

SEFER MELAKHIM BET: THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS
By Rav Alex Israel

Shiur #15 Chapters 13–14. The Fall and Rise of Yisrael

Our past two *shiurim* have discussed the southern kingdom of Yehuda under Atalia and Yo'ash. We shall now return to the northern kingdom, Yisrael. The last event we discussed was Yeihu's dramatic and violent revolt. Today we shall describe the course of events under the four kings of the Yeihu dynasty:

- Yeihu (28 year reign)
- Yeho'achaz, son of Yeihu (17 years)
- Yo'ash/ Yeho'ash (16 years)
- Yerav'am, son of Yoash (41 years)

PRESSURE FROM ARAM

The central feature characterizing this period is the overwhelming dominance of Aram under the leadership of Chaza'el. These turbulent times – predicted by Eliyahu¹ and by Elisha² – see Chaza'el absolutely controlling the northern kingdom, granting a reprieve only to the capital city of Shomron. Furthermore, Chaza'el advances along the coastal plain as far as the city of Gat, threatening the southern kingdom too, including Jerusalem.³ Our chapter charts this crushing military campaign.

In the reign of Yeihu the attack begins with Chaza'el controlling all the lands of Yisrael on the eastern side of the Jordan River:

In those days, the Lord began to reduce Yisrael; and Chaza'el smote them throughout the territory of Yisrael east of the Jordan, all the land of the Gil'ad – of Gad, of Re'uvein and of Menasheh – from Aro'er by Wadi Arnon up to Gil'ad and Bashan." (*II Melakhim* 10:32-33)

This continues in the reign of Yeho'achaz, a king who "did that which was evil in God's eyes." Here, Chaza'el and his son Ben-Haddad seem to make further inroads into Yisrael's territory, decimating the military:

And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Yisrael, and He delivered them into the hand of Chaza'el King of Aram, and into the

¹ *I Melakhim* 19:16-17

² *II Melakhim* 8: 7-15

³ 12:18-19

hand of Ben-Haddad the son of Chaza'el, continually... For there was not left to Yeho'achaz of the people save fifty horsemen, and ten chariots, and ten thousand footmen; for the king of Aram destroyed them, and made them like the dust in threshing. (*II Melakhim* 13:3,7)

Yisrael's desperate situation in which Aram allows only fifty cavalry and ten chariots indicates that Chaza'el has imposed a regime of full demilitarization, other than a ceremonial guard. Yisrael is too weak to resist Aram:

Chaza'el king of Aram oppressed Yisrael all the days of Yeho'achaz. (*II Melakhim* 13:22)

However, at this point, we begin to identify a turnaround:

And Chaza'el king of Aram died; and Ben-Haddad his son reigned in his stead. And Yeho'ash the son of Yeho'achaz took again out of the hand of Ben-Haddad the son of Chaza'el the cities which he had taken out of the hand of Yeho'achaz his father by war. Three times did Yo'ash smite him, and recovered the cities of Yisrael. (*II Melakhim* 13:24)

The new king in Aram appears to lack the ferocity and military prowess of his predecessor. The new king in Yisrael, Yo'ash, has the power to fight back, regaining territories previously lost to Aram.

The process of the fall of Aram and the restoration of Yisrael reaches its peak in the reign of Yeho'ash's son, Yerav'am II:

He restored the border of Yisrael from the entrance of Chamat unto the sea of the Arava, according to the word of the Lord, the God of Yisrael, which He spoke by the hand of His servant Yona the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was of Gat-Chefer." (*II Melakhim* 14:25)

In other words, in Yerav'am's time, Yisrael restores its border against Aram, making inroads into Aramean territory as far as Chamat!

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Now, we may ask – what caused this turnaround? Here we face two options. One possibility is to chart the geo-political shifts that befell the region during this period. Historians⁴ point to a peak in Aram's power under Chaza'el's regime due to a lull in Ashur's power which afforded Aram regional control. This power advantage continued under Ben-Haddad III until the rise of King Adad-nirari III of Ashur (806-782 BCE) who attacked Aram, besieged Damascus, and subjected Aram to continued military pressure and heavy taxation. With Aram paralyzed, Yisrael expanded, extending its northern and

⁴ See Sh. Yeivin, "The Foreign Policy of Judah and Yisrael in the Jehu Dynasty" in *Studies in Kings* vol.2 (Kiryat Sefer: Jerusalem, 1985) pgs. 299-305 [Hebrew]; *Biblical Encyclopedia* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1950) vol.1, pg. 597-8 [Hebrew]; and A. Grossman: "Kings II chapter 14: The Conquests of Jeroboam son of Yo'ash" <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/tanach/rishonim/grosman7.htm> [Hebrew].

eastern borders to a size not witnessed since the period of David and Solomon.

