

Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings
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Shiur #14: Chapter 14 – Yerovam’s Demise

In chapter 13, we read of the incident in which Yerovam's sacrificial altar was publically condemned by a prophet from Yehuda. With "*moftim*," miraculous signs proving his authenticity, the *Ish Elokim* cautioned Yerovam that the path he had chosen was religiously mistaken, warning that the bones of his priests would eventually be burnt upon that very altar. Yerovam failed to heed the warning:

Even after this incident, Yerovam did not turn back from his evil ways but kept on appointing priests from the ranks of the people for the *bamot*... Thereby, the House of Yerovam incurred guilt – to their utter annihilation from the face of the earth. (13:33-34)

Whereas the prophet in chapter 13 did not target Yerovam explicitly, preferring to direct his message at the altar, in our chapter Yerovam receives his own personal prophecy of doom.

PROPHETS AND THEIR KINGS

The backdrop to the story is that Yerovam's child has fallen ill with a life-threatening sickness. From the fact that "all Israel mourn him" (14:12,18), we may deduce that this child is the heir to the throne.

At that time, Aviya son of Yerovam became ill. And Yerovam said to his wife, "Go disguise yourself, so that you will not be recognized as the wife of Yerovam. Then go to Shiloh. Achiya the prophet is there — the one who told me I would be king over this people. Take ten loaves of bread with you, some cakes, and a jar of honey, and go to him. He will tell you what will happen to the boy.

It is apparent from the story that Yerovam cannot visit Achiya Ha-Shiloni personally, and he sends his wife in his stead. But if Yerovam cannot appear before Achiya, why not select a different prophet? One candidate would be the *navi zaken* living in *Beit-El*, of whom we read in chapter 13. Why couldn't Yerovam seek his counsel?

It is obvious that he seeks the prophet "who told me I would be king over this people." Achiya designated Yerovam as the king; Achiya is thus the address for the fate of the heir to the throne. The irony is that it is will be Achiya who will pronounce the demise of Yerovam’s royal dynasty.

The scene here touches upon some clear parallels to the Shaul-Shmuel relationship:

1. Gifts to the prophet: In order to gain counsel of the *navi*, one brought a gift.

Here, Yerovam instructs his wife, "Take ten loaves of bread with you, some cakes, and a jar of honey, and go to him."

Before Shaul's early encounter with Shmuel, we read, "Shaul said to his servant, 'If we go, what can we give the man? The food in our sacks is gone. We have no gift to take to the man of God. What do we have?' The servant answered him again. 'Look,' he said, 'I have a quarter of a shekel of silver. I will give it to the man of God so that he will tell us what way to take.'" (*Shmuel I* 9:7-8)

2. In both cases, God informs the prophet of the arrival of the guest in advance:

With Yerovam's wife: "God had told Achiya, 'Yerovam's wife is coming to ask you about her son...'"

With Shmuel: "Now the day before Shaul came, the Lord had revealed this to Samuel: 'About this time tomorrow, I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin. Anoint him leader...'" (*Shmuel I* 9:15-16)

3. The most evocative connection is the disguise:

Here, we read how Yerovam's wife disguises herself to meet the prophet. Towards the end of Shaul's life, we read, "Shaul disguised himself, putting on other clothes, and at night he and two men went to the woman. 'Consult a spirit for me,' he said, 'and bring up for me the one I name...' Then the woman asked, 'Whom shall I bring up for you?' 'Bring up Samuel,' he said." (*Shmuel I* 28:7-11)

The symmetry moves a stage forward when we recall that both circumstances reflect a *nevua* that pronounces the demise of the king, the death of his son (or sons), AND the defeat of all Israel.¹

Of course, this parallel scene, augmented by all the other common features that we have noted between the Shaul and Yerovam in previous classes,² amount to a strong link. In both cases, the *navi* who appoints the king announces their rejection, and we have the impression that the thrust of that *navi*'s prophecy was inextricably linked to that particular king.³

¹ See *Melakhim I* 14:15, and *Shmuel I* 28:19

² These include the tearing of the coat, appointment in the countryside, and use of similar language; see *shiur* 10 and *shiur* 11 note 13.

