

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)  
\*\*\*\*\*

**Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings**  
**By Rav Alex Israel**

**Shiur #25 - Spoils of War - Chapter 20 (Part II)<sup>1</sup>**

Achav engages in three wars with Ben-Hadad. The first two are found in chapter 20, and Achav is victorious in both campaigns. In the third battle (described in chapter 22), Achav loses the war - and his life.

Last week, we told the story of the opening campaign, in which Achav expressed impressive faith, relying upon the directives of the prophet against all odds, resulting in an improbable victory.

The second battle, a year later, is also framed in a religious context. The Arameans are convinced that their previous defeat had been a victory for the God of Israel. And yet, by their assessment, in different geographic conditions, their Assyrian gods would be stronger:<sup>2</sup>

The officials of the king of Aram advised him, "Their gods are gods of the hills. That is why they were too strong for us. But if we fight them on the plains, surely we will be stronger than they." (20:23)

Aram's mobilization extends beyond the religious sphere. They reorganize their military force to ensure that their troops are not susceptible to the disciplinary and organizational failures of the previous campaign (see vv.24-25). This is a battle that they intend to win. In the depiction of the battle, Aram seems to "cover the land," whereas Yisrael are described as "two flocks of goats." Not very encouraging.

And it is on this backdrop, that the *navi* yet again offers God's assistance. The prophet informs Achav that war has religious weight. Now that the Aram has framed the campaign as a battle of the gods, God's reputation is on the line!<sup>3</sup>

The man of God came up and told the king of Israel, "This is what the Lord says: 'Because the Arameans think the Lord is a god of the hills

---

<sup>1</sup> I have found R. Elchanan Samet's series of studies on this chapter very useful, especially his sources for this section. See Herzog College's *Megadim* journal, issue 16, pp.55-100.

<sup>2</sup> A geographical perspective of God was common in many cultures. We have explained that the Ba'al was a local god. Similarly, some explain Yona's flight from Israel as expressing that God would not be manifest outside the borders of the land. See the statement of the Rabbis: "Anyone who lives outside the land of Israel is as if he has no God" (*Ketuvot* 110b).

<sup>3</sup> We see God act in order to defend His own reputation frequently in *Tanakh*; see *Shemot* 32:12, *Bamidbar* 14:4-16; *Devarim* 32:27; *Yehoshua* 7:9; and *Yechezkel* 36:22,32.

and not a god of the valleys, I will deliver this vast army into your hands, **and you will know that I am the Lord.**' (20:28)

Once again, the *navi* is nurturing and mentoring Achav, with God Himself stimulating and actively encouraging Achav's faith.

## **BEN-HADAD'S SURRENDER; ACHAV'S CAPITULATION**

And what happens? The war is fought in the plain of Afek, to the east of the Kinneret.<sup>4</sup> The Israelites gain the upper hand, decimating the enemy forces. Now it is Ben-Hadad's turn to flee, as he "takes refuge in the town, hiding in an inner room" (v.30). As in our first story, the *Tanakh* spends little time on the war itself and is more interested in the exchanges between the two protagonists, Achav and Ben-Hadad, and the officials that mediate between them:

His officials said to him, "Look, we have heard that the kings of the house of Israel are merciful. Let us go to the king of Israel with sackcloth around our waists and ropes around our heads. Perhaps he will spare your life." Wearing sackcloth around their waists and ropes around their heads, they went to the king of Israel and said, "Your servant Ben-Hadad says, 'Please let me live.' (vv.31-32)

This masquerade has a specific objective of making Ben-Hadad look more vulnerable in Achav's eyes. The aim is to activate the sense of "mercy" for which kings of Israel are famed!

The sackcloth... was the manner of prisoners of war, and the ropes around their heads, as if to say that they were on the verge of being hung. They aimed to say: Oh master king, we are your prisoners of war and understand that we should be executed, if not for your manifest mercy. (Abarbanel)

Achav falls for the trick. His reaction is startlingly positive:

The king answered, "Is he still alive? He is my brother."

