

Bringing the Prophets to Life

Weekly insights into the Haftara by Rabbi Nachman (Neil) Winkler

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For those observing Purim M'shulash, the haftara this Shabbat is the same as last week - see the link on Philo-Torah for 'Haftara - Rabbi Winkler' under 'Previous week's files'

For those with 'regular' Shabbat Parshat Ki Tisa - here it is:

KI TISA - 39 p'sukim - Melachim Alef 18:1-39

Moshe taught; Eliyahu fought.

The bulk of this week's parasha of Ki Tisa deals with the sin of Eigel HaZahav, the Golden Calf. The Torah elaborates on the misguided attempt of the nation, who, upon seeing that Moshe Rabbeinu had not returned (when they expected him to), sought a new leader to guide them through the desert and lead them to Eretz Yisrael. Most commentators agree that the people did NOT attempt to replace G-d but, rather, to replace the "agent" (MAL'ACH) that G-d promised would lead them [Sh'mot 23;23].

Chazal find many parallels of the events at Har Sinai with the episode

related in Sefer M'lachim Alef (18:1-39) and, for that reason, chose it as the haftara for this Shabbat. At Har Sinai the majority of B'nei Yisrael did not seek a replacement for Hashem but, fearing the loss of G-d's promised MAL'ACH (Moshe), they turned to the Eigel HaZahav as Hashem's "newly chosen" agent. Similarly, those at Har HaCarmel did not see their reliance on Ba'al as an abandonment of G-d, but, fearing the possibility of drought, they saw the non-deity as "insurance" for rain, serving BOTH Ba'al and (L'HAVDIL) Hashem. Additionally, we find the three thousand worshipers of the Golden Calf punished with death by Moshe's decree, and the worshipers of Ba'al fated to be killed at the directive of Eliyahu.

And yet, despite these (and other) similarities between the two biblical stories, the different "postscripts" of both stories are especially enlightening. After the punishment meted out to the sinners in the desert, we never read again of any suggestions to abandon Hashem or worship another power. The lesson taught at Sinai was learned and the controversy was put to rest.

Not so in the case of Eliyahu and the Ba'al worshipers. Although our haftara ends with the moving cry of Israel HASHEM HU HA'ELOKIM, "Hashem is (the true) G-d", the story

does not end there. In the very next perek we find that, despite the seeming act of T'shuva at Har HaCarmel, the people remained passive when the wicked queen Izevel sought to murder Eliyahu, and forced him to escape to the Southern kingdom of Yehuda. Ultimately, despite the remarkable display at Har HaCarmel, pagan worship was not eliminated from the land - despite the prophet's demonstration of G-d's power.

And we are right to wonder why.

I would suggest that there was a fundamental difference between the approaches of the two leaders. Immediately following the sin of the Golden Calf, we read the laws pertaining to the Mishkan and those of korbanot, sacrifices. The Torah continues by teaching societal laws and various other mitzvot. As a result, Moshe Rabbeinu spent the years following the sin teaching and explaining what Hashem expects of His chosen people. By doing so, he educated the nation in the ways of Hashem and he developed a unique relationship, a "rebbe relationship", with the people.

Eliyahu does not. After killing off the idolaters at Har HaCarmel, the navi is compelled to flee from the threats of the Queen in order to save his life. He had no opportunity to teach, educate or inspire the people. Nor could he

develop any relationship with them. He remained the "mystical" figure, distant, and regarded by his people as being unreachable, much as he had always seemed before Har HaCarmel.

Belief in Hashem and commitment to His laws cannot be transmitted by miracles alone nor by punishments or decrees. Divinely-demanded ethics and principles must be educated and not simply legislated. Different generations required different approaches. Moshe taught; Eliyahu fought.

We retain Moshe's teachings to this day.

But Eliyahu will have to yet return to complete his task, just as the navi Malachi tells us (3:23). ✨