

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
YISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

Shiur #17: Chapters 14-15
The Best of Times:
The Reigns of Yerav'am II and Uzzia

YERAV'AM BEN YOASH (14:23-29)

The long and impressive reign of Yerav'am ben Yoash sees the Northern Kingdom reaching the summit of its regional power and material prosperity. Taking advantage of a lull in the power of neighboring states – Aram's influence has waned whereas the Assyrian empire has yet to extend its reach westwards – Yerav'am restores and expands the national border deep into Aram, beyond Damascus to Chamat, establishing regional hegemony not experienced since the heyday of King Shlomo (*I Melakhim* 14:25). *Sefer Melakhim* indicates that this territorial expansion was preordained by a prophet,¹ God's attempt to impress upon the king the divine underpinning of his success.

Sefer Melakhim's exiguous summary of Yerav'am's reign can fortunately be enriched by other sources. Archeology reveals enormous building works at Shomron and elsewhere during Yerav'am's reign.²

THE VIEW FROM AMOS

However, the most insightful assessment of the mood and pulse of this period may be gleaned by reading the incredible writings of the prophet Amos,³ who prophesized during the reign of Yerav'am.⁴ The book of *Amos* reveals a society of enormous wealth, complacency, and security and yet bearing startling

¹ The prophet who had predicted this expansion was named Yona ben Amitai. This could be the prophet of the biblical book of *Yona*, an approach adopted by most commentators, although this identification is questioned by R. Yosef Kaspi. Interestingly, a rabbinic view suggests that this is the same prophet who anoints Yeihu. In which case, Yona ben Amitai is instrumental in anointing Yeihu whose rule signals the advent of the severe Aramean military pressure, and he is the prophet who announces the fall of Aram and the restoration of the border. The prophet of the book of *Yona* visits Nineveh, the capital of Ashur/Assyria, and hence is connected to a different historical process, although this certainly doesn't preclude the prophet adopting variant tasks.

² Ostraca found at Samaria and dated to the ninth, tenth, and fifteenth years of Yerav'am II reveal huge revenues based on wine and oil, as well as expensive ivory plaques or furniture inlays. Israel Finkelstein records significant building at Megiddo, Chazor and Gezer in this period, See *The Bible Unearthed*, I. Finkelstein and N. Silberman, (Simon and Schuster, 2002) pp. 206-209.

³ For a very useful summary of the themes of the book of *Amos*, see A.J Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol.1 (Harper and Row: New York, 1962) pp. 27-38. For more on the themes we raise regarding Amos' prophetic-societal critique, see Rav Y. Cherlow, *Looketh on the Heart*, (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot/Chemed, 2007), pp. 31-44 [Hebrew].

⁴ The book is dated in the reign of Yerav'am – see Amos 1:1-2 and 7:11.

inequalities of income, and outrageous exploitation of the poor by the rich. Amos addresses the wealthy upper-class of Samaria with their lavish homes, expensive ivory furniture, and a decadent preoccupation with food, drinks, and entertainment:

They lie on ivory beds;
lolling on their couches,
Feasting on lambs from the flock
And on calves from the stalls.
They listen to song to the tune of the lute –
They account themselves musicians like David
They drink straight from wine bowls
And anoint themselves with the choicest oils. (*Amos 6:4-6*)

In an awful state of affairs, this luxury is financed by the exploitation of the poor:

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan
On the hill of Samaria –
Who defraud the poor,
Who rob the needy,
Who say to their husbands,
“Bring, and let’s party.” (*Amos 4:1*)

This gilded flamboyance is sustained by oppressing the peasantry. Amos depicts the rich feasting on wines collected as penalties for late payment of credit, and celebrations in which the moneylenders recline on rich fabrics seized from the hardworking poor as security for loans.⁵ God sends Amos to warn the people that the abusive behaviour – “You ... trample the heads of the poor” – will warrant the punishment of exile:

Thus says the Lord:
“For three transgressions of Israel,
For four, I will not revoke it (the Destruction):
Because they sell the righteous for silver,
The needy for a pair of shoes;
Ah! You who trample the heads of the poor,
Into the dust of the ground,
And make the humble turn a twisted course
...And they lay themselves down beside every altar,
Upon garments taken in pledge,
And in the house of their God they drink,
Wine bought with fines they imposed.” (*2:6-8*)

While *Sefer Melakhim* dwells almost exclusively on the issue of idolatry, Amos highlights the sin of social injustice within the Northern Kingdom. With the dramatic rise in national fortunes, the influx of wealth and prosperity has enriched the leadership exclusively. Society divides starkly into the “have’s” and the “have-

⁵ Another example is *Amos 8:4-8*, which describes people who cannot wait for Shabbat to end so that they can continue with their fraudulent financial affairs.

not's" in an economy riddled with loan-sharking systems that make the rich richer, and leave the poor in desperation.