Whereas Ben-Hadad's men initially addressed Achav from a subordinate position, speaking of Ben-Hadad as "your servant," now Achav addresses him as "my brother!" The degree to which this sudden brothering<sup>5</sup> of Ben-Hadad is disturbing is emphasized by the rapid shift in tone by Ben-Hadad's astute negotiators:

---

<sup>4</sup> Garsiel thinks that it was fought on the banks of the Kinneret around Ein Gev. Yehuda Kil (*Da'at Mikra*) suggests that the battle took place on the Golan Heights. Others have suggested that the war happened near today's Afula in Emek Yizrael.

<sup>5</sup> This might be a play on Achav's name. See Garsiel's article on names in the Achav story and the inter-textual linguistic word-plays that they create: <http://www.lib.cet.ac.il/pages/item.asp?item=8802>. Chazal also create a "midrash shemot" on Achav's name, declaring that he was "a brother to Heaven but a father to idolatry," indicating his preference for Ba'al (*Sanhedrin* 102b).

The men took this as a good sign and were quick to pick up his word.<sup>6</sup>  
“Yes, your brother Ben-Hadad!” they said. (v.33)

Was this a mistake? Why did Achav relate to Ben-Hadad with such warmth and amity? Would it not have been more sensible, more strategically advantageous to destroy Ben-Hadad and to be rid of an enemy king? Let us see what Achav has to say to Ben-Hadad when the two kings meet:

“Go and get him,” the king said.

When Ben-Hadad came out, Achav had him come up into his chariot.

Ben-Hadad said: “I will return the cities my father took from your father, and you may set up your own market areas in Damascus, as my father did in Samaria.”

[Achav said,] “On the basis of a treaty, I will set you free.”

So he made a treaty with him and let him go. (vv.33-34)

## EXPLAINING ACHAV

On an initial reading, we may well propose that Achav knows how to spot a good business opportunity. He is aware that a generation earlier, during the reign of Baasha, Aram had captured vast tracts of the Galil (see 15:20). Rather than executing Ben-Hadad, here was a chance to leverage the situation to regain lost territories. Additionally, Ben-Hadad offered him unrestricted export rights to Damascus. Here, Achav is presented with a rare economic opportunity, gaining access to an entire foreign market. The financial revenues from such a move could be enormous. Essentially, Achav and Ben Hadad sign a "treaty," a "Land for Peace" agreement, with significant economic benefits for Israel. Achav has maximized his military advantage, leveraging it to accrue huge benefits for the nation at large and for the national treasury.

Some have claimed that Achav's motives were political-military rather than economic. It is interesting that we have one piece of archeological evidence that sheds light upon the event of our *perek*. The Kurt Monolith<sup>7</sup> is an Assyrian document that describes the wars of the Assyrian King Shalmanesser III. It details an alliance between the king of Aram and Achav (who is described as unusually powerful). Historians<sup>8</sup> have speculated that, aware of the looming Assyrian threat, Achav sought an alliance with Ben-Hadad against Assyria, as his forces alone were insufficient.

Now, all these theories are interesting. But when we look at the text, we do not get the feeling that this is a politically calculated move or a discerning evaluation by Achav. Instead, the sense is one of visceral emotional instinct and even sentimentalism, as Achav questions, “Is he still alive? He is my brother.” And this is quizzical. Why might Achav see as a

---

<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew here is cryptic and grammatically complex.

<sup>7</sup> Found by J.E. Taylor in 1861; it currently stands in the British Museum

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.daat.co.il/daat/tanach/rishonim/grosman6.htm>

brother the man who attacked him twice, who attempted to humiliate him in Shomron, and about whom he himself said, "See! This man seeks evil [destruction]" (v.7)?

Nechama Leibowitz makes an enlightening suggestion. She begins by discussing a similar situation, in which King Shaul spares Agag, king of Amalek, only to unleash God's outrage. In this context, she discusses Achav:

The text [in the Book of *Shmuel*, regarding Amalek) records nothing else but the hankering after the spoils of war. Why, then, did Shaul spare Agag, it may be asked? It may be answered that he was loathe to slay a king. **Class solidarity overlooks all other considerations.** (Note too that Achav, one of the kings of Israel... did not show mercy to just any of his enemies but only to a royal adversary, the king condemned to utter destruction, calling him "brother" even when they both sent their armies against each other to annihilate and exterminate each other. In like manner, the kings of Europe banded together to rescue their French royal counterpart from the French revolution. They were inspired not by international brotherhood but by class solidarity.)<sup>9</sup>

In other word, we are talking about a VIP club, a royal fraternity in which Achav has mercy upon Ben-Hadad simply because he shares his rank. Even between warring kings, it would appear that a royal is a royal and deserves special treatment! Whereas the previous explanations may justify Achav's behavior, this particular motivation is morally problematic.

