Eliyahu the prophet makes perhaps the most dramatic entrance in Tanakh. We can legitimately describe him as "bursting upon the scene", for Eliyahu is not born, has no history, and introduces himself by making the radically presumptuous claim "By the Life of G-d, there will be no dew or rain except by my word". One cannot help but notice that he seems to be emphasizing his own role unnecessarily: does the rain not depend, ultimately, on G-d's decision rather than on Eliyahu's own word? Is a prophet anything more than the voice – however personal and subjective - that conveys G-d's decisions to humanity?

And this initial episode is typical rather than anomalous. Eliyahu forces G-d's hand time and time again, and at times openly defies Him. Yet his career ends with his greatness unchallenged, and with G-d showing him every sign of favor. Why does G-d favor and choose such an independent spokesman?

We will approach this issue by exploring several reckonings with what I see as the central issue of this episode, namely why Eliyahu takes this task upon himself rather than upon G-d's prophets as a class.

1) Eliyahu is contrasting his powers with those of the prophets of Baal. He understands that he cannot, at least at this point, compel the idolatrous prophets into permitting a direct challenge between Baal and Hashem, but he can establish his own credibility. This episode should be seen as a necessary precursor to that direct challenge, wwhich takes place several chapters later on Mount Carmel..

2) Eliyahu is at this point the only public prophet of G-d, as Jezebel has wiped out the remainder. Perhaps he does not wish to even hint that there are other prophets, lest they be found and killed. Perhaps, if he left it as a possibility that other prophets could undo his decree, they would be tortured by the king and queen until they agreed to do so.

3) There were false prophets of G-d around in addition to idolatrous prophets. Any one of those false prophets could at any time declare in G-d's name that the drought was ending, thus making Eliyahu's later accurate declaration seem just a lucky guess. Only by personalizing the test could Eliyahu ensure that fraudulent prophetic pretenders would not undermine his test and leave his public jaundiced and cynical by the time he agreed to end the drought.

4) Eliyahu was aware of and willing to publicly acknowledge the legitimacy of many contemporary prophets. But while he acknowledged them, he didn't trust them not to feel sympathy for the suffering of the drought-ridden Jews. Eliyahu understands that

the drought is his own initiative; he believes that G-d will support his decision, but he realizes that the Divine Will could respond in many different ways to the situation he faces. In other words, Eliyahu makes the rain dependent on his word, not on G-d's, to limit G-d's freedom of action, to prevent G-d from ending the test early through the voice of another prophet. "Trust my judgement", he says to G-d, "or fire me".

The fourth suggestion seems to me to fit best with both the text and its Talmudic interpretation. The midrash records that in the end G-d had to force, or in some versions trick, Eliyahu into ending the drought. There are three keys in Heaven, we are told: those of birth, of resurrection, and of rain. Human beings may possess at most one of these at a time. Eliyahu is overcome by guilt, or perhaps by moral anger, at the sudden death of the son of his benevolent Tzarfatite hostess. As a result he asks for the key to resurrection, and must give up the key to rain.

The implication of this midrash is that G-d found a third way; He neither fired Eliyahu nor, ultimately, did He trust Eliyahu's judgement. This generates an inherently unstable situation, and as would be expected, Eliyahu soon finds a way of simultaneously challenging G-d and the Jews again. He summons the prophets of Baal to a challenge match atop Mount Carmel. Each of them slaughters a cow, and prays to their respective god to set it afire. The midrash notes that Eliyahu thus violates the prohibition of bringing sacrifices outside the Temple, meaning that whatever the short-term consequences of his deeds, in the long term he almost certainly helps make it impossible for the kings of the Israelite kingdom to eliminate that practice, which becomes the bane of many later prophets.

But Eliyahu does not give G-d any real options; once again, he forces G-d to choose between backing him up and firing him. Eliyahu's position vis-a-vis G-d is stronger this time, as by backing him up regarding the drought G-d has irrevocably bound His credibility up with Eliyahu's. So G-d sends the flame and consumes the slaughtered cow, and the awestruck people declare that "Hashem is the L-rd, Hashem is the L-rd", and massacre the prophets of Baal. But the next day Jezebel tells Eliyahu that his life is forfeit, and we see in her words no sense that murdering Eliyahu will generate any significant popular outrage.

We next see Eliyahu in the wilderness in suicidal depression. This time, at least superficially, he does not seek to limit G-d's options, but to take away his own. "Take my life", he asks G-d, "for I am not better than my predecessors".

What generates Eliyahu's depression? Presumably not the threat to his life; Jezebel has been slaughtering all G-d's prophets for years. Rather, he is depressed because the failure of the Mount Carmel challenge indicates that his whole career has been a mistake. Above all, Eliyahu is the prophet of the dramatic, charismatic gesture. His opening scene set the tone for his entire career. Mount Carmel was the ultimate dramatic gesture, it worked perfectly, and nonetheless, the next day it seems that the world is unaffected.

Let us take a moment to understand the meaning of Eliyahu's reliance on the dramatic. His goal, as he memorably phrases it during the challenge, is to force Israel to choose between extremes: "How long will you stand on the threshold of two gates?" In other words, Eliyahu believes that the people deep down understand that G-d is G-d, but are unwilling to face the implications of that understanding. By posing the choice starkly, by making them understand that their behavior denies what they understand to be true, Eliyahu thinks he can make the Jews commit to G-d unconditionally. But now he sees that he cannot make them sustain that commitment. So this time he does not tell G-d "Trust me or fire me", but rather "Fire me; You trusted me and I failed".

Once again, though, G-d does not fire him. Instead, He sends an angel with food, and takes Eliyahu through a very explicit reenactment of Mosheh Rabbeinu's time on Har Sinai. Eliyahu goes forty days and forty nights without water, and ends up on Har Choreiv, Mount Sinai, in the cave where G-d hid Moshe while His Glory passed. A voice comes to Eliyahu, saying: "What are you doing here, Eliyahu?"

Eliyahu understands that he is being asked for a self-justification. His answer brilliantly captures who he is. At the same time, it makes us wonder whether the request that G-d fire him was not just another dramatic gesture, a plea for reassurance rather than a recognition of error. He says: "I have been very zealous for G-d, L-rd of Hosts, for the Children of Israel have abandoned Your Covenant. They have destroyed Your altars and put Your prophets to the sword. I am left alone, and they seek to take my life". We get a clear sense that his life is not worthless, that when push comes to shove his failure is their fault.

Let us not rush to condemn Eliyahu here. He believes in free will, in other words he believes that nothing he does can necessitate that his audiences will make the right decisions, just as nothing can deprive them of responsibility for their wrong

decisions. He can legitimately believe that he gave them the best chance of making the right decision, but they nonetheless failed.

G-d responds by showing Eliyahu a complex vision. First there is a hurricane, then an earthquake, then a wildfire – but G-d is not in any of these - and finally a quiet, delicate voice. G-d then repeats His question, word for word.

The simplest understanding of this tableau is that Eliyahu's dramatic path is represented by the three powerful natural phenomena, whereas the quiet delicate voice represents an alternative and preferred prophetic method. Eliyahu responds to G-d's repeated question by repeating his previous answer, word for word. The vision, so far as we can tell, leaves him unchanged. Let us explore this interaction further.

My student Yeshuah Rabenstein argues that here, with exquisite irony, G-d adopts Eliyahu's own method to instruct him. The reenactment of Mosheh's experience, the powerful vision, all these are dramatic demonstrations, not quiet delicate voices. And yet they leave Eliyahu unchanged. Perhaps, Yeshuah suggested, the point of this whole episode was to make Eliyahu realize that dramatic moments do not change people. Realizing that G-d's drama had not changed him – even momentarily - he would become more sympathetic to the people's failure to be changed by his dramas.

I think Yeshuah's perception is spectacular, but I also think his suggestion is caught in its own ironic web. If Eliyahu understands that he is unchanged because G-d's educational method was (deliberately) flawed, and not because he made the free choice to reject His message, then the method has not failed, and we are back where we started. I accept the irony, but I'm not convinced Eliyahu got it or could reasonably have been expected to get it.

Another student of mine, Chaim Strauchler, suggests that Eliyahu thought the whole vision was a test of his determination. He repeats his self-justification word for word because he thinks he is supposed to; the repetition is a repentance, a *teshuvah*, for his earlier despair.

My own sense is that Eliyahu understands that he is supposed to change, but consciously refuses to do so. Let me note here that this is a longstanding opinion of mine; my chavruta Eliyahu Teitz and I argued about this while I was still in yeshiva. Eliyahu Teitz thought that Eliyahu HaNavi simply failed to understand what G-d wanted, but I refused to accept this.

I further admit that my refusal had a deep emotional basis, for I identified with Eliyahu, especially in that moment of, as I understood it, defiance. During my college and semikhah years I would frequently read that chapter to renew my determination in the face of seemingly overwhelming opposition. This was, however, not a psychologically original experience on my part. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch records that he would reread this chapter once a month, and his foundational pedagogic work, Horeb, is named after Eliyahu's experience. (We will encounter Rav Hirsch's spectacular counterreading of this episode later in this essay.) One prefers not to identify with figures who just don't get it.

Eliyahu is a self-described zealot, and a large part of zealotry is absolute and unshakable conviction – which, with apologies to modernity, is not always a bad thing. Another Biblical use of the word zealotry indicates that it can involve a dedication to the best interests of someone who may put other interests above his own. When Yehoshuah urges Mosheh to condemn Eldad and Meidad for their temerity in continuing to prophesy in Mosheh's lifetime (or, midrashically, for prophesying that Mosheh will die before reaching the Promised Land), Mosheh's somewhat bemused response is: "Are you being zealous for me?"

The other prominent zealot in Tanakh, Pinchas, seems clearly to be praised for his zealotry. His killing of Zimri and Kazbi successfully aborts a raging Divine plague, and G-d Himself grants him "a covenant of eternal priesthood". Thus Pinchas's zealotry, as opposed to Eliyahu's, is effective. Nonetheless, the midrash identifies Pinchas with Eliyahu.

This midrashic identification is based both on the term "zealot" and by the suddenness of Eliyahu's appearance – as noted above, he is never born – and the absence of Pinchas' death, although he seems to remain prominent throughout Joshua's leadership. We could treat this as simply a formulaic application of what Yitzchak Heineman called "conservation of personalities".

I think, however, that such a treatment would be superficial, especially as "conservation of personalities" usually identifies a bit player with a prominent figure rather than identifying two prominent figures. The midrashists (not to mention Gersonides, who endorses this identification in his commentary) knew full well that Pinchas and Eliyahu's careers were markedly different. Whatever their motivation for identifying the two Biblical figures, they must have had an account of the differences.

Let us now make a fuller accounting of those differences. We have already noted that Pinchas's zealotry is effective whereas Eliyahu's is not. We might say more sharply that Pinchas's zealotry saves many lives at the cost of two, whereas Eliyahu's zealotry generates a massacre, and he seems to want yet more deaths. Let us add that G-d describes Pinchas as a zealot whereas Eliyahu is self-described. My student Aharon Ross notes that Pinchas is zealous spontaneously, whereas Eliyahu's zealotry is implemented through elaborate plans. I might reformulate that by saying that Eliyahu seems to be a constant zealot. Finally, Pinchas is rewarded for his zealotry, whereas Tanakh describes G-d's reaction to Eliyahu's self- description with real sharpness: "Go, return to your way through the desert to Damascus. When you arrive, you will anoint Chazal King of Aram and Yehu ben Nimshi King of Israel, and you will anoint Elisha ben Shafat of Aveil M'cholah as prophet in your stead". The midrash alertly rephrases the ending as "I don't want your prophecy". In other words, Eliyahu is fired (finally) for his zealotry.

How do the midrashists account for these differences when they identify Pinchas and Eliyahu? Why do they bother? My contention is that they must have developed an integrated, holistic vision of the life of Pinchas-Eliyahu.

Let us return to, and examine more closely, G-d's reaction to Pinchas' zealotry. We mentioned that He grants him "a covenant of eternal priesthood"; this seems an appropriate reward. But G-d also informs Mosheh "Behold, I am giving him My covenant of peace", which seems less character-appropriate. Zealots rarely look forward to lives of peace and tranquility.

Furthermore, the midrash claims that Pinchas does not become an ordinary priest, but rather assumes the office of war-priest. We next meet him leading the Jewish forces into battle against Midyan. What kind of job is that for someone with G-d's covenant of peace? Then, at the end of Joshua, he serves as Grand Inquisitor as the community investigates whether the tribes on the East Bank of the Jordan have committed idolatry. While he absolves them, the sense we get is that he was appointed because he could be counted on to lead the enforcers in if they were guilty. He is then identifies as the High Priest who serves as the oracle of Hashem during the civil war between Benjamin and the other tribes that concludes the Book of Judges. Hashem's instructions to the tribes, conveyed through Pinchas, are to attack and attack again

Finally, another midrash – a midrash which deserves to be widely publicized in that it demonstrates that the midrashists "got" it, that they understood and to some degree shared the feminist critique of patriarchal society – sums up Pinchas's character in less than attractive fashion. In Judges, we learn that Yiftach made an oath to sacrifice to G-d the first living being emerging from his house upon his successful return from battle. To his shock and dismay, his daughter was first out of the house to greet him. With a heavy heart, Yiftach sacrifices his daughter. (The simple sense of the words is that he killed her. Nachmanides, however, suggests that he only forbade her from marrying, but that the text treats this as equivalent to murder. His reading has much in both text and context to recommend it.)

The midrashists wonder why Yiftach did not have his vow annulled, as halakhah permits. (They don't address an even more obvious halakhic question, namely why the vow was binding at all when it required violating the prohibition against murder, and vows to perform illegal acts are halakhic nullities.) They respond that Yiftach, as political leader, felt that only the High Priest had sufficient stature to annul his vow. So he sent a message to the High Priest asking him to come. The High Priest, however, thought that Yiftach should come to him, and they were unable to resolve this dispute. The midrash sums up: "Between the two of them the girl was lost". Who was the High Priest? Pinchas!

So in the aftermath of his initial act of zealotry, Pinchas becomes warpriest, Grand Inquisitor, and a man so insistent on the dignity of his office that he has no concern for collateral casualties. How do we square this portrait with his having received G-d's Covenant of Peace?

I'd like to suggest that the midrash makes the following claim. Zealots are good, but dangerous. A zealous who gets something right does wonders, but habitual zealots will eventually get something important wrong. So G-d's initial reaction to Pinchas is "Great! You have done well, and earned a great reward. **Don't do it again!"**.

To cement and emphasize his point, G-d announces that he is giving, *notein*, his covenant of peace to Pinchas. The choice of verb is significant, as covenants are more often established by the consent of all parties involved – one is *koreit* a covenant – than given (see Genesis 17:2 for the other instance).

Let me therefore suggest the following as midrashic history. Pinchas kills Zimri and Kazbi, and G-d approves but immediately offers him His covenant of peace

lest his zealotry metastasize. Pinchas turns it down – his identity is bound up with his zealotry. Over time, as G-d (k'b'yakhol) watches nervously, he becomes warpriest, and signs of incipient disaster emerge in the episode with Yiftach. Pinchas gradually becomes Eliyahu. At Mount Carmel, he makes the long-feared mistake. Mount Carmel is a disaster – people die, and no one is changed.

So G-d takes Eliyahu to Choreiv. He hopes that Eliyahu will be influenced simply by the historical parallel to Mosheh, who argued with G-d on behalf of the Jews rather than against them. As the midrash puts it – "Mosheh sought the honor of the father and the son, but Eliyahu only sought the honor of the father". Perhaps G-d also hoped Eliyahu would learn from His own mistakes. R. Eliyahu Dessler argued that a key message of the Exodus narrative is that people are never really changed by dramatic one-shot experiences – if the Revelation at Sinai, following on the heels of the Ten Plagues, could not prevent the Golden Calf from occurring almost immediately, how could Eliyahu expect his showmanship at Mount Carmel to seriously affect Baal-worship?

But Eliyahu is unmoved. So G-d takes him to the cave, and, via the vision, offers him the Covenant of peace on more time. And Eliyahu turns it down again. Two strikes, and he's out.

The last verses of Malachi, however, seem to present a very different view of Eliyahu. "Behold I am sending you Eliyah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible Day of the Lord. He will return the hearts of fathers to sons, and the hearts of sons to fathers, lest I come and smite the land utterly". Here Eliyahu is presented as a figure of peace, almost an anti-zealot. In midrash, Eliyahu's post-Biblical career is almost always described in terms compatible with that verse. Eliyahu brings peace and comfort, recognizes the significance of comedians, etc.

I suggest that the midrashists posited that Eliyahu is offered the covenant of peace a third time, in Heaven, and that this time he accepts.

That is one version of history. It resolves many difficulties, as we have shown, but also generates some new questions.

First: why does G-d take so long to fire Eliyahu if we can, in retrospect, see the danger signs all along? Second: Eliyahu as a purely Biblical figure is not consistently without compassion; he argues with G-d on behalf of the widow who hosts him, for example. How does that episode fit with the midrash's claim that he cared "only for the honor of the Father"?

Perhaps these two questions answer one another – perhaps Eliyahu's compassion finally disappears in the crushing aftermath of Mount Carmel. But they have also been used as the basis or what we can call "alternative biographies" of Eliyahu.

One alternative is offered by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, present Chief Rabbi of England. He notes that while in the cave on Mount Choreiv G-d is not in the whirlwind, in the book of Job G-d does appear out of a whirlwind. Rabbi Sacks accordingly argues that G-d does not reject Eliyahu in toto at Choreiv, but at most points out that Mount Carmel was an error. Indeed, Eliyahu might well have remembered that G-d's original appeared to Mosheh at Sinai out of a flame, and His public appearance there was accompanied by loud sounds.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch offers a far more radical rereading. He suggests that the point of the vision was not to reject Eliyahu's path, but to reassure him of its necessity. The verse in Malachi teaches us that Eliyahu comes before the Messiah, that Eliyahu is the harbinger of redemption. That, says R. Hirsch, is precisely the message of the vision – that the quiet delicate voice cannot come before the hurricane, earthquake, and wildfire have passed. Eliyahu is depressed because he cannot see the results of his work, so G-d shows him that his work is a necessary preparation for redemption. (Indeed, while the Revelation at Sinai may not have "worked", in the sense of making the whole population permanently faithful to Hashem, would anyone argue that it was unnecessary or counterproductive?)

In Rav Hirsch's reading, the command to anoint Elisha is not a rejection but a confirmation; G-d uses it to tell Eliyahu that his work will in fact live on. Indeed, Elisha is if anything a less compassionate figure than Eliyahu, and the text describes his role as that of killing those Baal-worshippers who escape the swords of Chazael and Yehu, Eliyahu's anointees as kings of Aram and Israel respectively.

R. Hirsch's reading has several other textual advantages. First, Eliyahu's Biblical career does not end after this episode, indeed it has no yet reached its halfway point. Second, why does Hashem send the angel to revive Eliyahu in the wilderness if in fact "he is not better than his ancestors", and it would be better for his career to be ended?

But let us assume that there is some tension between G-d and Eliyahu in the prophetic relationship, that G-d regularly seeks to moderate Eliyahu's zealotry. We set that possibility up through a reading of the life of Pinchas, but it can also emerge

from the Eliyahu story itself. For example, after Eliyahu declares the drought, G-d sends him to places where he will see the suffering his decree has inflicted, presumably to make him aware of the consequences of his passions. Even R. Hirsch can admit that Hashem's overall endorsement of Eliyahu is not without its discomforts.