³ This is particularly pronounced in the case of Shmuel, whose name is closely tied to that of Shaul (see *Shmuel I* 1:20, 27-28) and who mourns the Shaul's failure – see *Shmuel I* 16:1-2 and the Abarbanel's comments there.

We would do well to reflect on the fact that in both the cases of Shaul and Yerovam, the king has not exactly been consulting with the *navi* throughout their tenure. Shaul broke off ties with Shmuel after Shmuel's pronouncement of renunciation. Likewise, it would seem that Yerovam has not been consulting with Achiya regarding his religious reforms and his new cultic shrines. These men are estranged from their spiritual benefactors, but are forced to turn to them when their very survival is in peril. Of course, they each seek life and discover that the very opposite will come to them.⁴

SUBTERFUGE

As we have mentioned, Yerovam's wife disguises herself for her meeting with Achiya. The *pesukim* mock this feeble attempt when they inform us that "Achiya could not see, for his eyes had become sightless with old age."

What was the purpose of this concealment?

He was concerned that people would say that he was inquiring of the prophets of God, rather than the prophets of his [golden] calves. (Malbim)

He knew that Achiya hated him, for he had removed himself from the way of God. He said to himself: If Achiya knows it is my wife, he will prophecy nothing but bad tidings. (Radak)

Many figures dress up in Tanakh. For some, the objective is to be able to deliver a message that would otherwise not be received or heard.⁵ In those cases, the effect is theatrical and the aim of the costume is to convey a lesson that will access and penetrate the recipient (usually the king) before it is deflected.

But in this case, if we follow the Radak, the impression that is given is that the *navi* will bless people (or curse them) in accordance with his personal feelings towards the recipient. Is that really the case? This can be understood in one of two ways:

When a prophet inquires [of God] regarding a given matter, he inquires regarding that issue specifically... If he [Achiya] did not know that this was Yerovam's wife, he would inquire only as to whether the sick child would live and maybe he [the *navi*] would pray for him. But if he knew that it was Yerovam's wife, then he [the *navi*] would prepare to inquire of God regarding all matters of the House of Yerovam, for this is [not a private but] a public matter. (Malbim)

⁴ We might add that both stories involve descendants of Rachel who struggle against the would-be king from the tribe of Yehuda.

⁵ Such as the *navi* who talks to Achav (*Melakhim* I 20:35-41) and the woman from Tekoa (*Shmuel* II 15).

According to this interpretation of the Radak, Yerovam thought that he would gain greater assistance and a better chance for his son if he would be treated merely as an individual rather than the crown prince. Yerovam wishes that his sick son be treated like any other child before the prophet.

But a second possibility for Yerovam's concealment is that he felt that the anger of the *navi* would condemn him. This is reminiscent of the episode of Yaakov seeking a blessing of the blind Yitzchak in his old age; if one can trick the purveyor of the blessing, one may emerge with a blessing rather than a curse. Our story fails to follow the Yaakov story, however, and is more akin to the case of Bilaam, who is brought to curse Israel, but says: "I could not of my own accord to anything good or bad contrary to the Lord's command. What the Lord says, that I must say" (*Bamidbar* 24:13). The prophet cannot independently adapt the word of God in accordance with his personal inclinations.⁶ No matter to what extent Yerovam conceals his wife, and no matter how blind the prophet may be, God will send his word of truth to his prophet and deliver His pronouncement.

I think that the insertion of this masquerade into the story continues a theme that was dominant in our previous chapter. Yerovam is continually attempting to circumvent the word of God, manipulating his mandate to his own designs. This subterfuge cannot work. God's inexorable word will be delivered, even if human beings attempt to twist and distort it.

In this case, the messenger sent by the king Yerovam in order to bring about the child's recovery actually becomes the reverse - an agent of God bearing a message of death. The excruciating return journey of Yerovam's wife, fully cognizant that her entrance into her home will bring about her child's death and the bitterness of her bereavement, drives home the irrevocable divine verdict. In a sinister echo of the "*mofet*," the prophetic sign of the previous chapter, the very death of her child establishes the veracity of Achiya's prophecy. (Had Yerovam heeded the first sign, then the second awful indication would not have transpired.)

