

Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings
By Rav Alex Israel

Shiur #28: Chapter 22 – Achav's Final Battle

In this chapter, Israel is back at war. After three peaceful years, Achav decides to attack Aram. Why? If you recall, chapter 20 ended with a peace treaty between Aram and Israel detailing that certain cities be returned to Jewish sovereignty. It appears that these agreements had not been honored. Achav, confident in his military superiority and determined to take Aram to task for abrogating their peace promise, prepares for battle.

UNITY

Interestingly, Achav's ally here is none other than Yehoshafat, King of Yehuda. Yehoshafat is exuberant about the alliance:

I will do what you do; my troops shall be your troops, my horses shall be your horses. (22:4)

We know that Yehoshafat is a God-fearing king who follows God devotedly. We might anticipate that he would keep his distance from Achav. However, he clearly valued the unity of the nation. He shared close family ties with Achav, marrying his son to Achav's daughter (see *Melakhim* II 8:18). In addition, he engaged in joint projects with the North, both military ventures¹ and sea voyages.² His language reflects his enthusiasm at the unity of the nation after a long period of acrimonious division.³

THE UNIQUENESS OF PROPHECY

The first half of the *perek* depicts a scene at "the threshing floor at the entrance to the gate of Shomron," where the two kings may have been viewing their troops in training accompanied by prophets. Alternatively, this was an arena in which a large numbers of "prophets, four hundred men" would deliver their prophecy for the Kings.

In the classic Jewish tradition, (*Shoftim* 20:27, *Shmuel* I 23:10-12, *Shmuel* II 5:19) Yehoshafat suggests that prior to embarking upon the military conflict, the king should consult with God. And it is here that a struggle begins

¹ See our chapter and *Melakhim* II ch.3

² See *Melakhim* I 22:50; *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 20:35-6.

³ *Chazal* seem to pick up on this pervasive atmosphere of unity as opposed to division and opportunism in other eras – see *Vayikra Rabba* 26:2, which suggests that during this period, Jews did not betray one another and preserved a sense of cohesion in the face of outside pressures.

between the band of 400 prophets, who all act and speak in unison and give an identical message, and Michayhu Ben Yimla.

Go up and the Lord will deliver [them] into the hands of the king.
(22:6,13,15)

These are Achav's prophets. Michayahu Ben Yimla is summoned by request of Yehoshafat, who, being from Yehuda, is uncomfortable with this large band of prophets. He specifically requests a "*navi la-shem*."

There are several lessons to be learned from this chapter about the classic mode of Israelite prophecy.

The first is raised by the Talmud. The Talmud wants to know how Yehoshafat knew that these four-hundred prophets were not loyal to God. Obviously, the number four-hundred is familiar from chapter 18, in which this was the number of the "prophets of Ba'al." We should note, however, that in this chapter they are not described as such. Moreover, they talk in the language of God, using the Tetragrammaton (YHVH) in *pasuk* 13. They talk like *nevi'ei Hashem*, and even though we, the reader, know that this scene is staged (see *pasuk* 13), at the very least there would appear to be a desire to see prophets loyal to God rather than to the Ba'al.

(Parenthetically, let us note that this represents, once again, evidence that Achav had ups and downs in his relationship with monotheism and the Ba'al. At this stage, he has adopted the outer trappings of the Ba'al but used the name of God.)

The Talmudic passage relates the conversation in the following manner:

Yehoshafat said, "Isn't there another prophet to *Hashem*...?"

He [Achav] replied, "There are all of these [the 400]!"

He responded, "I have the following tradition from my grandfather's house: the same communication is revealed to many prophets, but no two prophets will prophesy in the identical phraseology." (*Sanhedrin* 89a)

In other words, Yehoshafat knew that Israelite prophets never prophesy in mass groups, in unison. When you see a group of prophets talking the same and acting the same, you know it is false prophecy.

