

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

Dedicated in memory of
Joseph Y. Nadler, z”l, Yosef ben Yechezkel Tzvi

Shiur #10 – Elisha's Tears

ELISHA'S VISIT TO DAMASCUS

Elisha came to Damascus. Ben-Haddad King of Aram was sick, and he was told, “The man of God has come here.” The king said to Chaza’el: “Take a gift in your hand and go to meet the man of God, and inquire of the Lord by him, saying, ‘Will I recover from this sickness?’” Chaza’el went to meet him and took a gift in his hand, even every kind of good thing of Damascus, forty camels’ loads. And he came and stood before him and said, “Your son Ben-Haddad King of Aram has sent me to you, saying, ‘Will I recover from this sickness?’” Then Elisha said to him, “Go, say to him, ‘You will surely recover,’ but the Lord has shown me that he will certainly die.” The man of God kept his face expressionless as long as he could, and then he wept.¹ Chaza’el said, “Why does my Lord weep?” Then he answered, “Because I know the evil that you will do to the sons of Yisrael: You will set their strongholds on fire, and you will kill their young men with the sword, and you will dash their little ones in pieces, and you will cut open their pregnant women.” Then Chaza’el said, “But what is your servant, who is but a dog, that he should do this great thing?”² And Elisha answered, “The Lord has shown me a vision of you as king of Aram.” So he departed from Elisha and returned to his master, who said to him, “What did Elisha say to you?” And he answered, “He told me that you would surely recover.” On the following day, he took the cover and dipped it in water and spread it on his face, so that he died. And Chaza’el became king in his place.

¹ This translation follows Rashi, Radak, Ralbag and Metzudat David. Many other translators translate it as “He [Elisha] fixed his gaze steadily on him until he [Chaza’el] was ashamed” Whereas the text supports this reading, the context fits best with the reading of the traditional commentators.

² Chaza’el views these vicious acts as a “great thing,” a reflection of military prowess. His reference to himself as a dog is a reflection of his self-perception as an ordinary commoner (*Daat Mikra*) or possibly a loyal servant of his master, the king (a dog usually follows his master). Thus, he is saying, “How could I, a mere commoner, bring about such incredible devastation?” Elisha replies that he will indeed become king.

This scene concludes the series of Elisha stories.³ But this short episode raises some serious questions. Why does Elisha visit Damascus, a foreign capital? Does the prophet intend to meet with Ben-Haddad, informing the king prior to his arrival? And if so, what is his message to him? Moreover, is Elisha's message directed at Ben-Haddad or at his assistant, Chaza'el, who in our story becomes the king's assassin and successor?

At first glance, this is yet another episode depicting Elisha as the object of Aram's great admiration.⁴ Here, Ben-Haddad indicates his subservience to Elisha by sending Chaza'el to "stand before" the prophet, referring to himself as "your son,"⁵ and offering Elisha a substantial gift. Ben-Haddad's question, "Will I recover from this sickness?" evokes a parallel with chapter one of *Il Melakhim*, in which the evil king Achazyahu becomes ill and sends the identical inquiry to the god Ba'al-Zevuv. In that story, Eliyahu censures Achazyahu, as the royal appeal to a foreign deity constitutes a public *chillul Hashem* (desecration of God's name). Here, ironically, we encounter a foreign idolatrous king who holds Elisha, the "man of God," in such high esteem that in his sickness, he seeks him and his God. If the tale of Achazyahu was an affront to God's honor, this is surely a significant *kiddush Hashem* (sanctification of God's name).

TWO VISIONS

Elisha's dialogue with Chaza'el is fascinating. It would appear that Elisha is experiencing live prophecy while he is speaking to Chaza'el; the visions he beholds are so powerful that he is overwhelmed by emotion and cannot contain his tears.