What drives Eliyahu in this relationship? What makes him either so sure of himself, or else so consumed by his uncertainties, that he feels compelled to challenge G-d?

We noted earlier that in the scene at Har Choreiv Eliyahu is reenacting an encounter between Mosheh and G-d. In that encounter, Mosheh asked to see G-d's Glory, His *kavod*. According to the midrash, that meant that Mosheh asked why bad things happen to good people, and why good things happen to bad people.

For Mosheh, and probably for most of us, the more difficult question of that pair was the first, why the righteous suffer. It is hard to imagine a book titled "Why Good Things Happen to Bad People" being a runaway bestseller. I suspect that this is because we live in a culture that is fundamentally optimistic about human nature, which assumes that the vast majority of people have not behaved sufficiently badly to deserve failure in the pursuit of happiness.

But it is possible to argue that justifying the suffering of the righteous is simple, whereas the success of the wicked is a theological monstrosity. Let me illustrate, and then explain, why,

A famous Talmudic story tells of G-d taking Mosheh into R. Akiva's classroom. Mosheh is impresses, by R. Akiva, and asks to see the reward prepared for such a man. G-d shows him R. Akiva's flesh being sold in the marketplaces. Mosheh exclaims: "This is Torah and this is its reward?" G-d replies: "Be silent! So it arose in My mind".

R. Eliyahu Dessler, whom we have met before, connects this story to a midrash, cited by Rashi in his commentary to the Torah, which explains why the first chapter of Genesis always uses the name Elokim for G-d whereas the second chapter uses Hashem Elokim. Elokim is taken to refer to G-d's attribute of justice, whereas Hashem refers to His attribute of mercy. Says the midrash: It arose in G-d's mind to create the world in accordance with justice, but He saw that it would not survive, so He made mercy a partner in Creation.

Says R. Dessler: The inclusion of mercy in creation is not ideal, because Divine mercy erodes the dignity of Man. In a world run in accordance with strict justice, every human moral decision has real and lasting consequences. Mercy means that G-d will ignore some of our decisions and actions. R. Akiva's reward was the chance to live – however briefly and ultimately unsuccessfully – in a world of strict justice. Thus G-d replied to Mosheh's challenge by referring him to what arose in His mind at the time of Creation.

Mercy, unlike justice, is random. One of my high school students would regularly complain that I gave him lower grades on a test for the same answers as his peers. My reply would be that he had gotten exactly the number of points those answers deserved, but that I had been merciful with the other students. He would then demand the same degree of mercy, whereupon I would reply that it was of the essence of mercy that it was not deserved and thus could not be demanded or held accountable to any standard.

In other words, bad things may happen to good people because, in a just world, who of us deserves better? But good things happen to bad people when justice is arbitrarily replaced by mercy.

Eliyahu was deeply offended by the arbitrary nature of mercy. He demands consistency of G-d; "if You require these things, You must enforce them, or our choices are not meaningful and dignified".

In midrash, however, Eliyahu becomes the reconciler of opposites. He is, first of all, the person who lives in Heaven, who is simultaneously an inhabitant of the Upper and Lower worlds. The verse in Malachi tells us that he will reconcile the generations; he also appears at circumcisions, a moment of great generational tension, and immediately after Shabbat, when the borders between sacred and profane blur. Finally, at the seder we open the door to shout our imprecations at murderous pagans, but meanwhile Eliyahu comes in, underscoring that to attack requires leaving our fortifications, and thus makes us vulnerable. (I owe this insight to my friend Shoshanah Gelfand.) This is even more true when the battleground is spiritual or intellectual.

Perhaps the midrash understands that only Eliyahu could play this role. When the idealistic among us are counseled to moderate, we – often correctly - suspect that the apostles of moderation have no understanding of idealism. But the world cannot survive strict justice, and so Eliyahu comes to tell us that, while he of all people

understands the powerful attraction of consistent idealism, he has learned that mercy and ambiguity have legitimate roles to play.

May we successfully learn that lesson without in the process forgetting our ideals.