

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

SHIUR #38: CARMEL PART 6: GOD'S FIRE (38) By Rav Elchanan Samet

"God's fire descended and consumed the offering and the wood and the stones and the dust and licked up the water that was in the ditch" (38)

This verse brings us to the dramatic climax of the episode at Carmel. What happens here represents the purpose of all the actions that were performed leading up to it, in preparation for it, and it is the point of departure that facilitates all the actions that are to follow. Indeed, in several respects this verse is highlighted as the climax of the story: in terms of content, style, and its location within the literary unit to which it belongs (verses 30-46).

A. In terms of content, this verse is exceptional in relation to the entire story in its description of the direct and exclusive action by God. The opening words, "God's fire," should be understood as *Targum Yonatan* renders them – "fire descended from God," i.e., "sent by God." Thus, this verse is reminiscent of other verses describing similar events:

"Fire emerged FROM BEFORE GOD and consumed the offering and the fats upon the altar" (*Vayikra* 9:24)

"Fire descended FROM THE HEAVEN and consumed the offering and the sacrifices" (II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 7:1)

Attention should be paid to the fact that even though the purpose of our story is to prove to Israel that God is the Lord, and thereby to bring them back to the faith of their forefathers, the nature of the actions undertaken here is entirely human; there is almost no mention of any direct Divine involvement in them. Even the descent of rain at the end of the story is not described in the text as an act of God. Nevertheless, there are a few exceptions. The first is the point of departure for our story, which belongs to the previous unit:

"Many days passed, and God's word came to Eliyahu in the third year, saying: Go, appear before Achav, that I may give rain upon the face of the earth." (18:1)

The second instance is our present verse:

"A fire descended from God and consumed..." (38)

The third is the concluding verse of the story:

"God's hand was upon Eliyahu, and he girded his loins and ran before Achav until the approach to Yizre'el." (46)

Thus, at these three critical junctures – at the point of departure for these events, at the point of their conclusion, and at their climax – there is mention of some level of Divine involvement. But it is only at the climax of the story that this involvement is overt and visible to all. God's involvement here admittedly comes in response to Eliyahu's prayer, but it does not come about through his agency – as it does in the other two cases.

B. The substantial importance of our verse, as explained above, finds expression in its ceremonious, grandiose style. The detailed description of the elements consumed by the fire is reminiscent of the preceding actions undertaken by Eliyahu, as described in verses 30-35. This serves to emphasize the connection between these actions and their fruition; everything prepared has been consumed by the Divine fire that descends from heaven.

Aside from this reminder, the description of the consuming fire stands out in its chiasmic structure. Let us consider a literal translation of the verse in Hebrew:

A	...And consumed
B	the offering and the wood and the stones and the dust
B	and the water that was in the ditch
A	it licked up

The description opens and concludes with verbs, while the middle is filled with nouns – all those artifacts that are consumed by the fire. The order of the objects that are consumed is in accordance with their location: from the highest (the offering) to the lowest (the water in the ditch that Eliyahu dug out). But the division of the verse, indicated by the phraseology (the *etnachta* under the word "dust"), creates two unequal groups. The first contains four items (the offering, the wood, the stones, the dust), while the second contains only one (the water in the ditch). What is the reason for this? Firstly, there is the linguistic explanation: "consumed" is not a verb that is

appropriate to the evaporation of water by the fire, since water is not flammable and fire cannot burn it. Therefore the verb "licked up" is selected in relation to the water.

The second reason for the water being set apart from the other items is a thematic one: the licking up of the water by the fire demonstrates the awe of the miracle in a way that the consumption of the other items does not. This is not only because water is the element that is most opposite to fire (which is the reason why Eliyahu pours it over the sacrifice and the wood), but also because the water in the ditch is a considerable distance from the altar itself. In other words, by emphasizing that the fire licks up even the water in the ditch, the text gives us an idea not only of the power of the fire, but also of the extent to which it spreads throughout the area prepared for it. For this reason the text separates between the consumption of the altar and what is upon it, and the licking up of the water in the ditch.

The extent of the miracle, expressed specifically in the licking up of the water, is highlighted by means of the postponement of the second verb until the end of the sentence. This, then, is the reason for the chiasmic structure of the verse.

C. Concerning the location of our verse within the section of the story describing Eliyahu's actions, starting in verse 30 and continuing through verse 46, we have elaborated in previous *shiurim*. We may recall here that this verse serves as the central axis of this part of the story. The preceding eight verses (30-37) described the six stages of Eliyahu's preparations for the miracle, and the eight verses that follow (39-46) describe the six results of this miracle.

It is difficult to point to exact parallels between the "preparatory" verses and the "results"; nevertheless, we may point to a general framework that creates a symmetrical structure. On either side of the central axis there is a clear parallel between Eliyahu's prayer, in which he expresses his faith that God's response will bring about a situation in which "This nation will know that You are the Lord God" (verse 37), and the fulfillment of this prayer: "All the nation saw... and they said, 'the Lord is God'" (verse 39).

There is also a hidden parallel between the introduction to the unit and its conclusion. At the outset, Eliyahu calls upon the nation, "Come near to me," and the nation obeys. After turning their backs on the prophets of Ba'al and their altar, the nation finally attaches itself to its true prophet and begins to cooperate with him – increasingly so after the miracle of the fire. Thus, the nation becomes deserving of complete reconciliation: not only a resumption of rain, but also something else – the return of the prophet to them. The story ends with Eliyahu running before Achav. If

Achav here symbolizes the nation, then this act represents a rejoining of the nation by the prophet in return for the nation rejoining him.

The important point for our discussion here is that all that we read in this unit leading up to the verse that serves as the central axis serves to lead us to that verse, while all that follows is a result of it. For this reason this verse is located exactly midway through the unit.

Thus content, style and structure come together to emphasize our verse as the climax of the gathering at Carmel.

Translated by Kaeren Fish