

Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings
By Rav Alex Israel

**SHIUR #18: CHAPTER 15-16 TURBULENCE IN THE
NORTHERN KINGDOM**

Our chapter depicts the instability of the Northern kingdom. Each house of royalty is brought to an abrupt end by bloody assassinations, as opportunists seize the throne time after time. The timeline of the Northern kings (below - with wavy lines indicative of a revolt or assassination) clearly portrays this process.

Yerovam – 22 years

Nadav – 2 years

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Baasha – 24 years

Elah – 2 years

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Zimri – 7 days

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Omri – 12 years

Yerovam's son, Nadav, is assassinated by Ba'asha from the tribe of Yissachar. As described by *Sefer Melakhim*, the nation is involved in a military conflict, engaged in a war campaign against the Philistine city of Gibton. Ba'asha takes advantage of Nadav's presence in the war camp to kill the newly appointed monarch – only two years in office – and to usurp the throne. If this were not enough, we read how he cruelly murders all of Yerovam's offspring, decimating every member of the royal family.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, we read how the *navi* rebukes him for his religious path and decrees his demise.

Ba'asha's rule lasts 24 years, but his son, Elah, fares no better than his predecessor. The one glimpse that we are given of his palace depicts the king in a drunken stupor. After 2 years in power, he is killed by Zimri, an army officer of medium rank – the commander of half the chariotry. This act of treachery was preserved eternally in the idiom "Zimri, murderer of your master" as a pejorative designation of ultimate betrayal.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Compare, for example, the act of Avimelech in *Shoftim* 9:5 and Saul's promise to David in *Shmuel* I 24:21. The common practice, it would seem, in the case of an insurrection by an outsider would be to execute the entire royal line in order to eliminate all contenders to the throne. An example of where this went "wrong" is in *Melakhim* II 11:1-16, where Atalia kills all the offspring of the king, but baby Yoash is snatched from the dead, only to return later as king.

<sup>2</sup> Pronounced against the army officer Yehu by the evil Izevel – see *Melakhim* II 9:31

Zimri thought that he would secure power by killing the king, but it seems that his military colleagues had other ideas. Abandoning the battlefield (they are still engaged in war with Gibton 25 years later!), they march against the capital city, Tirtza, to oust the pretender to the throne, Zimri. Zimri, understanding that his revolution is doomed to failure, engages in the ultimate act of self-destruction as he burns down the palace – Tirtza – in an act of suicide.

What follows is a period of five years<sup>3</sup> in which there are two contenders to the throne – Tivni and Omri. Omri, a senior military commander, prevails as king, and Tivni is killed.<sup>4</sup>

In summary, this period offers nothing but upheaval and violence. If we add the disastrous civil war of Baasha and the attack by Ben Hadad on the north of the country,<sup>5</sup> the composite picture is dismal.

### **DIVINELY ORDAINED?**

When he became king, he struck down all the house of Yerovam; he did not spare a single soul... **in accordance with the word that the Lord had spoken through his servant Achiyah Ha-Shiloni** – because of the sins that Yerovam had committed... (15:29)

It seems that Ba'sha has been divinely mandated to destroy Yerovam and his entire family. And yet in 16:7 we read that:

The word of the Lord came through the prophet Yehu ben Chanani against Baasha and against his house for all the evil that it had done in God's eyes... and that he had had struck it down [the House of Yerovam].

If God approved of Ba'asha's act of deposing the royal House of Yerovam, then why is Ba'sha condemned later for the self same act? Was it divinely ordained and approved or was it an act of evil? The commentaries discuss this point. Rashi:

Since he (Ba'asha) followed the same sins, he had no right to kill him (Nadav ben Yerovam), hence he was punished for his murder. Similarly we find 'I will visit the blood of Yizrael upon the House of Yehu' (Hoshea 1:4) – since Yehu failed to follow a path different to that of Achav, he was punished for his murder. (Rashi 16:7)

The House of Yerovam was condemned for its forbidden religious practices. Rashi suggests that whereas the House of Yerovam could have justifiably been destroyed, Ba'asha had no moral right to kill them, since he followed the same sinful path. Rashi's support comes from King Yehu. He destroyed the

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<sup>3</sup> Rashi establishes the five year period: Zimri rules in the 27<sup>th</sup> year of Assa; Omri in his 31<sup>st</sup> year. Since Zimri ruled only 7 days, that leaves a five year interim period.

<sup>4</sup> See *Da'at Mikra* commentary to 16:21.

<sup>5</sup> 15:16-22; see our previous *shiur*, #17.

