

# ***SEFER MELAKHIM BET: THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS***

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Dedicated in memory of

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## **Shiur #13: Chapters 11-12**

### **The Wicked Queen and the Boy King (Atalia and Yo'ash)**

The Yeihu revolt generates a political upheaval in both the Northern and Southern kingdoms. In Yisrael, Yeihu succeeded King Yehoram whom he had assassinated,<sup>[1]</sup> and thus, despite the advent of a new royal dynasty, Israel did not suffer from break in leadership. In Yehuda, however, with the king having been killed,<sup>[2]</sup> and many of his close family members as well<sup>[3]</sup>, a leadership vacuum emerged. It is Atalia, the king's mother, also the daughter of Ach'av and Izevel (8:26), who seizes the throne. In an act of unspeakable cruelty, she kills the entire royal family, including, we assume, many of her own children and grandchildren (11:1). Unbeknownst to her, baby Yo'ash, the youngest of Achazyahu's sons, heir to the monarchy, is secretly snatched from the massacre and is raised in secret, until he will be able to ascend the throne. Yet again, this episode bears witness to the corrupting influences of the Northern kingdom; norms that originated in Phoenicia have now seeped into Yehuda by its alliance with the North.

Unlike Yeihu's murderous revolution in Yisrael, Atalia's motive in massacring her own family is inexplicit.<sup>[4]</sup> The sanitized phrase "she killed off all the seed of the royal house," (1:1) indicates an absolutely tyrannical desire to govern that sweeps away all normal moral sensitivity,<sup>[5]</sup> as described by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz:

On the one hand, it is clear that Atalia, like [Izevel], was not just a strong personality but a woman who yearned to rule; a woman with a real ambition, an intense passion for power... Her passion was simply for power itself, and this drive of hers was so strong that it caused her to carry out a series of extreme acts, even to the point of destroying the royal heirs. ... She did not even make any serious political or religious changes within the country. She became simply a manifestation of this one drive: to rule.<sup>[6]</sup>

Rabbi Steinsaltz also explains how the political background made this all possible:

Queen Atalia's rule was possible ... only because she ruled in the kingdom of [Yehuda], where a single dynasty had reigned for many years, and where there had not been a single real revolt or serious threat to overthrow the royal dynasty. Thus Atalia, who in fact had no real claim or right to rule, could, in the absence of other claimants to power, govern for six years – a fairly long period.

... If she had come to power a few years earlier, it would have been claimed that the queen was getting political help and support from the members of the ruling house of [Yisrael], to whom she was related. The surprising thing is that Atalia took up the reins of government after her family and her power base in the kingdom of [Yisrael] were destroyed to the last man. At such a time, there should have been a popular response against foreign rule (it should be remembered that Atalia may have been [Izevel's] daughter and, in any case, was not from [Yehuda] but from [Yisrael] and was thus, from every viewpoint, a foreign transplant). Nevertheless, despite all these strikes against her, Atalia maintained control of the government for a considerable length of time. Her removal from power was the result of a conspiracy in the highest circles of the kingdom, and not as the result of a popular revolt.<sup>[7]</sup>

And yet, the *Tanakh* itself tells her story only obliquely as a preliminary detail in the plot to overthrow her. Atalia is treated as an illegitimate monarch, with her reign ignored by the standard protocol employed by *Sefer Melakhim* for each king. Her story, the pretext for the rise of the boy-king Yo'ash, merely underscores her fraudulent rule.

## **Y(EH)O'ASH, KING OF YEHUDA**

Yo'ash has a colorful and intriguing biography. He is the child-king who survives Atalia's massacre and is raised in the chambers of the Temple, only to be crowned at age seven in a dramatic coup. <sup>[8]</sup> Guided by the High Priest, he dedicates his life to the Temple, but in his old age, for no obvious reason, he turns away from God and serves Ba'al. We shall follow his life story and seek to understand his surprising turn to idolatry, late in life. Why would a person so entrenched in the service of God suddenly repudiate his life's commitment? What happened?

In studying Yo'ash's life, we shall divide it into three sections to give it some shape and structure:

1. His Infancy
2. The Renovation of the Temple
3. Yo'ash's Demise: Chaza'el's Attack, and Yo'ash's Assassination

### **1. YO'ASH, THE CHILD KING (AGE 1-7)**

After Atalia massacres all the male heirs to the throne, Yo'ash's aunt, Yehosheva, saves his life, concealing the little prince and his wet-nurse. One imagines that this effort is far from simple; after all, the baby's body would have had to be accounted for. Almost certainly, a team of conspirators is involved in hiding the young heir, probably people affiliated with the more traditional regime of Yehuda, which had been God-fearing. The most prominent of this clandestine circle is Yehoyada, the High Priest who allows Yo'ash to be raised in the confines of the Temple

itself.<sup>[9]</sup> Six years later, when Yo'ash is seven years old, the secret is revealed. Yehoyada stages a revolution within the courtyard of the Temple. He ensures that the Temple is fully guarded and secured, and, in an organized ceremony, the young king is crowned; the trumpets sound, and the people applaud and acclaim their new king. By the time Atalia realizes what is happening, it is too late. Yo'ash is the sovereign, and Atalia is executed.

