

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
YISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

SEFER MELAKHIM BET: THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS
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Shiur #19: Chapter 16
King Achaz – Abandoning God

King Achaz¹ ascends the throne and immediately² finds himself embroiled in a war, as his kingdom comes under attack by Aram and Yisrael.

The invasion by Aram and Yisrael is directly connected to the looming advance of Ashur (Assyria), which threatens to overwhelm the region. Yehuda's neighboring states are absolutely opposed to any acquiescence to Assyrian domination; servitude to a foreign yoke is unacceptable. And so, plans are made to repel the foreign aggressor. Two kings – Pekach of Yisrael and Retzin of Aram – devise a united resistance against Ashur. However, they need wider support from other kingdoms, and Achaz refuses to collaborate with the anti-Assyrian coalition. In response, Pekach and Retzin attack and devastate Yehuda, subjecting Yerushalayim to siege.³ *Divrei Hayamim*⁴ records 120,000 casualties in a single day of fighting, and 200,000 prisoners of war. Their plan is to remove Achaz from power and to install an anti-Assyrian, pro-alliance sovereign in his stead:

We shall march against Yehuda and invade and conquer it, and we shall set up a king in it, the son of Tov'al." (*Yishayahu 7:6*)⁵

The huge advance against Yerushalayim throws King Achaz into a panic: "His heart and the heart of his people trembled as trees of the forest shake in the wind" (*Yishayahu 7:2*). What could he do? He risks losing his kingdom. For Achaz, the only recourse is to appeal to Ashur for protection:

Achaz sent messengers to Tiglat-Pil'eser, king of Ashur, to say, "I am your servant and your son; come and deliver me from the hands of the

¹ Achaz's name, as evidenced by archeological evidence, was Yeho-Achaz. The *Tanakh* removes the prefix which bears God's name, thereby shortening his name. Why? It is possible that the divine association with his name was deliberately omitted due to his idolatrous direction.

² It appears that this attack was gaining momentum already in the period of King Yotam. See *II Melakhim 15:37*.

³ *II Divrei Hayamim 28:17-18* records an invasion in the West by Philistia, and in the East by Edom. It is possible that Achaz was invaded on every front in a coordinated attack by multiple kingdoms of the anti-Assyrian coalition. See also *II Melakhim 16:6*: "At that time king Retzin of Aram recovered Eilat for Aram... and Edomites came to Eilat and settled there..."

⁴ *II Divrei Hayamim 28:6-8*. See the dramatic story of the return of the captives there.

⁵ Chapters 7-10 of *Yishayahu* deal with the period of the siege by Pekach-Retzin against Yerushalayim.

king of Aram and from the hands of the king of Yisrael who are attacking me." Achaz took the gold and silver that were in the House of God and in the treasuries of the palace and sent them as a gift (*shochad*) to the king of Ashur. The king of Ashur consented; he marched against Damascus and captured it. He deported [its inhabitants] to Kir and put Retzin to death. (*II Melakhim* 16:7-9)

And so, Achaz voluntarily surrenders Judean independence to Ashur, entering into a vassal agreement. One imagines that Ashur is only too happy to accept. They are securing an ally, and therefore a foothold, in a sought-after region.

THE VOICE OF PROPHECY

What does the prophet think of Achaz's appeal to Ashur? At the critical juncture, in the thick of the siege, Yishayahu approaches King Achaz to convey God's word, warning Achaz that a strategic alliance with Ashur would prove disastrous. His first appeal informs the king that the current attack would pass swiftly.⁶

Be firm and be calm.
Don't be afraid,
Do not lose heart,
On account of those two smoldering stumps of firebrands;
On account of the raging of Retzin of Aram
and Ben Remalyahu.
....Thus says the Lord God,
It shall not succeed,
It shall not come to pass... (*Yishayahu*, 7:4-7)

In other words, Yishayahu informs Achaz that Pekach and Retzin make a great deal of smoke, but in this instance, there is no fire! God asserts that the kings would abandon their attack before Yerushalayim would be subdued.

Apparently, Achaz is unconvinced. The prophet then proposes that Achaz appeal directly to God⁷ to seek His direct guidance:

The Lord spoke further to Achaz: "Ask for a sign from the Lord your God, anywhere down to *She'ol*, or up to the sky." But Achaz replied: "I will not ask, and I will not test the Lord." (*Yishayahu* 7:11-12)

Achaz's refusal to "test" God should not be viewed as an expression of humility or a devout gesture.⁸ One reading suggests the king's cynicism

⁶ See also *Yishayahu* 8:1-5.

