and water

b. The parallel between the meeting of Eliyahu and the widow of Tzarafat and his meeting with Ovadia:

17:9/18:5 - In both situations, Eliyahu approaches a person foraging for wood or straw outside the city.

17:12/18:9-10 – Refusal to comply with Eliyahu's request, language of "as the Lord your God lives."

17:14/18:17 – Eliyahu's reassurance in the name of God: "So says the Lord God" or as the Lord of Hosts lives."

Specter of death - 17:12 – And we shall eat it and die/ 18:9,13 - You deliver me to die in Achav's hands

17:19 – to remember my sin (*avoni*)/ 18:9 - How have I sinned (*chatati*)?

What is the parallel here? We might suggest that in the same manner that Eliyahu has to use the full power of his personality to convince the widow that he bears the word of God so that she forgo her personal self-interest to obey and provide for him, Ovadia must forgo his personal self-interest and endanger himself to present Eliyahu to the king. Once again, we are dealing with the Eliyahu's power (as noted by Uriel Simon) of coercing people to follow his (and God's) dictates despite their personal preferences. This may certainly be an important prelude to his plan of convincing Israel to serve God.

(For more on this parallel, see Uriel Simon, pp. 209-217 and Samet at: <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/eliyahu/19eliyahu.htm>)

c. The connection between the revival of the dead boy in ch.17 and Eliyahu's actions at Mt. Carmel.

1. His appeal to God, accusing God of acting inappropriately, causing destruction and death: 17:20 – "O Lord my God, have you brought tragedy also upon this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?" 18:37 – "That these people will know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again."

2. Threefold action: 17:21 – With the boy / 18:37 – pouring water three times.

Ovadia into Eliyahu's messenger, the force of God's word redirecting Ovadia's allegiance, and the result is that "Achav went to meet Eliyahu."

To my mind, Ovadia personifies the dilemma of the nation. The nation feels that it has two masters, God and Ba'al, and they are caught between the two. Let us recall that both God and the Ba'al promise rainfall. Must one choose between the two? Ovadia is Achav's closest minister, but he also fears God "exceedingly." Ovadia is "wavering between two opinions;" Eliyahu forces Ovadia to make a choice.

This is the precursor to Israel's choice.

MT. CARMEL

Eliyahu summons Izevel's prophets of Ba'al to a contest at Har Ha-Carmel. Why did Eliyahu choose this particular location?

The location of the "dual" is the Carmel Mountain range near today's Haifa.¹⁵ Two coordinates identify this location: the Kishon stream (v.40) and the direct access to Yizrael (Jezreel, Achav's winter palace - v.46). Both of these match the Carmel mountain range precisely.

There are two possible explanations for the choice of location. Eliyahu chooses to challenge the Ba'al on its own territory. The Carmel is characterized by perennial greenery. Even in a protracted drought, in which the entire countryside turns to parched hues of yellow and brown, the Carmel mountain range retains its fertile greenery. In the mindset of the Ba'al, this unusual fertility indicates that this was a region in which the Ba'al exercised particular control.

The second explanation may relate to the location of the Carmel between two cultures.¹⁶ From the peak of the Carmel, one can look northwards to the coastline, the trading areas under Phoenician administration and influence. When one looks southwest, one sees the hill lands of the Shomron, the ancestral portion of Efrayim - the classic Israelite territory. If Israel is "wavering between two opinions," two cultural systems, two religious orientations, the Carmel is positioned at that fulcrum-point. The location reflects, once again, the choice that the people have to make.

ACTIVATING THE PEOPLE

3. Followed by prayer and God's miraculous response. (It is even plausible that the life-giving rainfall is parallel to the restoration of life to the child.)

4. The ending: 17:24 - "Now I know that you are a man of God and the word of God in your mouth is true." 18:36 - "Let it be known that You are God in Israel and I am your servant..." 18:39 - "The people fell on their faces and said, 'The Lord – He is God.'"

¹⁵ Other places are known by the name of Carmel, for example in the southern region of Yehuda; see *Yehoshua* 15:55 and *Shmuel* I 25:2.

¹⁶ Both of these suggestions can be found in this article by Yisrael Rosenson: <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/kitveyet/taleley/eliyahu-2.htm>

Eliyahu acts as a master choreographer in planning the events of the day in order to bring the people to a point of faith. As we mentioned earlier, his original call to exclusive commitment to God is met with stony silence.

It is at that point that Eliyahu unveils his challenge of bringing fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice. The aim is to prove the true God beyond any doubt. He begins by giving the Ba'al worshippers full advantage: there are more of them and they get to choose the animal that they will use. Eliyahu knows that he has to engage his audience, and so, when Eliyahu allows them to dance all morning, we wonder what Eliyahu is thinking. It would appear that he doesn't do anything during the first half of the day. He allows the Baal to occupy the people's attention. Quite deliberately, the description of their dancing (v.26) utilizes the verb PS"CH. This informs us that Israel's religious oscillation and indecision of "wavering between two opinions" is tantamount to Ba'al worship.

The day is divided into time periods:

1. morning until noon
2. noon
3. afternoon, "until the bringing of the *mincha*"¹⁷
4. at the "bringing of the *mincha*"

This technique ratchets the tension upwards, stage by stage.

At noon, after the Ba'al worship has been uneventful throughout the morning, Eliyahu begins to taunt the priests of Ba'al, utilizing cynicism and comedy to tease the worshippers of the Ba'al. One can well imagine how at this point in the day he had everyone's attention. After all, the Ba'al worship had exhausted itself, continuing uneventfully throughout the morning. Eliyahu's stand-up routine was something new and entertaining

. This throws the Ba'al prophets into a greater frenzy, raising their voices and slashing themselves with sharp blades until they bleed.¹⁸

In the morning, "there is no voice and no response" (v.26).

