

Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings
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Shiur #27

Chapter 21, part 2 – Confrontation, Punishment, Submission

After discussing the story of the illegitimate and underhanded acquisition of Navot's field, we now come to God's condemnation of Achav. We must restate that from God's perspective, Achav, rather than Izevel, is the prime offender. It is he who is targeted with the full weight of God's outrage.

The section that we will study this week can be divided into a number of parts:

- 1) vv. 17-20 – The Confrontation between Eliyahu and Achav
- 2) vv. 21-24 – Achav's punishment
vv. 25-26 - Summative assessment of Achav's reign
- 3) v. 27 – Achav's Teshuva
vv. 28-29 - God's mitigation of Achav's punishment

Of course, the primary problem that we will face in this section is not the dreadful deaths that are predicted for Achav and Izevel but Achav's *teshuva*. We know that Achav has been responsible for directing the nation away from God, encouraging idolatry, and persecuting the prophets, in addition to his considerable personal crimes. Izevel, too, is depicted as thoroughly evil. We have even been waiting for their downfall and their comeuppance. On this backdrop, Achav's sudden *teshuva* is disconcerting, arousing a sense of astonishment. Can a person change so fast? Can one make amends so easily? Might it not be mere theatrics? Furthermore, God's immediate and seemingly overgenerous acceptance of that *teshuva* raises questions. Why would God respond so magnanimously to Achav's remorse?

THE CONFRONTATION

The prophet Eliyahu is sent by God to confront Achav in a particular time and place. Eliyahu is informed, "He is now in Navot's vineyard; he has gone down to take possession of it." Eliyahu catches Achav "red-handed." Here is their dialogue:

Say to him, "Thus says the Lord: Would you murder and take possession?"

Say to him, "Thus says the Lord: In the very place where the dogs lapped up Navot's blood, the dogs will lap up your blood, too."

Achav said to Eliyahu, "So you have found me, my enemy?"

He said, "I have found [you]."¹

Why does Eliyahu confront Achav with two statements? What do these statements mean? The classic commentaries amplify the meaning of these lines eloquently:

"Would you murder and take possession?" This is a question which aims at opening the conversation to hear an answer, even though the details are known. Like... "Where is Hevel your brother?" (Radak)

You committed a murder! How do you now [have the right to] take his possessions? (Malbim)

Whether this is merely an opener or actually a fully fledged accusation, this line states Achav's crime in absolute terms.

The next phrase condemns Achav to a dishonorable burial. Why is this particular act of humiliation selected as a suitable response to Achav's actions? The Ralbag explains that this is pure justice:

On the manner that Navot died, in that he died an unnatural death, so Achav will die. And in the manner in which the dogs licked Navot's blood, so will the dogs lick your blood. (Ralbag)

¹ Note that the first two statements to be spoken by Eliyahu are reported only in the manner that God instructs Eliyahu, and that the second exchange is reported in direct dialogue between Achav and Eliyahu as told by the narrator. For more on this interesting structure, see R. Elchanan Samet's *shiur*: <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/eliyahu/66eliyahu.htm>
I will quote the section that deals with this:

"When the reader arrives at the result of the sin of Achav and Izevel, when Achav comes to take possession of the vineyard of the murdered Navot, he expects to read – first and foremost – God's reaction to this crime. And an immediate reaction indeed appears: 'God's word came to Eliyahu...' (v. 17). If, instead of this verse, we were to read – as proposed above – 'Eliyahu went down to meet Achav, and he found him in the vineyard of Navot, and he said to him: So says God...', not only would there be some delay in the reader's hearing of God's immediate response, but more importantly we would hear of God's response only indirectly, from Eliyahu's mouth, and by deducing that he had been told by God to say this. This would weaken the impact of the Divine response, while what the text is trying to do is the opposite: to strengthen and amplify its impact. This effect is achieved by conveying God's word to Eliyahu in direct speech.