⁷ An example of such a test would be that of Gid'on (*Shoftim* 6:36-40) or of Moshe (*Shemot* 4:8).

⁸ Achaz uses the language of *Devarim* 6:16. Heschel suggests that "we have no right to question the king's sincerity. His refusal to ask for a sign was motivated by piety" (Heschel, A.J. *The Prophets*, vol.1 (New York, 1962) pg. 64. However the majority of commentators read his response as we have presented it.

regarding the power of prophecy, but more likely, Achaz is simply indifferent to God and disdainful of the words pronounced in His name:

"I have no desire to contribute to God's veneration." (Rashi)

Achaz's intent is to say: "I don't believe in the prophet's divine message, and I have no interest in hearing it whatsoever." (Daat Mikra)

As we shall see, Achaz's nonchalant disdain for God's prophecy belies a deeper repudiation of the God of Yisrael.

THE DANGERS OF ALLIANCE

But we may well pose the question: why is the alliance with Ashur so problematic? After all, their assistance saves Yehuda from possible obliteration! What is the problem?

Yishayahu expresses the objection to allying with Ashur in the following manner:

Because that people has spurned
The waters of the Shilo'ach, which flow gently,
Assuredly
My Lord will bring up against them
The mighty waters of the Euphrates
The king of Ashur in his multitude
It shall rise above all its channels
... and swirl over Yehuda like a flash flood,
Reaching up to the neck. (*Yishayahu* 8:6-8)

These lines describe the mighty waters of Ashur, which will drown Yehuda in a flash flood. Yishayahu is suggesting that any meddling with a power of Ashur's magnitude will bring unforeseen results that could eventually turn against and even overwhelm the kingdom. Indeed it was Ashur that had destroyed the northern kingdom, and had it not been for a miracle, they would have vanquished Yerushalayim too. When you invite a powerful aggressor as your ally, you never know when the firepower might be turned against you.

We would be wrong to underestimate Achaz's predicament. Yishayahu is recommending the "waters of the Shilo'ach that flow gently," effectively proposing a policy of political quietism: neither to join the coalition nor to ally with Ashur. "*Hishamer ve-hishaket* – stand back and stay quiet." For a sovereign leader, that is a virtually impossible course of action. How does a leader facing attack rely on God and adopt a totally passive posture?

And yet, if we wish to appreciate Yishayahu's firm stand, we must appreciate the price paid in the collaboration with Ashur. The danger rests not in the military arena but rather in the cultural-religious sphere.

The Assyrians were fanatically devout. In military campaigns the king assumed the role of deputy of the god. The prowess and victories of the army were thought to reflect the power of the God Ashur. Assyria imposed the recognition of her gods as the overlords of the gods of the conquered peoples. Political subservience involved acceptance of her religious institutions. It was nearly impossible for a small vassal state to keep from being flooded with the idolatrous and superstitious practices under royal Assyrian protection. This explains the infiltration into Judah of all sorts of foreign cults and superstitions in the period she was a vassal of Assyria. (Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol.1, p.72)

In other words, reliance upon the military might of Assyria would engender a parallel religious capitulation. Indeed this is what subsequently transpires.

IDOLATRY

In the lines that introduce Achaz, *Sefer Melakhim* depicts the king as acting in a most contemptible manner. It lists a litany of crimes perpetrated by the king:

He followed the ways of the kings of Yisrael. He even consigned his son to fire (*Molekh*), in the abhorrent fashion of the nations which the Lord had dispossessed before the Israelites. He sacrificed and made offerings at the shrines (*bamot*) on the hills and under every leafy tree. (*II Melakhim* 16:3-4)

We do not know what triggered Achaz's departure from the ways of God; after all, his father and grandfather had been loyal adherents to Torah. It is difficult to assess how much of this idolatrous culture is boosted by the alliance with Ashur, and how much is a product of the king's personal religious predilections. But his religious waywardness is unprecedented. The Talmud describes Achaz as consistently "evil from start to finish" (*Megilla* 11a).

Achaz promotes worship outside the Temple compound, possibly sacrificing to various natural forces such as "leafy trees" and the "hills." The "*Molekh*," an ancient Canaanite pagan rite,⁹ is an object of service; this is the first time its service is practiced by a Judean king. The precise manner of its rituals is open to debate: either it is a symbolic fire ritual whereby a father leads his child between flaming pyres although the child is unharmed,¹⁰ or the child is sacrificed in a grotesque burning ceremony.¹¹ Woefully, this practice, adopted here by Achaz, endured in Yerushalayim, such that it was featured

⁹ *Vayikra* 18:20, 20:2

¹⁰ See for example, Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, "Laws of Idolatry," 6:3. This relies on the language of "passing your son through."

