

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

This week's shiurim are dedicated by Joseph and Phyllis Eisenman
in honor of Judah L. Eisenman

Shiur #01: CHAPTER 1
“ALL THE KING’S MEN”: ACHAZYAHU’S MESSENGERS

INTRODUCTION

Let us open with a few words of introduction regarding *Melakhim's* division into two segments, and the seam line dividing *Melakhim Aleph* and *Bet*. In its original form, *Melakhim* was a single unit, undivided into *Melakhim 1* and *2*. The division into two is first found in the Septuagint and the Vulgate and appears in Jewish sources only from the Venetian printing of the *Tanakh* in 1525. However it has been adopted in Jewish sources as a matter of convention. The reason for the split into two smaller books was the need to divide the large and unwieldy scroll of *Melakhim* into two more manageable segments. However, the break between the books is arbitrary and crude: it awkwardly interrupts the description of the reign of Achazyahu, King of Israel, and it mystifyingly perforates the smooth flow of the Eliyahu stories. For this reason, one who picks up the thread of *Sefer Melakhim* at this point is very much thrust into the proverbial deep end, as one lacks significant background information. We shall attempt to bridge some of this knowledge by providing introductions and explanations where necessary. In order to begin at a logical point, we shall begin with just a few verses from the end of *Melakhim Aleph*, as we open our study with *Melakhim Bet* ch.1, the lone chapter that addresses the reign of Achazyahu, king of Israel (the northern kingdom).

ACHAZYAHU, SON OF ACHAV

Achazyahu the son of Achav began to reign over Israel in Samaria in the seventeenth year of Yehoshaphat king of Judah, and he reigned two years over Israel. And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, and walked in the way of his father, and in the way of his mother, and in the way of Yerav'am ben Nevat, wherein he made Israel to sin. And he served Ba'al, and worshipped him, and provoked the Lord, the God of Israel, according to all that his father had done. And Moav rebelled against Israel after the death of Achav. (*I Melakhim 22:52 – II Melakhim 1:1*)

Achazyahu, son of Achav has a notably unsuccessful reign, assuming the throne for a paltry two years; his early demise is due to an unfortunate domestic accident.¹ He dies without leaving an heir (1:17), and his brother assumes the throne after him. Achazyahu had assumed the throne after the death of his father, Achav, who was killed in Israel's disastrous defeat at the hands of Aram (*I Melakhim* ch. 22), and the kingdom's hegemony declines yet further as Achazyahu loses control of Moav. His attempted seafaring venture, a collaboration with the southern kingdom, presumably out of economic interest, ends in disaster (*I Melakhim* 22:49-50). Religiously, he follows "the way of his father and the way of his mother (Izevel)." Achav and Izevel had adopted Ba'al as the official religion in the capital, Shomron (*I Melakhim* 16:32), and had threatened the lives of the prophets of God (*I Melakhim* 18:4, 19:2). As we shall see, Achazyahu continues their idolatrous regime and their disdain for God's prophets. From the perspective of *Sefer Melakhim*, there could be little worse than an idolatrous regime. And yet, Achazyahu manages to take idolatry a step further than even his father:

He sent messengers, and said unto them: "Go, inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv² the god of Ekron whether I shall recover of this sickness."

This enquiry of Ba'al-Zevuv arouses God's ire, as He sends His prophet to issue a pronouncement sentencing him to an imminent and premature death:

An angel of the Lord said to Eliyahu Ha-Tishbi: Arise, go up to meet the messengers of the king of Samaria, and say unto them: "Is there no God in Israel, that you go to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv the god of Ekron? Therefore thus says the Lord: You shall not descend from the bed you ascended, but you shall die."

Why does this appeal to Ba'al-Zevuv seal Achazyahu's fate? In the past, God has not hurried to condemn idolatrous kings such as Achav. And yet, here, it seems that God acts with immediacy. This is because Achazyahu's appeal to Ba'al-Zevuv is not merely a highly visible manifestation of his idolatry, but rather a new low-point that is particularly reprehensible.