The coronation is followed by a ceremony, in which Yehoyada leads the nation in renewing the covenant with God (11:17), thereby formally closing the period during which Ba'al held sway in Yehuda. Moreover, he dismantles and destroys the accoutrements of the Ba'al worship which had infiltrated the country under King Yoram, King Achazyahu, and Queen Atalia.

For the next period, as Yo'ash grows up, it would appear that the *kohanim* – Priests – are the strongest political group in the country, backing, protecting, and guiding Yo'ash. Yo'ash clearly identifies with their worldview and accepts their instruction (12:3). It therefore comes as no surprise when Yo'ash turns his attention, as an adult, to a serious renovation and rebuilding of the Temple.<sup>[10]</sup> Yo'ash commissions the Priests to finance this project:

Yo'ash said to the Priests, "All the money brought into the house of the Lord as sacred donations ... let the Priests receive it, each from their acquaintance; they in turn shall make repairs to the House, whenever damage may be found." (12:5-6)

## 2. THE RENOVATION OF THE TEMPLE<sup>[11]</sup>

Despite the lofty plans of the Temple renovation project, something goes wrong. It is now Yo'ash's twenty-third year; the king is now thirty years old, and most certainly an independent character. The king summons Yehoyada and the other Priests, and accuses them of negligence vis-a-vis the Temple:

He assembled the Priests and the Levites and charged them as follows; "Go out to the towns of Yehuda and collect money from all Israel for the repair of the House

of your God. Do it quickly!” But the Levites did not act quickly. And the king summoned Yehoyada ... and said to him: "Why have you not demanded that the Levites collect the tax<sup>[12]</sup> ... from (the people of) Yehuda and Yerushalayim?"  
(*II Divrei Ha-yamim* 24:6)

The Priests and Levites have failed at financing the Temple. And so, the king steps in and adopts a direct method of taxation, bypassing the Priests. He institutes a tax at the Temple itself, by means of a simple collection box:

And the Priest Yehoyada took a chest, and bored a hole in the lid of it, and set it beside the altar, on the right side as one came into the house of the Lord... and when they saw that there was much money in the box, the king's scribe and the High Priest came up, and they put up in bags...And they gave the money...into the hands of the workmen (of the Temple). (*II Melakhim* 12:10-12)

In other words, he institutes an official admission fee for visiting the Temple. This new financing strategy is more effective:

... All the officers and all the people brought it joyously and threw the money into the box until it was full. (*II Divrei Ha-yamim* 24:9-10)

But why did the Priests and *the* Levites fail in their responsibility? What is the flaw in the original mode of financing?

### **THE PROBLEM: “PROTEKTZIA”**

One has to read carefully to discern the problem. The Priests' initial method of collection is to solicit funds, "each from their acquaintance": from personal contacts, friends, and benefactors. The Radak explains that the Priests would

collect contributions by spreading the word around their circles of neighbors, friends, associates and colleagues. This should have been an effective technique to raise sufficient funding. If each Levite had done this, then the costs of the renovation would have been met.

However, this method is reminiscent of a charity board or a school committee in which each member must fill a table for the dinner with their friends and relatives. This method may work well for small communal organizations, but it is a disaster for public institutions. Why?

First, there is apathy. What incentive do Priests have to fundraise for the Temple? As it is, Priests have to make collections for the tithes –*teruma* and *ma'aser* – in order to subsist. One may presume that the Priests had been reluctant to make requests for further money. Furthermore, they may have feared that a generous donation to the Temple would come at the expense of funds for themselves. Maybe they simply had resented being the sole fundraising mechanism for the Temple renovations.

Second, this method opens the possibility of corruption. This system allows certain Priests to become "activists," lobbying for extra funds and acquiring powerful benefactors and backers, who may subsequently have a greater influence in deciding the allocation of those funds. Financing through personal favors and "*protektzia*" opens the door to paybacks, bribery, and other abuses of the system.

Finally, if the fundraising mechanism is entrusted to an informal system, without direct accountability, it may not be too difficult to imagine a scenario in which Priests personally solicited funds and certain monies "went missing," other people using it for political gain. And when an organisation becomes corrupt, who wants to put more money into it! King Yo'ash says: "Do not receive any more money from your acquaintances, **but deliver it** for the repair of the house"

(12:8), indicating that some money is not being delivered! *II Divrei Ha-yamim* (24:5) simply attributes the failure of the plan to laziness: an amateur system rather than a fraudulent one. Nevertheless, shouldn't we conclude that this mode of collection is fertile ground for problems?

## THE SOLUTION: REGULATED GIVING

Yo'ash changes the system:

- First, "now therefore receive no more money of your acquaintance" (12:8).
- Second, he introduces the money chest alongside the Temple altar. Everyone who visits the Temple is required to give a donation.
- Third, "the king's scribe and the High Priest came up, and they put up in bags" (12:11).

This improves the situation in several ways:

1. Control: The money management is taken away from the control of the Priests.
2. Anonymity: People cannot build large power factions by means of their fundraising potential. This limits the possible corruption within the ranks of the Priests.
3. Accountability: A representative of the government **and** the High Priest each have to be present as the money is counted.

*II Divrei Ha-yamim* adds that the people gave this tax "joyously." Who gives taxes with glee? Not many people do, except those who are relieved that they now have a transparent and accountable mechanism of donating to and supporting their beloved spiritual institution. Now they need not be concerned about financial misappropriation or mere amateur financing.

The text suggests that these improvements did the trick and that, indeed, the Temple received the requisite funds.

## TRUSTING THE TREASURER

We have spoken about the problems that arise when relying too heavily upon an informal fundraising mechanism, based upon personal connections and simple goodwill. In contrast, regarding King Yo'ash's plan we read:

... They reckoned not with the men, into whose hand they delivered the money to be bestowed on workmen: for they dealt faithfully. (12:16)

Rashi explains:

The treasurers did not bring the administrators to account for their expenditure, given to the workmen and contractors, for they were not suspect, for they acted in faith.

Despite the earlier misappropriation of Temple funds, the administrators who supervise and manage the builders and craftsmen for the Temple are given a free hand to make financial decisions for the Temple renovations, without close scrutiny. Interestingly, the Talmud uses this as a source for rules of charity funds:

Our Rabbis taught: The collectors of charity are not required to give an account of the moneys entrusted to them for charity, nor the treasurers of the Temple of the moneys given for holy purposes. There is no actual proof of this (in *Tanakh*), but there is a hint of it in the words: "They reckoned not with the men into whose hand they delivered the money to give to them that did the work, for they dealt faithfully." (*Bava Batra* 9a)

We should note that the Talmud does not advocate for a completely non-regulated environment. Talmudic legislation mandates two, and preferably three, charity treasurers, both for collection and distribution of charitable funds, in order to preclude fraud and ensure financial integrity. Additionally, the Talmud rules that the charity officer be a person of impeccable reputation. On the other hand, if every charity official is cross-examined over each budgetary decision, or every receipt that is misplaced, then few people would be willing to take the task upon themselves. At some level, along with the safeguards and the accountability, there must also be a certain element of trust and integrity.

When is trust appropriate and when is it negligent? When can one rely on the integrity of public officials and when must one be suspicious and wary? How does one decide?

These are difficult dilemmas facing any public sector, because, obviously, there is always a degree of discretion in running such a project: do you take the cheaper or more expensive craftsman? Which fabric or material do you select? Do you take standard goods or have them specially designed? When it comes to questions such as these, it would appear that license is given to the trustworthy work-managers to appropriate the funds as needed. And it would appear that part of their professional pride is precisely that trait of integrity and honesty – "for they acted in faith."

NEXT WEEK, we shall address the religious turnaround of Yo'ash, and the reversal of the kingdom's fortunes in the latter days of Yo'ash's life.

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[\[1\]](#) 9:24

[\[2\]](#) 9:27-8

[\[3\]](#) 10:13-14

[\[4\]](#) There are several instances of kings who kill the entire line of a pretender or contender for the throne, especially in Yisrael. See *Shoftim* 9:5, *Shmuel I* 24:21, *I Melakhim* 15:29. But here it is *her own* family!

[\[5\]](#) Atalia bears the title, unique in *Tanakh*, of "wicked - *mirsha'at*" (*II Divrei Hayamim* 24:7).

[\[6\]](#) *Biblical Images* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), p.193

[\[7\]](#) (*ibid.* pg.190)

[\[8\]](#) The figure of King Yo'ash burst in to the public limelight some years ago when a tablet surfaced, said to have been excavated on the Temple Mount, which quoted,

almost verbatim, certain lines from *Divrei Ha-yamim* that relate to Yo'ash. Unfortunately, the widespread assessment was that it was a forgery. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jehoash\\_Inscription](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jehoash_Inscription).

<sup>[9]</sup> See *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* 1:66 and *Midrash Sochar Tov* on *Tehillim* 18:23, where there is a discussion as to whether he was kept in the attic of the Temple or the side chambers – see Rashi and Radak. The *Targum* to *II Divrei Ha-yamim* 22:11 suggests that he was kept in the *Kodesh Kodashim* (Holy of Holies) itself, but possibly the intent is to the attic above the *Kodesh Kodashim* (*Daat Mikra*).

<sup>[10]</sup> This is particularly urgent due to the vandalizing of the Temple, perpetrated by the Atalia regime. See *II Divrei Ha-yamim* 24:7.

<sup>[11]</sup> This is the *haftara* for *Parashat Shekalim*

<sup>[12]</sup> This is called, "the tax of Moses the servant of God" and would seem to refer to the annual half-shekel donation to the Temple. See *Shemot* 31:11-16. In that passage it seems that the money was used in order to take a national census, with the silver donated to the Tabernacle. However, *Divrei Ha-yamim* supports the tradition as detailed in Tractate *Shekalim* of an annual half-shekel tax for Temple purposes even in the absence of a national census.