¹¹ See *II Divrei Hayamim* 28:3 which subtly shifts the letter "*ayin*" changing the Hebrew meaning from "pass through" to "burn." Similarly, the references in *Yirmiyahu* (see note 13 and see also *Yirmiyahu* 19:5 and *Yechezkel* 16:20-21) mention burning the child or killing him.

during the period of Menashe¹² and later in the period of Yirmiyahu.¹³ The *Molekh* rite was practiced in the valley of Ben Hinnom¹⁴ adjacent to the city. If we wish to understand how *Sefer Melakhim* assesses these transgressions, its usage of the phrase "in the abhorrent fashion of the nations which the Lord had dispossessed before the Israelites,"¹⁵ clearly suggests these acts as prefiguring national exile.

THE ASSYRIAN ALTAR

But Achaz does not suffice with home-grown idolatry:

When King Achaz went to Damascus to greet Tiglat-Pil' eser, king of Ashur, he saw the altar in Damascus. King Achaz sent the priest Uriah a sketch of the altar and a detailed plan¹⁶ of its construction. The priest Uriah did just as King Achaz had instructed him from Damascus; Uriah the priest built the altar before King Achaz returned from Damascus. When the king returned from Damascus and when the king saw the altar, the king approached the altar, ascended it and offered his burnt-offering and meal offering; he poured his libation and he dashed the blood of his peace-offering against the altar. As for the bronze altar which had been before the Lord, he moved it from its place in front of the Temple...

King Achaz travels to Damascus to personally greet his savior. There, he sees a sacrificial altar and immediately demands that an identical model be installed at the Temple in Yerushalayim. There is no indication that Tiglat-Pil' eser had demanded that the altar be built to express Achaz's vassalage. Instead, Achaz's eagerly embarks on the project in his enthusiastic adoption of Assyrian mores. When Achaz initially appeals to the Assyrian ruler, he presents himself with the words, "I am your servant and your son." This implies that Tiglat-Pil' eser is his king and his father, or as we would say it, "*Avinu Malkeinu!*" In other words, Achaz knowingly and calculatingly replaces his Judaism with Assyrian religion; moreover he appears to revel in it.

The verses here emphasize Achaz's royal title: "The **king** returned ...the **king** saw the altar, the **king** approached ..." *Daat Mikra* suggests that the royal emphasis indicates that the altar is inaugurated with majestic pomp and ceremony. Alternatively, it is calling attention to the expansion of the royal role, as the king adopts the role of *Kohen*, ascending the altar and offering the sacrifices and libation – yet another reflection of foreign norms.

¹² *II Melakhim* 23:10

¹³ *Yirmiyahu* 7:31, 32:35

¹⁴ Today's Sultan's Pool

¹⁵ This line references the Torah's depiction of the illicit worship of the Canaanites in *Vayikra* 18:21 and 20:2 (and by implication, the warnings of 18:25-28 and 20:22-24) and also in *Devarim* 12:2. Both passages instruct Israel to replace the degenerate religious culture of Canaan with a society built around a single worship site and embodying morality (as depicted in *Vayikra* chapter 19.)

¹⁶ The word used here is "*tavnit*." It has particular resonance regarding the *Mikdash*, as it is used by the Torah to indicate the precise form of the Tabernacle furniture. Cf. *Shemot* 25:9, 40.

REMOVING THE PEDESTALS

But Achaz's desecration of the Temple has yet to reach its climax. In a series of cryptic *pesukim*, we read how Achaz dismantles or possibly defaces some of the Temple furniture:

King Achaz cut out the insets, the laver stands (*mekhonot*), and removed the laver (*kiyor*) from them. He also removed the tank (*yam*) from the bronze oxen that supported it and set it on the stone floor – on account of the King of Ashur.

Why does Achaz remove these insets and stands? Some have suggested that the metal bases are sent as part of the "bribe" to Tiglat-Pil'eser, but that is difficult to sustain seeing that these are made of bronze and not particularly valuable. Radak views this as an act of vandalism and desecration:

Everything he did was in a spirit of provocation and debasement, as we witnessed with the altar, and his extinguishing of the [Temple] lights¹⁷ and the closing of its doors¹⁸ ... He defaced the vessels of God's house.

