

Ki Tisa: 1 Kings 18:1-39¹

In the 9th century BCE, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was prosperous and powerful. While some worshiped God, most people adopted idolatrous practices when serving God or served Canaanite gods outright. For two decades, King Ahab increased Israel's idolatry. He allied with King Ithobaal I of Tyre (Phoenicia), marrying its princess, Jezebel. In Israel's capital, Samaria, she built a temple where she, Ahab, and the people worshiped the regional rain god, Baal, and the fertility goddess, Asherah. Jezebel persecuted those who served God, and put God's prophets to death. Nonetheless, Ahab appointed Obadiah, who greatly feared God, over his royal household. A disciple of God's prophet, Elijah, Obadiah saved 100 prophets from Jezebel by hiding them in caves and feeding them.

In response to these idolatrous changes, Elijah appeared, publicly decreeing a drought and famine against the Kingdom of Israel. For three years, Elijah hid as Ahab and his allies sought to find and kill him. The Haftarah opens as God instructs Elijah to confront Ahab. Obadiah and Ahab were each scouting out food to preserve their work animals from death. Elijah encounters Obadiah and asks him to bring Ahab. Obadiah is awed by Elijah's sudden appearance but fears that Ahab will kill him if Elijah disappears before meeting Ahab. After Elijah reassures Obadiah, Elijah and Ahab meet, each accusing the other of responsibility for the drought. Elijah instructs Ahab to assemble the entire people, 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah to Mt. Carmel. Ahab complies with Elijah's command, though the Asherah prophets do not appear. Elijah challenges the people to stop worshipping both God and Baal, but they do not commit. Elijah then proposes a test to show which god will send a fire to consume its prophets' sacrifice. This will show which deity heeds its prophets' prayers, controls nature, and is responsible for Israel's prosperity and power. The people accept this test.

Granting every advantage to Baal's prophets, Elijah taunts their beliefs as they sacrifice, pray, and ritually slash themselves all day. Baal does not consume their bull. Elijah constructs an altar to God, disadvantaging himself by repeatedly dousing it, his bull, and a surrounding trench with water. After a single prayer, a heavenly fire descends, consuming not only the bull but also the altar and its water. In response to this spectacular miracle, the people declare, "The Lord, He is God! the Lord, He is God!"²³

Haftarah Breakdown

Verses 18:1-2: God tells Elijah to confront Ahab, and that He will end the three years of intense drought in Samaria.

I Kings 18:1	מלכים א י"ח:א
After a long time, the Lord's word came in the third year [of the famine] to Elijah, saying: "Go, appear to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the ground."	וַיְהִי יָמִים רַבִּים וַיְבַרְהוּ ה' הַיָּה אֶל־אֵלֵיהֶוּ בַּשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁלִישִׁית לֵאמֹר לֶךְ הַרְאֵה אֶל־אֲחָאָב וְאֶתְנֶה מָטָר עַל־פְּנֵי הָאָדָמָה:

Verse 18:3-6: At the same time, Ahab and his God-fearing servant, Obadiah, are seeking food for their animals.

I Kings 18:5	מלכים א י"ח:ה
Ahab said to Obadiah, "Travel in the land to all the springs of water and to all the wadis. Perhaps we will find grass to save the horses and mules alive, so that we will be deprived of [all] the beasts."	וַיֹּאמֶר אֲחָאָב אֶל־עֹבַדְיָהוּ לֶךְ בְּאֶרֶץ אֶל־כָּל־מַעְיָנֵי הַמַּיִם וְאֵל כָּל־הַנְּחָלִים אֲוִלִי וְנִמְצָא תְּצִיר וַיִּנְחֵהוּ סוּס וְפָרָד וְלֹא נִכְרִית מִהַבְּהֵמָה:

¹ Sepharadim recite verses 20-39.

² The Haftarah concludes here although its story and drama continue on. The rarely recited Haftarah for Parashat Pinchas tells a later part of the story.