The advantage of the approach adopted by the text here could also have been a disadvantage, since the proximity of God's word to the criminal deed, on the one hand, may have distanced it from Achav's reaction to it, on the other. This would have diminished the drama of Eliyahu's encounter with Achav. This would have been the case if the text were to have gone back and spelled out Eliyahu's going to the vineyard of Navot, and recorded the encounter with Achav there, and the conveying of God's word. But the text describes the rebuke in such a way as to maintain and heighten the drama. It is specifically by refraining from describing the actual encounter between them, and the recording of Achav's rhetorical question, "Have you found me, my enemy?" immediately after God's preceding words, that the text deliberately creates the impression that this is Achav's reaction to God's words which have just been conveyed to him by Eliyahu. God's words to Eliyahu thus 'become,' in the text, Eliyahu's words to Achav."

In other words, this creates a *midah ke-negged mida*. Justice is performed towards Achav. He will be treated in precisely the manner that he treated Navot. He will be killed, and the blood will be spilt in a public place, lapped up by the dogs.

Chapter 22 describes the sullen enactment of his punishment:²

The king died and was brought to Shomron, and they buried him there. They washed the chariot at a pool in Shomron where the prostitutes bathed, **and the dogs licked up his blood, as the word of the Lord had declared. (22:37-38)**

Eliyahu's double pronouncements express most succinctly the crime and its punishment. Interestingly, however, the Abarbanel suggests that these two pronouncements, dictated and mandated by God, were intended to induce a confession from Achav:

“Regarding these two pronouncements, the first was in question form and the second was designed as the response to Achav's reply.”

We fail to hear whether Achav responded between the first statement and the second. And yet, it appears that Achav intended to deny the charges.

DENIAL

Achav said to Eliyahu, “So you have found me, my enemy?”
He said, “I have found [you].”

Again, the commentators assist us:

“Have you found me, my enemy?” You are my enemy and you have found me guilty on this point, as if to say, “Izevel did the act and not me!” His intent was to express denial before the *navi*, as if to say that it was done without his knowledge.

Achav tries to deflect the guilt. He attempts to blame Izevel, but more so, he depicts Eliyahu as his enemy. By casting Eliyahu as his enemy, he appears to be saying that Eliyahu's harsh critique is an expression of personal animosity rather than a divine moral pronouncement.³ If this is a personal quarrel, then Achav can absolve himself of the prophet's harsh ethical standards.

In the next chapter, Achav relates to another *navi*, Michaya ben Yimla, in a similar style, taking the prophet's negative approach as a personal affront:

² Similarly, see the fulfillment of the prophecy of destruction of Achav's line – pronounced here – in *Melakhim* II ch.9 during Yehu's rebellion. There, the divinely mandated assassination of the king (Achav's son) takes place at Navot's field – see 9:21, 25-26. Izevel also meets her death in that chapter; see 9:10,30-37.

³ This exchange is strongly reminiscent of the mutual accusations between Achav and Eliyahu in 18:17-18.

There is one man through whom we can inquire of God, but I hate him, because he never prophesies anything good for me, but only misfortune – Michaya ben Yimlah. (22:8)

There too, Achav blames the prophet for the personal tension between the king and the loyal prophet of God. Prophets are biased, aligned against the authorities.

But Eliyahu is uninterested in Achav's denial.

PUNISHMENT

What follows this exchange is a detailing of the punishments accruing to Achav:

Because you have committed yourself to doing what is evil (*ra*) in the sight of the Lord, I will bring disaster (*ra'ah*) upon you and I will make a clean sweep of you; I will cut off from Achav every male and every bondsman and freeman in Israel. I will make your house like the house of **Yerovam son of Nevat** and the House of **Ba'asha** son of Achiya, because of the anger with which you have angered and because you have lead Israel to sin. (vv.21-24)

These verses provide a lengthy declaration predicting the demise of Achav's royal line. But whereas this morbid warning is addressed to Achav specifically, it is familiar to us from the two kings referenced in this speech - Yerovam ben Nevat and Ba'asha. Both kings were confronted by prophets predicting their demise in response to their sinful actions. The similarity in phraseology draws a connection between the prophecy in our chapter, and the prophecies that predicted their downfall:

