PROBING THE PROPHETS

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Rabbi Winkler's popular Jewish History lectures can be viewed by visiting the OU Israel Video archive: ***https://www.ouisrael.org/video-library***

Among the most compelling rivalries described in all of Tanach is the conflict between Eliyahu HaNavi and the Israelite king, Ach'av. The text describes Ach'av's wickedness as being worse than that of any previous Israelite king as he openly worshiped foreign gods, especially Ba'al. The king's behavior, promoted by his Phoenecian queen, Izevel, helped spread the practice of idolatry throughout the Northern Kingdom, corrupting the masses and angering Hashem. And so, as the 17th perek of M'lachim A opens, we read the very first act of Eliyahu, i.e., that of decreeing a drought (and subsequent famine) that would be broken only by his word alone.

As our haftarah opens, at the beginning of perek 18 (according to Ashkenazic practice), Hashem, in the third year of the drought, calls upon the prophet to appear before Ach'av so that Hashem could break the drought and bring the rain. Eliyahu arranges for a vivid display of G-d's power as he challenges the prophets of Ba'al to a public confrontation and gathers all of Israel to Har HaCarmel. There, in dramatic fashion, G-d answers the navi's prayers and sends down fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice that lay upon the temporary altar. The people react by falling to the ground and proclaiming "Hashem is the (true) G-d!"

The connection of this selection from the nevi'im to the events depicted in today's parasha seems quite obvious. Like Moshe in our parasha, Eliyahu strikes out against the idolaters of his time; like Moshe, Eliyahu punishes those who served the false god; and, like Moshe, Eliyahu brings the people back to G-d. But the similarities between these two spiritual giants go beyond this one story. Moshe "exiled" himself from his people by placing the Ohel Moed outside of the Israelite camp while Eliyahu was exiled from the people throughout the years of drought. Moshe stayed atop Har Sinai for forty days and nights without eating or drinking while Eliyahu walked for forty days and nights without eating or drinking in order to reach Har Sinai. Moshe was forced to flee a king for fear of his life while Eliyahu was forced to flee a queen (Izevel) for fear of his life. The similarities continue (you might try to think of some yourselves!).

Sadly, we note that Moshe succeeded in his mission to end idolatry within the nation (with the exception of the sin of Ba'al P'or)

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and led the people to the Promised Land. Eliyahu, however, did not succeed, leading the people back to the worship of G-d. He is taken from this world with his mission unfulfilled, but with the promise that he would yet return to complete his job.

It is no surprise, therefore, that the prophet Mal'achi ends his prophecies - and closes the Era of Prophecy - with the promise that G-d will send Elijah as a harbinger of messianic times. And how fitting that is! It was Moshe who informed the nation of their soon-to-be redemption from the exile in Egypt and their return to the land of their fathers. It will be Eliyahu who informs the nation of their redemption and their return from the Diaspora to the land of their fathers. May we see that soon, speedily and in our time. ■

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