But possibly, we can suggest¹⁹ that Achaz is making a serious theological point in his enigmatic removal of the temple reservoirs from their bases. Shlomo had installed the *yam* (tank), the ten *kiyorim* (basins), and the wheeled *mekhonot* upon which they sat. These were however, somewhat controversial, as the bases were fashioned with animal imagery. The *yam* stood on twelve oxen, and the *mekhonot* were inlaid with insets of "lions, oxen and cherubim."²⁰ Why did Shlomo include animal imagery in the Temple?

These [images of lions, oxen, and *keruvim*] are the images seen by Yechezkel in his vision of the divine chariot. (Ralbag)

[The crafting of these wheels was in the form of] the wheels of the chariot (7:33) – the holy chariot that was seen in the vision of Yechezkel. (Radak)

These commentators are referring to the vision of Yechezkel, in which "the heavens opened and I saw visions of God" (*Yechezkel* 1:1). The angelic figures have faces that include images of a cherub, an ox, and a lion (see *Yechezkel* 1:5,10; 10:14). And so we may surmise that Shlomo was drawing upon this mystical imagery, attempting to reflect the divine majesty in artistic form.

Let us be clear: these animals represent God's chariot, his means of transport, his platform – not God Himself. And yet, if Achaz is taking pains to remove the *yam* and *kiyor* from their ornate pedestals, he is deliberately

¹⁷ *II Divrei Hayamim* 28:7

¹⁸ *II Divrei Hayamim* 27:24 and 28:7

¹⁹ I heard this idea from Rav Yaakov Medan.

²⁰ See *I Melakhim* 7:25, 29, 36.

removing this angelic imagery. If these carvings and mouldings do in fact portray God's motion, his mobility, then the removal of the carving is a deliberate attempt to symbolically paralyze God, to state clearly that God is incapacitated and stagnant. If this theory is correct, then this act is a deep insult to the Almighty.

POISONING YOUNG MINDS

The Biblical depiction of Achaz's crimes seem limited to the sphere of idolatry, the Temple, and divine worship. However the sages spread the net further afield.²¹ In a vivid image, the *Midrash* suggests that Achaz instigates the national closure of the Jewish education system:

"And it came to pass in the days of Achaz..."

This may be compared to the son of a king against whom his tutor plotted, desiring to kill him.

He said to himself: "If I slay him now, my life will be forfeit to the king. Therefore, I will rather withdraw his wet-nurse from him and he will die of himself."

Achaz ... reasoned thus to himself:

"If there are no children, there will be no students;

If there are no students, there will be no scholars;

If there are no scholars, there will be no elders;

If there are no elders, there will be no prophets;

and if there are no prophets, the Holy One, blessed be He, will not cause his *Shekhina* to rest upon them."

....R. Chunia said in R. Leazer's name: "Why was he called Achaz? Because he closed (*achaz*) the synagogue and houses of study." (*Bereishit Rabba* 42:3)

The *Midrash* paints an image of Achaz as intent on destroying Judaism. In this creative portrayal his strategy is not to attack the leadership – executing the prophets²² or the scholars. Instead Achaz chooses to dry it up at the grassroots level. But where do the sages see this in the text?²³ If we can interpret this *midrash* metaphorically and read it back into our chapter, I would suggest that the *Molekh* and the "altars on every hill and under every tree" become an attraction for the common people. Rather than attacking the leaders of national monotheism, Achaz promotes pagan alternatives that are far more enticing for the average person than God-worship, and in this way, he erodes loyalty to God at the popular level.

²¹ *Sanhedrin* 103b: "Achaz permitted incest." The Talmud also debates as to whether Achaz had a place in the world to come: "R. Simeon b. Eleazar said on the authority of R. Meir Achaz, Achazya, and all the kings of Yisrael of whom it is written: 'And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord' will neither live [in the future world] nor be judged [there]."

²² Interestingly, the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 104a) indicates that Achaz had some respect for, or at least shame in the face of, the prophet Yishayahu.

²³ The *Midrash* relates this to *Yishayahu* 8:16-18; Yishayahu seems to state that he and his students will have to seclude themselves, studying Torah and waiting for more hospitable times. The book and biography of Yishayahu is beyond the scope of our *shiur*, but see the analysis of Rav Yoel bin Nun and Beni Lau in their new volume, *Isaiah*, Tel Aviv: Yediot Acharonot and Chemed books (2013) pp 145-6, 164-166.

IN CONCLUSION

After two generations of kings who upheld God's worship unequivocally, we encounter Achaz. Here is a king who is attracted to everything Assyrian. He looks to Ashur to offer his country military backing, disregarding an explicit prophetic directive. In the religious sphere, he transforms the Temple into an Assyrian shrine. In this regard, Achaz is one of the most harmful kings that we have encountered in *Sefer Melakhim*.