

HAFTORAH OF SIDRA : כִּי תֵשָׂא

*This week's Haftorah is taken from the first Book of Kings,
from Chapter 18 verse 1 till verse 39. Sefaradim begin at verse 20.*

1. Although there are a number of topics covered in the Sidra, nevertheless the episode of the Golden Calf stands out prominently. When it seemed as if the madness that had grabbed hold of the people was unstoppable, Moshe Rabbeinu bravely stood in the breach and dealt decisively with the situation. He punished the wrongdoers and then set about defending the People from the deserved anger of HaShem. The Haftorah of this Sidra tells of a similarly dramatic event at Mount Carmel when Eliyohu HaNovvi, too, stood quite alone against the priests of the Baal and brought the Jewish People back to HaShem.

2. The time was during the reign of Achov, a king whose wife Izevvel was a Phoenician princess and who together with her had spread idolworship throughout the Land of Israel. In her crusade against Torah and Judaism, Izevvel had killed out hundreds of Talmidei Chachommim or had forced them to flee the country or driven them underground. Even Eliyahu HaNovvi himself had had to go into hiding. Because of all this, Eliyahu HaNovvi had decreed a drought of three years and HaShem had fulfilled his words. There was terrible famine in the land.

3. At the end of the third year of misery and starvation, HaShem told Eliyahu to appear before Achov. He is to tell him that HaShem has not forsaken His People. If only they would publicly renounce their idolworship and return to Him, He will give rain. Eliyahu sets out in the direction of the royal residence in Shomron. Achov, together with Ovadya, his Master of the Royal Household, were just then walking through the locality. They had taken different paths, searching for even some damp watercourses where there might be some clumps of grass for the horses — so desperate was the situation — when suddenly Ovadya comes across Eliyahu. Despite his position in the household of the wicked Achov, Ovadya was a truly G-d-fearing man and he was glad to see his Rebbe, Eliyahu. But when Eliyahu told him to inform his royal master that he wished to speak with him, he was seized with panic. Achov and his henchmen had long searched high and low for Eliyohu for they wanted to kill him. If Ovadya was now to tell Achov that Eliyahu had met him and had told him that he was coming — and then he quite understandably fails to turn up — Achov will kill Ovadya for he will say that he is harbouring his sworn enemy, Eliyahu. He begs Eliyahu not to command him to deliver the message and thus spare his life. But Eliyahu tells him that he will indeed meet with Achov this day. With this assurance, Ovadya goes ahead and tells Achov.

4. The years of dire famine and the terrible suffering of his people have not made Achov repent of his treachery to HaShem. So that when Achov claps eyes on Eliyahu for the first time in three years, his hurls his contemptuous accusation at Eliyahu: “Is that you, you troublemaker in Israel?” Eliyahu tells him that it is not he who has brought misery upon the people. It is Achov, who has misled the people to forsake HaShem and His Torah, indeed forced them to betray HaShem and His Torah. He it is who has brought terrible misfortune upon the people. But now, says Eliyahu, seeing that the “prophets” of the Baal idols have not been able to bring rain these three years, let there be a public contest when the people themselves shall be allowed to choose whom they will follow: HaShem or Baal.
5. Eliyahu challenges Achov to call together all the four hundred and fifty “prophets” of the Baal, together with the four hundred “prophets” of the Ashayroh idols, all of them receiving the royal patronage of Izevvel and Achov. Eliyahu, the only prophet who dares to publicly stand alone against these eight hundred and fifty charlatans and their royal sponsors, will stage a contest to show who has the power to bring rain, who rules the world: HaShem or Baal. Let Achov command the people to come to Mount Carmel and see this confrontation and allow them to make up their own minds! Achov, sensing that this contest was of Eliyohu’s own initiative and not commanded by HaShem, agrees, confident that the magic of the priests of Baal will prevail.
6. Before the assembled people, Eliyahu clearly sets out the terms of the contest. The “prophets” of the Baal shall build an altar and sacrifice a bullock, laying out its meat upon the logs of wood — but setting no fire. They shall then pray to their idol that he should send fire from heaven to consume the sacrifice. Eliyahu will do the same, but he will pray to HaShem. The one who answers with fire from heaven is the true G-d and the other is clearly a sham and a fraud. No more pussyfooting around, no more ambivalence, no more ifs or buts. Winner takes all, loser loses all! The people, freed by Eliyohu’s zealous bravery from the intimidating power of the priests of Baal, shout their approval.
7. Eliyahu tells the idolaters to make sacrifice first as there are many more of them. They prepare their sacrifice and make a great show of crying out to their idol but of course, there is no response. Eliyahu mockingly chides them to call out louder. “Maybe your god is asleep and can’t hear you or maybe he’s in a deep discussion with somebody, or he’s not at home just now!” They frantically call out and shout and prance around and jump up and down, all to no avail. After a whole morning of these antics, the fraudsters concede that there is nothing more that they can do.
8. Then, towards Mincha time, Eliyahu draws near. He beckons the people to come closer and watch carefully what he is doing and ensure there is no trickery and no sorcery. He rebuilds the Mizbayach out of twelve stones (representing the twelve Tribes of Israel) and he digs a ditch all round the Mizbayach. He arranges wood on its top and on the

wood he arranges the sacrifice. Then he calls for water and he pours water on the meat, on the logs, on the Mizbayach — until everything is soggy wet and the surrounding ditch is full of water. Then he prays to HaShem and says: “HaShem, G-d of Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yisroel! Please let it be known today that You are the G-d of Israel ... Answer me, HaShem, answer me and let Your People know that You are G-d ...” Immediately, fire sweeps down from heaven and it consumes the offering and the wood and even scorches the very stones of the Mizbayach and licks up all the water in the ditch, too. And all the people saw it all and they prostrated themselves and called out: “HaShem — He is G-d! HaShem — He is G-d!” [The Haftorah ends at this point.]

9. Eliyahu tells the people to be rid of the evil fraudsters who had brought them so much harm and immediately the “prophets” of the Baal are unceremoniously killed. (There is today at the foot of Mount Carmel a grass-covered knoll which is quite clearly man-made and it is said that this is the mass grave of some of those false prophets of the Baal.) Eliyahu tells Achov to get ready — the rains are about to come. Eliyahu prays hard and a small cloud appears on the horizon, and the rains come. Achov makes his way back to his palace, now quite clearly shunned by the people. The only one who still treated him with any respect as king was Eliyahu.
10. When Achov arrives back at his palace he tells Izevel of the events that had transpired, how all the false prophets are dead and of the public declaration of faith in HaShem by the people. Izevel sends a message to Eliyahu, telling him that although he has perhaps scored this time, nevertheless “I swear by the gods that by this time tomorrow you’ll be dead!” Eliyahu flees for his life into the wilderness, despondent and saddened. He knows that it is true that however spectacular the miracles might be, sooner or later their effect will wear off, for a miracle does not prove the truth. A miracle is nothing more than a banner, an attention-grabber. Indeed, in Hebrew, the word for “miracle” is the same as for “banner,” (“nayss” — “נֵיֶס”). True faith does not depend on miracles but on knowing the truth and Eliyahu knows that there is still much work to do to eliminate from the Jewish People the false, seductively attractive idolworship and restore their true belief in HaShem and His Torah. It will be hard work, but it will be done.