- "I will bring disaster upon you" – cf. 14:10, (and *Melakhim* II 21:12)
- "A clean sweep of you (*u-viarti acharekha*) - cf. 14:10, 16:3
- "I will cut off from Achav every male and every bondsman and freeman in Israel" - cf. 14:10 and 16:11
- "You have lead Israel to sin" - cf. 14:16, 16:2,13
- "The dog's shall devour those who die in the city; those who die in the field shall be eaten by the birds" – cf. 14:11, 16:4

These and other phrases resound with the echoes of the devastation wrought upon the royal houses of Yerovam and Ba'asha. However, interestingly, the lines delivered here are not lines that are more severe than average. As we can observe, these are standard phrases now delivered to a king of Israel for the third time in history, informing him that his royal line is at its end.

So there are two dimensions to Achav's demise. *Pasuk* 19 is addressed personally to Achav. Interestingly, this edict is never commuted or mitigated, not even by Achav's submission to God. In that regard, God retains the perception of Achav in the *pesukim*, that "there never was anyone like Achav who committed himself to that which was evil in God's eyes."

But *pesukim* 21-24 concern themselves with the House of Omri, Achav's royal lineage. Here he is just another chapter in the dismal succession of kings of the Northern kingdom. It is this legacy that is commuted in the wake of Achav's remorse.⁴

TESHUVA

What stimulates Achav's repentance? How does his initial denial of sin turn around to become a contrite act of *teshuva*?

R. Elchanan Samet suggests that the root cause lies in the previous *pesukim*. When Achav is addressed as yet a further increment in the unfortunate fate of royal houses of Israel, following in the footsteps of his fleeting and un-heroic predecessors, the comparison irks him most deeply:

It is specifically this comparison that hurts Achav, since it implies that the House of Achav will be nothing but a brief episode, devoid of influence, in the stormy history of the Kingdom of Israel – like the House of Yeravam and the House of Ba'asha. All of the enormous efforts at which Omri and Achav had excelled – the creation of the new capital city, Shomron... forging of courageous political ties with the former enemy Kingdom of Yehuda (chapter 22) and with the Kingdom of Tzidon... the reinforcement of Israel's army and leading it to victory against the principal enemy in that generation – the Kingdom of Aram (chapter 20) – all of this will be counted for nothing, and the royal house that has achieved all of this will be cut off!⁵

R. Samet's explanation rests on the order of the *pesukim*. Achav's *teshuva* does not appear when he faces Eliyahu in the field. It is the latter rebuke that induces Achav to repent, not even the warning of his own personal demise.

I feel that other possibilities regarding Achav's mindset should be entertained. Often, a personal attack is met by an almost reflexive response of self-defense. It might well be that Achav initially defended himself, only to rethink at a later moment, accepting guilt and the responsibility.

Whatever his motivation, Achav appears to engage in sincere acts of repentance. How do we know? Because God informs us that his remorse was heartfelt:

"Have you seen how Achav has humbled himself before me?" (v.29)

⁴ And hence, the kingdom is taken away in the lifetime of Achav's son, and Izevel's gruesome death is also delayed, as her punishment is included in the section dedicated to the kingdom. It is in this dimension that Achav scores a reprieve. But as regards Eliyahu's words in *pasuk* 19, we see that take place albeit in a slightly muted form. Achav's blood is not directly lapped up by the dogs, but as his bloodstained chariot is washed, the dogs lap up the water with his blood in it.

⁵ <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/eliyahu/69eliyahu.htm>

Before we address the surprising turnaround in Achav's character, let us simply note that Achav's sackcloth, mourning, and fasting invites our attention to an intriguing symmetry in the chapter:

Verse 4	Verse 27
... dispirited and sullen	... he rent his clothes and put sackcloth on his body
He LAY DOWN on his bed	He FASTED
And turned away his face ⁶	And LAY in sackcloth
And he WOULD NOT EAT BREAD	And walked about subdued ⁷

If in the first situation, Achav merely lay in bed in a state of depression, the second situation has Achav lying in sackcloth, as a deliberate, active state of remorse. Furthermore, whereas in *pasuk* 4, Achav is not in a mood to eat, here he is positively fasting.

