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Haftarat Ki Tisa*: The Encounter between* Eliyahu Ha-Navi *and the Prophets of Ba'al: Challenging Religious Syncretism*

In the *haftarah* for *Ki Tisa*, we read that "*ha-ra'av chazak be-Shomron*" – "the famine was severe in Shomron" (*Melakhim Aleph* 18:2). This by itself is not that remarkable, as famines were relatively frequent in the Land of Israel. What makes this famine unusual, however, was that it led to a dramatic showdown between *Eliyahu Ha-Navi* and the prophets of Ba'al.

To understand this confrontation, we need to appreciate the religious dynamics of the First Temple Period. The Israelites and Judahites – contrary to popular belief – did not abandon worshipping Hashem. Rather, their problem was religious syncretism, i.e., the blending of the worship of *Hashem* with that of other deities. While such syncretism itself is clearly forbidden by the Torah, the people were susceptible to such practices for a number of reasons. First, Canaanite culture was still widespread throughout the land. Much of Israelite material culture derived from Canaanite prototypes, so much so, that it is often difficult to distinguish an Israelite vessel or tool from a Canaanite one. Second, Phoenician culture exerted influence through both economic and diplomatic relationships that were generally beneficial. The marriage between Achav and the Phoenician princess Izevel solidified these bonds, while at the same time infusing pagan worship into the royal household. And, third, the Canaanite deities were less abstract than some might think. These gods had easy-to-understand roles with tangible representations such as small figurines, bulls, or trees.

The two main culprits for this syncretism were the two major Canaanite/Phoenician[1] deities: Asherah and Ba'al. According to Canaanite myths, Asherah was the chief female deity, the life-bestowing, mother goddess who was represented by a limbless tree trunk (often carved) planted in the ground. Ba'al, who was both her son and consort, emerged as the principal male fertility deity, responsible for routine aspects of daily life, such as rain, crops, and livestock. The worship of both Ba'al and Asherah included cult prostitution, a form of sympathetic magic meant to ensure the continued fertility and productivity of the land. While Asherah could be further worshipped in sacred groves, Ba'al was associated with animal sacrifices and divination.

Another aspect to consider of this confrontation was the role of the Israelite king Achav (873–852 bce). While we are well aware that Achav strayed religiously, we often neglect to acknowledge his political accomplishments. Following in the footsteps of his father Omri, Achav transformed the small and politically unstable kingdom of Israel into a military power, capable of not only defeating

1. Phoenicians were essentially sea-faring Canaanites. "Phoenicia" is a Classical Greek term used to refer to the region of the major Canaanite port towns. In terms of archaeology, language, life style, and religion, there is little distinction between Phoenicians and other Canaanites.

the Arameans, but also preventing incursions into the region by the Assyrians. Israel also gained in economic importance as trading relations flourished with both Phoenicia and Aram.

It was during Achav's reign that the building of the Israelite capital at Shomron was completed. Located on a dominating hill, halfway between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, the ancient city of Shomron was situated in a fertile zone known for its wine and oil production. In building their capital, Omri and Achav selected an innovative configuration in which the palace and the other administrative buildings were constructed in the highest part of the city, which was then strongly fortified as a separate enclosure. Like the contemporary *ophel* in Jerusalem, the acropolis at Shomron served as a sophisticated royal citadel and stronghold to contend with both internal and external dangers. This security was matched by its luxury. In one building, over 500 pieces of carved ivory – furniture inlay imports from Phoenicia – were found.

The construction of the capital itself would have been cause for alarm to Eliyahu. It signaled the rising strength of the monarchy and its attendant estrangement from the general populace. Many of the fears elucidated by Shmuel about the perils of kingship appeared to be coming true (*Shmuel Aleph* 8:10–20), not least of which was the great effort and expense Achav devoted to the raising of horses for chariots and cavalry. The great luxury enjoyed by the palace further exacerbated the division between elites and commoners. While the king rested on beds of ivory, the farmers were literally concerned about their next meal. Finally, with the introduction of pagan worship in the capital, Achav contributed to the insidious and pervasive practice of religious syncretism – the blending of Canaanite and Phoenician religious traditions with Israelite ones.

At first glance, it might seem that Achav was no syncretist, but simply a pagan. After all, he married a Phoenician princess, built an altar and temple to Ba'al in Shomron, actively worshipped Ba'al and Asherah, and accepted into his palace hundreds of prophets of Ba'al and Asherah. On the other hand, Achav did not interfere with the continued worship of *Hashem*. He retained as his chief steward the "God-fearing" Ovadiah,[2] who had rescued 100 prophets of *Hashem*. Moreover, Achav respected Eliyahu as a *navi* of *Hashem*, agreeing without hesitation to the proposed showdown at *Har Ha-Carmel* between *Hashem* and Ba'al. And, finally, after the contest, Achav accepted *Hashem*'s victory and did not obstruct the subsequent massacre of the prophets of Ba'al.

In light of the above, we are able to grasp this confrontation as not only a battle between *Hashem* and Ba'al or as a battle between prophet and king, but rather as a battle for the heart and soul of Israel. The question was not simply "who will bring the rain?" The question was how to convince the Israelites to give up their religious syncretism and worship *Hashem* alone. As Eliyahu expressed: "*ad matai atem poschim al shetei ha-se'ipim*" – "How long will you dance between two opinions?" "*im Hashem ha-Elokim, lekhu acharav, ve-im ha-Ba'al lekhu acharav*" – "If *Hashem* is the God, go after Him! And, if the Ba'al, go after it!" The message was clear: you have to choose; you cannot worship both. Significantly, at this point, the people did not answer Eliyahu. They apparently saw nothing wrong with their syncretism.