There is a slight dissonance between what the *navi* says and what actually transpires. The *navi* tells Yerovam's wife that "when you come to the CITY the child will die"(14:12), but the child only dies "when she entered the THRESHOLD OF HER HOUSE" (v.17). This interplay between the physical house or home of Yerovam and the royal "House" or dynasty of Yerovam

⁶ This theme deserves deeper analysis. After all, Avraham is told, "Those who bless you, I will bless" (*Bereishit* 12:3), indicating that the power of blessing is his. Elisha, irritated by some mocking youths, curses them, and are mauled by bears (*Melakhim* II 2:23-25); when Elisha is treated well by the Shunamite woman, he blesses her with the birth of a child (*Melakhim* II 4). Yet we can still say with confidence that regarding a person's destiny, it is the word of God that prevails and His intent alone, rather than the instinctive human pronouncement of the prophet. Of course, greater investigation is needed regarding the episode of Yaakov and Esav and the *berakhot*.

(14:10, 13) is deliberate.⁷ The death of the child at the moment of entry into the house is indicative of the end (or death) of Yerovam's royal house.⁸

THE CONDEMNATION

Achiya's pronouncement is divided into two:

14:6-14 – Yerovam's punishment

14:15-16 – National Punishment

(The fulfillment of these punishments occurs later in the *sefer*: Yerovam's in 15:29-30 and to Israel's in *Melakhim* II 17:21-23.)

Yerovam's punishment is expressed in furious and crude terminology. First, God articulates Yerovam's guilt with phrases taken from Achiya's initial prophecy to Yerovam:

If you do whatever I command you and walk in my ways and **do what is right in My eyes** by **keeping my statutes and commands**, as **My servant David** did, I will be with you. (11:38)

Here:

But you have not been like **My servant David**, who **kept My commands** and **walked in My ways** with all his heart, doing only **what was right in My eyes**. (14:8)

Hashem adds that Yerovam "acted worse than all those who preceded" him.

The punishments expressed here include coarse references to "dung" and "those who urinate against the wall."⁹ The prediction regarding Yerovam's descendents, that "he who dies in the city shall be devoured by dogs, and anyone who dies in the field will be eaten by the birds" (v.11), is reminiscent of the ranting of Goliath (*Shmuel* I 17:44) and most probably an echo of contemporary expressions of carnage and decimation.¹⁰ (Only in the case of Achav and Izevel do we see these words carried out literally.¹¹) We can only suggest that this crass "street language," which indicates total destruction,

⁷ See *Shmuel* II 7, where there is a similar interplay between the concepts of the physical house (of God and David) and the royal House of David (his dynasty).

⁸ I saw this observation in Jerome Walsh's book on *Sefer Melakhim*, part of the *Berit Olam* series. He takes this further, suggesting a pun of sorts - "*saf ha-bayit*" (the threshold) of the palace echoing "*sof habayit*" – the end of Yerovam's dynasty. I think the pun, while tempting, is unsubstantiated by the text.

⁹ See the Radak, who offers the various options of meaning here: 1) even the dogs will be wiped out. 2) The male line of the family will be destroyed. 3) This is a shortened form that indicates people of intelligence and discerning qualities. (This third option also appears in Targum and Rashi.)

This phrase recurs in *Melakhim* I 16:11, 21:21, and *Melakhim* II 9:8, as well as in *Shmuel* I 25:22.

¹⁰ *Da'at Mikra*

¹¹ *Melakhim* I 22:37 and *Melakhim* II 9:35.

reflects the fury and anger with Yerovam's sins, and the consequent determination to eliminate all his descendents. Indeed, when the punishment happens to Yerovam's son, Nadav, the *pesukim* deliberately stress, "He did not spare a single soul of the House of Yerovam... in accordance with the word of God in the hand of... Achiya Ha-Shiloni."

The language which constitutes this pronouncement of absolute destruction against errant royal dynasties becomes a periodic feature of *Sefer Melakhim*. It recurs time after time, dynasty after dynasty, addressed to each of the royal houses of the Northern Kingdom (see 16:1-2, 21:20-25, and *Melakhim* II 9:8).

