

Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings
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Shiur #19 – Chapter 16
Ahav: An Introduction

Omri's reign is characterized by political stability, military strength, peace and cooperation between the Northern and Southern kingdoms. The development of a new capital city, Shomron, gave a spirit of renewal to the kingdom of Yisrael. Spiritually, however, the kingdom had reached its lowest ebb yet:

Omri did evil in the eyes of the Lord; he was worse than all who preceded him. He followed all the ways of Yerovam ben Nevat and the sins which he committed and caused Israel to sin..." (16:25-26)

There is a certain inconsistency in the verses here. If "Omri followed all the ways of Yerovam," then why is he "worse than all who preceded him?" We can possibly suggest¹ that it was Omri who set the negative trajectory of the kingdom, aligning it through economic, cultural, and religious ties with the wealthy trading region of Phoenicia. By forging those ties, including the marriage of his son Achav to a Phoenician princess, Omri planted the seeds of religious waywardness, even if it was during the reign of his son Achav that the poisonous flowers of his reign bore fruit.²

ACHAV

Achav, son of Omri, became king over Yisrael in the 38th year of King Assa of Judah, and Achav, son of Omri, reigned over Yisrael in Shomron for 22 years. Achav, son of Omri, did evil in the eyes of the Lord more than all who preceded him. It was a light thing to follow the sins of Yerovam ben Nevat; he took as a wife Izevel, daughter of Etba'al, King of the Phoenicians, and he went and served Ba'al and bowed to it. He set up an altar to Ba'al in the temple of Ba'al which he built in Shomron. Achav made the Ashera, and Achav continued to anger the Lord, God of Israel, more than all the kings of Israel who preceded him. (16:29-33)

Omri married his son Achav to the daughter of the King of Sidon. His name was Etba'al, the Ba'al suffix indicative of the spiritual allegiances of Phoenicia. Classic Israelite names frequently bear the suffix, "-Yah" or "-Yahu," as in Eliyahu, Chizkiyahu, Yirmiyahu, Yoshiyahu and the like. The suffix refers to

¹ See Ralbag, who offers a different explanation.

² See *Micha* 6:16, in which Omri is implicated in the same sinful category as his son Achav.

God's name YHVH. Thus, the very mention of the name of Izevel's father reflects the prominent pagan orientation of Phoenicia.

The alliance with Phoenicia compounded by Achav's marriage to Izevel, thrusts Ba'al to the very center of Israelite life in the Northern kingdom. Part of the problem is the personality of Izevel, Achav's wife. She appears to have been a most ardent and ruthless missionary of the Ba'al. With her band of 400 idolatrous prophets³ and her ban of Israelite God worship and persecution of its prophets,⁴ she enforced her pagan religious regime with determination. Her lack of moral conscience⁵ was unprecedented even against the corrupt political backdrop of the Northern kingdom. Her dominating influence over her husband coupled with her fearless resolve made a significant contribution to Yisrael's spiritual deterioration.⁶

The effects were overwhelming. In the era of Achav, Ba'al became the official religion. Israelites had frequently dabbled in other gods, but the people always perceived their fundamental alignment as oriented towards *Hashem*. Now, with the "*Beit Ha-Ba'al*" functioning as the exclusive means of worship in the capital city of Shomron, we can certainly echo the *pesukim* as they crave the "light" sins of Yerovam.

One may ask how Achav, an Israelite king, could have fallen so thoroughly into the hands of the Ba'al, a foreign deity. In today's western world, with its separation between religion and state (to one degree or another), we fail to understand the degree to which economic and political alliances, on the one hand, and religious orientation, on the other, went hand in hand. We see, time after time, throughout *Tanakh* that when Israel allies itself with a regional power, cultural influences (and that means religious influences) are not far behind.⁷ In a similar manner to which a country such as Israel today is receptive and susceptible to American cultural norms and many aspects of its worldview, Yisrael, in seeking the economic and political strength of Phoenicia, opened themselves to its gods as well.

Let us add some wider comments by the famous scholar of the Near East, W.F Albright:

...In judging the frequent triumphs of Canaanite polytheism in Israel, we must always bear in mind that polytheism had a popular appeal in many ways like that of dominant secularism of our own age. The wealth, science, and aesthetic culture of that age were lined up on the side of Canaanite religion... Compared with Phoenicia, the lands of

³ And it would appear that there was more than a single ensemble of prophets – see 18:19, 22. Note how they are denoted as "eating at the table of Izevel."

⁴ 18:4, 13; 19:2; and see how Achav threatens the prophet of God in 22:26-27.

⁵ This is reflected especially in the story of Navot's vineyard in ch.21.