THE PROPHETIC PERSPECTIVE

And yet, *Sefer Melakhim* is a prophetic book rather than a chronicle of political-military history. It explains historical events in spiritual terms: sin breeds war, poverty and invasion, while fidelity to God stimulates economic prosperity and peace. And so, when we witness a dramatic turnaround from domestic collapse and foreign domination to secure borders and military victory, we presume that it is a response to religious devotion or national repentance. However, in our situation, this was not the case. A different process was underway.

And Yeho'achaz besought the Lord, and the Lord hearkened unto him; **for He saw the oppression of Yisrael, how that the king of Aram oppressed them.** And the Lord gave Yisrael a deliverer, so that they went out from under the hand of the Arameans; and the children of Yisrael dwelt in their tents, as beforetime. (*II Melakhim* 13:4-5)

And Chaza'el king of Aram oppressed Yisrael all the days of Yeho'achaz. **But the Lord was gracious unto them, and had compassion on them, and had respect unto them, because of His covenant with Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov, and would not destroy them, neither hath He cast them from His presence until now.** (*II Melakhim* 13:22-23)

He restored the border of Yisrael ... by the word of the Lord, the God of Yisrael, which He spoke by the hand of His servant Yona the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was of Gat-Chefer. **For the Lord saw the affliction of Yisrael, that it was very bitter; for there was neither bond nor free left, and with none to help Yisrael.** And the Lord said **He would not blot out the name of Yisrael from under heaven;** but He saved them by the hand of Yerav'am the son of Yo'ash. (*II Melakhim* 14:25-27)

1. GOD'S MERCY – GOD'S LOVE FOR YISRAEL

Throughout this period, under three kings, we fail to discern any significant national process of religious improvement. Certainly, Yeho'achaz beseeches God, but the Asheira remains in Shomron (14:6), and the nation continues to worship in the shrines of Beit-El and Dan. Likewise with his successor, we lack evidence of any alteration in the religious climate of Yisrael.

So why does God assist? Why does He rescue Yisrael?

With Yeho'achaz we read that, "the Lord hearkened to him for He saw the oppression of Yisrael." Yisrael's helplessness stimulates God's merciful rehabilitation. They are saved not because Yisrael is particularly deserving of

salvation, but simply because God is concerned for the nation's welfare. In a second image under Yeho'achaz, God grants Yisrael a reprieve due to "the covenant with Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov." It is the power of His ancient relationship with Yisrael, sealed with Avraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov that saves the nation.⁵ Finally, under Yerav'am, "He would not blot out the name of Yisrael from under heaven." God saves Yisrael because their very survival is in jeopardy; at this point in time, the alternative to salvation is exile and decimation. God has no desire to see Yisrael disappear.⁶

We may even identify an incremental deterioration here. In the first instance, God's assistance is stimulated by prayer. In the second instance, it is the memory of the forefathers and their merits which save the nation. But the third time, there is nothing positive to offer; the nation's survival is merely an expression of God's aversion to destroying Yisrael.

But God's patience, his caring and mercy do not last indefinitely. When *Sefer Melakhim* refers to the potential "blotting out" of Yisrael, it would seem to be issuing a message of caution, suggesting that Yisrael's demise is a real and present possibility! Indeed, after the reign of Yerav'am ben Yoash, the northern kingdom swiftly crumbles and is dominated by Ashur, which eventually sends the people of Yisrael into exile. This period, a lull in terms of international pressure on Yisrael, really is the last opportunity! God exercises forbearance now, but later even God's tolerance will be exhausted.

2. THE ROLE OF THE PROPHET: A CALL TO CHANGE.

As we read of the reversal in Yisrael's fortunes, we read twice of the presence of a prophet, predicting the national upswing. We are informed twice that this process of national rehabilitation is being spearheaded by a prophet.

