

# DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

## Parshas Pinchas

### From the Haftarah: Eliyahu's Journey

#### INTRODUCTION: DISAPPOINTMENT – AND NEW APPOINTMENTS

One of the most noticeable features of the Haftarah for Parshas Pinchas is that it is often not read. If the Shabbos of Pinchas falls in the three weeks, the haftarah for the week is set aside and we read the first of the three haftarahs of calamity (*t'lasa de'puranusa*) that lead up to Tisha b'Av. Yet as we will see, in addition to obviously deserving study in its own right, our haftarah contains a lesson which is itself most relevant to this period in the Jewish year.

The Haftarah describes the aftermath of Eliyahu's famous confrontation with the prophets of Ba'al on Mount Carmel. Upon hearing of this episode, Queen Jezebel demands his death and Eliyahu is forced to flee for his life, exclaiming to Hashem that he has endured enough and requests that Hashem take his soul. When Hashem appears to Eliyahu, Eliyahu declares that he has acted zealously on Hashem's behalf toward the Jewish people who had forsaken their covenant with Him. Subsequently, Hashem tells Eliyahu to return and to appoint Elisha as a prophet in his stead.

What is behind the appointment of Elisha at this stage as the new prophet? We might be inclined to understand that Hashem is granting Eliyahu's request that he no longer have to endure the hardships of being Hashem's prophet. However, a vastly different – and quite startling – explanation of this development is provided by our sages in the Midrash.

#### MECHILTA: DEMANDING THE HONOR OF HASHEM AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE

Let us preface by noting that a prophet of Hashem operates on two planes:

- ▷ His dealings with the people regarding their waywardness in keeping Hashem's commandments. This is called "demanding the honor of the Father."
- ▷ His dealings with Hashem on behalf of the Jewish people, defending them, praying for them and pleading their cause. This is called "Demanding the honor of the Children"

In respect to these two realms, the Mechilta<sup>1</sup> considers the differing approaches of various prophets throughout our history, stating that although the prophet needs to confront the people, "demanding the honor of the Father," he also needs to plead the cause of the Children when dealing with Hashem. A classic example of this dual role is Moshe Rabbeinu. On the one hand, he has numerous confrontations with the people over their wrongdoings. These include his many rebukes and exhortations, as well

<sup>1</sup> Parshas Bo Sec. 1.

as dispensing harsh punishment toward offenders where necessary – such as with the sin of the Golden of Calf. On the other hand, when talking to Hashem about the people, he will do anything to defend them, even asking – during the very same episode of the Golden Calf – that his name be erased rather than them being wiped out.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to this, says the Mechilta, Eliyahu demanded the honor of the Father but *not* of the Children. The source for this pronouncement is the verse in our Haftarah: When asked by Hashem “*What are you doing here, Eliyahu?*”<sup>3</sup> He responded, “*I Have acted with great zeal for Hashem, King of Legions, for the Children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, they have destroyed Your altars and killed Your prophets.*”<sup>4</sup> When speaking to Hashem about the Jewish people, he spoke only words of criticism and did not try to defend them or plead their case.

Moreover, the Mechilta concludes that it was *for this reason* Eliyahu was instructed to appoint Elisha as a prophet in his stead. This was not because Hashem granted his request to be relieved of his duties; it was because, having failed to plead the cause of the Jewish people when speaking with Hashem, he had disqualified himself as a prophet. As the sages of the Midrash express it – and as only they can – “Hashem said to Eliyahu: I have no desire for your prophecy.”

### **IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF MOSHE RABBEINU**

Considering the above, one of the outstanding halachic authorities among the late Rishonim, Rabbeinu David ibn Zamra (Radvaz),<sup>5</sup> reveals a fascinating additional dimension in the events of our haftarah. The verses relate that Eliyahu wandered for forty days without food or water until he came to a cave in Mount Chorev – another name for Sinai – where Hashem appeared to him and asked him what he was doing there.<sup>6</sup> As we know, prophecy generally occurs only in the land of Israel. If so, why would Hashem let Eliyahu journey for so many days until he was in the desert outside of Israel before appearing to him?

The Radvaz explains that Hashem wanted to indicate to Eliyahu that, in addition to demanding Hashem’s honor from the people, he should also be pleading their cause before Hashem. As we have seen, the prophet who embodied this dual combination was Moshe Rabbeinu. Therefore, Eliyahu was lead “on the trail of Moshe Rabbeinu,” with a view to being inspired to emulate him. This began with him going for forty days without food or water, just as Moshe had done before him, and culminated in him arriving at the very mountain where Moshe had prayed and pleaded before Hashem to forgive the people for the Golden Calf. Specifically, he found himself in the cave from which Moshe beheld Hashem revealing the Thirteen Divine Attributes of Mercy, which were then transmitted to the Jewish people as a means of arousing His mercy and attaining His forgiveness.

