

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

Shiur #18: Chapter 15
Tumult and Decline

Chapter fifteen is comprised of a sequence of brief passages, each depicting the successive kings of both Yehuda and Yisrael. Each regal summary bears stereotypical features that are standard for *Sefer Melakhim*. For the casual reader, these detail-heavy formulaic summaries offer little of interest other than the monotony of names and dates. And yet, this assemblage of data reveals more than meets the eye at first glance, as both the cumulative impression of the passages and the novel details regarding each sovereign suggest broader assessments of both the personalities concerned and the state of the nation in this period.

The chapter opens with the formidable King Uzzia of Yehuda, and closes with his son, Yotam, presenting a sixty-two year span of dynastic stability and serenity in the South. Concurrently, and occupying the central space of the chapter, five Northern kings are described as passing in rapid, tumultuous succession, with the Northern state racked by relentless political opportunism in which one national revolt is swiftly followed by further mutiny. The quick pace of coup and counter-coup along with foreign invasion race toward Yisrael's end, as Yisrael stands on the precipice of exile. The kings of Yisrael are:

Zekharia (ben Yerav'am) – 6 months

~~~~~ Revolt ~~~~~

**Shalum ben Yavesh – 1 month**

~~~~~ Revolt ~~~~~

Menachem ben Gadi – 10 years

Pekachya ben Menachem – 2 years

~~~~~ Revolt ~~~~~

**Pekach ben Remalyahu – 20 years**

~~~~~ Revolt ~~~~~

Hoshea ben Ella - 9 years

Under **Zekharia**, the protected and "saved" dynasty of Yeihu (13:5, 23; 14:26-7) crumbles in a public assassination. The chaotic closure of the House of Yeihu is marked by a comment suggesting the reassurance of divine order, as it explains the end of the family's rule as the fulfilment of the divine word (see 10:30 and 15:12).

Thereafter one gains the impression of rapid decay leading to catastrophic collapse. **Shalum** murders Zekharia after six months on the throne. Shalum is himself assassinated by **Menachem** after a mere month as sovereign. The reign of **Menachem** and his son **Pekachya** ends in another bloody coup (15:25), and the latest usurper, **Pekach**, loses his own life at the hand of a third assassin, **Hoshea** (v.30).

The sheer violence and shameless ambition to rule,¹ callously discarding the extant sovereign, displays the total breakdown of governmental authority in this ominous period.

ASHUR'S ADVANCE

A second feature emerging from these accounts is the menacing advance of Ashur. In the first instance Menachem ben Gadi is subject to military pressure as "Pul, King of Ashur, came against the land" (15:19). He stymies the aggressor with a huge monetary payment,² financing the heavy tribute by taxing the aristocracy.³ Pul is the nickname in late sources for Tiglat-Pileser III, and its usage here is witness to the degree to which he was a household name for the generation of *Sefer Melakhim*.

The reign of Pekach brings a more pernicious attack from Ashur, in which the enemy overruns the entire valley of the Galilee, a major swathe of the kingdom: "Iyun, Abel-Beit-Ma'akha, Yano'ach and Kedesh, Chazor, Gilad, and the Galil, all the territory of Naftali, and he deported [the population] to Ashur" (15:29). Records from Ashur mention 13,250 exiles.⁴

Read in a larger context, these events foreshadow a sad and violent conclusion yet to be told: the conquest by Ashur and Yisrael's exile and dispersion. Yisrael is characterized by disarray, turbulent, weak and self-destructive, framed on both sides by the stable strength of Yehuda.

FOUR CONCURRENT PROPHETS

¹ See Hoshea's critique in *Hoshea* 7:3-7.

² This tribute is recorded in the annals of Ashur, See Bustenai and Kochman in *Olam Ha-Tanakh* who suggest that this payment to Ashur was made by Menachem to procure Ashur's backing of his regime, against his political opponents. If this assessment is correct then this is an instance in which Yisrael, in a narrow and self-centred political calculation, tragically invites its eventual destroyer into its own borders.