It is one thing to promote idolatry on the domestic front, but it is another thing entirely when the King of Israel approaches a neighboring country in need of its deity. Instead of God's name being publicized, a foreign god is being sought to cure the king; hence, Eliyahu's opening phrase: "Is there no God in Israel, that you go to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv the god of Ekron?" This is the inverse of the idyllic "End of Days" image, in which Jerusalem becomes a magnet for international attention: "Many peoples shall go and say: Come – let us go to the mount of the Lord, to the House of the God of Jacob, that He may instruct us in His ways, and that we may walk in His paths ... He will

¹ Abarbanel and R. Yosef ibn Caspi both suggest that this was a divine punishment for his idolatry.

² Here Ba'al Zevuv is described as the god of Ekron, one of the Philistine cities. In discussing the nature of this deity, Umberto Cassuto (in *Encyclopedia Mikra'it*) suggests that Ba'al Zevuv may be a pejorative term for a Phoenician Ba'al god whose real name was Ba'al Zevul, possibly also the source of the name Izevel (Jezebel).

judge many nations, and arbitrate for the many peoples" (*Yishayahu* 2:3). By Achazyahu's action, Israel states that its God is inept and irrelevant. Even sinful kings such as Yerav'am³ and Achav⁴ consult with prophets of God in moments of distress. Beyond the adoption of idolatry as the national religion, Achazyahu's appeal desecrates God's reputation, and God decrees that the king will pay the ultimate price for this offence.

MESENTERS

This is where the drama begins. The entire clash between the prophet and the king will take place by means of the king's emissaries.⁵ In the first instance (verses 3-8), Eliyahu will intercept the delegates to Ba'al-Zevuv, sending them back to the king. In the second scene (verses 9-15), Eliyahu will contend with a series of military units dispatched by Achazyahu.

But why does God send Eliyahu to interact with Achazyahu's delegates? Why not approach the king directly? This question seems especially pertinent given the fact that the chapter ends with Eliyahu delivering his condemnation in person to Achazyahu.

One possibility is that Eliyahu cannot enter Shomron for fear of his life. Izevel had issued a death warrant against him, and this could still be in force. Rather than facing the king, Eliyahu is forced to engage with him remotely by means of his delegates.

But our chapter's focus upon the role of messengers leads us to a different conclusion. Eliyahu needs to stop the delegation in its tracks. A religious Israelite state visit to Ekron would be the ultimate *chillul Hashem* (desecration of God's name). If Eliyahu had gone to meet Achazyahu, the messengers would have continued on their way to Ekron. Instead, Eliyahu intercepts Achazyahu's officials and averts the embarrassing appeal to the Philistine god.

WHOSE MESSENGERS?

But Eliyahu does more than that. Let us compare what Eliyahu is instructed to say to the delegates (God's instruction to Eliyahu) with what the delegates actually say in reporting Eliyahu's words to Achazyahu:⁶

³ *I Melakhim* ch.15.

⁴ *I Melakhim* 20:13-14, 22, 28.

⁵ As we shall see, the question of the delegates and who controls them is the critical feature of this story, expressed by the seven-fold usage of the verb *Sh.L.Ch.* (see verse 2, 6 twice, 9, 11, 13, 16).

⁶ Note that a stage is missing here. First (v.3-4), the angel instructs Eliyahu to talk to the messengers. This is followed by "And Eliyahu went" (v.4). But then, immediately (v.5-6) we read of the messengers addressing Achazyahu. Where is the middle segment – Eliyahu talking to the messengers? This is a familiar literary feature in *Tanakh*, as a middle linking stage is omitted. Other examples from *Melakhim* include *I Melakhim* 21:17-20 and *II Melakhim* 4:26. A stage may be omitted merely to speed up the narrative, acknowledging that Eliyahu would have transmitted the communication faithfully.

Eliyahu's instruction

(3) Arise, to go up to meet the messengers of the King of Shomron, and speak to them.