These vivid visions are expressed twice in the encounter by the phrase, "the Lord has shown me." In the first instance, Elisha says to Chaza'el:

"Go, say to him, 'You will surely recover,'⁶ but the Lord has shown me that he will certainly die." (8:10)

The second time, Elisha states:

"The Lord has shown me a vision of you as king of Aram." (8:13)

In the first communication, Elisha offers two conflicting statements, in a plan that seems duplicitous. He instructs Chaza'el to console the king that he will

³ There are still a few remaining stories: the anointing of Yeihu (9:1-6) and King Yo'ash's visit to Elisha on his deathbed (13:14-19) followed by the resurrection of the dead soldier (13:2-21). However, this is the final episode in the ongoing series of the Elisha stories. We shall relate to these episodes briefly later in this *shiur*.

⁴ Previous episodes would be the story of Na'aman (5:17), and the story of the Aramean army (6:8-23).

⁵ The corollary of "your son, Ben-Haddad" is voiced by the king of Yisrael referring to Elisha as "my father" in 6:21 and 13:14.

⁶ The Hebrew here is awkward as there is a critical *kri* and *ketiv* – a disparity between the written text and the recited text, as dictated by tradition. One way, it reads, "You shall not live" and the other way it reads, "You will surely recover."

live, but he then informs the king's courtier that, in fact, King Ben-Haddad will die. Why does this holy man communicate a lie to Ben-Haddad and then expose the truth to Chaza'el? Why the double message? Malbim suggests a technical solution:

"You will live as regards this illness." However, he will die of another cause, because in fact Chaza'el killed him...

Metzudat David suggests that the positive prognosis to Ben-Haddad, although untrue, was intended "to console him," in an attempt to avoid adding to the stress of a dying man.⁷ It would seem that Radak's explanation is closest to the mark. He suggests that Elisha intended to inspire Chaza'el to assassinate his master:

"You will live from the illness ... but the Lord has shown me that he will be killed." Thus, when Elisha informed Chaza'el that he would be king over Aram and said, "The Lord has shown me that he will certainly die," Chaza'el understood that he wished to inform him that he [Chaza'el] should assassinate him [Ben-Haddad], but he didn't say it explicitly.

By having Chaza'el issue the false reassurance to the king, Ben-Haddad will be misled into a false sense of security and will be off-guard when Chaza'el comes to kill him.⁸

If the Radak is correct, and Elisha is instigating an assassination, we need to probe the prophet's motives.

THE "ANNOINTING" OF CHAZA'EL: ELIYAHU'S THREE TASKS

To appreciate the plot to kill Ben-Haddad, we must return to chapter nineteen of *I Melakhim*. There, at Mount Chorev, God had issued a series of instructions to the prophet Eliyahu:

And the Lord said to him: "Go, return to your way to the desert of Damascus and you shall come and **anoint** Chaza'el to be king over Aram. And you shall **anoint** Yeihu, the son of Nimshi, as king over Yisrael, and you shall **anoint** Elisha, the son of Shafat, from Avel Mechola to be prophet in your stead." (*I Melakhim* 19:15-16)

Eliyahu was to anoint three new leaders:

- Chaza'el as king of Aram
- Yeihu as king of Yisrael, the northern kingdom
- Elisha as prophet in his stead

⁷ This form of sensitivity finds its way into the *Shulchan Arukh Yoreh De'a* (338:1): one must be very careful with the dying not to use startling language that may expedite their death.

⁸ See Yael Shemesh, "Lies by Prophets and Other Lies in the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of the Ancient Near East Society* vol. 29, (2002).

What is the objective of this series of leadership appointments, and are they coordinated as parts of a single project or plan? Let us present some context to this divine command: Eliyahu had just protested to God about the terrible idolatry of the King Ach'av and his wife, Izevel. God responded to Eliyahu's outrage by instructing Eliyahu to anoint a trio of new leaders who would furnish a solution, a synchronized plan to enact violent punishment upon the northern kingdom:

"Those who escape the sword of Chaza'el, Yeihu will kill, and those that escape the sword of Yeihu, Elisha will kill." (*I Melakhim* 19:17)

This prediction is indeed fulfilled. Chaza'el delivers a crushing blow to Yisrael:

In those days the Lord began to reduce Yisrael; and Chaza'el defeated them throughout the territory of Yisrael, east of the Jordan; all the land of Gil'ad – Gad Re'uven and Menashe – from Aro'er by Wadi Arnon up to the Gil'ad and Bashan." (*II Melakhim* 10:32)

The Lord was angry with Yisrael and he delivered them into the hands of King Chaza'el of Aram ... Yeho'achaz was left with a force of only fifty horsemen, ten chariots and ten thousand foot soldiers; for the King of Aram had decimated them and trampled them like the dust under his feet. (*II Melakhim* 13:6-7)

Whereas Chaza'el is the foreign aggressor, avenging the sins of Ach'av by battering Yisrael from the outside, Yeihu is his corollary from within. Yeihu will be the Israelite army captain who instigates a revolution and deposes the House of Omri, killing Ach'av's son, Yehoram, and executing a host of other royal figures including the evil Izevel. These events are depicted in the upcoming chapters of *II Melakhim*.

Yeihu got up and went inside. Then the prophet poured the oil on Yeihu's head and declared, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Yisrael: 'I anoint you king over the Lord's people Yisrael. You will strike down the house of Ach'av your master ... The whole house of Ach'av will perish...'" (*II Melakhim* 9:6-8)

And so, we see that Chaza'el and Yeihu bring the demise of Ach'av's regime. But what of the last of the three, Elisha? Does he violently avenge the idolatry of the House of Omri? Do we witness the "sword of Elisha" executing the followers of idolatry?

If we examine the instructions to Eliyahu, we should note that Eliyahu fails to follow God's instructions. Eliyahu performs only the last of the three tasks assigned to him; he only appoints his own successor, Elisha. What of the other two tasks? He leaves them for Elisha to perform. We asked why Elisha visits Damascus. We now understand that he is there to "anoint" Chaza'el, to appoint him as king. He must complete Eliyahu's unfinished business and unleash Chaza'el's great destructive power against Yisrael. Of course Elisha lacks the legal power to anoint Chaza'el, and so, in this scene,

he instigates a situation whereby Chaza'el assassinates his superior, and usurps the throne. Likewise, in the next chapter, Elisha initiates Yeihu's ascent to the throne, by sending a prophet to anoint him, and ordering him to terminate the House of Omri.

ELISHA'S TEARS

But what is the role of Elisha? We have followed him for some time now. He generally seems to be a non-vindictive figure,⁹ usually providing assistance of one sort or another to individuals, groups or the nation. Does Elisha share the characteristics of the malicious Chaza'el and Yeihu? Even though he initiates the reign of these two leaders, is Elisha filled with malevolent intent?

Let us return to the scene in which he talks to Chaza'el. He envisages a scene in which Chaza'el will ravage Yisrael: "You will set their strongholds on fire, and you will kill their young men with the sword, and you will dash their little ones in pieces, and you will cut open their pregnant women." At this thought, Elisha simply cries.

Rav Elchanan Samet contends that Elisha's weeping affects Chaza'el deeply:

At this critical moment for Chaza'el, as the prophet portends the enormous transformation in his life, a dark cloud looms. He does not receive the tidings of his reign in a spirit of joyous celebration but rather through the bitter tears of the prophet who bears his good news This weeping communicates not merely the prophet's unfathomable pain, but it also a critique of the cruel potential latent in Chaza'el's personality.

Just as Chaza'el will be cognizant, throughout his tenure as king over Aram, that he owes his monarchy to the Israelite prophet, and that it is he who lent legitimacy to his sovereignty, he will also live in the shadow of the prophet's tears. And as the prophet's prediction of his kingship sanctioned his rise to the throne, so the crying that accompanied it will be a moral restraint upon Chaza'el's actions, and a proscription of his more monstrous acts.

Now, when Chaza'el battles his enemy, Yisrael, he will live up to his sovereign responsibility and lead his nation to victory after victory. However, he will not actualize his potential for absolute victory and cruelty. Even though he almost destroys the Israelite army ... we have not heard of Chaza'el attacking women and children in Yisrael, and as such, the dreadful prophecy of Elisha, "you will dash their little ones in pieces, and you will cut open their pregnant women," never transpired. (*Pirkei Elisha*, pg. 597)

⁹ Exceptions are the forty-two children and the bears (2:23-25), his outburst to Yehoram (3:13), the treatment of Geichazi (5:26-27), and the trampling of the king's aide (*shalish*) (7:17-20).

