

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #32: Carmel

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

By Rav Elchanan Samet

2. "And all the people came close to him"

Eliyahu's first act, in preparation for the anticipated miracle, is to gather the people around him:

"Eliyahu said to all the people: Come close to me.
So all the people came close to him." (30)

This introduction to Eliyahu's actions is a stark contrast to the preamble to this event as a whole, in verse 21:

"Eliyahu came close to all the people, and said: How long...."

At the start of the day, the people had reservations about Eliyahu. The prophet had to approach them, and what he told them, when he approached them, was greeted with a perplexed – or uncertain – silence: "The people answered not a word."

But now, the nation is quick to respond to his invitation. The people gather to him, and with curiosity and anticipation they await his next words. But now is the time for action, and Eliyahu acts silently. It is through these actions that Eliyahu will convey to the people what he wants to say.

Hence, this invitation to the people to approach is meant to facilitate the continuation of the halted dialogue that the prophet began when he approached them. The possibility of continuing this dialogue, with such a striking change in the nation's attitude towards Eliyahu, is the result of the ongoing failure of the prophets of Ba'al.

We may attribute two further objectives to Eliyahu's invitation to the people to approach. Firstly, he wants to demonstrate by means of a mass action, performed by

the entire nation together, that they have turned their back on the prophets of Ba'al and the altar of Ba'al - which are left, shamed and alone, following their terrible defeat.

Eliyahu's second objective – and we shall elaborate on this further – is to invite upon himself the closest, most public observation and criticism of himself and what he is about to do. As Abarbanel explains:

"Eliyahu commands the entire nation to approach him, in order that they will see everything that he is going to do and not suspect him of deceit."

3. Preparing the altar

The next two stages in Eliyahu's actions are related to establishing the altar:

(30) "He repaired God's broken altar,
(31) and Eliyahu took twelve stones – as the number of the tribes of the children of Yaakov, to whom God spoke saying, 'Israel shall be your name' -
(32) and he formed the stones into an altar in God's Name."

The relationship between these two actions – repairing the altar and rebuilding it with stones – is problematic: did Eliyahu make use of an existing altar, which merely needed some "repair" – some renovation and completion (verse 30) - or did he build a new altar from the twelve stones that he took (as verse 32 would seem to suggest)?

This question perplexed earlier as well as more modern commentators, and various solutions have been proposed.

The following is suggested by A. Simon:

"It is more reasonable to assume that folk altars – like the altar to God atop Mount Carmel and like the altar that Eliyahu establishes in its place – were formed from stones of the field, which had not been cut with any iron instrument and which were placed in layers atop each other so as to achieve a more or less raised surface. It appears that such a stone altar would sometimes be built upon a compact sand mound (as a sort of second layer on top of the "sand altar"), for there is a hint to this in the description of God's fire that descends upon Eliyahu's altar: 'It consumed the sacrifice and the wood, and the stones, and THE EARTH, and licked up the water that was in the ditch' (verse 38). The order here is from the top downward, and from this we may deduce that between the level of the altar stones and the ditch that was around it, the "earth" upon which the stones had been arranged was visible, and this was

considered a part of the altar. The stones of such an altar would be scattered, as a result of neglect or destruction, and anyone who came to rebuild it would have to gather suitable stones over again. Hence:... Eliyahu started by repairing the sand basis of the broken altar (by raising it, packing the sand close, and forming its shape), and continued by gathering twelve stones... from which he build the body of the altar...."

This represents a realistic explanation of Eliyahu's actions concerning the building of the altar.

But Eliyahu's main objective in these actions was not the tangible achievement at the end – a finished altar ready for a sacrifice to be offered upon it. All of these could have been described in two words: "*va-yiven mizbe'ach*" (he built an altar). But the text elaborates at length in its description of his actions, devoting two full verses to them. We must conclude, then, that Eliyahu's actions are symbolic and convey important messages. Thus the actions themselves become a means of communication between Eliyahu and the people – a silent communication which is more effective than words. In the following sections we shall examine each of these actions and the messages that they are meant to convey.

4. Repairing the broken altar of God

Eliyahu does not build an entirely new altar. Rather, he chooses to establish his altar upon the foundations of "God's broken altar," which he repairs. It would seem that he means thereby, to highlight the contrast between God's altar and that of the prophets of Ba'al. Concerning the latter, we are told (verse 26), "They capered about the altar THAT HAD BEEN MADE" (literally: "which he had made"). They had no need to build an altar, for "someone" had already made it long ago, for the purposes of worshipping Ba'al on the Carmel. Therefore they made use of the altar that was ready and waiting for them, an altar which – apparently – was still in active use. The situation of God's altar upon the Carmel was very different. It was broken – apparently not as a result of neglect, but rather as part of the intentional destruction of such altars that was inspired by Izevel. This is what Eliyahu had complained about at Mount Chorev:

"The children of Israel have abandoned Your covenant; THEY HAVE DESTROYED YOUR ALTARS, and slaughtered your prophets by the sword...." (19:10)

By selecting this broken altar as the basis for rebuilding, Eliyahu is hinting at the real imbalance between the two competing parties: Eliyahu represents the service of God,

suppressed by the royal house, while the others – the false prophets – represent the form of worship that is fostered by the royalty. As we have mentioned, Eliyahu notes this contrast hinting verbally in his proposal of the test (verse 22): "Eliyahu said to the people: I alone remain a prophet to God, while the prophets of Ba'al [number] four hundred and fifty men." Just as there his intention was to hint at the grave circumstances in which the numerical superiority of the false prophets had come about ("It was, when Izevel cut off the prophets of God..." – verse 4), so, here too, he means to present the contrast between the two competing sides at the time of Izevel's domination over Israel.

Indeed, in Eliyahu's words at Mount Chorev, quoted above, we detect a clear reference to the connection between these two actions, concerning which Eliyahu expresses outrage on God's behalf: "They have destroyed YOUR ALTARS and slaughtered YOUR PROPHETS with the sword." Admittedly, there Eliyahu attributes these actions to the entire nation, which has abandoned God's covenant, but this arises from the nation's silent acquiescence to Izevel's deed, and the fact that the people themselves are "dancing between two opinions (i.e. straddling the fence)." Hence, Eliyahu's choice of choosing God's broken altar (along with his words in verse 22) is meant as a veiled rebuke: "You allow this situation in which Izevel and the servants of Ba'al are obstructing the service of God in Israel, persecuting His prophets, and destroying His altars." By repairing the altar Eliyahu hints at the restoration of Divine service to which this entire occasion is geared.

(to be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish