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## **The Eliyahu Narratives Yeshivat Har Etzion**

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### **Shiur #72: Achazya**

#### **Part 1: Achazya, Son of Achav – General Overview**

The era of the reign of Achazya, son of Achav, is described in the text over the course of twenty-one verses, from I *Melakhim* 22:52 until II *Melakhim* 1:18. The first four verses of this description (I *Melakhim* 22:52 - II *Melakhim* 1:1), as well as the last verse (II 1:18) present a general evaluation of his reign, while the intermediate verses (II 1:2-27) represent the boundaries of the sixteen-verse narrative that will be the subject of the next few *shiurim*. The story starts with Achazya's fall, leading to his illness, and it ends with his death from this illness – "according to God's word that Eliyahu spoke."

There are two aspects to this narrative: on one hand, it is another chapter in the history of Achav's household and its decline; on the other hand, this is one of the "Eliyahu narratives," including the last record of Eliyahu's prophetic activities prior to his ascent in a storm to the heavens (in the following chapter). We shall not be addressing the first aspect in the following *shiurim*, and therefore we shall take this opportunity to present a brief overview of Achazya, son of Achav.

Achazya's reign was a short and bitter one: he reigned for less than two years (see I *Melakhim* 22:52 and II *Melakhim* 3:1), and this period was characterized by a rapid decline of the House of Achav. Achazya rose to power after Achav, his father, was killed in the war of Ramot Gil'ad, a battle that was altogether futile (I *Melakhim* 22:35-40).

Although most of what the *Tanakh* has to say about Achazya is to be found within our narrative, a few additional details about him, as well as a general evaluation of him, lie outside of its boundaries, in the framework within which the narrative takes place.

The decline of the House of Achav during the days of Achazya is apparent on two levels. Firstly, there are the sins of Achazya - which are more serious than the sins of his fathers; and secondly, there are the punishments that befall him and the Kingdom of Israel, which show signs of the disintegration of Achav's royal dynasty.

Achazya is described as a loyal successor of both of his parents:

"He performed evil in the eyes of God and walked in the way of his father and in the way of his mother...

And he served Ba'al and worshipped it, and angered the Lord God of Israel, like all that his father had done." (I *Melakhim* 22:53-4)

Our narrative begins with a stark narrative illustration of Achazya's idolatry:

"And Achazya fell through the lattice in his upper chamber that was in Shomron, and he fell ill, and he sent messengers and said to them: Go inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv, the god of Ekron, whether I shall recover from this illness." (II *Melakhim* 1:2)

Achav, Achazya's father, is accused more than once of leading Israel astray after idolatry, but never is he mentioned as personally serving idols. This grave sin of Achazya, which also represents a terrible desecration of the Name of God – "Is it because there is no God in Israel...?" (verses 3,6,16) – is what seals Achazya's fate to die of his illness such a short time after assuming the throne.

Even prior to his illness, Achazya fails in other areas of royal leadership. His partnership with Yehoshafat, King of Yehuda, in building a fleet of merchant ships in Etzion Gever does not work out as he had hoped (I *Melakhim* 22:49-50; II *Divrei Hayamim* 20:37); and Moav, which was under Israelite rule, rebels against Israel after the death of Achav (II *Melakhim* 1:1).

Achazya's fall through the lattice in the upper chamber of his palace, and his ensuing illness, are perceived by the commentators as a punishment. However, not only does this punishment not cause him to repent; he goes on to sin even more gravely – both by sending messengers to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv, the god of Ekron, and in his violent confrontation with Eliyahu, as recounted in our chapter.

Achazya's death represents the speedy realization of God's word to Eliyahu:

"He died according to God's word that Eliyahu spoke." (17)

One further detail associated with his death awards his punishment even more serious significance:

"And Yehoram [Achazya's brother] reigned in his stead... for he had no son."

## **Part 2: Achazya's Messengers – King vs. Prophet**

Eliyahu is the main character in our narrative, appearing throughout (II *Melakhim* 1:1-18). Eliyahu already has experience in standing before a king of Israel and conveying harsh messages. This is what he has done since his very first appearance in *Tanakh*, when he swore before Achav that there would be no rain

(I *Melakhim* 17:1), as well as in his meeting with him close to Shomron in the third year of the drought (I 18:18), as well as in his encounter with him at the vineyard of Navot (I 21:17-24). Still, in our narrative the hostility between Eliyahu and the king of Israel reaches its climax. Not only does God's word, which Eliyahu bears, not succeed in softening the sinful king (as happened in the case of Achazya's father, Achav, in the vineyard of Navot); it even brings the king to attempt violence against the prophet. This time, Eliyahu does not withdraw from the imminent hostility against the king, as he has done twice in the past (following his oath in front of Achav, 17:3 onwards, and after Izevel's threat against him, 19:4). He is ready to do battle against the king and his messengers, until God's word – which he bears – is victorious.

The clash between Achazya and Eliyahu in our chapter is unique in that it takes place through the agency of Achazya's various messengers, who have the misfortune to find themselves on the battlefield between the king and the prophet. A description of the negotiations between Achazya's messengers and Eliyahu takes up most of the narrative in our chapter, both quantitatively (verses 3-14 – a whole twelve verses out of a total of sixteen), and in terms of dramatic quality. On the other hand, the description of the meeting between Eliyahu and Achazya, at the end of the story, occupies only one verse, adding nothing new.

Two types of messengers sent by Achazya are active during the course of the narrative in relation to Eliyahu. On this basis we may divide the narrative into two parts. In verses 2-8 there are Achazya's messengers who are sent to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv, the god of Ekron; Eliyahu stops them along the way and sends them back to Achazya. In verses 9-17 we find the captains of fifty with their fifty men, who are sent to Eliyahu himself.

The centrality of the concept of "sending" in our narrative is highlighted by means of a key word that is repeated over and over throughout: the root *sh-l-ch* (to send, dispatch) appears a total of seven times in this story (never as a noun – "*shelichim*"; the messengers sent by Achazya are referred to as "*malakhim*" in the first part of the story, and "captains of fifty" in the second part):

1. (2) Achazya fell... and he fell ill; and he **sent** messengers and said to them...
2. (6) ... And he said to us: Go, return to the king who **sent** you
3. ... is it because there is no God in Israel that you **send** to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv?
4. (9) He **sent** to him a captain of fifty, and his fifty.
5. (11) And again he **sent** to him another captain of fifty, and his fifty.
6. (13) And again he **sent** a third captain of fifty, and his fifty.
7. (16) ... Since you **sent** messengers to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv.

In all seven cases, Achazya is the "sender," and in each instance the act of sending is a sin. In the first three instances, as well as in the seventh, the "sending" in question involves sending messengers to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv: there is the sinful act itself (appearance no. 1); and the rebuke and promise of punishment (appearance no. 2, 3,7). After Eliyahu manages to halt this delegation and send the messengers back to Achazya, along with his prophecy of punishment, the king tries three times to send soldiers to attack the prophet (appearances 4,5,6). Following the failure of these attempts at "sending," too, Eliyahu once again conveys to Achazya – this time directly, with no intermediary – the prophecy of punishment for his first "sending" (appearance 7).

Achazya's various messengers react in different ways to the challenge that faces them, requiring them to choose between the mortal, formal authority of their king and the authority of the man of God who is sent by Him. The decisions of the messengers, and the reactions of Eliyahu to their decisions, represent the crux of the story, and these will be the focus of the coming *shiurim*.

Translated by Kaeren Fish