By late afternoon, the lack of response is stronger: "No voice, no response, **no one listening**" (v.29).

THE UNITY OF THE NATION

Eliyahu has deliberately exhausted the opposition and exposed their inability to produce fire from heaven. But Eliyahu is not simply interested in proving God's veracity; he is interested in healing the nation. It is late in the day that he beckons the people with the same verb, "*Vayigash*," that was met with silence beforehand: "Approach me!" he says. This time, without hesitation, "All the nation approached him" (v.30).

¹⁷ *Daat Mikra* suggests that this is the hour of bringing the afternoon sacrifice in the Temple at Jerusalem.

¹⁸ A modern example of such practices may be the "*Ashura*" ceremony in the Shiite sect of Islam, in which religionists cut and beat themselves until flowing with blood.

It is now that Eliyahu engages in symbolic action representative of the heritage and unity of *Am Yisrael*:

- Repairing the altar with 12 stones "for the 12 tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of God had come saying, "Israel will be your name."
- Pouring 12 jugs of water (4 jugs, 3 times)
- Praying to God

All of this is pure education. The notion of repairing an altar rather than building a new one gives the sense that there is room for *teshuva* – repentance and repair.

The number twelve is particularly interesting given that we are discussing a kingdom split into two; only a section of tribes belong to the Northern Kingdom. Nonetheless, Eliyahu is transmitting that the nation are one, all descended from Jacob. Eliyahu is telling them that just as they are a nation since Jacob, God hasn't altered for them either.

Eliyahu's prayer expresses his explicit goal:

Answer me God, answer me!
And let this nation know
That You are the Lord, the God...

RESPONSE

As we have seen, the notion of silence and vocalization are key to the depiction here. The recurrent word of the chapter is the verb ANN"A¹⁹ indicative of response or an answer. The trial of whether the Ba'al will "answer" in fire, will be a critical stimulus as to whether the nation will find their own clarity of voice in calling out to God. Eliyahu's orchestration of the day allows the nation to shift, to progress. The people become more active, more vocal, and more involved as the day advances:

At the start: "...the people said nothing" (v.21).

After Eliyahu's initial proposal: "Then all the people said, 'What you say is good'" (v.24)

Late in the afternoon: "Eliyahu said to all the people, 'Come here to me.' They came to him" (v.30).

It is Eliyahu who repairs the altar alone, but then, at the next juncture, Eliyahu gets the people involved:

¹⁹ ANN"A appears seven times in these lines. See v.24-29, and verse 37 (and also the use of the verb KARA.)

Then he said to them, "Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood." "Do it again," he said, and they did it again. "Do it a third time," he ordered, and they did it the third time. (v.33-34)

Now we see the people actively engaged. And, after fire descends from the heavens:

When the people saw this, they fell on their faces and cried, "The Lord – He is God; The Lord – He is God." (v.39)

Eliyahu has achieved his objective. He has spurred the nation to action. The famine has shaken the nation. The people have made their commitment. In that twilight hour, that *ne'ila* hour at the end of the day, the people come to a clear understanding of the true texture of their religious allegiance. This is reinforced by what follows: the people capture the Ba'al prophets and execute them.

This is quite a turnaround in a single day!

ACHAV

But the drama is not over yet! We should note Eliyahu's denouement to the day's momentous events:

"Eliyahu said to Achav: Go up, eat and drink, for there is a rumbling of [approaching] rain" (v.41)

Where does Achav stand with all this? On the one hand, the execution of the prophets could only have taken place with Achav's seal of approval. Moreover, Eliyahu runs (see v.46) in front of Achav's chariot all the way back to Yizrael, the act of a loyal servant. It would seem that the events of the day have signaled a religious turnaround for Achav, and Eliyahu is responding by exhibiting the respect due to a loyal Jewish king.²⁰ On the other hand, we recall the bitter clash between Eliyahu and Achav only a few hours earlier:

Achav said to him: 'Is that you, O traitor of Israel?' He retorted, 'It is not I who have betrayed Israel but you and your father's House, by forsaking the commandments of God and going after the Ba'alim.' (v.17-18)

So what do we make of Achav? Is he the traitor of Israel, or God's loyal servant? Can we accept so radical a reversal in so short a space of time?

When one examines this chapter, one of the unexpected observations that we can make is actually Achav's passivity and his compliance with Eliyahu. After a tense introduction through the prism of Ovadia's concern of violence and murder, we expect to meet a furious, hostile and dangerous king. Instead discover that Achav is quick to comply with Eliyahu's demands.

²⁰ See Rashi's comments to 18:46

It is possible that Achav had understood that Eliyahu constituted the key to the rainfall, hence his agreement to follow Eliyahu's plan. But it is startling how quickly he agrees to the contest at Har Hacarmel. And the absence of any discussion with, or formal pronouncement on behalf of the king allowing the slaughter of 400 royal prophets, represents a rather deafening silence. Our final scene of the chapter shows Achav riding back to Yizrael, at Eliyahu's instruction, accompanied by Eliyahu! On the one hand, the events of the day may have been so overwhelming so as to absolutely transform Achav. On the other hand, we have room to suggest that Achav is depicted here as a somewhat weak, spineless character. Since his position and influence are so critical, we will be revisiting our assessment of Achav and his wife Izevel in our future shiurim to understand the religious role that this king plays in the spiritual struggle between king and prophet, God and his law.