EFES ATZUR VE-EFES AZUV

However, one phrase has deeper connections. The mysterious phrase, "*atzur ve-azuv*" (14:10), translated as "bond and free" (JPS), relates to a phrase in *Shirat Ha'azinu*. There, we are told (*Devarim* 32:37):

For the Lord will vindicate His people,
And take revenge for His servants,
When he sees that his might is gone,
And neither bond nor free is left. (*efes atzur ve-efes azuv*)

The song of *Ha'azinu* is a poem that foresees the ups and downs, the turbulence of sin and punishment, within Israel.¹² In that *shira*, the removal of "bond and free" from Israel is indicative of reaching the lowest point, on the one hand, but also of a reversal of fortunes from bad to good, a gesture of God demonstrating mercy and reentering the picture. The usage of these words referring to utter destruction in *Melakhim* is borrowed from *Ha'azinu*. When we hear this phrase, we should understand their implications: despite the trouble up ahead, God is in control. They suggest that after the violence and chaos, better times will come. They also indicate that the events described here in *Sefer Melakhim* are included in the events that God always knew would transpire in Israel.

MITIGATING PHRASES

In this vein, there are arguably two mitigating phrases in this otherwise depressing prophecy, and *Chazal* pick up on them. The first is when Achiya utters the punishment of *Am Yisrael*: "God shall smite Israel, as a reed is shaken in the water (14:15)."¹³

The *gemara* interprets this in a positive manner, as indicative of the endurance of Israel.

¹² For a good understanding of *Shirat Ha'azinu*, see R. Elchanan Samet's shiur: <http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.60/51haazin.htm>

¹³ Since the punishment is that they shall be exiled "beyond the river," the *navi* uses a water metaphor here.

Better is the curse with which Achiya Ha-Shiloni cursed Israel than the blessing with which the wicked Bilaam blessed them. Achiya Ha-Shiloni cursed Israel by a reed, as it is said, "For the Lord shall smite Israel, as a reed is shaken in the water." Just as a reed grows in well watered soil and its stem is renewed and its roots are numerous, and even if all the winds of the world come and blow upon it they cannot dislodge it from its place, but it sways in unison with them, and as soon as the winds subside, the reed still stands in its place, [so may Israel be]. But the wicked Balaam blessed them by the cedar. Just as the cedar does not stand in a place of water... immediately the south wind blows upon it and uproots and overturns it on its face." (*Sanhedrin* 105b)

The second "positive" phrase is when Achiya says:

He alone will be brought to burial, because in him there is found some good to *Hashem*, God of Israel, in the House of Yerovam. (14:14)

This *pasuk* is difficult to understand. What is the "good thing" that is in Yerovam's house, and who in particular did something good? Maybe this is deliberately left ambiguous so as to confer some good to Yerovam, but yet to obscure it.

Nonetheless, *Chazal* suggest (*Mo'ed Katan* 28b) that Aviya, Yerovam's son, had done something positive to reverse his father's actions. R. Zera suggests that "he abandoned his turn [in Yerovam's *Beit Ha-Bamot*) and himself went up to Jerusalem." R. Chanina bar Pappa suggests that "he rescinded the guards that his father Yerovam had placed upon the roads so that the people would go up to Jerusalem." This indicates that even Yerovam's family contested his categorical ban on ascent to Jerusalem and sought to reverse their father's actions.

SHEKHEM TO TIRTZA

This episode concludes with Yerovam's death and the succession of his son, Nadav. One final note should be made before we leave Yerovam. Our story informs us (14:17) quite incidentally that Yerovam's palace is in a town called Tirtza. The *Tanakh* was apparently uninterested in informing us that Yerovam had built a new capital city in Tirtza! As we know, Yerovam's initial center was Shekhem (12:25). We shall see however, that over the next period, Tirtza is the royal capital city (16:9, 15-18). This will only change in the era of Omri, when the capital moves to Shomron (16:24). At a future opportunity, we will explain the appeal of Tirtza and the eventual success of Shomron as the Northern capital.