My Lord swears by Himself;
I loathe the pride of Jacob,
And I detest his palaces.
I will deliver (to the enemy) the city and its inhabitants alike. (6:4-8)

COMPLACENCY

But it is near impossible to frighten a smug, secure society. In Yerav'am's era, the national military successes have engendered a *zeitgeist* in which people are convinced that Israel is invincible⁶:

They boast,
"Destruction shall never overtake us,
Nor approach us." (9:10)

Those who rejoice with no substance,⁷
Who exalt, "By our might we have captured Karnayim!"
But I, O House of Israel,
Will raise up a nation against you,
Declares the Lord, the God of Hosts,
Who will harass you from Levo-Chamat
To the Wadi Araba. (6:13)

Some were convinced that Israel was unbeatable. Others, however, were imbued with a religious belief that as the Chosen People, God would never abandon Israel, and as such, if and when the "Day of the Lord" – the day of God's retribution and reckoning – did arrive, the Israelites as God's chosen people would escape, unscathed. Amos challenges this perspective:

You alone have I known of all the families of the earth;
Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities. (3:1-2)

The people of Shomron assumed that God's special relationship with Israel would guarantee them protection. The prophet warns Israel that the special relationship offers no privileges; rather, it demands a higher ethical standard. Instead of offering unconditional protection, it would focus and heighten their liability, thereby accentuating sins, and exacerbating punishment.⁸ Again and again, Amos dispels the optimistic misconceptions, offering instead foreboding warnings of Israel's exile due to its abusive society.

WARNINGS

Amos takes his message to the Temple in Beit-El, but he is ejected by the High Priest for his dire predictions to the king and his people. Amongst his

⁶ Also *Amos* 5:18

⁷ This is a subtle pun about the victory over the town of Lo-Davar in the Transjordan, so it may be read, "rejoice about [the victory over] Lo-Davar" (NJPS).

⁸ Also *Amos* 9:7

repeated threats of war, exile and drought, Amos consistently predicts that the earth will turn over, in other words, an earthquake.⁹ Indeed, an earthquake shakes the kingdom a mere two years after Amos begins his prophecy.¹⁰ And yet, even with a national disaster of this proportion, the king failed to heed his words. Even worse is that in these fortunate times, an island of calm and prosperity in a stormy region, Israel could not have found a way to harness its peace and wealth towards kindness, justice, and communal support.

KING UZZIA (15:1-7)

King Uzzia of Yehuda ruled alongside Yerav'am ben Yoash for a lengthy and stable fifty-two years. The *Tanakh* describes his reign as an extraordinary period of power and prosperity. Yet again, *Sefer Melakhim* furnishes little information, only Uzzia's positive religious commitment and an indication of his expanded borders and extensive building. However, *Divrei Ha-yamim* supplements the missing details. Among them we read:

- Uzzia's military conquests of the Pelishtim, Ammon, and the Sinai all the way to Egypt, grant him regional hegemony. Historians have commented that Uzzia reached a position in which he controlled both major highways between Egypt to Mesopotamia, the *via maris* (*Derekh Ha-yam*) and the King's highway (*Derekh Ha-melekh*), an achievement which gave him enormous influence and procured significant national revenues (26:6-8).¹¹
- He builds extensively, strengthening Jerusalem's walls and constructing towers. He also establishes border fortifications in the desert frontier (26:9-10).
- Uzzia "loves" farming and agriculture, investing in irrigation, which in turn generates new pasture land and arable areas (26:10). Uzzia is the only king in *Tanakh* who is described as a lover of the land.
- His army is large and powerful, and he ensures that it is fully supplied with uniforms and weaponry. Amongst the armaments, we read of "*chishvonot machshevet choshev*," in our language, cutting-edge firing technologies. Uzzia's production of new weaponry ensures his military advantage against new developments in Ashur's military arsenal.

And so, there is little to fault in the kingdom of Uzzia. These are the good times.

PRIDE COMES BEFORE A FALL

But Uzzia's story takes a startling turn when he is stricken by leprosy. In *Melakhim*, this event is left unexplained:

The Lord struck the king with a plague and he was a leper until the day of his death; he lived in isolated quarters while Yotam, the king's son, was in charge of the palace and governed the people of the land. (15:5)

⁹ Amos 4:11, 8:7, 9:1

¹⁰ See Amos 1:1, *Zekharia* 14:6. Archaeologists see evidence of this earthquake and date it at 760 BCE.