The stage was therefore set for the dramatic confrontation. The playing field was made level by the fact that the ritual selected – animal sacrifice –was a shared practice among Israelites and Canaanites/Phoenicians. Why animal sacrifice was practiced is itself an interesting question. While the meaning was complex and varied from culture to culture, the underlying procedure was essentially the same: "This procedure consists in establishing a means of communication between the sacred and profane worlds through the mediation of a victim, that is, of a thing that in the course of the ceremony is destroyed." [3]

In offering sacrifices (*korbanot*), Israelites, Canaanites, and Phoenicians were participating in a well-established Ancient Near Eastern pattern. Textual sources reveal many of the particular reasons

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2. See Hayyim Angel, "Hopping Between Two Opinions: Understanding the Biblical Portrait of Ahab," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 35 (1):3–10, 2007.

3. Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 67.

for individual sacrifices, but the common idea was that through sacrifice, people established a propitiatory relationship with the divine, a by-product of which was sanctifying human consumption of meat. In the case of ancient Israel, *korbanot* were offered for much of the same reasons we now associate with prayer: to praise *Hashem*, to become closer to Him, to express thanks, love, and gratitude. Sacrifices were also offered to mark holidays and festivals, to cleanse a person of ritual impurity, and to atone for human transgressions.

The Canaanites and Phoenicians also offered sacrifices to establish a relationship with their deities. From textual sources, a few differences emerge from Israelite practice. The first is that the Canaanites and Phoenicians believed that in offering the sacrifice they were literally providing food for their gods. The second is that the sacrifices were often linked to the practice of divination by observing the animal's behavior during and after its slaughter and from marks and flaws detected on the victim's body. The third is that the sacrifices were not generally associated with personal atonement.

On *Har Ha-Carmel*, both sides were given a bull and the opportunity to offer a burnt sacrifice, or *olah*. This particular type of offering is very simple and extremely common. The *olah* was completely burnt and not eaten. Symbolically, this type of offering was appropriate to the situation as it represented complete submission to *Hashem*. It expressed a desire to commune with *Hashem* and be unified with Him. By choosing a simple offering with a straightforward meaning, Eliyahu was making the contest as transparent as possible. There was neither opportunity for hidden tricks nor any reason to complain about unfair advantages. This was as fair a contest as could be devised, and the winner would be clearly manifest. The only difference between this and the usual *olah* sacrifice was that, in this case, *Hashem* had to provide the fire.

As the description of the dramatic encounter makes clear, the offering of sacrifices was a multi-sensory experience. The prophets of Ba'al prepared the bull and prayed to their god, perhaps reciting sacred texts. They danced around the altar and cut themselves with their weapons. If they had musical instruments, they surely would have used them. Except for the self-mutilation, the ritual behavior ascribed to the prophets of Ba'al would not have raised any eyebrows among the Israelites because this type of ritual performance was familiar to them from their own experience. This is what made the syncretism so hard to remove – it did not appear so foreign.

Despite going through the proper motions, the prophets of Ba'al failed to bring about the desired result. Their ritual performance failed. The best they could hope for was a stalemate.

The action now shifted to Eliyahu. Aware of the dramatic backdrop and the expectancy of his audience, he carefully and deliberately supervised the preparation of the *olah*. As with any successful ritual performance, Eliyahu's movements included formality, symbolism (12 stones to represent the 12 tribes), repetition (three times water is poured on the wood and bull), and enhancement (he planted seeds in a trench encircling the altar). By allowing the prophets of Ba'al to proceed first, Eliyahu gained home-field advantage, the opportunity for a walk-off base hit.

Eliyahu called out, and *Hashem* answered with a consuming fire. For the people, this was an intensely spiritual encounter, and they reacted accordingly. As they fell down, they twice proclaimed "*Hashem hu ha-Elokim*" – "*Hashem* – He is the God!" (*Melakhim Aleph* 18:39) becoming, at least for the moment, true believers. Their faith received a further boost when shortly thereafter *Hashem* ended the drought and brought the much needed rain.

The victory had been unmistakably won, yet the practice of religious syncretism did not end immediately. Why? Understanding the reasons syncretism was so hard to remove may be best explained by mathematical logic, particularly the principles used to establish truth values of mathematical statements. Syncretism – the blending of belief systems – operates essentially as a disjunction. In logic, a disjunction is a compound sentence formed by using the word "or" to join two simple sentences. What this means is that the statement can be true when only one part is true. Thus, the Israelites did not perceive Ba'al as false just because it was *Hashem* who answered them.

Yet this episode on *Har Ha-Carmel was* a watershed moment. It turned back the rising tide of syncretism just when syncretism was on the verge of gaining official political recognition – the

marriage of Achav and Izevel symbolized this, while their actions promoted it. It is no coincidence that this episode featured one of Israel's strongest prophets against one of Israel's strongest political kings.

Eliyahu's victory offered a harbinger of hope that true faith in the Oneness of *Hashem* could one day be established. The long drawn-out process required the implementation of significant reforms and the experience of great national tragedy, but ultimately the day arrived when every Jew could utter "*Hashem hu ha-Elokim*" – "*Hashem* – He is the God!" and believe it without any conflict in their heart.