House of Achav in a spirit of religious zealotry. However, later, he himself fails to follow God.<sup>6</sup> This raises serious questions as to the legitimacy of his original act. Ralbag adds to Rashi's perspective:

One has to question why this was considered a sin; after all, had Achiya the prophet not transmitted the word of God that this would transpire to the House of Yerovam?... We can suggest that he was punished for this since it was clear that he did this not [as punishment] for Yerovam's sins, because he himself followed those practices, nor did he do this to fulfill God's word... but rather out of an evil heart so that he would be king and no one could contest his monarchy. Furthermore, he was punished because he killed him at a time when he [Nadav] was fighting God's wars [national defense] against the Philistines... (Commentary to 15:29)

If we wish to summarize the arguments here, we will say that Ba'asha is guilty of destroying the House of Yerovam because:

- He followed the same religious path. (Rashi)
- His motivation was personal ambition, not a principled moral act. (Ralbag)
- He attacked the king at a time of war (Ralbag)

I would like to underscore the moral point here. From the text of Sefer Melakhim, it is probable that Ba'asha doesn't know that he is fulfilling a divine prophecy when he usurps the throne and kills Yerovam's family. After all, Achiya Ha-Shiloni delivered his devastating prophecy in private to Yerovam's wife (14:5-16). Why would Ba'asha be aware of God's intentions? Rather, we must assume that Ba'asha was completely unaware that his violent, opportunist, and malevolent act was pre-ordained by God. The important thing is that despite the fact that this act was decreed by God, this does not free Ba'asha from even one iota of responsibility.

This is a classic reflection of Jewish Ethics. The fact that the house of Yerovam is condemned lends no moral legitimacy to unethical acts against them. This philosophy of divine punishment in conjunction with human responsibility is reflected in a famous *mishna*:

He [Hillel] saw a skull floating on the surface of the water. He said about it: "Because you drowned others, you were drowned; and they that drowned you shall be drowned." (*Avot* 2:7)

There is a chain of divine justice, but the instrument of God's justice is not absolved of moral responsibility.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Melakhim II 10:31

<sup>7</sup> Hence, even though the Israelites were decreed to descend to Egypt, the Egyptians are still responsible for enslaving them- See Rambam, *Mishna Torah, Hilkhot Teshuva* 6:5. Similarly, see David's ethic in *Shmuel* I 24:12-15.

The Abarbanel notes that the very symmetry contained within the structure of our chapters reveals the sense of retribution against Ba'asha, removing any suggestion we might have of Ba'asha's innocence:

After Ba'asha killed the House of Yerovam for their sins, and he himself performed the same sins, it is only appropriate that he should be punished in the same manner... What would transpire with Ba'asha's son was that which occurred to Yerovam's son. Just as Nadav [son of Yerovam] ruled for two years, so did Elah [son of Ba'asha]. And just as Nadav was assassinated, so was Elah, to fulfill the words of the prophet that Ba'asha would suffer the same fate as Yerovam. Look how incredible the similarities are! (Abarbanel, p. 572)

Indeed, the symmetry is remarkably strong:

|                       | House of Yerovam                                                                                                                                                 | House of Ba'asha                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Length of their reign | 22                                                                                                                                                               | 24                                                                                                                                       |
| Their son's reign     | 2                                                                                                                                                                | 2                                                                                                                                        |
| The prophet's words   | I raised you <b>from among the people</b> and made you a leader of my people Israel.                                                                             | I raised you <b>from the dust</b> <sup>8</sup> and made you leader of my people Israel                                                   |
| The sin               | You have made for yourself other gods ... <b>you have provoked me to anger</b> (14:9)                                                                            | You walked in the ways of Yerovam ... <b>to provoke me to anger</b> by their sins (16:2)                                                 |
| The punishment        | I will cut off from Yerovam every last male in Israel—slave or free. I will <b>burn up</b> the house of Yerovam as one burns dung, until it is all gone. (14:10) | I am about to <b>burn up</b> Ba'asha and his house, and I will make your house like that of Yerovam son of Nevat. (16:3)                 |
| The punishment        | Dogs will eat those belonging to Yeroboam who die in the city, and the birds of the air will feed on those who die in the country. (14:11)                       | Dogs will eat those belonging to Ba'asha who die in the city, and the birds of the air will feed on those who die in the country. (16:4) |
| Fulfillment           | When he ruled... he killed off all the house of Yerovam; he did not spare a single soul... as God spoke. (15:29)                                                 | When he ruled ... he killed off all the house of Ba'asha; He did not spare a single male... as God spoke. (16:29)                        |

<sup>8</sup> Yerovam is raised from "the people," whereas Ba'asha is raised from "the dust." This relates to Yerovam's elevated social standing prior to his appointment as kings, whereas Ba'asha was merely a commoner.