¹¹ H. Tadmor

Once again, *Divrei Ha-yamim* elaborates:

When he was strong, he grew arrogant to the point of destruction, he trespassed against the Lord his God and entered the Temple of the Lord to offer incense on the incense altar. The priest Azaria, with eighty other brave priests of the Lord, followed him in and, confronting King Uzzia, said to him: "It is not for you, Uzzia, to offer incense to the Lord, but for the Aaronite priests who have been consecrated to offer incense. Leave the sanctuary, for you have trespassed; there will be no honor in it for you from the Lord God." Uzzia got angry as he held the censer, ready to burn the incense, and as he became enraged with the priests, leprosy broke out on his forehead in front of all the priests in the House of the Lord beside the incense altar.... So they rushed him out of there; he too made haste to get out for the Lord had struck him with a plague. Uzzia was a leper until the day of his death; he lived in isolated quarters as a leper for he was banned from the House of the Lord ... (*II Divrei Ha-yamim* 26:16-21)

Why did Uzzia decide to offer incense in the *Mikdash*? And why was he punished by the affliction of leprosy (*tzara'at*)? *Divrei Ha-yamim* focuses upon Uzzia's arrogance or overblown pride; his "heart was lifted up." This is echoed by the Talmud:

R. Samuel b. Nachmani said in the name of R. Yochanan: Because of seven things the plague [of leprosy] is incurred: slander, the shedding of blood, vain oath, incest, arrogance, robbery and envy... Because of arrogance, as it is written: "But when he [Uzzia] was strong, his heart was lifted up so he did corruptly, and he trespassed against the Lord, his God . . . and the leprosy broke forth in his forehead." (*Arakhin* 16a)

If we place Uzzia's formidable accomplishments in context, we may understand the roots of his hubris. The period prior to Uzzia saw the kingdom in a dreadful slump. The preceding kings – Yoash and Amatzia – both suffered disastrous war campaigns. Yoash faced a devastating Aramean threat to Yerushalayim, surviving only by paying his entire treasury to Chaza'el. The kingdom was left impoverished and weak. His son Amatzia instigated a disastrous war against Yisrael and was defeated and captured in battle, with Yerushalayim overrun by Yisrael, and the treasury emptied yet again. Indeed both of his forebears – Yoash and Amatzia – were assassinated by their courtiers. And so, the kingdom which Uzzia inherited as he ascended the throne was a humiliated and destitute country. But Uzzia spearheaded a spectacular turnaround, both domestically and internationally. Uzzia, who was loyal to God, had every reason to believe that his religious dedication was the key to his success. *Divrei Ha-yamim* says as much: "He applied himself to the worship of God during the days of Zekharia, who instructed him in the fear of God. **As long as he sought the Lord, God made him prosper**" (*II Divrei Ha-yamim* 26:5). We might suggest that it was precisely his eminence that generated the idea:

One day [Uzzia] came to the Beit Midrash.
He asked them: "What are you discussing?"

They replied: "The law that 'He who approaches [the sanctuary] will suffer death'" (*Bemidbar* 1:51).

Said Uzzia "God is a king, and I am a king. It is appropriate that the king serve the king by offering incense before Him."

Immediately, "He entered the Temple of the Lord to offer incense..." (*Midrash Tanchuma Noach*, chapter 13)

Uzzia sees no separation of the monarchy and the priesthood. He believes that he is the most fitting public figure to represent the nation before God. On the one hand, we can see Uzzia's act as mere arrogance, an overinflated ego. But some thinkers take it a stage further.

Uzzia's entrance to offer incense is an expression of the phenomenal power that he saw imbued in himself, and his desire to dominate not merely the sovereign realm but also the priesthood (Rav Yuval Cherlow).¹²

Judaism sees the Temple as an institution that stands independent of the king. In fact, in certain ways the Temple represents an alternative royal environment. Both the king and High Priest are appointed by being anointed with oil.¹³ Both the palace and the Temple, have royal livery, an honor guard, a treasury.¹⁴ And yet, it seems the king and the priest cannot be unified in a single personality.¹⁵ The priests are God's representatives, while the king represents the nation. And when the king acts as high priest, he is in some manner assuming a godly role. This position is clear to the priests who feel empowered to instruct the king to "leave the sanctuary," as "It is not for you, Uzzia, to offer incense to the Lord, but for the Aaronite priests who have been consecrated to offer incense." If the offense here is not mere arrogance, but rather a blurring of the lines, as Uzzia seeks to usurp the domain of God, his punishment rings with a strong sense of irony. The affliction of leprosy can be diagnosed and cured only by means of an attendant priest who pronounces the plague and recovery from it.¹⁶ And so, the man who wished to act as a priest finds himself in need of their services.