Chapter thirteen relates King Yoash's visit to the great prophet Elisha as he lies on his death bed.⁷ And in that encounter, the prophet foresees the victory of Yisrael against Aram. Later, with Yerav'am (*II Melakhim* 14:23), we read of a certain Yona Ben Amittai, (quite possibly the very prophet of the book that bears his name), who had predicted Yisrael's return to independence and the restoration of its border with Aram.

⁵ The *Midrash* discusses how long *zechut avot*, the merit of the patriarch's, can serve a protective function for Israel. See the discussion in *Vayikra Rabba* 36:6 (as well as *Shabbat* 55a and *Yerushalmi Sanhedrin* 10:1) in which the opening opinion proposes, on the basis of the verse here, that the reign of Yeho'achaz is the last time at which the memory and good deeds of the forefathers protect Israel. Our prayers which frequently appeal to *zechut avot* would seem to adopt the dissenting opinion of Rav Acha, that "the merit of the forefathers is in effect for all time."

⁶ These lines echo the song of Ha'azinu, in which God saves his people, even without their repentance, so as to prevent their destruction. See especially the literary parallel of "bond and free" in *I Melakhim* 14:26 and in *Devarim* 32:36. See also A. Bazak, "The Uniqueness of the Song of Haazinu", VBM, <http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.64/53haazinu.htm>, which references our verses directly.

⁷ There is a certain poetic irony here, as Elisha had visited Ben-Haddad as he was on his death bed. That visit had led to Chaza'el's rise to power. Now on Elisha's death-bed, he predicts Aram's (Chaza'el's) decline and fall.

Why does God send two prophets to herald Yisrael's victory against Aram? What effect should this foreknowledge generate? What does the prophet seek to achieve by informing the king of the impending national upswing?

I think that this relates directly to our earlier observation. Spiritually, Yisrael is at an all-time low and not particularly deserving of salvation. And yet, God has predicted that the kingdom will rise once more and break the shackles of Aram.

How will the king and the nation relate to these victories? What processes will this turnabout effect in the national psyche? Will it be perceived as a fluke, a random regional fluctuation? Will it lead Yisrael to serve God? Or will a new period of peace and prosperity merely lead to a rise in the standard of living with an ensuing atmosphere of hedonism, corruption, materialism, and continued abuse of the poor? Will people take advantage of prosperity, calm, and security to better the ills of society?

The role of the prophet is to convey that this victory is God-given, not a product of the winds of chance. This awareness might stimulate a positive response from the nation. Possibly the carrot will work instead of the stick; the good times as heralded by the prophet will draw people closer to God. And so, in charting the fall and rise of the Northern Kingdom, the prophet seeks to generate appreciation for God, His love for Yisrael, and His great mercy.

ELISHA AND SYMBOLIC ACTIONS

The final scenes of Elisha are striking in their dramatic power:

Elisha had been stricken with the illness of which he was to die. King Yo'ash of Yisrael went down to see him. He wept over him, and said: "My father, my father, Yisrael's chariots and horsemen!" Elisha said to him: "Take a bow and arrows"; and he took a bow and arrows. He said to the king of Yisrael: "Put your hand upon the bow"; and he put his hand upon it, and Elisha laid his hands upon the king's hands. He said: "Open the window eastward"; and he opened it. Then Elisha said: "Shoot!" and he shot. And he said: "The Lord's arrow of victory, an arrow of victory over Aram! You shall rout Aram completely at Afek, until they are destroyed." And he said: "Take the arrows"; and he took them. And he said to the king of Yisrael: "Strike the ground"; and he struck three times and stopped. The man of God was angry with him, and said: "If only you would have struck five or six times! Then you would have annihilated Aram; whereas now you shall defeat Aram only three times." (*I Melakhim* 13:14-19)

The story begins with the king's visit to the dying Elisha. The king of Yisrael cries at the thought of the prophet's death, and he proclaims Elisha as Yisrael's "chariots and horsemen," in other words, the protector of the nation, an echo of Elisha's lament at the moment of Eliyahu's passing (*I Melakhim* 2:11).