³ With emendations, all translations are from Sefaria.org. To dedicate, comment, or subscribe, email afarahhelper@gmail.com,

Verses 18:7-16: Obadiah meets Elijah, who tells him to inform Ahab of his return. Fearing Elijah's disappearance before Ahab comes to him, Obadiah tries to stop Elijah's request by recounting his life of righteous acts. After Elijah promises to appear to Ahab, Obadiah tells Ahab that Elijah has arrived.

I Kings 18:12	מלכים א י"ח:י"ב
When I leave you, the Lord's spirit will carry you off to I don't know where. [But] when I come and tell Ahab and he does not find you, he will kill me. Yet your servant has revered the Lord from my youth!	והי'ה אגני אלה מאמ'ך ורוח ה' וישא'ד על אש'ר לא-אד'ע ויבאתי להגיד לאחאב ולא ימצא'ה והרגני ועבד'ך נרא א'ת-ה' מנערי:

Verses 18:17-20: Elijah confronts Ahab, declaring that the idolatry of Ahab and his royal house caused the drought. Elijah summons the prophets of Baal and Asherah to a confrontation at Mount Carmel.

I Kings 18:18	מלכים א י"ח:י"ח
[Elijah] replied, "I have not brought trouble on Israel; rather it is you and your father's house [who have troubled Israel] by your abandonment of the Lord's commandments, and you have followed the Baalim."	ויאמר לא עכרת'י את-יש'ראל כי אם-א'ת'ה ובי'ת אב'יך בעז'ב'כם את-מ'צ'ו'ת ה' ותל'ך א'ת'רי הב'ע'ל'ים:

Verses 18:21-24: Elijah extorts the people to follow God alone but they silently refuse. He then arranges a prophetic contest between him and Baal's prophets. Each side will offer a bull to its respective god; the god who answers is the true deity.

I Kings 18:24	מלכים א י"ח:כ"ד
Call on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the Lord. The god that answers by fire is [the true] God. All the people replied, saying, "Well said!"	ויקרא'ת'ם בש'ם א'להי'כם ויאני' אקרא בש'ם-ה' ות'ה הא'לה'ים אש'ר-י'ענה באש הוא הא'לה'ים ויע'ן כ'ל-ה'ע'ם ויאמרו טוב הד'בר:

Verses 18:25-29: Baal's prophets pray and slash themselves for most of the day, but their bull is not consumed. Elijah taunts and insults them for being unable to rouse their god.

I Kings 18:29	מלכים א י"ח:כ"ט
When the afternoon passed, they prophesied until the time of the offering of the afternoon sacrifice. There was no voice, nor any to answer, nor any that heard.	ויהי כ'עבר הצ'ה'רים ויתנבאו עד לע'לו'ת המנ'חה ואין-קול ואין-ע'נה ואין-קש'ב:

Verses 18:30-36: Elijah and the people repair God's broken altar and ready it for his sacrifice. They also douse it in water.

I Kings 18:34	מלכים א י"ח:ל"ד
[Elijah] said, "Fill four jars with water, and pour it on the burnt sacrifice and on the wood". He said, "Do it a second time," and they did it a second time. He said, "Do it a third time," and they did it a third time.	ויאמר מלאו אר'בעה כ'דים מ'ים ונצ'קו על-ה'ע'לה ועל-ה'עצ'ים ויאמר ש'נו ויש'נו ויאמר שלשו וישלשו:

Verses 18:37-39: After a short prayer by Elijah, God consumes the sacrifice, the altar, and the water. In response, the people declare God as the true deity.

I Kings 18:39	מלכים א י"ח:ל"ט
And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, "The Lord, he is God! The Lord, he is God!"	וירא כ'ל-ה'ע'ם ויפלו על-פ'ניהם ויאמרו ה' הוא הא'לקים ה' הוא הא'לקים: