

As the haftorah of Ki Tisa opens, Eliyahu haNavi is ordered by G-d to break an impasse with King Achav and allow rain to fall in Israel. The scenario is a bit disturbing - your average prophet doesn't have to be forced to do things for benei Yisroel. And Eliyahu's character grows no less unsettling as the story proceeds. To his last breath, in the face of obvious Divine displeasure, he denounces the Jews, describing himself as the last prophet of G-d in a nation of blasphemers.

The midrash provides a brilliant but cryptic interpretation of Eliyahu: "Pinchas zeh Eliyahu". At first glance this identification seems straightforward; both are described as "kannaim", and both kill out of passion for G-d. But closer examination reveals that they practiced very different brands of kannaut. Pinchas is called a kanai by G-d, whereas Eliyahu takes the label unilaterally. Pinchas kills personally, on the spur of the moment in reaction to a plague, and to force a communal teshuvah; Rashi justifies his actions on the grounds that "kannaim pog'im bo" before they have time for reflection. Eliyahu exhorts others to kill during a drought of his own making, at the climax of a massive communal Teshuvah, and as the result of careful planning. Pinchas's kannaut is for G-d and for Benei Yisrael, Eliyahu's for G-d but at the expense of Benei Yisrael. Not coincidentally, Pinchas succeeds but Eliyahu's actions are shown to be futile a day later. How, then, can the midrash identify Pinchas with Eliyahu?

A possible solution can be found through another question. After Pinchas kills Kozbi and Zimri, G-d offers him a "brit shalom". Meforshim have noted the seeming incongruity of this reward, particularly as Pinchas later became the mashuach milchamah. And Eliyahu certainly does not act like a man with a "brit shalom".

Perhaps the midrash considers kannaut essentially dangerous even when justifiable. Thus G-d approves Pinchas' action, but hurries to give him a brit shalom lest his zealotry get out of hand. In the midrash's view, Pinchas turns it down. Thus he becomes mashuach milchamah, and eventually Eliyahu, the kannai for G-d but against man. G-d makes a second attempt to save him, bringing him to Har Sinai to hear that "lo baraash Hashem". But Eliyahu rejects G-d's peace again, and G-d removes him from the scene.

The story of Eliyahu appears to be a Greek tragedy - a great man fails, inevitably, because of an essential flaw in his character. But in the literary parallels to Moshe's ascent of Sinai, and indeed in the choice of his story as the haftorah for Ki Tisa, we see a more Jewish moral. For Moshe's actions after the sin of the Golden Calf are roughly comparable to Eliyahu's - he encourages the Leviim to kill, does so again after several hours, and does so before G-d's punishment begins - but Moshe immediately prays for the salvation of his nation. Even at the peak of passion, compassion can thrive. Eliyahu failed tragically, yes, but not inevitably.

He did not even fail permanently. In midrash Eliyahu becomes the heavenly intercessor for the Jews, the harbinger of Moshiach, a symbol of ahavat yisroel. From his life we learn the heights to which man's love for G-d can reach. From his afterlife we learn the depths to which G-d's love for man still reaches.