

The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #28: Carmel

Part 3: Eliyahu addresses the prophets of Ba'al (25-29)

1. Differences between Eliyahu's first proposal and his second

Already in his address to the nation, when Eliyahu proposes the test between himself and the prophets of Ba'al (verses 22-24), he includes an appeal to the false prophets: "You shall call out in the name of your god" (verse 24). But he does not wait for their response, and the people – who respond with enthusiasm to his proposal ("They said, 'The thing is good'") – obligate them to agree (as discussed in greater detail in the previous *shiur*).

Now, having obtained their agreement, Eliyahu addresses the false prophets separately:

(25) "Eliyahu said to the prophets of Ba'al: Choose one ox for yourselves, and prepare it first – for you are the majority; and call out in the name of your god, but do not apply any fire."

Is this proposal identical to the one previously presented to the entire nation (including the false prophets)? Let us compare them:

Proposal to the nation (23-24):

1. "Two oxen shall be given to us
2. they shall choose one ox for themselves
3. and they shall cut it into pieces, and place it upon the wood
4. but they shall not apply any fire.
5. And I shall prepare the other ox, and place it upon the wood
6. and I shall apply no fire.
7. Then you shall call out in the name of your god

8. And I shall call out in the name of the Lord."

Proposal to the prophets of Ba'al (25):

1. "Choose one ox for yourselves
2. and prepare it first, for you are the majority
3. And call out in the name of your god
4. but apply no fire."

The proposal as presented to the nation includes eight stages, while the prophets of Ba'al are presented with only four. Even these four fundamental elements differ from their parallel counterparts. Let us list all the omissions and changes:

- i. The proposal to the false prophets omits the first stage as presented to the nation – "let two oxen be given to us." Perhaps, by this stage in the events, the oxen were already before them, and they needed only to choose between them.
- ii. Stage 3 of the proposal to the nation corresponds to stage 2 of the proposal to the prophets, but the latter is condensed in one aspect and expanded in another. The carving of the ox and placing its limbs on the wood is condensed into a single word: "*Va-asu*" (you shall prepare it). On the other hand, Eliyahu explains why they will prepare their ox first (as well as having first choice of the ox): "For you are the majority." This elaboration has a parallel in his words to the nation, in verse 22, which precedes his detailed proposal: "I alone remain a prophet to God, while the prophets of Ba'al number four hundred and fifty." This verse is a justification in advance for requiring the false prophets to perform every stage of the proposal first. Now, in addressing the prophets themselves, Eliyahu includes this justification within his proposal.
- iii. The original order of the proposal is reversed. In the proposal to the nation (stage 4), the noting of the fact that no fire will be applied to the sacrifice, precedes the mention of the false prophets calling out to their god (stage 7). But in his address to the prophets themselves, Eliyahu first describes them calling out to their god, and only afterwards tells them that they will apply no fire. His intention seems to be to combine the calling to Ba'al and the preparation of the sacrifice into a single, continuous act; only after the description of this act as a whole is it appropriate to note what will NOT be done. This discrepancy serves as preparation for the principal and most striking difference between the two proposals.

iv. That is: Stages 5,6 and 8 of the proposal to the nation are omitted from Eliyahu's proposal to the false prophets. The explanation for this would seem to be that these stages all pertain to Eliyahu's own actions; therefore, they have no place in his address to the prophets. But this raises a problem: Eliyahu's original proposal gives the impression that his own actions are meant to be combined with the actions of the false prophets, such that the "calling out" of both sides takes place simultaneously. Why, then, does Eliyahu omit his part in the action, corresponding to the actions of the prophets of Ba'al?

We may answer this question by referring to Abarbanel:

"Eliyahu misled them when he said, "Let two oxen be given to us... and you shall call out in the name of your god, while I call out in the name of the Lord...." THEY THOUGHT THAT THEY AND ELIYAHU WOULD OFFER UP THEIR SACRIFICES TOGETHER... But Eliyahu, seeing that they were acquiescing and had no possibility of avoiding this test, then corrected what they had understood from his deception, by saying, 'Choose yourselves one ox and prepare it first...' – in other words, THEY WOULD NOT PREPARE THEIR SACRIFICES TOGETHER, FOR THERE WOULD BE NO WAY OF DISTINGUISHING THE TRUTH FROM FALSEHOOD UNLESS EACH GROUP PREPARED ITS SACRIFICE SEPARATELY. Therefore he said, '... and prepare it first.'"

In his first address, Eliyahu is careful to preserve a perfect balance between himself and his opponents. But once the latter are already irreversibly committed, he is able to diverge slightly from this strict balance. He introduces a "technical" correction into his original plan which, from the nation's point of view, seems logical – their communal attention should not be divided between two actions taking place at the same time; rather, they should be able to concentrate on each separately. This "correction" fits in with Eliyahu's general plan, whose success requires that the false prophets are met with failure before God answers his own call.

2. The first failure of the false prophets

Eliyahu presents his proposal to the prophets of Ba'al, and they respond:

(26) "They took the ox which was offered to them, and prepared it, and they called out in the name of Ba'al from morning until noon, saying: 'Ba'al – answer us!' But there was no voice, nor any answer, and they capered around the altar which had been made."

Does their response match what was offered to them in every detail? Let us compare:

Eliyahu's proposal:

"Choose for yourselves one ox
and prepare it first...
and call out in the name of your god"

False prophets' action:

"They took the ox WHICH WAS OFFERED TO THEM
and prepared it
and they called out in the name of Ba'al..."

The number of stages and the order of their appearance are identical, but the discrepancy in the first stage stands out starkly. Eliyahu emphasized, both in his words to the nation (verse 23 – "THEY SHALL CHOOSE one ox FOR THEMSELVES") and in his direct appeal to the false prophets (verse 25 – "CHOOSE FOR YOURSELVES one ox"), their right to choose the ox they wanted first. This is has significance for the success of the test; Eliyahu wants to prevent any possible claim that they were given a blemished ox and that it was for this reason that their sacrifice failed. But now, when it comes to the test itself, we are seemingly being told exactly the opposite: "They took the ox WHICH WAS GIVEN (or "which he gave") TO THEM" – implying that Eliyahu selected the ox and gave it to them. But this contradicts the offer that he himself made twice, as well as running counter to the attempt to preclude any after the fact complaints on their part!

On the literal level, Rav Keel (*Da'at Mikra*) appears to solve this problem by interpreting this phrase in the general sense: "which was given to them' (by whomever gave it) – referring to the people who brought the oxen to Mount Carmel."

For half a day, "from the morning until noon," the false prophets persist in their efforts to obtain some response from Ba'al. They try to achieve this in two ways. Firstly, through prayer: (26) "They called out in the name of Ba'al... saying, 'Ba'al – answer us!'" ; secondly, through bizarre worship rites: "They capered around the altar which had bmade."

But none of this has any effect. In contrast to their cry, "Ba'al – answer us!," the result is that "there was no voice, NOR ANY ANSWER."

To all those present at Mount Carmel, as well as to us – the readers – the failure of the false prophets appears to have been proven beyond any doubt. Now, with noon having passed, it seems that the time has come for Eliyahu to prove his faith – faith in God. But Eliyahu has other ideas. He conducts himself in a relaxed manner, as one who has time on his side and who need not rush to exploit the failure of the false prophets, his opponents, and push them off the stage. With astounding generosity, real "nobility" – of the sort that expresses absolute self-confidence – he offers his opponents another opportunity.

(to be continued)

Translated by Kaeren Fish