⁶ Uncharacteristic to *Sefer Melakhim*, in which kings are singled out for punishment, in our case, Izevel receives her own condemnation from God (21:23); her influence upon Achav is noted in 21:25. See also the fulfillment of God's prophecy in *Melakhim II* 9:35.

⁷ Good examples are Achaz in *Melakhim II*, ch.16, and, of course, Menashe in ch.21, both of whom were under Assyrian influence.

Judah and Israel were very poor, very rustic and far behind the spirit of the day in fashions, arts of civilization, and material pleasures of life. All the sinister fascination of the elaborate proto-sciences of magic and divination was marshaled in defense of polytheism against the stern, almost savage, simplicity of Mosaic theology. When Israelite women employed the same amulets as their Canaanite friends in order to ward off evil spirits, they unconsciously made it more difficult to save their children from the perils of the Canaanite way of life. The extraordinary thing is that the way of Moses succeeded in Israel in spite of the forces drawn up against it! (*The Biblical period from Abraham to Ezra – a Historical Survey*, p.61)

A LITTLE ABOUT THE BA'AL

The chapters we are about to study describe the ongoing struggle between two personalities: Achav the king, and his nemesis, the great prophet Eliyahu. The Ba'al is at the focal point of the tension. The tool or medium which generates much of the drama is a drought, a simple absence of rain. Is there a connection between Ba'al and the rain? There certainly is a direct link.

Ba'al is a god which was endemic to both Phoenicia and Canaan, which are in essence part of the same geographical continuum. Ba'al represents the rain or storm god, responsible for fertility and agricultural success. The notion of Ba'al as connected specifically to rainfall is reflected in the *gemara* as well, in which a field that is watered solely through the rain is known as a "*sedeh ha-ba'al*."⁸ The primary agricultural and economical drawback in *Eretz Yisrael* (and Phoenicia) is a lack of rain; Israel is not a land endowed with rivers or a regular irrigation supply.⁹ Hence, the attraction to Ba'al is enormous. Ba'al proposes an alternative route to guarantee rainfall, and thus to economic stability or even prosperity.

As we mentioned in an earlier *shiur*,¹⁰ we should not be tempted to see the Ba'al as merely a figurine or a molten image. There were whole worlds of mythology that animated the Ba'al, and the entire religion, with its colorful pantheon of gods, must have appeared very sophisticated. Moreover, the accessibility of the rituals associated with Ba'al must have been tempting, especially in arid years. Ba'al was associated with its female counterpart, the Ashera,¹¹ which came in two possible representative forms, either a tree, or alternately, a female form, frequently a woman who was clearly pregnant or nursing. The theory was that the rain (the male god) penetrates the earth, giving fertility to the tree (the female). Hence, sexual rituals were frequent in the ceremonies of the Ba'al.

I detail this in order to help us understand the magnetic allure of this deity, such that from the time of the Judges (*Shoftim* 2:11) through the

⁸ *Moed Katan* 2a-b; *Bava Batra* 28a

⁹ See *Devarim* 11:10-12

¹⁰ <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/melakhim/16melakhim.htm>

¹¹ See how they both appear together in 18:19.

Temple's destruction (*Melakhim* II 23:4), the Ba'al was a constant temptation and a devastating avenue of sin.

CHIEL BEIT HA-ELI AND THE CITY OF JERICHO

As we continue through the lines describing Achav and his kingdom, we encounter a mysterious and seemingly disconnected *pasuk*:

During his reign, Chiel from Beth-El built Jericho. He laid its foundations at the cost of Aviram, his first-born, and set its gates in place at the cost of Seguv, his youngest, in accordance with the words that the Lord had spoken through Yehoshua Bin Nun. (16:34)

What is this *pasuk* referring to? What is the connection between building Jericho and the death of Chiel's sons? Furthermore, what is the connection to Achav? The verses explicitly connect the two events with the phrase, "In his reign/days." Why?

To answer the first question, we need look no further than the verses in *Yehoshua* (6:26), in which Yehoshua pronounces an oath:

Cursed of the Lord be the man who shall build the city of Jericho: He shall lay its foundations at the cost of his first-born, and set its gates at the cost of his youngest.

Chiel abrogated this oath. He built Jericho, and he suffered the consequences. Why must we hear about the resurfacing of this peculiar episode at this specific juncture?¹²

UNRAVELING JERICHO

Some wish to frame this occurrence within the perspective of homecoming and exile. After all, the first city that Israel captured in Canaan was Jericho. As an everlasting sign to God's victory at that site, Yehoshua vowed that the city be left in ruins. Chiel's obstinate rebuilding of the city at huge personal loss is indicative of an undoing of the miraculous entry into the land, or a process of unraveling the divine mandate and legacy that bestowed the land to the nation by virtue of God. The upshot of this is that Chiel is, in some manner, inviting exile and the retraction of God's protection and providence. This would connect with the reign of the idolatrous king Achav whose regime of the Ba'al threatens to undermine the very tenure of Israel in its land.

