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The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #33: Carmel

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

By Rav Elchanan Samet

5. Twelve stones, corresponding to the number of tribes of Israel

Having repaired the foundation of the broken altar to God, Eliyahu goes on to rebuild the upper part of the altar, using a new collection of stones. This stage, too, is converted through Eliyahu's actions into a symbolic act: Eliyahu takes care to ensure that the number of stones from which the altar will be built is twelve. We may assume that the intention of the text here is to tell us that not only are we, the readers, aware of the number of stones and its significance, but that Eliyahu also ensures that his entire audience notices as well. How he achieves this – whether by mentioning it explicitly or by making it clear in some other way – is unknown.

What does Eliyahu mean by highlighting the twelve tribes of Israel, here and now?

This act gives rise to the obvious association of a similar act by Moshe, when he built an altar at the foot of Mount Sinai and prepared to forge the covenant between the nation and God:

"Moshe came and told the nation all that God had said, and all the precepts, and all the people answered with a single voice and said, 'All the things of which God has spoken – we shall do.'

Moshe wrote down all of God's words, and he arose early in the morning and BUILT AN ALTAR at the foot of the mountain, WITH TWELVE STONES, CORRESPONDING TO THE TWELVE TRIBES OF ISRAEL...

Moshe took half of the blood and put it in basins, and [the other] half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar.

He took the book of the covenant and read it out to the people, and they said: 'All that God has said we shall do, and we shall hear.'

Moshe took the blood and sprinkled it over the people, and said: 'Behold – the blood of the covenant which God has made with you, concerning all of these things.'" (*Shemot* 24:3)

In imitating Moshe's actions, Eliyahu hints at his desire to renew the covenant between all of Israel and God. The people who are now gathered at Mount Carmel serve as the representatives of all twelve of the tribes, and this altar that Eliyahu repairs will soon turn into the basis for the revelation of a sign of the covenant between God and the tribes of Israel. The fire that descends from God onto this altar, built from twelve stones, will be the signal that God is resting His Presence amongst Israel and renewing the bond between the nation and God: "This day it will be known that You are God IN ISRAEL" (verse 36).

But we must also take note of the differences between the two events. Moshe is about to forge a covenant between God and the nation concerning THE WORDS that he reads out to them: "Behold – the blood of the covenant which God makes with you concerning all of THESE THINGS (or 'words')." "These things" are the commandments of the Torah and its precepts. Concerning the fundamental faith that God is the Lord of Israel, there was no need to forge a covenant or to provide any special explanation. Eliyahu, in contrast, is coming to renew the covenant between the nation and God on the most fundamental level: a covenant concerning recognition of His Divinity and accepting it.

Another difference between the two instances is that Moshe receives in advance the response of a nation eager to enter the covenant: "All the people answered with a single voice and said, All the things of which God has spoken – we shall do." Eliyahu, on the other hand, encounters suspicion and doubt; it is only after the descent of the fire from heaven that he receives the nation's wholehearted response.

These differences are also reflected in the different times when the action takes place. The covenant at Sinai is forged in the morning: "HE AROSE EARLY IN THE MORNING and built an altar at the foot of the mountain...." The morning hour symbolizes the "morning" – dawning – of the nation. Eliyahu performs his actions "AT THE TIME OF THE MINCHA OFFERING" – the evening sacrifice, offered at twilight – a historical moment when darkness and light intermingle in the lives of the nation that is "dancing between two opinions." But when the fire descends from heaven it will illuminate the darkness with a great light, and all the "dancing," deliberation and doubts will vanish. Then the words of the prophet will be fulfilled: "There shall be one day that will be known as being God's – neither day nor night, and it shall be that at evening time there will be light." (*Zekharia* 14:7)

6. Yaakov – Yisrael

We have not yet exhausted all the content of verse 31. The text does not suffice with noting the numerical connection between the stones that Eliyahu takes and the tribes of Israel, but adds: "As the number of tribes of the children of Yaakov, to whom God's word came, saying: Your name shall be Yisrael."

What does this mean to tell us?

Mount Carmel, upon which the events in our story take place, is located in the north of *Eretz Yisrael*. As far as we know (and not only from what is hinted at in this chapter), the place was a well-known site for idolatrous worship by many different nationalities. The height and beauty of the mountain, rising up over the sea, made it a site of worship for those people – and particularly, for the Ba'al worshippers from Tzidon. Carmel, then, was the site of bitter conflict with the world of the neighboring nations, which tempted *Am Yisrael* with their wealth and culture, drawing them towards their pagan beliefs and customs.

In this mighty battle against the world of the other nations, Eliyahu has to bring about a victory for monotheistic faith in the consciousness of Israel, and a renewal of the ancient covenant. In the background to Eliyahu's battle here stands Izevel, daughter of Etba'al, King of Tzidon, and the congregation of prophets of Ba'al who enjoy her patronage – and who are apparently her fellow nationals. Eliyahu has to undo the faith of his fellow Israelites in the god of Tzidon.

The emphasis here on the twelve tribes, children of Yaakov, is meant to create a dividing line between the twelve tribes of Israel and the foreign elements that are threatening the unity and uniqueness of *Am Yisrael*. The emphasis on the name of Yaakov as the one "to whom God's word came, saying: Yisrael shall be your name," is meant to recall Yaakov's battle against the angel – the spiritual representative of Eisav ("the prince of Eisav," in the words of the Sages). In this battle our forefather prevailed: "For you have striven with God and with man, and have prevailed" (*Bereishit* 32:29). And like Yaakov, so too his descendants, now standing at Carmel. Eliyahu and the entire nation will prevail in their spiritual battle against the four hundred and fifty alien prophets of Ba'al, and they will overcome them.

(to be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish