

**The Eliyahu Narratives
Yeshivat Har Etzion**

**Shiur no. 40 - Carmel
Part 8: The Nation's Response (39-40)
By Rav Elchanan Samet**

1. "The Lord is God..."

Following the description of the great miracle of the descent of God's fire, the text describes the reactions of the nation. In verses 39-40 they declare, "The Lord is God...", and they slaughter the prophets of Ba'al. From this point onwards, up to the end of our chapter (verse 46), we hear nothing more about the nation.

The first reaction of the nation is described as follows:

(39) All the nation saw it, and they fell upon their faces, and they said: "The Lord is God; the Lord is God!"

It is not out of formal obligation to the conditions of the test, which they accepted upon themselves in advance, that the people react as they do. Both from their actions and from their words, as described in these verses, we sense a genuine and spontaneous awe and fear of God. This awe is evidenced, first and foremost, by the fact that they fall upon their faces. This falling comes as a response to seeing God's fire falling from heaven to the earth. In falling before Him, the people gathered here repeat the actions of their forefathers in the desert, in similar circumstances (*Vayikra* 9:24):

"Fire emerged from before God and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fats, AND ALL THE NATION SAW IT, and they shouted, AND FELL UPON THEIR FACES."

In both cases, this falling to the ground is the acknowledgement of the Divine Presence – the human response to the appearance of God. The Ba'al ha-Metzudot (following the example of Abarbanel) interprets, "They fell upon their faces – to prostrate themselves before God."

The nation's declaration, "The Lord is God," does indeed seem to be the required conclusion arising from the conditions of the test (verse 24): "The God Who will answer with fire – HE IS GOD," and as a belated response to Eliyahu's demand that they make a decision (verse 21); "If THE LORD IS GOD, follow Him." But in their repetition of this cry, they reveal their great emotion and the independence of their conclusion. The Radak explains the repetition as follows:

"The repetition [is meant to express] the strength of the faith in their hearts. They say and repeat, 'the Lord is God!'"

2. The capture of the prophets of Ba'al and their slaughter

It is only after the nation has proved its true repentance and return to God in the spontaneous reaction discussed above, that Eliyahu turns to them and tests their readiness to translate their new awareness into practical action:

(40) "Eliyahu said to them: Take the prophets of Ba'al; let not one of them escape."

And, amazingly enough, the people who that same morning were still "dancing between two opinions" and were not ready to turn their backs on Ba'al worship, now immediately heed Eliyahu's call, and do as he commands:

"They took them."

Thus Eliyahu channels the powerful, newfound religious devotion in the nation into a drastic, practical expression of that feeling – thereby also testing its sincerity. Obviously, aside from the importance of putting the false prophets to death as a test of the nation's sincerity at this moment, it also halts forthwith the activity of these false prophets amongst Israel.

This development is actually quite surprising: the other results arising from the miracle of the descent of fire and described in the unit of verses 39-46 are all more or less to be expected. We are not surprised by the reaction of the nation described in verse 39, nor by the description, from this point onwards, of the resumption of rainfall. But the capture and slaughter of the prophets of Ba'al is different: not only are we not expecting this, but it actually seems to contradict the conditions of the test that Eliyahu proposed at the start of the chapter. The purpose of the test, as explained by Eliyahu, is a clarification of the question of which God is the true One, Who should be followed. There was never any hint, in his words,

that the clarification of this question would lead to the physical liquidation of the losing side. On the contrary, the balanced attitude towards the two sides that Eliyahu takes such pains to exhibit at every stage, and the generosity that he displays towards his opponents at the various stages of the buildup, create a matter-of-fact atmosphere that gives no impression of animosity between the sides. The ramifications of this test are meant to influence its judges – the nation and its faith. But, there was no hint that the test would have such dramatic results for the participants themselves. Now, it turns out, in contrast to the tolerant tone that has been maintained, Eliyahu utilizes his victory to physically annihilate those who stood against him in this test and lost. What is the meaning of this sudden change?

In a previous *shiur*, we noted the dual significance of the test at Carmel. The one message is a universal religious one – the purpose proposed by Eliyahu at the beginning of his address to the nation and to the false prophets. The other message, which becomes manifest in the course of Eliyahu's preparations for the great miracle of the descent of fire, is the nationalist-Israelite aspect of the event: a renewal of the covenant between Israel and God. On the basis of this dual significance we explained Eliyahu's two-part prayer, and we noted that he also awards dual significance to the miracle of the fire. Here it must be added that the same duality extends to the nation's reaction.

The initial spontaneous reaction of the nation, as described in verse 39, is directly related to the conditions of the test that were set out at the beginning of the story. Although we have noted above that this reaction did not arise from a formal obligation to the conditions of the test, but rather gives expression to genuine awe and the nation's own, independently-drawn conclusion. Still this does not negate the obvious linguistic connections between Eliyahu's words at the beginning of the story and the nation's present reaction, and hence the attachment of this reaction to the sphere of the "test" – the first message of the episode.

The people's second reaction – their response to Eliyahu's demand that the prophets of Ba'al be caught in order to be put to death, as described in verse 40, is a reaction that arises from the higher significance of the events at Carmel: the renewal of the covenant between the nation and their God and a return to the commandments of the Torah. In this context, the prophets of Ba'al are not partners in a cordial attempt to establish "Who is God," but rather are leading Israel astray into idolatry, thereby endangering the existence of *Am Yisrael* as God's nation.

At the time that Eliyahu proposes the test to the nation "dancing between two opinions," he creates a mood of relativist tolerance, which suits the pagan

concepts with which the nation has become infected; "Idolatry is indulgent" – it tolerates the existence of a multiplicity of deities. But now that the One God has revealed Himself to His nation in order to renew the covenant with them, He is revealed as a jealous God Who will not abide the sin of idolatry amongst His nation, the members of His covenant. Now Eliyahu cannot suffice with the spiritual "high" of the people who are falling upon their faces and declaring, "The Lord is God." He must act to remove all idolatry from Israel by putting to death those who incite towards it, in order that the covenant will not be violated again.

Let us now turn our attention to the second part of verse 40:

"Eliyahu took them down to the Kishon River, and slaughtered them there."

This brief account – just seven words in the Hebrew – gives rise to several questions:

a. Why does Eliyahu take the prophets of Ba'al down to the Kishon River, which is at the foot of the Carmel, rather than putting them to death at the top of the mountain, where they had spent the whole day?

It would seem that the descent of fire onto the altar that Eliyahu built, and onto the area demarcated by the trench, bestowed a sanctified status on the site; this was a place where God's Presence rested. This entailed that killing of any person – even people legally deserving of the death penalty – cannot be carried out at this holy place, because of the complete contrast between the altar and the spilling of blood. The descent from the Carmel to the Kishon River therefore expresses a severance – not only from the specific place where God's fire came down, but from the geographic area as a whole that served as the arena for this event.

b. What is the legal basis, in the commandments of the Torah, for putting the prophets of Ba'al to death?

Against the background of the very severe prohibitions in the Torah against idolatry, and the death sentence that it carries for all those who engage in it and influence others to engage in it, not a single one of our commentators raises this question. It is clear to all that these prophets were deserving of death according to Torah law, both on the basis of their actions prior to coming to Carmel and in their actions there on this day.

Nevertheless, we must conclude that Eliyahu's action here represents a "prophetic *ad-hoc* measure." He does not put the false prophets to death through the accepted procedure as commanded by the Torah, on the basis of evidence by witnesses and a decision by judges. He acts on the urgent need of the moment, and the necessity of acting in a quick and decisive way. In any event, the fact that the prophets of Ba'al are deserving of death is clear.

c. What is the meaning of the text attributing the two actions - "Eliyahu took them down.... And he slaughtered them" – to Eliyahu? It would seem that what we are being told here is that Eliyahu did this with his own hands, without help from others. But here we must ask why, in the very same verse, we read about the capture of the false prophets by the people, who acted in accordance with Eliyahu's instructions – "they took them," while thereafter Eliyahu operates alone?

In truth it would seem that it is difficult to imagine that Eliyahu single-handedly slaughtered all four hundred and fifty prophets of Ba'al. Realistically, the slaughter of four hundred and fifty men by one person is complicated and would have taken many hours; for one person to lead them down, live, to the Kishon River is almost impossible.

Therefore, the explanation of Radak seems logical:

"He slaughtered them there – HE COMMANDED that they be slaughtered, for all the nation was on his side when they saw this great wonder."

But if this is the case, we must ask why the text changes its formulation, starting off in the plural ("they caught them"), but thereafter attributing actions performed by the nation at Eliyahu's command, to the prophet himself? Would it not be more accurate – and also linguistically consistent – to say, "They caught them and led them down to the Kishon river, and slaughtered them there"?

We may propose two answers to this question:

i. The formulation of the verse as we propose above would be misleading: the reader may conclude that the leading of the false prophets down to the Kishon River and their slaughter there is performed not only BY the nation but also at their initiative, swept away in a tide of religious fervor and enthusiasm towards such drastic action, without any command by Eliyahu. This mistake would arise because the verb, "they caught them," is preceded by Eliyahu's command, "Take (catch) the prophets of Ba'al...", while before the two other verbs (which, in our proposed reading, refer to

the nation) we find no such command. But this understanding does not suit the facts. It is Eliyahu who instructs the people to perform all of these actions, and this is important not only for a proper evaluation of their behavior (i.e., they did not act as a crazed mob with no restraints), and for our appreciation of Eliyahu's responsibility for their actions.

ii. It is also possible that the formulation of the verse, in the form in which it is written, hints that Eliyahu did not command the entire nation to kill the false prophets. He only commanded all of them to catch them, but the prophet chose to do the rest with a handful of faithful followers who chose to go with him, those who "God had touched their hearts." These people admittedly acted at Eliyahu's command, but they were not representative of the entire nation, and therefore the text leaves off the general plural with which the verse started out ("they caught them"). This emphasizes that these actions are attributed mainly to Eliyahu, who acted with the help of his loyal followers. If this hypothesis is true, we learn from this that Eliyahu limits his demands from the nation to a certain boundary; he does not demand their partnership in actions that lie beyond their ability or what they are prepared to do.

Translated by Kaeren Fish.