CRISIS OF VALUES

¹² Some have viewed this anecdote as a footnote to the worship of Ba'al. For example, "...it was a frequent practice - in an effort to placate their gods - to kill young children and bury them in the foundations of a house or public building at the time of construction...'In his days did Hiel the Bethelite build Jericho: he laid the foundation thereof in Abiram his firstborn...'" Howard E. Vos, *An Introduction To Bible Archaeology*, Revised edition (Chicago: Moody Press, 1953), p. 19.

But I would prefer to take a simpler direction and explain this event in the perspective of the national sense of priorities, the degree to which the nation is in touch with their identity. Let me explain.

The entry to Canaan was a formative event for the Israelite nation. Time after time, God instructed *Am Yisrael* to engage in acts to give meaning to the events that they experienced (such as the ceremony at Har Eival and the commemoration of Pesach), or even to deliberately construct memorials, such as the stones raised from the riverbed of the Jordan:

In time to come, when your children ask their fathers: What is the meaning of these stones? Tell your children: Here the Israelites crossed the Jordan on dry land. (*Yeshoshua* 4:21; see also 4:6)

In other words, these monuments were intended to educate, to instill a legacy, a sense of national heritage and historical importance. Similarly, the ruined hill of Jericho would symbolize for eternity the miraculous victory of the founding of the country.

What would it take for Chiel to take a national heritage site and to build upon it? It would be similar to the travesty of a developer who wanted to build luxury housing on the Gettysburg field or turn the palace of Versailles into a condominium complex! If someone is capable of taking a national icon and turning it into a real estate development, that reflects a total absence of national values and education; it denotes a deficiency of pride and an absolute lack of understanding and appreciation of *Am Yisrael's* history and priorities.

If Chiel can rebuild Jericho, then the damage of Achav's reign is deep and thorough. People have abandoned any sense of confidence or pride in Jewish heritage and fail to see value or importance to sites that should be infused with deep meaning.

ENTER ELIJAHU!

It is at this juncture that we meet the overwhelming personality of the prophet Eliyahu, who enters the story unannounced and, in characteristic Eliyahu fashion, with a devastating pronouncement:

As the Lord lives, the God of Israel whom I serve, there will be no dew or rain except at my word. (17:1)

Again, a non-sequitur. What is the connection between the events here? The *midrash* offers an ingenious narrative that connects the otherwise distinct and dislocated *pesukim*, offering a new story that reconstructs the continuity of the story:

What is the sequence here? Eliyahu and Achav went to comfort Chiel in his mourning. Achav said to Eliyahu: Is it possible that the curse of

the student [Joshua] was fulfilled, and the curse of Moshe Rabbeinu was not fulfilled? After all, it states, "If you stray and serve other gods ... God's anger will be ignited against you and he shall close the heavens and there shall be no rain." All Israel serve idols and the rain has not stopped! Immediately, Eliyahu said, "As the Lord lives, the God of Israel whom I serve, there will be no dew or rain except at my word." (Rav Yoseph Kra, based on *Sanhedrin* 113a)

This creative *midrash* manages to connect Achav's flagrant idolatry, the preordained death of Chiel's sons, and Eliyahu's radical pronouncement.

But beyond the linkage, it focuses our attention on the central bewilderment regarding Achav's reign and Eliyahu's impatience about it. The problem is this: Achav is the most serious sinner thus far amongst the Israelite kings; he has made idolatry the official Israelite religion and abandoned God entirely. And yet, his kingdom is flourishing. This goes against all the predictions of the Torah! The *midrash* portrays Achav at Chiel's *shiva* house scoffing at the notion that Chiel's sons might have died as a result of Chiel's sin, his abrogation of God's word. Achav hasn't witnessed or experience any correlation between his (lack of) faith and the national fortune.

And it is at this point that Eliyahu steps in and swears in God's name – "as God lives" – that there will not be rain until he allows it. As if to say – I will uphold the honor and commitment of God; I will enforce the Torah's pledge, the divine stipulation. If Achav is going to continue with his idolatry, Eliyahu insists that there can be no rain. And indeed, chapter 17-18 describe a three year drought.

Eliyahu's outburst raises serious questions. If Eliyahu is outraged, why is God not angry? Is Eliyahu correct? Furthermore, is Eliyahu making his pronouncement as an emissary of God, or as a man, a concerned Jew who sees the idolatrous rule of Achav and seeks to protest this departure from traditional Jewish faith?

We shall take up these questions in our shiur next week, as we study chapter 17.