EARTHQUAKE

During the period of Uzzia a historic earthquake shook the kingdom. It was so devastating an event as to be recalled hundreds of years later by the prophet Zekharia.¹⁷ In a fascinating connection, ancient tradition connects this earthquake with Uzzia's act of bringing the *Ketoret*. This is recorded by Josephus:

While Uzzia was in this state ... he was corrupted in his mind by pride, and became insolent ... he put on the holy garment, and went into the temple to offer incense to God upon the golden altar ... **In the meantime a great**

¹² Rav Y. Cherlow, *Looketh on the Heart*, pg. 228. See also *Vayikra Rabba* 16:1 that Uzzia "sought to discredit the high priesthood."

¹³ High Priest – *Vayikra* 4:3, 21:10; King – *I Shmuel* 10:1, 16:13, *I Melakhim* 1:39.

¹⁴ See for example *I Melakhim* 14:26, *II Melakhim* 14:14.

¹⁵ Nachmanides discussion in his commentary to *Bereishit* 49:10, and his critique of the Hasmonean priests who assumed the throne. Ramban suggests that the Hasmonean monarchy met a swift demise due to its violation of this separation between palace and Temple.

¹⁶ See *Vayikra* chapters 13-14 and *Mishna Negaim* 3:1

¹⁷ *Amos* 1:1 and *Zekharia* 14:5

earthquake shook the ground and a rent was made in the temple, and the bright rays of the sun shone through it, and fell upon the king's face, insomuch that the leprosy seized upon him immediately. And before the city, at a place called Erogel, **half the mountain broke off** from the rest on the west, and rolled itself four furlongs, and stood still at the east mountain, till the roads, as well as the king's gardens, were spoiled by the obstruction.

Rashi connects yet a third strand to this. The great prophet Yishayahu records the scene in which he receives his initial prophecy:

In the year that King Uzzia died, I beheld my Lord seated on a high and lofty throne; and the skirts of His robe filled the Temple. Seraphs stood in attendance on Him. Each of them had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his legs, and with two he would fly. And one would call to the other: "Holy, Holy, Holy! The Lord of Hosts! His presence fills all the earth!" The doorposts shook at the sound of the one who called, and the House kept filling with smoke. I cried, "Woe is me; I am lost! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips ..." Then I heard the voice of my Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me."

For Rashi,¹⁸ the "year that King Uzzia died" is the year that he was stricken by leprosy, and here we see a scene in the "Temple" in which "the doorposts shook." In other words, Yishayahu's appointment coincides with Uzzia's offering incense which instigated the earthquake of Uzzia's era.

Why was Uzzia's offering incense so severe as to warrant an earthquake of enormous proportions? Does Yishayahu, who calls the nation a "people of unclean lips" indicate that the sin lay as much with the nation as with the king? Some suggest that much like in Yisrael, the national prosperity generated a decadent, arrogant society:

Woe to those who rise early in the morning
to run after their drinks,
who stay up late at night
till they are inflamed with wine.
They have harps and lyres at their banquets,
pipes and timbrels and wine,
but they have no regard for the deeds of the LORD,
no respect for the work of his hands.

...So people will be brought low
and everyone humbled,
the eyes of the arrogant humbled.
But the Lord of Hosts will be exalted by his justice,
and the holy God will be proved holy by retribution.

Woe to those ...who acquit the guilty,

¹⁸ Rashi *Amos* 1:1, *Hoshea* 1:2, Radak *Yishayahu* 6:4.

In return for a bribe,
but deny justice to the innocent.
... Therefore the LORD's anger burns against his people;
His hand is raised and he strikes them down.
The mountains shake,
and the dead bodies are like refuse in the streets.

In that case, Uzzia's "arrogance" merely epitomizes a wider national atmosphere of decadence.

King Uzzia lived out his days in quarantine while his son ruled the country. In 1931 a stone was found in Yerushalayim by Professor Eliezer Sukenik. It read: "The bones of Uzzia, King of Yehuda, rest here ... Do not open!" However it was found off-site and when dated it was found to come from 70-30 BCE. Some speculate that in Second Temple times, they renovated Uzzia's grave and that this is the headstone.

IN CONCLUSION

Our *shiur* this week has depicted the heyday of Yerav'am ben Yoash in Yisrael and Uzzia in Yehuda. These are the best of times, with the country experiencing a rare respite from foreign pressure, and an era of prosperity and peace. In this period, the challenge for the nation is to retain their moral standards amidst the wealth and the high standard of living. The words of Amos and Yishayahu indicate that the sins in this period were not idolatry, but excessive indulgence on the part of the upper class, along with extreme abuse of the poor. Every blessing brings its unique challenges. Here, the prophets alert us to the pitfalls that lie in a peaceful, affluent society. We would do well to heed their words.