All that has transpired between these two descriptions of the king's grief is a result of Izevel's attempt to relieve her unfortunate husband's misery, to get him out of bed and to feed him. And yet as comparison of the two descriptions shows, she has not succeeded, and not only does Achav's condition revert to what it was, it worsens: Izevel's efforts are in the end a disservice. (Y. Zakovitch in Meir Weiss, *The Bible from Within*, p.403)

MIDRASHIC EXPLANATIONS

Our understanding of Achav's *teshuva* is made difficult by conflicting cues in the *pesukim*.

On the one hand, God declares how Achav has humbled himself and defers his punishment. Furthermore, Achav's actions of personal affliction, acts unbecoming of a king, would seem to indicate an internal upheaval of significant proportions.

On the other hand, if one looks ahead to chapter 22, we see Achav associated with false prophets, and at the same time intimidating and imprisoning prophets of God. This would not seem to be contingent with Achav's penitent persona. Moreover, one wonders whether self-affliction can undo the religious "facts on the ground" around the country. If shrines to Ba'al and Ashera exist around the country, why should Achav's personal grief be significant? Achav has to repair the damage!

It is for this reason that we find conflicting strains in the Midrash. Either Achav is a paradigm of sincerity:

⁶ For a similar situation of desperation in which a king turns his face, see the case of Chizkiyahu and his prayer in *Melakhim* II 20:43.

⁷ Some of the *mefarshim* suggest that this phrase indicates Achav walked barefoot, as one in a state of excommunication (see Rashi and Ralbag).

He sent for Yehoshafat, King of Yehuda, and he would administer forty lashes to him three times every day, and with fasting and prayer he would arise and go to bed before God, and he occupied himself with Torah all of his days and never again returned to his evil deeds. (*Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* #34)

Or a shallow cosmetic change in lifestyle:

To what extent did he fast? If he was used to eating every three hours, he now ate only after six hours. If he would usually eat every six hours, he now would eat only after nine hours... (*Pesikta De-Rav Kahana shuva, piska* 24:11)

As we see, the degree and depth of Achav's *teshuva* remains an open topic.

PREMATURE CONCLUSION?

One of the strange things about the conclusion of chapter 21 is that it seems premature. The chapter seems to summarize and conclude Achav's reign when we still have a long, dramatic and detailed chapter 22 before us, which describes Achav's heroic death and the fulfillment of Eliyahu's declaration that Achav's blood would be licked up by the dogs. Would it not be more appropriate to summarize Achav's reign at the end of chapter 22?

One suggestion may be found in the Rambam:

Although there are sins that are more serious than bloodshed, they do not lead to **destruction of civilization** in the way that bloodshed does. Even idolatry, or – needless to say – prohibited sexual relations or desecration of Shabbat, are not like bloodshed [in this respect]. For these belong to the category of transgressions between man and God, while bloodshed belongs to the category of sins between man and his fellow. And anyone who commits such a sin is a completely wicked person, and all the commandments that he may have performed throughout his life are not equal in weight to this sin, nor will they save him from judgment... We learn this from the example of Achav, who was an idolater, as it is said of him – “But there was no-one like Achav, who gave himself over to do evil in the eyes of God... and acted most abominably in going after idols” (21:25-26), but when his sins and merits were set out before God, there was no sin that made him deserving of being wiped out, nor any other matter that stood against him, like the blood of Navot...”(Laws Pertaining to a Murderer 4:9)

One might argue that the most severe of Achav's crimes was idolatry, a sin on a national scale, whereas the murder of Navot was a personal crime, which didn't affect the national temper and did not influence wider ethical norms in ancient Israel. The Rambam insists, however, that murder is at the top of the pyramid, as it causes “the destruction of civilization,” the disintegration of society, undermining its cohesion and trust.