At this point Elisha demands that the king engage in some peculiar drama: the shooting of the "arrow of victory" eastwards, and the dashing of the arrows on the floor. Why does the prophet demand this strange behavior, almost a theatrical performance? Is it a magic ritual? What place does this activity have in the world of prophecy?

In truth, there is a rich tradition of prophetic drama: Yirmiyahu is instructed to wear a yoke on his shoulders to demonstrate subservience to Bavel (*Yirmiyahu* 27); Yishayahu walks barefoot and undressed, simulating a prisoner of war (*Yishayahu* 20); Hoshea is commanded to marry a harlot to express Yisrael's infidelity to God (*Hoshea* 1); Yechezkel acts out a scene of exile by breaking the wall of his house and leaving with a small bag of essential items (*Yechezkel* 12); at another point, Yechezkel makes a show of merging separate pieces of wood into a single branch to communicate a lesson of national unity (*Yechezkel* 37:16–17). Prophets of Yisrael were frequently commanded to dramatize God's message.

Is this merely theater or do the actions of a prophet have some effect? Many of the above instances are clearly designated as a sign, in order to dramatize and animate the divine message.⁸ However, in our story with Yo'ash, the prophet critiques the king, and says: "If only you would have struck five or six times!" The implication is that these actions are determining future events!

Rabbi Yosef Caspi suggests that the king's behavior in this scene is a psychological reflection of his resolve:

If the king had struck [the ground with the arrows] several times, as the man of God intended ... this would demonstrate his success in battle, for it would reveal his enthusiasm and determination, his mood regarding the war... and when he failed to do this, it highlighted his tepid enthusiasm and his foolishness. It was this that angered the prophet.

In other words, striking the floor three, or six times will not change the national fate. But a passionate and desperate king may have struck the floor with more gusto. Yoash's lukewarm response exposes an absence of rage and desperation, which may also affect his determination in the war campaign.

Ramban adopts an entirely different understanding of this scene:

Know that once a decree delivered by angels emerges from the potential to the actual via symbolization, this decree will be fulfilled in all cases. Therefore, the prophets perform an act of prophecy, as Yirmiyahu ordered Barukh (*Yirmiyahu* 51:63-64): "When you finish reading this book, tie a stone to it and cast it into the midst of the

⁸ Rambam took a radical view that most of these actions transpired in a prophetic dream, but not in reality. See *Guide of the Perplexed* II:46.

Euphrates, and say, 'Thus shall Babylon sink,'" etc. This is the issue of Elisha's putting his hand on the bow: "Then Elisha said, 'Shoot,' and he shot. And he said, 'The Lord's arrow of victory, the arrow of victory over Aram!'" (*II Melakhim* 13:17). And it says there (v. 19): "Then the man of God was angry with him and said, 'You should have struck five or six times; then you would have struck down Aram until you had made an end of it, but now you will strike down Aram only three times.'" (Ramban, Commentary to *Bereishit* 12:6)

Ramban perceives prophetic symbolic drama as a means of transforming God's will from a potential decree to the realm of action. He believes that the acts of the prophet will have a mechanical effect, determining future events. Elisha's laying of hands upon the king instills the prophet's aura or authority into the figurative act. And the precise performance of the act is critical; a mistake in the choreography engenders a flaw in the outcome. This view, while highly non-rational, reflects Ramban's mystical wisdom regarding the machinations of prophecy. Despite the difficulty in comprehending the lines that connect cause and effect, this supernatural interpretation may be the best manner of reading this episode.

Possibly though, by examining this encounter of king and prophet closely, we may discern the composite way in which the story is constructed and identify two different segments, each with their own dynamic.⁹ The scene is in fact comprised of two segments, two separate actions:

Segment 1: Verses 15-17	Segment 2: Verses 18-19
"Take a bow and arrows" ... and he took	"Take arrows" ... and he took
"Put your hand upon the bow"	-
And Elisha placed his hands ...	-
"Open the window" ...	-
"Shoot!" ... And he shot	"Strike the ground!" ... and he struck three times, and stopped.
Message: "God's arrow of victory" ... You shall rout Aram completely	Message: If only you would have struck five or six times! ... Now you shall defeat Aram only three times.