Is there is no God in Israel **that you ("attem" – pl.) go** to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv, god of Ekron?!

(4) Therefore

Thus says the Lord:

You shall not descend ... but you shall surely die.

The messengers' report of Eliyahu's words:

(6) Go, return to the king who sent you, and say to him:

Thus says the Lord:

Is there is no God in Israel **that you ("atta") send** to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv, god of Ekron?!

Therefore

You shall not descend ... you shall surely die.

Eliyahu's instruction consists of two separate statements. The first is a challenge and rebuke to the messengers. It is phrased in the plural (*attem*) and levels an accusation at the officials themselves for complying with the king in appealing to Ba'al-Zevuv. The second statement is a divine pronouncement of punishment – "Thus says the Lord" – worded in the singular and therefore addressed particularly to Achazyahu, proclaiming that he will die.

However, see how the delegates adjust and reorient the message. One might have anticipated that they would merely repeat verse 4, the second statement, and ignore the first. Instead we observe two differences:

1. "Thus says the Lord" is moved to the beginning of both statements.
2. The rebuke, "Is there no God in Israel ..." is now addressed to the king (*atta*) personally, as it now accuses the king of "sending" rather than the accusation to the messengers of "going."

Fascinatingly, the messengers take the accusation leveled at them and turn it, with full divine force, at Achazyahu (*atta*). In other words, they understand that just as the punishment is addressed to Achazyahu personally, so the guilt falls upon the king rather than the messengers. And so, they preface the communication as a whole with the words, "Thus says the Lord."

In effect, these messengers experience a dramatic reversal. They swiftly turn from representing Achazyahu to acting as God's mouthpiece. The loyal envoys who were sent to seek the king's health return and condemn him to death. The emissaries, who were sent out (*lekhu*) in search of Ba'al-Zevuv, return (*lekhu shuvu*)⁷ bearing the message of God.

⁷ Rav Elchanan Samet discusses the twin verbs, "*lekh*" and "*shuv*," and their function. See *Pirkei Eliyahu*, pp. 423-4.

Earlier we contended that Eliyahu was instructed to intercept the delegation in order to prevent the encounter with Ba'al-Zevuv and avert the *chillul Hashem* of a royal Israelite appeal to an idolatrous deity. But the interaction with the officials goes beyond that pragmatic objective. With this act, Eliyahu and God, rather than Achazyahu and the Ba'al, exhibit their control of the king's men. In the past, Eliyahu has posed the challenge that plagued his generation: "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Ba'al is God, follow him" (*I Melakhim* 18:21). In this scene, the struggle between those two options is manifest, and God enforces His supremacy.

THREE MILITARY CAPTAINS

When the delegation returns with the dreadful prophecy and the king identifies the source as none other than Eliyahu, he dispatches "a captain of fifty with his fifty men" – the first of three military units – to seize the prophet. The story becomes a threefold power contest, with Eliyahu "sitting on the top of the hill" (v.9), expressive of his unassailable position.⁸ He is confronted by the military commander who speaks with all the force and authority of the king, ordering Eliyahu, "By order of the king, come down!" (v.9). This is a direct collision between the king and God. On the one side stands Achazyahu's sovereign power invested in the hands of his army captain; on the other, God is represented by His surrogate, Eliyahu – hence Eliyahu's response, "**If I am a man of God**, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and with your fifty men!" (v.10).

Three military units are dispatched to seize Eliyahu. Three army captains address him. A textual comparison between the scenes illustrates the storyline.

1. "He climbed up to him ... and said to him: 'Man of God, by order of the king, come down!'" (v.9).
2. "He said to him: 'Man of God, by order of the king, come down **at once!**'" (v.11).
3. The third captain of fifty climbed and approached and knelt before Eliyahu and implored him saying: "Man of God, please have regard for my life and the lives of these fifty men, your servants! See, fire has fallen from heaven and consumed the first two captains and all their men. But now have respect for my life!" (v.13).