And thus, when Eliyahu arrived at Chorev, Hashem appeared to him and asked: “*מַה לָּךְ פֶּה אֵלַיְהוּ?*” – *What are doing here, Eliyahu?*” Contained within this question was a message for Eliyahu: “*Why do you think I led you specifically here? Think about who was here before you and how they acted. Perhaps you can learn from their example.*”

However, Eliyahu responded to Hashem’s question by saying that he had acted zealously on Hashem’s behalf toward the people who had forsaken their covenant with Him.<sup>7</sup> So consumed

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2 See Mechilta *ibid.* where Yirmiyahu is also cited as an example of one who demanded both the honor of the Father and the Children.

3 Melachim I 19:9.

4 *Ibid.* verse 10.

5 Responsa Radvaz, Vol 6, No. 2,294.

6 Verses 8-9.

7 Verse 10.

was Eliyahu with zeal on Hashem's behalf that, even standing where Moshe had stood in prayer on the people's behalf, he failed to consider that he should do likewise. Additionally, the Radvaz explains that it is possible Eliyahu felt that the people were so entrenched in sin that they were beyond redemption, unlike the episode with the Golden Calf which, grave as it was, was one incident.

At this stage, the verses relate that Hashem told Eliyahu to leave the cave, where He brought about, first to a great and powerful wind, then an earthquake and finally a fire. Yet Hashem informed Eliyahu that He was in none of those things. Then, the verse says that Hashem brought about a "small thin sound," implying that it was there that He could be found.<sup>8</sup> The message for Eliyahu was that although Hashem has many powerful and fearsome agents through which to dispense His wrath and bring destruction upon sinners, He does not reside in those agents, but rather in the still small voice of prayer asking for appeasement and forgiveness.

After this vision, Hashem again asks Eliyahu, "Why are you here, Eliyahu?"<sup>9</sup> Yet even now, Eliyahu responds as before, stating that he acted zealously on Hashem's behalf toward the people who had violated His covenant.<sup>10</sup> It was at this stage, with him still not considering the notion of praying on the people's behalf, that Eliyahu was told to appoint Elisha as a prophet in his stead, as explained by the Mechilta.

### **ELIYAHU, ANGEL OF THE COVENANT**

In our experience, Eliyahu is known as the "Malach Habris – the Angel of the Covenant." And indeed, we set aside a seat of honor for him at every *bris*. The background to this practice, too, lies in the events of our Haftarah. The Midrash Pirkei R' Eliezer<sup>11</sup> relates:

אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא, לעולם אתה מקנא. קנאת בשטים... וכאן אתה מקנא, חייך  
אין ישראל עושין ברית מילה עד שאתה רואה בעיניך. מכאן התקינו חכמים שיהיו  
עושים מושב כבוד למלאך הברית.

*Said the Holy One, Bless be He, "You are always acting zealously; you acted zealously in Shittim...<sup>12</sup> and you are acting zealously here. By your life, the Jewish people will not perform a bris milah without you seeing it with your eyes." Based on this, the Sages instituted that they should place a seat of honor for the Angel of the Covenant.*

The commentators differ regarding the meaning behind Eliyahu's presence at every *bris*. Some understand that it is a reward for acting so zealously on behalf of Hashem's covenant,<sup>13</sup> while others see it rather as a response to Eliyahu's claim that the people had abandoned the covenant, so that he now witnesses firsthand every time the people uphold it.<sup>14</sup> Either way, what is certainly true is that by this stage in history, there is no one with more direct experience of the Jewish people's commitment to Hashem's covenant throughout the centuries, and appreciation of their essential virtue, than Eliyahu. Perhaps it for this reason – and based on this knowledge – that it is none other than Eliyahu who will herald the future redemption. Indeed, if we ourselves

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8 Verses 11-12.

9 Verse 13.

10 Verse 14.

11 End of Chap. 29.

12 As related at the end of Parshas Balak (25:7-8). This reflects the tradition from our sages that Eliyahu is Pinchas.

13 As implied by the Midrash's reference to his presence as a seat of honor.

14 See commentary of R' David Luria to Pirkei R' Eliezer loc. cit., and Drisha to Tur Yoreh Deah sec. 265.

endeavor to absorb Hashem's lesson to Eliyahu at Chorev – to always speak of our fellow Jews in a benevolent manner and with a compassionate outlook – we will no doubt have more reason to anticipate the arrival of Eliyahu, bringing with him for Hashem's beloved people good tidings, salvations and consolations.

May we merit to hear them soon!