How does the *perek* evaluate the course of action taken by Achav?

## THE JUDICIAL PARABLE

As we see from the end of the chapter, when the *navi* who disguises himself and approaches the king, God is far from happy with the clemency extended to Ben-Hadad. The chapter ends in a severe condemnation:

Thus says the Lord: Because you have set this man free, whom I had doomed (*ish chermi*), your life shall be forfeit for his life and your people for his people. (v.42)

Two observations are worthwhile making here. The first is the fact that a random Israelite soldier is able to make the king stop his carriage and give him his attention. A regular civilian has open access to the king. We see several times in *Nakh* a political culture of commoners freely approaching and conversing with royalty. Whether it be the woman from Tekoa who consults King David,<sup>10</sup> the two prostitutes judged by Shlomo,<sup>11</sup> or the women on the wall in Shomron,<sup>12</sup> the sense is that commoners had opportunity to converse with and complain to the king. Frequently, this takes the form of a judgment,

---

<sup>9</sup> Studies in *Vayikra* (WZO 1980), p.316

<sup>10</sup> *Shmuel* II ch.14

<sup>11</sup> *Melakhim* I ch.3

<sup>12</sup> *Melakhim* II 6:26-30

but sometimes it is simply an opportunity to voice a difficulty to the monarch. This democratic culture is an impressive reflection of the rule "that his heart not be raised above his brothers" (*Devarim* ch.17).

A second point must be made about the prophet's disguise. Why is it necessary? Beyond the transmission of God's message, what is the purpose of this theatrical trap?

Prof. Uriel Simon has noted that this act of masquerade by a prophet is reflected in several stories in the *Tanakh*.<sup>13</sup> In fact, he identifies them as a sub-genre called the "Judicial Parable," in which the storyteller presents:

...a realistic story about a legal violation that is told to someone who has committed a similar offense in hopes that the person will unsuspectingly pass judgment on himself or herself.<sup>14</sup>

The offender will be caught in the trap only if he or she does not detect prematurely that the parable condemns him or her. Thus, the speaker disguises the parable as a legal case and creates some discrepancy between the parable and the offender's situation in order to trap the offender. In our case, the mask, or bandaging of the wounded *navi* has a dual effect: It hides his true identity allowing Achav not to realize that he is being challenged by a prophet, and it also makes him look like a wounded soldier, fresh from battle, thus reinforcing the parable.

Now, here we get into some difficulty. Simon suggests that the story has to accord somewhat with the real-life situation but must disguise the reality, or else the parable cannot work. The discrepancy is built-in.

And yet, the discrepancy is too great in our case. In the prophetic parable, the man was explicitly told to: "guard this man! If he is missing, it will be your life for his" (v.39). But as regards Ben-Hadad, was there any explicit or implicit intimation that Ben-Hadad had to be killed or incarcerated? Why is Achav condemned so severely in our story – had he been explicitly instructed to kill Ben-Hadad? In fact, because of this jarring discrepancy, the Talmud Yerushalmi (*Sanhedrin* 11:5), and in its footsteps Rashi, insist that Achav HAD been told explicitly not to favor or release Ben-Hadad. But that is not in the text!

If the Yerushalmi is accurate, this story stands in direct parallel to the episode (*Shmuel* I ch.15) of Shaul having mercy upon Agag (as we mentioned in the name of Nechama Leibowitz above). In both cases, an enemy king is

---

<sup>13</sup> David and Batsheva in *Shmuel* II 11:1-4; the Tekoite woman in *Shmuel* II ch.14; the *mashal ha-kerem* in *Yishayahu* ch.5. One of the key features of this situation is the notion of catching people "red-handed." This is true even without the *mashal*, as we see in our upcoming chapter about Eliyahu appearing to Achav at the moment that he took possession of Navot's vineyard. Similarly, see *Melakhim* I ch. 13, in which the *navi* appears in particular at the moment at which Yerovam worships upon his altar.