The first captain ascends the mountain and delivers the king's message with full and uncompromising royal authority, as would be expected of a military officer. But he and his men are consumed by fire. The second officer acts more boldly, not even climbing up to Eliyahu. Instead he issues his

⁸ The drama of the chapter is illustrated beautifully by vertical axis and the motifs of "up" and "down" as found in the Hebrew roots *A.L.A.* and *Y.R.D.*, which feature 21 times in the chapter. This is especially evident in this scene, as the army officers must "ascend" or climb up to Eliyahu and command him to "descend." Of course, the key line in the chapter also displays this motif: "You shall not DESCEND (*Y.R.D.*) the bed which you ASCENDED (*A.L.A.*), but you shall surely die."

command from the foot of the hill, insisting that the prophet respond to the king's command "at once!" This dauntless exhibition of power leaves Eliyahu absolutely unfazed, as his response remains exactly the same as with the first officer: "If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you with your fifty men!" The second group is also annihilated instantaneously.

With the approach of the third captain, we witness a capitulation, an absolute surrender of royal power to God's power. The officer abandons his confident and aggressive stride and cautiously, even timidly, approaches the prophet, kneeling before him and pleading for his life and the lives of his subordinates. He even "forgets" to mention his royal commission. It is at this point that God's angel assures Eliyahu that he is safe and allows him to accompany the troops.

This three-stage process illustrates the crumbling of the king's authority. His troops disregard his orders; as they cower before the prophet, the power balance has dramatically shifted. Now Eliyahu is absolutely in control. Eliyahu, who embodies God's power, has demonstrated God's supremacy. This has been acknowledged by the mighty military of Achazyahu.

ACHAZYAHU'S MOTIVES

One wonders as to Achazyahu's motive in seizing Eliyahu. Ralbag assumes that he intended to honor Eliyahu, as fifty soldiers comprise an honor-guard.⁹ Alternatively, Abarbanel indicates that the bedridden king wished to hear the prophecy from Eliyahu in person; hence the order to arrest Eliyahu and bring him to Shomron.¹⁰ But the lack of any attempt to have Eliyahu accompany the troops peaceably, along with the combative and disdainful tone of the captain, would seem to preclude these explanations. An alternative motive would be that the king wished to harm or even to kill Eliyahu. Rav Elchanan Samet adopts this approach, suggesting Achazyahu's motivation in killing Eliyahu:

By causing the prophet bodily harm, they are also harming his prophecy and causing it to be nullified. This explains the attempts on the part of several kings in *Tanakh* to harm or even kill prophets who had uttered prophecies of punishment against them. It is not merely an attempt to silence the opposition, as the modern reader may interpret

⁹ This is the case regarding Adonia (*I Melakhim* 1:5) and Avshalom (*II Shmuel* 15:1). The tone of the captain here makes the option of an honor-guard unlikely. However, we should recall the usage of groups of fifty as regards the prophets of God, both in *I Melakhim* 18:4 and in *II Melakhim* 2:16. The inverse symmetry is striking.

¹⁰ Ralbag and Abarbanel are forced to explain that despite the king's intent to respect or summons the prophet, Eliyahu objected to the domineering tone of the army officers and insisted that he be granted a higher status than the king. This insistence, obviously unthinkable for the king's courtiers, led to the violent confrontation. Alternatively there was some misunderstanding, and despite the king's innocent intent, Eliyahu feared for his life (Abarbanel).

the move. Rather, it is a "metaphysical" intention to nullify the prophet's undesirable message.

It seems that for Achazyahu, lying in his sickbed and surely terrified that the prophecy conveyed to him from Eliyahu will be realized, an assault on Eliyahu represents an act nullifying the validity of his prophecy. He sends his soldiers to harm Eliyahu in order to bring about his own recovery. The opposition to the "man of God" is therefore, in essence, opposition to the "word of God." The battle against the prophet is an attempt to thwart the realization of his prophecy.¹¹

This would certainly give some explanation for Eliyahu's extreme and bloody reaction to the army captain and his fifty men. It also explains the angel's message, after the third officer deferentially approaches Eliyahu: "Go down with him; do not be afraid" (v. 15).