But is there any connection between Achav's idolatry and his greedy and shameless pursuit of Navot? Again, R. Elchanan Samet's enlightening *shiurim* suggest the following connection:

The foreign, pagan culture that entered Israel together with Izevel introduced new concepts into Israelite society and into the Israelite royalty with regard to the status of the king and the norms of the monarchy. Religious corruption is the source of the moral and social corruption that ultimately characterizes Achav's household. But it is specifically the social corruption – epitomized by the story of Navot – that seals their fate.⁸

The idolatrous momentum was not without linkage to the royal culture instigated by Izevel of simply disposing of enemies and mere irritants. *Sefer Melakhim* deliberately summarizes Achav and his corruption at the point in which he engages in this act of spineless murder. This is his lowest point. Even though he will continue to live, this is the point at which we choose to summarize his religious failings and moral depravity.

IZEVEL

We should not leave this chapter without a few words about Izevel.

"The dogs shall devour Izevel in the rampart of Yizra'el ... Indeed there was none like Achav ... incited by Izevel his wife Izevel" (v.23-25)

God directs his prime focus towards the Jewish king Achav, marginalizing Izevel in His words of condemnation. And yet, it is clear from the story of Navot, and from the previous chapters that describe the "450 prophets of the Baa'l, and 400 prophets of Ashera who eat at Izevel's table" (18:19) that this is a driven woman who has very different ideas of religion and governance. She introduces foreign deities and an alien (religious and administrative) culture into the Israelite body-politic with significant "success," corrupting her husband Achav, and the nation at large. She remains in our minds as one of the most evil women of Tanach.

Her fate is more gruesome than that of her husband. Her body itself will be eaten by the dogs. Of note is the place in which her body will be consumed: "In the ramparts of Yizre'el." That is precisely the location in which she had set up the fabricated trial for Navot – in the city and not in the field. It would appear that her death also reflect the reciprocity of *midda k'negged mida*. Furthermore, the fact that her body is afflicted in a manner far more horrific than Achav belies the fact that she was truly to blame for Navot's death. She is not the monarch, but she still bears the blame for Achav's murder, and she pays the price.

⁸ <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/eliyahu/66eliyahu.htm> at the end of the article.

A last point of significance is that whereas Sefer Melakhim warns that several kings and their houses will be "devoured by the dogs" (14:11; 16:14) this is generally a metaphor, a mode of expression. It never actually transpires. But with Izevel it happens quite literally as described in a gory and graphic scene later in Sefer Melakhim:

Then Yehu went to Yizre'el. When Izevel heard about it, she painted her eyes, arranged her hair and looked out of a window. As Yehu entered the gate, she asked, "Have you come in peace, Zimri, you murderer of your master?" He looked up at the window and called out, "Who is on my side? Who?" Two or three eunuchs looked down at him. "Throw her down!" Yehu said. So they threw her down, and some of her blood splattered the wall and the horses as they trampled her underfoot. Yehu went in and ate and drank. "Take care of that cursed woman," he said, "and bury her, for she was a king's daughter." But when they went out to bury her, they found nothing except her skull, her feet and her hands. They went back and told Yehu, who said, "This is the word of the Lord that he spoke through his servant Eliyahu HaTishbi: On the plot of ground at Yizre'el dogs will devour Izevel's flesh. Izevel's body will be like refuse on the ground in the plot at Yizre'el, so that no one will be able to say, 'This is Izevel.' " (Melakhim II 9:30-37)

This lady is controlled, aloof, and fearless. See how she anticipates the men coming to execute her. She doesn't run. She calmly sits and puts on her make-up, doing her hair. And when they enter the palace, she confronts them, accusing them of cowardice and betrayal! This scene, to my mind, gives us a sense of this lady's personality helping us to understand her extraordinarily devastating influence on the Israelite kingdom.

Next week, we shall study chapter 22.