

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings
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Shiur #24 – Chapter 20 – A Test of Faith (Part I)

Did the contest at Mt. Carmel and the ensuing rainfall make an impression on Achav? Was Achav affected by the experience of God's fire descending from heaven or was he oblivious to God's powerful presence?

Achav's religious orientation is complex and far from linear. Achav does not share Izevel's monolithic attachment to the Ba'al. Rather, Achav's faith has a fascinating history, taking interesting twists and turns. On the one hand, Achav is described by the *mishna*¹ as one of the three evil kings of Israel whose place in the World to Come was denied. On that backdrop, we might see him as a hopeless case. But it is Chapter 20 that provides the impetus for a surprisingly positive Rabbinic statement regarding Achav:

R. Yochanan said: Why did Achav deserve to reign for twenty-two years? Because he honored the Torah, which was given with twenty-two letters (*Sanhedrin* 102b)

What is the Biblical source for this *midrash*? How does Achav honor the Torah? Is this out of character?

Let us survey the evidence:

Chapter 20 describes Achav's altercations with the Kingdom of Aram. In this depiction of the royal court, the prophet of God has a central role. Achav acts upon the encouraging words of the prophet - not once, but twice. The theme of the prophetic message is, "and you shall know that I am God,"² which implies that God is interested to advance and deepen Achav's faith. In a scene at the end of the chapter, we see how one of the *nevi'im* needs to disguise himself so that Achav doesn't recognize him. A clear feature of this chapter, then, is that Achav is acquainted with *nevi'ei Hashem* and responsive to them.

Where are the prophets of the Ba'al and the Ashera? If Izevel remains a central religious influence, why are prophets of God allowed to feature so freely and prominently in the royal arena? It is true that in chapter 18, Achav's closest advisor, Ovadia, was loyal to God. But at the same time, he needed to hide his allegiance to God. At that point in time, Izevel had a free hand when it

¹ *Sanhedrin* 10:2

² 20:13, 28.

came to national religion. With the central role of the prophet of God in chapter 20, we have to consider the fact that something HAS changed in the royal court. Eliyahu's actions had generated a significant shift in the religious tone of the kingdom.

Chapter 20 ends with a clash between the prophet and the king, leaving a sour taste regarding the positive cooperation between the king and the prophet. Similarly, chapter 21 tells a story of considerable friction between prophet and king; yet, when condemned by Eliyahu for his unethical actions, Achav responds with an act of contrite repentance.

In chapter 22, we return to the royal court. There, we find 400 prophets. Interestingly, they are false prophets, more like actors or a paid political crowd who give a sense of support by chanting in unison the lines that the king wishes to hear. Nonetheless, and particularly important in the light of the number of constituents - 400 - these prophets speak in God's name and not in the name of the Ba'al.

What we are contesting then, is that Achav is far from having rejected God or the religion of Israel. He has his vacillations and fluctuations as regards the place of Israelite religion, but he is engaged in an active dialogue with his Judaism. In our chapter, God shows an active interest in encouraging his faith. What the evidence would seem to show is that after Har Ha-Carmel, the prophets of Ba'al do not return. Instead, prophets of God have a fixed presence in the royal court. That religious adjustment is enormously significant. In many ways, Eliyahu succeeded.

ARAM

The backdrop to our *perek* is the hostility between Aram and Israel, a conflict that began already in the times of Ba'asha (15:19-21) and steadily escalates after Achav, continuing until the reign of Yerovam ben Yoash.³ In our chapter, Aram's king Ben-Hadad joins with 32 other kings, probably tribal chieftains bound to him by treaty, and sets siege to Shomron. The dialogue here is indirect and is conducted in the form of telegraphic messages sent from the siege camp to the besieged Achav. (The verb SHL"CH is something of a keyword,⁴ featuring in a more intense form – SHALACH - at the end of the *perek*.)

The dialogue here is difficult. We shall compare the first exchange with the second:

And he sent messengers to Achav inside the city to say to him:

"Thus said Ben-Hadad: Your silver and gold are mine; your beautiful wives and children are mine."

³ See *Melakhim* II 14:23. There are times when Aram gains a crushing upper hand. See *Melakhim* II 6:24-28, 13:7, 23.

⁴ See vv.2, 5, 6, 7, 9, 17, 34, 42

The king of Israel replied: "As you say my lord king: I and all I have are yours."

Then the messengers came again and said:

"Thus said Ben-Hadad: When I sent you the order to give me your silver and gold and your wives and your children, I meant that tomorrow at this time I will send my servants and they will search your house... and seize everything you prize and take it away." (vv.2-6)

Achav's reaction is slow and deliberate. He first summons his advisors, giving them his feeling that this is no ordinary demand but essentially a provocation, a pretext for attack: "This man is bent on evil/destruction."⁵ They advise him not to submit, and Achav informs Ben-Hadad:

Tell my lord the king: "All that you demanded of your servant at first, I shall do, but this thing I cannot do." (v.9)

The commentaries are puzzled. In his first message, Ben-Hadad proclaimed that Achav's money and close family were his. Achav agreed! What was the critical shift that took place in the second demand? Why did Achav agree so readily to the first demand and reject the second? The Ralbag and Metzudat David both explain:

I and all I have are yours: I am under your governance, to serve you and to pay tribute. (Ralbag)

In other words, the original request was seen as demand that Achav capitulate to the superior military might of Aram, aligning himself with Aram as a vassal, paying taxes to the Aramean kingdom, but essentially governing his internal affairs independently. But Ben-Hadad's second message indicated that he wished to actually enter the city and seize Achav's family and his house items. That was an act of humiliation, a violation of the international standard between vassal and sovereign. Alternatively, as suggested by R. Yoseph Kra, it was a demand to have the city open its doors and submit to the enemy, allowing them to overrun and destroy the kingdom. In short, it is a message that tells Achav that Ben-Hadad is determined to wage war or to force a surrender, but that he is not interested in other options. And because this is precisely an existential threat, Achav called a cabinet meeting. His advisors also understand that this is no ordinary offer, and that essentially it is a declaration of war. His ministers advise him to reject the arrangement.

This depiction of Achav taking advice is interesting. We see Achav as a person who is open to influence and to reason. Do note, however, that Achav still calls Ben-Hadad, "lord, my king," indicating that he would accept the subordinate vassal agreement.

⁵ In Hebrew, the verb is "RA"AH," usually translated as "evil." But in many contexts it means annihilation or destruction; see *Bereishit* 19:19; *Shemot* 32:12,14; *Yona* 3:10.

In contrast to Achav's humble demeanor, the response of Ben-Hadad is one that smacks of arrogance and braggery. He boasts as to his victory.⁶ But interestingly, Achav does not adopt a subordinate or intimidated position. He will have the final word in the conversation. In a wonderful idiom, he expresses that this battle is far from decided:

The king of Israel answered, "Tell him: 'One who puts on his armor should not boast like one who takes it off.'"

In other words, this is a military makeover of the famous expression, "Don't count your chickens before they hatch"!

THE SEFER TORAH

Chazal however, read this exchange very differently. They suggest that Achav was willing to accept that his wives and children would be seized by the enemy forces. What was it that Ben Hadad demanded next – "everything you prize" – that Achav refused? What was his red-line? It was a *Sefer Torah*! This is not a personal dressing-down of the king, but rather an act of national humiliation, as Ben-Hadad seeks to take away a national symbol. And it is this attack at the spiritual roots of Israel that leads to a response by Achav. Let us read Rashi's comment:

Are not all the items mentioned in the earlier message "prize" possessions? But what is the "prize"? It is that which is the most precious of all: the *Sefer Torah*, about which it is said, "It is dearer than gold and great treasures." Achav said to himself, "He is asking for a great thing which does not belong to me alone, but to the elders of Israel!" Hence, "He summoned the elders of the land." Even though they served idols, they respected the Torah.

In this fascinating *derash*, as Achav faces the very survival of his kingdom, he discovers that what matters most to him is his Jewish identity. In a classic gesture that has been exhibited by many wayward Jews, who, in critical moments of danger or external pressure and anti-Jewish humiliation discover their Jewish roots, Achav demonstrates that at his core is a Jewish sensitivity, a commitment to God. He may not keep the law but he knows that it is the essence of Israel's survival.

THE PROPHET

⁶ Ben-Hadad's statement, "May the gods deal with me, be it ever so severely, if enough dust remains in Samaria to give each of my men a handful," expresses his victory in terms of dust. It would appear that this metaphor was one that was part of a wider vernacular in Aram. See two other instances where dust or earth is expressed in regards to Aramean military encounters:

Melakhim II 13:7: "For the king of Aram had destroyed the rest and made them **like the dust** at threshing time."

And in the context of Naaman: *Melakhim* II 5:17: "Please let me, your servant, be given as **much earth** as a pair of mules can carry, for your servant will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the Lord."

Tzarikh Iyun!

At this point, Ben-Hadad activates his forces to enforce the siege. Interestingly, we are informed even at this stage (v. 12) that Ben-Hadad and his compatriots had started drinking. They clearly were not anticipating any action that day. After all, a siege can take months, if not years. There was no need at this point to be on alert. The brief mention of Ben-Hadad drinking with his associate kings conveys not only their confidence, but underscores the contrast in mood between the carefree scene at the siege-camp, and the tense atmosphere inside Shomron. This disparity will be the key to Achav's victory. By the time we reach v. 16, Ben-Hadad will be drunk (despite the fact that it is only noon).

It is at this juncture that the *navi* enters the scene:

Thus says the Lord: Do you see this great multitude? I will deliver it into your hands today and you shall know that I am the Lord.

Achav does not contest the prophecy and seeks only to know who will lead the battle and who will conclude it. Achav follows God's advice, sending out the "*na'arei sarei ha-medinot*" to attack. This is hardly a recommended tactic - sending out a small unit of soldiers⁷ to attack so a large force, in broad daylight, at noon – and yet it would appear that they are following God's instruction against all odds. At any rate, a drunken Ben-Hadad delivers an incoherent message to his sentries.⁸ Seeing a meager 232 people emerging from the camp, they view this as a possibility that this is a group of deserters, abandoning the city and the bleak prospects of a prolonged siege. And so, a small force becomes an advantage, and the forces from Shomron win the day.

The victory had been orchestrated by God, and it is clear that God had been victorious. Even if, in retrospect, we could see the genius in sending a small force in midday, no one could have had intelligence information as to the inebriated state of the enemy, a critical factor in the panic and confusion that ensued. God's hand was evident in this unpredictable reversal of fortunes.

As we can see from v. 22, the *navi*, now allied with Achav, cautions against over-confidence, informing the king that Aram will return next year. Nonetheless, this close relationship is a dramatic shift in the texture of the government of the North.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE *PESHAT* AND THE *DERASH*

⁷ The number of the army which followed the attack force – 7,000 – is interesting, because the last appearance of this number was in regards to the "seven thousand – every knee that has not bowed to Ba'al" (19:18). Is this a literary indication that the people have been exonerated for their sins of *avoda zara*?

⁸ See the *mepharshim* who all agree that Achav's strange line: "If they have come out to surrender, take them alive; and if they have come out for battle, take them alive anyway" indicates that whichever way, the people should be taken alive. I think it is clear from the incoherence and linguistic lilt that these are the words of a drunk man.

What is the difference between the *peshat* and the *derash*? According to the *midrash*, there is a certain innate quality to Achav that understands the value of the primary symbols of Judaism. The unwillingness to part with a *Sefer Torah* expresses certain principles that Achav always held.⁹ God rewards Achav then, by offering him a victory over his enemies as a response to his religious commitment. This is a story of virtuous acts and their reward.

But according to the *peshat*, Achav begins with simple sense of national pride. His refusal towards Ben-Hada is not a religious one. It is national, political. Nonetheless, Hashem uses this opportunity as a springboard to motivate Achav along religious lines, having the Navi inform Achav how God will assist in moments of absolute despair. The sense generated by the *peshat* reading is one of God actively seeking to draw Achav to a different religious place, to educate him that if he follows God, God will protect him.

We shall continue with this chapter in our upcoming *shiur*.

⁹ I have always wondered why *Chazal* chose the particular object of a *Sefer Torah* to make this point. One place where a *Sefer Torah* features prominently is in the religious renaissance by the king Yoshiyahu. Yoshiyahu found a *Sefer Torah* after the dreadful period of idolatry lead by the evil king Menasheh (see *Melakhim* II 22:8-12). I wonder whether this *midrash* aims to say that however bad things were in Achav's time, they were incomparable to the religious rejection perpetrated by Menasheh. Achav had a *Sefer Torah* and he cherished it. In Menasheh's time, there was no *Sefer Torah* to be found!