

THE ROLE OF ELIYAHU AT THE BRIS

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I.

The presence of Eliyahu haNavi (Elijah the Prophet - see I Kings 17:1 - II Kings 2:22) at the B'rit is well-known; the baby is circumcised while being held on "Kissei shel Eliyahu" - Eliyahu's chair. Along with the B'rit, there is one perennial occasion where Eliyahu's presence is felt - at the Seder. It would seem, then, that Eliyahu is our connection with the past - the intergenerational link who is symbolically invited to those occasions where we link our lives with those of our ancestors.

A closer look at our calendar and life-cycle events gives us a different picture - Eliyahu's name is not invoked at the other "life-cycle simchah" - a wedding. Nor is his presence symbolized in our celebration of the three festivals (Pesach (aside from Seder eve) Shavuot and Sukkot). Even as we invite the Uzhpizin into the Sukkah, Eliyahu is left off of the guest list. What is the rationale behind our interest in sharing important occasions - but selectively - with the Giladite prophet?

Eliyahu's most impactful moment (I Kings 18) took place atop Mount Carmel, when he not only challenged 850 of Ah'av and Izevel's idolatrous prophets - demonstrating the omnipotence and utter rulership of haKadosh Barukh Hu - but, more significantly, he convinced the people that indeed "YHVH is THE God, YHVH is THE God". The same syncretistic Israelites who were burning the candle at both ends - worshipping the local Canaanite gods (just in case!) along with Hashem - repudiated their dual allegiance in the clearest of voices. Eliyahu had won the hearts of the people back to the One True God - for a while.

In the next chapter, we read of Eliyahu's flight to Horev (= Sinai), on account of his being a wanted man. A careful reading implies that not only was he wanted by the royal house, but that the people had also returned to their Ba'al worship and were out to kill him. (Read I Kings 19:10, 14 and especially 18). What had happened here? What of the vocal and unswerving affirmation of the people at Carmel?

Eliyahu ran to Sinai/Horev and he expected to find God in the fire, in the earthquake and in the great wind...but God was finally found in the "still, small voice." What is the lesson here? and what is the connection - if any - between this lesson and the stand at Carmel?

II.

Our lives are made up of day-to-day living - and of "moments". We all experience situations which

drive our emotional meters to the limit, whether the awe we feel when we first visit the Grand Canyon, the terror we experience in the split-second before a narrowly averted accident, or the amazement when we hold our son or daughter in our hands for the first time.

Judaism is also built upon a combination of diligent, constant and consistent growth - and "moments". When God passed through Egypt, slaying the first-born of the Egyptians and concurrently sanctifying the first-born of the B'nai Yisra'el - that was a "moment". When we stood at Sinai "as one person with one heart" and accepted God's rule and His Torah - that was a "moment".

On the other hand, we have a calendar replete with revisitations to familiar places - three times a year, we bring ourselves back to Yerushalayim. Every week, we reexperience the majesty of creation. Every day, we face Yerushalayim three times and pour our hearts out to God in T'fillah. The Torah we study, much as it should be "considered new to us every day as if we had just received it at Sinai", demands a constant and diligent effort which is only fully realized and optimized through consistent commitment to rigorous study.

To wit - Jewish days, weeks and years are made up of steps, each building upon each other, each leading us to greater personal, communal and national heights of holiness. "Moments" are not mandated - they are experienced by those sensitive enough to recognize their mystery.

There is one exception to this rule - the night of the Seder. Unlike other holy days (including the rest of Pesach - "Hag haMatzot"), Seder night is not a recollection or even a reenactment - it is a total reexperience. We are transported from Los Angeles, Pittsburgh and even Yerushalayim to Egypt, gathered in homes with neighbors and friends, waiting for the moment when all will be irreversibly changed; when Egyptian and Hebrew are no longer cut of the same cloth, when holy and profane become defined and when the same holiness which destroys evil sanctifies the worthy (see Malakhi 3:19-20). At the height of this expectation, when we not only reexperience the greatness of Goshen, but we also pre-experience the majesty of Mashiach, we welcome Eliyahu - the "master of the moment."

III.

Eliyahu's stand at Mt. Carmel and his defiance of King Ah'av and Queen Izevel were epic events, heroic efforts which moved all assembled and impacted upon them in the most fundamental fashion, reshaping and reordering their priorities and values. However - the "moment" is not an end in and of itself - it is an opportunity to affect profound personal and communal change on a daily basis. That change, however, can only be accomplished through the diligent, quiet mode of "Mesorah" - transmission of teaching. Eliyahu shocked the people into seeing the truth - but there was no follow-up and, soon after, they "sought to destroy me." It is no wonder that Eliyahu fled to Sinai. Sinai, unlike the "other" mountain in our daily consciousness - Tziyyon - is a place of "moment". It was at Sinai that we experienced thunder and lightning and heard God's Voice as we entered the national B'rit. Sinai, however, never retained its sanctity - it was only holy for the duration of the "moment". It was only in

the Ohel Mo'ed and in the Mishkan (Sanctuary) that ongoing sanctity was to be found.

Eliyahu fled to Sinai - and encountered several potential "moments" - a fire, an earthquake and a mighty wind. This was where he expected to find God - in the "moment". But God was not found in the "moment"; He was found in the ongoing dialogue, in the Mesorah from parents to children, in the "still small voice." The "moment" is only of value if it inspires us to the real work of personal growth and change. (see Ramban, end of Parashat Bo, where he explains that the purpose of any miracle is to demonstrate that God's hand is to be found everywhere - not just in the miracle).

IV.

Eliyahu does not belong to the daily experience nor does he fit in to the cycle of holidays - as each of them is a piece of an ongoing relationship with God, expressed through historical, spiritual and intellectual components. In the same way, Eliyahu is not welcome at weddings. When we wed, we are not experiencing a "moment" per se - we are not shocked (hopefully!) to find ourselves under the Huppah with our mate. A wedding is a commitment to ongoing growth, both as individuals and as a couple. That is why wedding liturgy is always associated with Tziyyon and Yerushalayim (see Yirmiyah [Jeremiah] 33:10-11); just as the wedded couple is taking the first steps of day-to-day building, so is our relationship with Yerushalayim built upon thrice-yearly pilgrimages and thrice-daily T'fillot. Unlike Sinai, the holiness of Tziyyon is eternal.

A B'rit, on the other hand, is a "moment" par excellence. The child is being transformed before our very eyes, from an Arel into a Mahul, from an outsider to a member of the covenantal community. This "moment" brings us back to Sinai, where we entered our national B'rit. Just as there is no mention of Sinai in the Sheva B'rakhot, there is no explicit mention of Yerushalayim in those special blessings associated with a B'rit - it is a purely Sinaitic experience. (See Mordechai, Shabbat Ch. 19 where he cites the custom of Maharm of Rothenburg who would stand up for K'riat haTorah and at a B'rit. The Rav zt"l explains that K'riat haTorah is a reenactment of Kabbalat haTorah at Sinai and so we stand.)

We invite Eliyahu to the B'rit because he is the man of Sinai, the man of the "moment". But we recognize that the "moment" is fleeting and can turn on us if we do not commit ourselves to the daily growth of Talmud Torah - to listening to the "still, small voice" of Massoret Avot.

V.

POSTSCRIPT

Yoseph Tzvi is named for several people in our families whose memories will always be a blessing - and for Maran, R. Yoseph Dov haLevi Soloveitchik, zt"l. Thanks to Rabbis Baruch Lanner and Elazar Muskin for sharing gleanings of the Rav's Torah which provided the seeds for the above presentation.