In the first segment, the prophet enacts a scene with a specific series of actions, very carefully instructed and completely fulfilled. Only one arrow is fired; there is not much that can go wrong. The prophet waits patiently at each stage to ensure that his instructions are followed. In this instance, the arrow fired in the eastern direction is symbolic of God's decision to turn the tables and commence the process of Aram's decline. This segment involves the laying of the prophet's hands upon the arrow, and it seems to express the force of a divine communication. The message here is the announcement to the king that he can prepare for better times.

⁹ See Rabbi David Sabato, "The Death of Elisha," Yeshivat Birkhat Moshe (Maaleh Adumim): <http://www.ybm.org.il/hebrew/LessonArticle.aspx?item=3824>

But the second segment allows more room for the king's initiative. The instruction by the prophet is general, not specific, and all the activity is performed by the king; the prophet is inactive. It may be that this scene is reflective of the human response and involvement in God's plan. It seeks to expose the inner attitude and determination of the king. Here the question is the extent to which man will play his role in God's drama. In this instance, the king's half-hearted response irritates the prophet as an insufficient reaction to God's pronouncement.

Of course, the "arrow of victory" predicted by Elisha will wait a generation until it is completely fulfilled; the kingdom is restored to its borders only in the period of Yerav'am, son of Yo'ash.

RESURRECTION

The deathbed scene ends with a report of Elisha's burial, followed by the enigmatic anecdote of Elisha's bones causing a man to come back to life.

Then Elisha died and was buried. Groups of raiders of Moav used to invade the land each spring. Once when some people of Yisrael were burying a man, they spied a band of these raiders. So they hastily threw the corpse into the tomb of Elisha and fled. But as soon as the body touched Elisha's bones, the dead man revived and jumped to his feet. (*II Melakhim* 13:20-21)

So much about this story is incoherent. Why are there troops from Moav in Yisrael? Up until this point the enemy has been Aram! And is the identity of the raiders relevant to the story of the dead man? Who is the individual being buried; is his identity significant?¹⁰ Why did the man come to life? And what became of him afterwards? Most importantly, we wish to comprehend: why is this story important to our knowledge of Elisha? The commentaries each search for answers. Ralbag suggests:

It was unlike the [resurrection of the] son of the Shunammite who gradually returned to life, but here, he suddenly arose and stood up But this was not to return home to his previous life, but merely to have him leave Elisha's grave for the honor of Elisha. (Ralbag, *II Melakhim* 13:21)

Radak disagrees:

The Rabbis said that he lived and had children, and the reason that he was revived was to fulfill Eliyahu's blessing to Elisha that he be granted a double portion of his [Eliyahu's] spirit (*II Melakhim* 2:9). Eliyahu resurrected one person, and he [Elisha] resurrected two: one in his

¹⁰ This question is widely discussed. See the Talmud in *Sanhedrin* 47a and Rashi there s.v. "va-yechi va-yakam al raglav" who identifies the man as the "old prophet" in *I Melakhim* ch.13. Radak on 13:21 identifies him as Shalum son of Tikva, the husband of Chulda the prophetess.

lifetime - the Shunammite's son, and in his death – this man." (Radak 13:21)

For Ralbag, the story demonstrates how miracles will transpire, even after Elisha's death, to ensure that the prophet's bones are undisturbed. For Radak, based on *Sanhedrin* 47a, this is a fulfillment of a promise made by Eliyahu that his student be granted a double portion of his power, thereby designating him to revive the dead twice.

It is possible that neither of these answers fully explains the elements of this story, but we will suggest two somewhat speculative thoughts that may offer some light here. First, when Yo'ash addresses Elisha as "Yisrael's chariot and horsemen," we sense the reflection of Eliyahu's death scene. But of course, Eliyahu was not buried; he flew heavenwards, and tradition refuses to see his power expiring with his passing from this Earth. Possibly, this story comes to inform us that Elisha, just like his mentor Eliyahu, also retained some of his miraculous potency, even after his demise.

Second, we may suggest that Elisha's role here is in some way the resurrection of the nation. The combination of the threatening troops and the man who is revived, not through merit, but merely by proximity to the prophet in some way mirrors the work of Elisha. Elisha never calls for repentance. He simply offers assistance and healing to the people with which he comes into contact. His life ends by announcing the restoration of Yisrael's fortunes after an extended period of invasion and hardship. The idea of the revival of the dead thus seems to encapsulate Elisha's role in his lifetime.