POWER STRUGGLE

And yet, all this having been said, the essence of the story remains the power struggle between God and the king as played out by Eliyahu and Achazyahu's delegates. The real question is who is stronger, and in that respect, Eliyahu dominates Achazyahu's messengers twice. First, this is apparent in his approach to the delegation to Ba'al-Zevuv, as he transforms them into God's mouthpiece. Likewise here, Eliyahu paralyzes Achazyahu's intimidating guards, as he crushes their imperious control by the overwhelming power invested in him by God. They then shift their allegiance from Achazyahu to Eliyahu, thereby unequivocally establishing God's supremacy over both the king and his gods.

After this high drama in which Eliyahu has proven his superiority, why is there a need for Eliyahu to appear before the king? What can it add that the king does not already know? Eliyahu's personal delivery of God's pronouncement to Achazyahu in Shomron completes the structure of the chapter, as the truth of God's word is transmitted in the chapter's third utterance of the prophecy, spoken directly to the king:

Introductory exposition (king's sickness) – v.2
Prophecy (spoken by the angel of God) – v.4
Prophecy (spoken by the messengers) – v.6
Mission of the fifty
Mission of the fifty
Mission of the fifty
Prophecy (spoken by Eliyahu) – v.16
Conclusion (king's death) – v.17

APPENDIX: A HAIRY MAN

¹¹ *Pirkei Eliyahu*, p. 434.

Of course, this chapter compounds our formidable impression of Eliyahu, who receives unlimited divine support and seems to be able to bring down fire from heaven at will.

But one detail in particular deserves our attention. This is the only place in which we receive an intriguing visual description of Eliyahu, namely: "a hairy man wearing a leather belt around his waist" (v.8). Clearly, these physical features were Eliyahu's standard style of dress, because it is with these sparse details that Achazyahu responds, "That is Eliyahu Ha-Tishbi!" (v.8).

Eliyahu is not the only prophet who had distinctive clothing. We are told that Shmuel's mother would make him clothing each year:

His mother would make a little robe (*me'il*) for him and bring it up every year when she made the pilgrimage with her husband. (*I Shmuel* 2:19)

Shmuel's mother dressed him in the robe (*me'il*) when he was a young child. And yet, even posthumously, when the "medium" raises Shmuel from the dead, we read the following account:

The king answered ... "What do you see?"
And the woman said to Sha'ul, "I see a divine being coming up from the earth."
"What does he look like?" he asked her.
"It is an old man coming up," she said, "and he is wrapped in a robe (*me'il*)."
Then Sha'ul knew that it was Shmuel. (*I Shmuel* 28:13-14)

So we see that Shmuel has a trademark "*me'il*" that was his distinctive mode of dress, which he wore from infancy to death, and by which he could be clearly identified! It would seem that Eliyahu also dressed in a unique manner, and his appearance was unusual and immediately identifiable.

LONG HAIR

Some commentaries suggest that Eliyahu did not have long hair; rather the phrase "*ba'al sei'ar*" refers to a type of furry coat worn by prophets. The source for this may be found in *Zekharia* 13:4, where the prophet is described as wearing a hairy coat – an "*aderet sei'ar*." Eliyahu is depicted as having an "*aderet*" repeatedly in *Sefer Melakhim* (*I Melakhim* 19:13 and in *II Melakhim* 2:8, 13, 14).

But others see this as an unkempt appearance: "A hairy man: with wild hair. And a leather belt around his waist: And he cannot appear this way before the king" (Malbim). Could it be that Eliyahu was also a *nazir* (nazirite)? The classic *nazir* withdraws from society to live in a sacred zone. His hair is a distinctive mark that sets him apart from the community, away from the common people. This certainly matches Eliyahu's reclusive persona.

Whatever the explanation, chapter two (2:23) will depict Elisha, Eliyahu's successor, as bald. This stark difference between the "hairy man" and the "bald one" will allow us to ponder the differences between the prophet and his student.