³"*Gibor chayil*" may indicate military prowess, but it frequently suggests social standing, as in *I Shmuel* 9:1, *Rut* 2:1, and *II Melakhim* 24:14.

⁴ Records from Ashur cited in *Olam Ha-Tanakh*.

In our previous *shiur* we depicted the powerful and prosperous period of Yerav'am II (Yisrael) and Uzzia (Yehuda). We described the prophets Amos and Yishayahu who offered a biting critique of the thriving kingdom with their accusations of the wealthy societies of both Shomron and Yerushalayim as religiously smug, corrupt, aloof, materialistic, and exploitative of the working classes. Amos warns that Shomron will be destroyed; Yishayahu prophesizes the ruin of Yehuda.

The Talmud suggests that these two prophets – Amos and Yishayahu – were not alone:

Rabbi Yochanan said: "...Four prophets prophesized concurrently: Hoshea, Yishayahu, Amos and Mikha."⁵

The source for *Chazal's* statement may be found by simply examining the opening lines of the prophetic books:

The vision of Yishayahu the son of Amotz, which he saw concerning Yehuda and Yerushalayim in the days of **Uzzia, Yotam, Achaz, and Yechizkiyahu**, kings of Yehuda. (Yishayahu 1:1)

The word of the Lord that came to **Hoshea**, the son of Be'eri, **in the days of Uzzia, Yotam, Achaz, and Yechizkiya**, kings of Yehuda, and in the days of Yerav'am the son of Yoash, king of Yisrael. (Hoshea 1:1)

The words of **Amos**, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Yisrael **in the days of Uzzia king of Yehuda and in the days of Yerav'am the son of Yoash**, king of Yisrael, two years before the earthquake. (Amos 1:1)

The word of the Lord that came to Mikha of Moreshet in the days of **Yotam, Achaz, and Yechizkiya**, kings of Yehuda, which he saw concerning Shomron and Yerushalayim. (Mikha 1:1)

In other words, starting with the Yerav'am-Uzzia period and continuing throughout kings Yotam, Achaz, and Chizkiyahu (all kings of Yehuda), we are witness to a veritable burst of prophetic voices. Typically, *Tanakh* features the prophet as a lone figure; only a single prophet occupies the national stage at any given moment in time. A historical epoch in which multiple prophetic voices sound in parallel suggests a message that must be heard, as God funnels His guidance through a variety of channels, determined, so to speak, that the message penetrate. God's sending of prophet after prophet indicates an impending catastrophe.

The looming danger is the ascent of the Empire of Ashur, a superpower the likes of which the Middle East has never seen. It is a historical

⁵ *Pesachim* 87a

event that will fundamentally change the region. Ashur is the aggressor that exiles and destroys the Northern Kingdom. In Yehuda, forty-six walled cities will be invaded and burned, and Yerushalayim will survive by dint of a miracle. The storm is approaching.

What sort of message does the prophet offer to a country that will soon be threatened by a devastating empire? The final chapter of Hoshea offers two pointers:

"Ashur shall not save us; we will not mount horses..." (Hoshea 14:3)

Hoshea's statement is more than a prophet's directive. We shall suggest that Hoshea is critiquing and contesting opinions that were current in the contemporary society.

What strategy should be employed in the face of a huge superpower that threatens to overwhelm your nation? One obvious policy is to ally with the superior kingdom, serving as a vassal to their king. Hoshea rejects this policy as ill-fated. He says: "Ashur will not save us!" Fealty of this sort generally exacts a heavy cultural and religious price. This will be aptly demonstrated by King Achaz's treaty with Ashur which instigated an absolute replacement of Judaic religion by the deities of Ashur and their worship.

A second alternative would be to organize a resistance, a coalition of states which could fight and fend off the foreign aggressor. Again Hoshea warns against this: "We shall not mount horses." The horses are a reference to the leading power in the resistance to Ashur: Egypt. Hoshea warns that a direct confrontation with Ashur could endanger the very existence of the Judean state.

These messages recur, as we shall see, in the prophecies of Yishayahu. Everyone agrees about the threat. Everyone wants to save the Jewish State. The question is the appropriate policy. As we progress through this challenging era, we shall identify God's call to Yehuda to maintain its neutrality and to avoid alliances. For now, let us simply take note of the enormous hurdle on the horizon.

KING YOTAM: A FLAWLESS MONARCH

Upon this background, King Yotam's reign is characterized by remarkable national vitality. It appears that Yotam ruled the kingdom in his father's lifetime, after Uzzia was struck by leprosy⁶ and rules for sixteen years in his own right.⁷ He continued his father's uncompromising devotion to God and his regional control. He fortified the kingdom, renovating and fortifying the

⁶ *II Divrei Hayamim* 26:21

⁷ The chronology is complicated to say the least. In *II Melakhim* 15:33 we read that Yotam had a sixteen year reign, but 15:30 talks about Hoshea ben Ella rebelling against Pekach in the twentieth year of Yotam's reign. (*Chazal* have an elegant solution – see Rashi and Radak.) But more problematic is the resolution of the biblical timeline with the chronology of Ashur. See the *Biblical Encyclopedia* ("Yotam, Chronology") or *Olam Ha-Tanakh* for details.

Ofel in Yerushalayim, and constructing defense installations in the hill country of Yehuda. He waged war against Ammon and they paid him annual tribute.⁸

But it is his religious prowess which seems unprecedented. *Divrei Hayamim* states: "Yotam was strong because he kept a faithful course before God his Lord" (27:6). In an amazing summative comment, Rashi succinctly surveys each and every king of Yehuda, identifying the sin of each, and he concludes regarding Yotam: "He had not a single flaw."⁹ This assessment finds its origin in the Talmud:

Chizkiya quoted Rav Yirmiya in the name of R. Shimon b. Yochai: "I could save the world from judgment from the time I was born unto the present moment; and together with my son Eliezer, from the moment of creation until the present time; and in conjunction with Yotam ben Uzzia we could exempt the world from Judgement from Creation until the end of time." (*Sukka* 45b)

We will ignore R' Shimon b. Yochai's self-congratulatory attitude for the present time, and focus instead on his appraisal of Yotam as the epitome of piety. Upon this broad assessment, one detail particularly arouses our curiosity:

He did that which was pleasing to the Lord as his father Uzzia had done, but he did not enter the Temple of the Lord. (*II Divrei Hayamim* 27:3)

Why did Yotam not enter the Temple? The Radak offers two divergent readings:

That is to say, he followed his father in all respects but in this matter he was unlike him, for his father entered the sanctuary to offer incense. Alternatively, we may explain that because his father had stumbled in this matter, he refrained from entering the Temple to pray or sacrifice; instead he offered sacrifices on the local altars (*bamot*).

The first reading offers no remarkable praise for Yotam and merely seeks to differentiate him from his father who had sinned in the Temple. Yotam did enter the Temple, to pray and sacrifice, but not in the same sinful manner as his father.

But the second reading is even more interesting. Yotam decides that since the Temple had been the location of his father's downfall, attracting his penchant for leadership and inducing him to offer the forbidden incense, Yotam decides to keep his distance from the Temple. This would appear to be the mark of a true penitent (*Baal Teshuva*), as Rambam points out in "*Hilkhot Teshuva*" (2:4):

⁸ *II Divrei Hayamim* 27:1-8

⁹ This commentary is attributed by Rashi to Rabbi Eliezer ben Moshe.

One of the ways to repent is ... to remove oneself as far as possible from the original sin

Or, as he writes in "*Hilkhot De'ot*" (2:1):

So too should a person behave regarding all character traits. If he finds himself on one extreme he should move to the opposite extreme and accustom himself to such behavior ... until he may return to the proper middle path.

Yotam removes himself from the environs of the *Mikdash* so that he will not become entrapped in his father's sin. In this regard, we begin to appreciate how this man invested significant thought and effort in his dedication to God. Ironically, for the Radak, this entangles him in the prohibition of worshipping at local altars, and nonetheless, he is granted the accolade of the flawless monarch. We might see this as an expression of the great power of repentance.

NEXT WEEK, we will dedicate our *shiur* to the dramatic reign of King Achaz.