This teaches us that even when God decrees that a king will be punished, if someone comes in violence without God's explicit command, he is culpable for his actions as much as if the act were premeditated.

## THE HOUSE OF OMRI

King Omri and his royal line are going to be the answer to Yisrael's crisis, providing Yisrael with the economic and administrative stability that they so desperately need. We begin with the understanding that Omri is a popular leader; he is the "people's choice" (16:21-22). The knowledge that Omri had widespread backing launches his monarchy on a stable footing. However his power was not merely internal. From outside sources (like the Mesha Stele) we know that Omri conquered Moav<sup>9</sup> and even settled his people in their lands. He was a king who wielded power beyond his borders. From a *Tanakh* perspective, this stability and success must be seen as somewhat ironic. Omri and his son Achav are described at the outset as kings who "were more evil than all who came before him" (16:25). We will see that these two aspects of Omri's reign – the economic prosperity and the spiritual decline – are far from disconnected.

In the thirty-first year of King Assa of Yehuda, Omri became king over Israel for twelve years. He reigned in Tirtza for six years. He bought the hill of Shomron from Shemer for two talents of silver; he built [a city on] the hill and named the city which he built Shomron, after Shemer, the owner of the hill. (16:23-24)

Why is there a need to build a new capital city? Why does Omri shift the capital to Shomron?

If you recall, Zimri had burned the palace down, taking his own life. Omri then, has inherited a burnt-out palace. He has two choices. He can choose to renovate the royal city in Tirtza, or alternatively to begin again. He opts for the second option, living in Tirtza for the first six years of his reign while simultaneously designing, supervising, and constructing a magnificent, well-fortified city in Shomron. Shomron was able to withstand a three year siege by the fierce Assyrian army before it was penetrated.<sup>10</sup> This fact testifies to its impressive strength, storage facilities, and defense installations. By the time Omri moved there after six years, the city was most probably already built in the most modern fashion. Even with this move of the capital, we gain a view of Omri as a forward-thinker, planning for the future.

But there are other strategic reasons for shifting the capital. We know of Tirtza as a central Canaanite town from Yehoshua's era (see 12:24) and it is apparent that Yeravam adopted this town as his capital (14:17), and it had served as such ever since.<sup>11</sup> However, on an international level, Tirtza failed to serve Omri's needs. Tirtza faced east, towards the desert, and lacked

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<sup>9</sup> See *Melakhim* II 1:1

<sup>10</sup> *Melakhim* II 17:5

<sup>11</sup> Whereas Yeravam's kingdom began in Shekhem –see 12:25 – it soon moved to Tirtza, as testified by 14:17.

access to major trade routes. Omri intends to ally his kingdom with Phoenicia<sup>12</sup> (he married his son Achav to a Phoenician princess!). To this end, he chooses a site on both a north-south road, and also on a central east-west artery, with a particular exposure to the west and access to the coast. This city was later known under the Greek name, Sebastia.

## **SHEMER AND BUYING THE LAND**

The *pesukim* take great pains to stress the purchase of the land and its original identity – the ownership of Shemer. It is quite astounding that Omri, who builds this location into an entirely new city, does not name the city in his own name. Instead, he preserves the identity of the original owner.

This purchase is a positive reflection upon the kings of Israel, that they didn't expropriate land belonging to citizens [even for purposes of the monarchy], but rather paid for it in full. (*Da'at Mikra*)

This point is especially poignant in the light of the Navot story (ch.21), in which Omri's son, Achav, requests that a neighboring farmer sell him some land. That man refuses in the name of God:

The Lord forbid that I should give up to you that which is my ancestral inheritance. (21:3)

In that story, Achav understood that even as king, his hands were tied, and he was restricted from taking ancestral lands from another Jew, from his subjects. There is a reflection of a fundamental religious ethic that applies to tribal lands in *Eretz Yisrael*. The entire land is returned to its original owner in the Jubilee year (*yovef*). When it comes to real-estate, even the king is severely restricted! Omri himself appreciates that he must recognize the original ownership of the land and perpetuate the identity of the ancestral owner. For a king of Omri's power, this is no small statement.

Chazal, despite Omri's religious direction, praise him for his building of Shomron:

“Rabbi Yochanan said: Why did Omri deserve to be king? Because he added a city in the Land of Israel” (Sanhedrin 102b)

In next week's class, we will discuss the spiritual worldview of Omri and his son Achav.

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<sup>12</sup> There were economic reasons for this alliance, but also national-defense motivations as well. In these chapters, we see Ben Hadad of Syria as a major regional military force. The likelihood is that this alliance aimed to resist that pressure as well (Albright).