This point is underscored by the Rambam in his Laws of Principles of the Torah, ch.7, where he details the phenomenon of prophecy:

What is made known to a prophet during prophecy is done by way of parable, and he will immediately realize what the parable means. For instance, when Jacob the Patriarch saw the ladder with angels ascending and descending it, it was a parable representing monarchy and its subjection. Similarly, the animals which Ezekiel saw, the "boiling

pot" and "almond branch" which Jeremiah saw, and all the other objects seen by the other prophets were also parables. Of the prophets, some ... related what they saw in their prophecy and their interpretation of it. Others related just their interpretation. Sometimes, they related just the parables [of the prophecy], like Ezekiel and Zachariah sometimes did. All of the Prophets prophesized by way of parables and riddles. (7:3)

According to the Rambam, only Moshe Rabbeinu was able to receive prophecy with the clarity of a verbal message, a textual formulation. Prophets of a lower stature would see images, "parables," or visions. Part of the skill or gift of a prophecy was the ability to decipher and interpret the visions or the non-verbal communication.

If this is true, the text transmitted by the prophet, the words used in communicating God's message, was selected by the prophet himself. Prophets must put God's images and ideas into words, but it is the prophet, not God, who fixes the phraseology. It is for this reason that no two prophets will prophecy with precisely the same text. They receive a non-verbal message. The text is formulated by them, and as such, the probability of two prophets (let alone 400) emerging with same words, an identical linguistic formulation, is virtually zero.

Another point should be made here on the basis of this Rambam. In the Torah, the text is God's, because Moses' prophecy WAS textual, unlike that of the prophets.⁴ However, in *Nevi'im*, where the text was written by the *navi*, we should anticipate that each prophetic work will have a specific and unique literary style, distinct from other books. Why? Because if Yechezkel writes his book, and Yishayahu his, and Tzephania his, and each writes with God's content, but his own literary formulation, then each book will contain the literary hallmark of its human author.

We have digressed somewhat, but I feel that we have learned something valuable about the world of prophecy. No two prophets prophecy in exactly the same way. For this reason, we have "four prophets who prophesized at the same time."⁵ Why send four? Can a single prophet not deliver a message effectively? Apparently, God had something significant to communicate and he wanted four different people to say it in four different ways.

And yet, when you think about it, one of the characteristics of the Jewish prophet is his standing alone. This aloneness sometimes translates into loneliness as well. And this feature is shared by several prophets, from Moshe Rabbeinu⁶ to Eliyahu,⁷ Yishayahu,⁸ and Yirmiyahu.⁹

⁴ See for example, *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 7:6 and Ramban's introduction to his Torah commentary.

⁵ *Pesachim* 87a, *Bava Batra* 14b

⁶ *Bamidbar* 11:14; *Devarim* 1:9,13

⁷ *Melakhim I* 19:10,14

⁸ *Yishayahu* 50:1-11

PROPHETIC THEATER

A second aspect of our chapter that illustrates a central feature of Israelite prophecy is the manner in which the four-hundred prophets engage in symbolic acts in order to demonstrate their point. In *pasuk* 11m], their leader, Tzidkiya ben Kena'ana (a very "Jewish" name) creates iron horns that symbolize the victory of Israel against Aram, saying:

With these shall you gore Aram until you make an end of them. (22:11)

In this style, the false prophets follow a Jewish prophetic practice of engaging in theatrical symbolic action. Yirmiyahu walks around Jerusalem with a yoke on his shoulders (ch.27) in order to demonstrate subservience to Babylon. Yishayahu was told to walk barefoot and undressed to simulate the image of a prisoner of war (ch.20). Whether we are talking about Hoshea's marriages or Yechezkel breaking the wall of his house (ch.8), lying on his side(ch.4), or uniting pieces of wood (37:16-17), *neviei Yisrael* were frequently commanded to engage in demonstrative "drama" in order to transmit God's message. In this manner, Achav's false prophets represent and reinforce their message by acting in the true prophetic tradition.¹⁰

What do these iron horns represent? One imagines that they are designed to activate the ancient *nevuah* mentioned by Moshe in *Sefer Devarim* (33:17)

Like a firstling bull in his majesty,
He has horns like the horns of a Re'em,
With then he gores the peoples...

In the Torah, these verses are addressed to the tribe of Efrayim, which is an appellation for the Northern kingdom (as in *Yishayahu* ch.7 and *Hoshea* ch.5). It makes sense¹¹ that the horn, a symbol of military victory¹² and of the tribe of Efrayim, should be used to symbolize an Israelite military triumph. Achav's prophets would certainly reinforce their credibility by using these accessories.

Cynicism and Courage.

Here, we once again see the nerves of steel necessary to function in the role of a prophet. Michayahu is used to delivering unpopular messages to the king (see *pasuk* 8). In our chapter, the king's courtiers call him and instruct him as to the script or mantra that he should chant:

Let your words be like the rest of them; speak a favorable word.

⁹ Yirmiyahu 1:18

¹⁰ See also the Ramban on *Bereishit* 48:22. For the Ramban, this is certainly not theatrical; it is an act by prophets who positively activate certain happenings by their actions. See also *Melakhim* II 13:14-19.

¹¹ This approach is mentioned explicitly in *Da'at Mikra*.

¹² 75:5-6,

If we were in any doubt as to the veracity of the four-hundred prophets, we now understand that the entire spectacle is nothing more than a fraud. And we know that Achav is also aware of this fact because when Michayahu meets the king, he repeats the lines he had been dictated verbatim. The king's response is:

How many times must I adjure you to tell me nothing but the truth in God's name. (22:16)

In other words, Achav is also aware that this "prophecy" by the four-hundred is nothing more than a façade, a pretence.

At the same time, Michayahu's confidence and audacity at teasing the king and causing him to profess the lack of authenticity of his own prophets demonstrates his fearless stand towards the king.

He angers Achav to such an extreme degree that the king jails him with meager rations, "until I come home safe." Nonetheless, Michayahu holds his ground, saying "we will see who has to flee from room to room" (*pasuk 25*, a clear reference to the failure of 20:30; see the same phrase there).¹³

ACHAV

Israel loses the battle, as Michayahu predicted. At the end of the *perek*, Achav, although disguised in battle, is fatally injured. *Sefer Melakhim* seems to stress that this is an act of providence, as it informs us that Achav was disguised and yet "a man pulled back a bow randomly and hit the king of Israel between the folds of his armor" (v.34); it was a random shot, despite the king's disguise, and it entered the single weak point in Achav's armor.

Yet Achav remains in the battlefield, probably losing volumes of blood that cost him his life. He stays there to encourage his troops. Once the figurehead of the nation is dead, it is unlikely that the rank and file soldiers will hold their discipline, and he thus instructs his men that he remain propped in his chariot, even though it will cost him his life. *Chazal (Moed Katan 28b)* speak of this selfless and heroic trait very positively.

Achav is killed as the fulfillment of prophecies in BOTH the end of ch.20 and ch.21. Obviously, the manner in which he meets his death at the end of the chapter reflects BOTH of these decrees: The national defeat and his death is a fulfillment of the prediction in ch.20, but the dogs that lap up Achav's blood fulfill the prediction in ch.21.

CONCLUSION

¹³ Rav Sabato has a useful article that deals with "Fate and choice in the story of the death of Achav" discussing Michayahu's prophecy and its implications for Achav. Worthwhile reading: <http://www.vbm-torah.org/vtc/0066368.html>

It is at this point that we bid farewell to Achav, who has been a central figure in the last five chapters. As we mentioned at the outset, Achav is one of the evil kings listed in *Perek Ha-Chelek* (the tenth chapter of *Sanhedrin*) as having no place in *Olam Ha-Ba* because they betrayed their religious legacy in the most fundamental of ways. On the other hand, Rav Nachman said that "Achav was equally balanced" (*Sanhedrin* 102b). In other words, he had his devastating flaws, but also significant virtues.

In our study, we have seen that while we can certainly assert that Achav took the Northern Kingdom to unprecedented levels of idolatry, he is far from a simplistic character. Whereas his desire to ally himself with Phoenicia, his tough wife, and possibly his personal predilections drew him to the Ba'al, he also has an affinity for listening to God's prophets and appears to distance himself from the Ba'al after the great assembly at Mt. Carmel. He has periods of faith in God and his *teshuvah* is accepted by *Hashem*. On the other hand, we read how "there were none worse than Achav" (21:25) and the story of Navot is a chilling story of state murder.

In the end, we gain an impression of Achav as a wavering personality who lacks a solid backbone and is easily swayed and influenced. He can be swayed towards Ba'al and can be shocked to veer closer to God worship. It is this lack of personal resilience and consistency that leaves him so susceptible to wide alterations in his religious orientation. But that is no excuse for the damage that he inflicted upon both the nation and the unfortunate individuals who met their death as a result of his actions.

In next week's *shiur* we will take a closer look at the life and times of King Yehoshafat, which will bring us to the end of *Sefer Melakhim* I.