HARD TIMES

If anything, the persona of Elisha seeks to soften the blows of Aram, rather than heighten its effect. Elisha's entire prophetic tenure is characterized by military defeat, invasion and famine. At the start, Elisha participates in a war against Moav that ends shamefully.¹⁰ His period witnesses sporadic border attacks coming from Syria¹¹ which intensify,¹² eventually culminating in a terrible siege that inflicts desperate starvation on the capital city.¹³ Famine is prevalent throughout Elisha's era.¹⁴ These are tough times.

In God's original instruction to Eliyahu, it seemed that Elisha was designated as part of the punishing force, alongside Chaza'el and Yeihu, as an instrument of God's wrath and retribution. In fact, Elisha adopts a very different role. Elisha – during a time of phenomenal difficulty for the Kingdom of Yisrael – serves as something of an antidote, a counterbalance. Elisha's miracles serve individuals, or small groups. In the national arena, he has impressive powers: fiery horses and chariots that surround him, the ability to know the location of enemy attacks, to blind an army, and to predict the end of a siege. However, his powers never extend to defeating the enemy, or to forestalling the siege. Elisha's powers are impressive, but whereas on the one hand he offers benevolent assistance and a sense of hope, he is also powerless to alter the strategic balance of Aram's relentless military assault. The pendulum of punishment cannot alter its course.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Amazingly, Elisha escorts Yisrael through a period that would appear to exceed sixty years.¹⁵ Yisrael spends almost this entire period under Aramean intimidation or domination. And it would seem that Elisha's timespan as prophet is uncannily aligned with the period of Aramean dominance. It is not coincidental that Elisha's final act is to pronounce the fall of Aram and the rise of Yisrael, a geo-political reversal, whereby Aram will be defeated and Yisrael will restore its northern border:

Elisha had fallen sick of the sickness of which he was to die; and King Yo'ash of Yisrael went down unto him, and wept over him, and said: "My father, my father, Yisrael's chariots and horsemen!" Elisha said to him: "Take a bow and arrows"; and he brought him a bow and arrows. And he said to the king of Yisrael: "Put your hand upon the bow"; and he put his hand upon it. And Elisha laid his hands upon the king's

¹⁰ Chapter 3

¹¹ 5:2

¹² 6:6-8

¹³ 6:24-7:20

¹⁴ 8:1, 4:38

¹⁵ Elisha starts his tenure under the reign of Yehoram, and dies during the reign of Yeho'ash. The periods of Yehoram (12), Yeihu (28), Yeho'achaz (17), and Yeho'ash (16) together equal 73 years. If we include his apprenticeship under Eliyahu, which probably began during Ach'av's reign, we are most certainly dealing with sixty years of public service.

hands. And he said: "Open the window eastward"; and he opened it. Then Elisha said: "Shoot"; and he shot. And he said: "An arrow of victory for the Lord! An arrow of victory over Aram! You shall rout Aram at Afek, until you destroy them." (*II Melakhim* 13:14-17)

IN CONCLUSION

As we conclude the series of Elisha stories in *Melakhim Bet*, what might we surmise regarding Elisha's role? Elisha, far from being the instrument of God's anger, is a figure of protection, relief, consolation, support, assistance, and comfort during an extended period of hardship for Yisrael. Throughout the years of occupation and attack, Elisha devotes all of his God-given powers to a central goal: keeping faith in God alive. A prime example of this mission emerges from the scene of the king of Yisrael asking the prophet's assistant, Geichazi, to tell him "the wonderful things that Elisha has done" (8:4). In a generation in which faith might be lost, Elisha is a beacon that communicates God's unfailing presence, even during moments of punishment and suffering. Elisha doesn't defeat the enemy. He doesn't stop the siege. But he befriends the king and commoner alike, allowing them to understand that despite the adversity, God is still the God of Yisrael and has not abandoned His people.