<sup>14</sup> Uriel Simon, "The Poor Man's Ewe-Lamb: An Example of a Juridical Parable," *Biblica* 48 (1967).

pitied by a Jewish king, against God's explicit instructions. In each case, the violation of God's instruction to decimate the enemy in a *milchemet mitzva* results in the king being told that he himself will lose his throne.

As in a game of chess (which reflects ancient war), victory cannot be declared unless one has killed the king. Despite the loss of 130,000 soldiers, Ben-Hadad could still save face. Achav might communicate to the nation that God had fought for Israel and that He had given them military triumph, but as long as the enemy king is free, that is a debatable and questionable assessment. And we can raise this question ourselves: Was Israel in fact, victorious, or did Achav's actions essentially squander the military victory allowing it to evaporate? An answer may be found in chapter 22, where we read that a mere three years later, Ben-Hadad had flouted all his promises. With Ben-Hadad at large, God's victory is insignificant.

## JERICHO AND THE SPOILS OF WAR

But possibly a more appropriate parallel story is that of the battle of Jericho in *Sefer Yehoshua* (2:6-8). Where does that parallel begin? The *navi* in our chapter calls Ben-Hadad "*ish chermi*," translated by the Targum as a man who has been sentenced to die. The word "*cherem*" is a crucial word in the case of the city of Jericho, which is, of course, another battle in which God fought for Israel. If you recall that story, Achan was condemned to death for taking from the spoils (*cherem*) of war. There are some interesting parallels between the two chapters.

*Melakhim*: "And these encamped opposite these for seven days." (v.29)

*Yehoshua*: "They marched around the city once... they did this six days. On the seventh day..." (*Yehoshua* 6:14-15)

*Melakhim*: "The prophet approached: So says God:... I will deliver this massive force into your hands." (v.28)

*Yehoshua*: "*Yehoshua* said:... God has delivered you the city" (6:17)

*Melakhim*: "The wall fell on 27,000 survivors." (v.30)

*Yehoshua*: "The wall collapsed" (v.20)

Of course, the victory at Jericho is characterized by the ban on taking the spoils: "The city is banned (*cherem*) and all its contents are God's" (v.17). Why are the spoils of war so sacrosanct in Jericho? The spoils are restricted because they belong to God. God fought the war; the decisive victory was His. Hence, the spoils of war belong not to man, but to God. Achan, who took from the spoils, "betrayed" Israel<sup>15</sup> because he appropriated an object of God's victory for his own personal enjoyment, gain, or use. He took the symbol of God's victory for himself, as if to say, "We fought this war; it is ours, not God's."

---

<sup>15</sup> This is an interesting parallel to Achav, as Achan is called a betrayer (*Yeshoshua* 6:18, 7:25), and Eliyahu brands Achav as a betrayer or traitor (18:18).

Interestingly, Rashi translates the phrase "*ish chermi*" as "the man of My battle," intimating that it is not within Achav's rights or jurisdiction to release this man. Ben-Hadad is God's prisoner, not Achav's. As we saw, Achav capitalized upon this military victory to gain political, territorial, and economic capital. Achav seeks to reap personal profit from God's victory. But Achav's appropriation of the victory is a violation of God's role in the war.

Note that in this parable, the man is not guilty of not killing the prisoner, but rather that he was so preoccupied with his own interests that the prisoner got away! Achav allows the prisoner to get away. But unlike the parable, the prisoner does not simply escape – that would be bad enough! Rather, Achav cuts a bargain plea on the side! He makes a deal! In this regard, he ignores the fact that this is God's victory and that as a result he has no rights to the benefits of war, using the victory for his own profit.

## **CONCLUSION**

God's presence is palpable behind the state politics and military negotiations of chapter 20. God is the source of Israel's victories, the prophet orchestrates Achav's moves, guiding his tactics and boosting national confidence. And yet, Achav sidelines God's role and uses the victory for his advantage instead of the war acting as a springboard for faith. In this way, from God's vantage point, he undermines his status as king.