

SEFER MELAKHIM BET: THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS

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Dedicated in memory of

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Shiur #12: Chapters 9-10 – The Yeihu Revolution

Yeihu's revolt is possibly the most dramatic and sensational story of *Melakhim Bet*, a gripping tale of conspiracy and murder, divine justice and religious zeal. With tempestuous force (*shiga'on*), Yeihu kills two royal families: King Yehoram and Izevel the queen mother of Yisrael, as well as King Achazyahu of Yehuda. He then turns to eliminate the pagan cult of Ba'al, which had flourished under royal sanction for an entire generation. His revolt reopens the battle against Ba'al, begun by Eliyahu, but absent in the Elisha stories.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS 9-10

We begin with a brief summary of the storyline. Yeihu, a senior army officer who had served under King Ach'av,^[1] is now stationed at Ramot Gil'ad, on the border between Yisrael and Aram. He is leading his troops in an ongoing war of attrition against the Syrian forces, who are led by King Chaza'el.^[2]

Most unexpectedly, a prophet arrives, sent by Elisha, who picks Yeihu from amongst the senior ranking officers, and asks him if they may talk in a side room. There, the prophet anoints him as king over Yisrael, instructing him to destroy the House of Ach'av and to avenge the lives of all the prophets killed under the auspices of Izevel.

Losing no time, Yeihu rides down to the royal palace in Yizrael. Greeted by both the king of Yisrael (Yehoram) and the king of Yehuda (Achazyahu), Yeihu promptly kills them both. Yehoram, in an expression of recompense for Ach'av's sins, is killed in the field of Navot. Izevel too is killed, and before she can be buried, the wild dogs of Yizrael consume her body.

Next, Yeihu sends word to the officials of Shomron to kill all members of the royal family – all seventy brothers of Yehoram. The city leaders who are exceptionally fearful (10:4) of Yeihu, who has managed to kill the kings of both kingdoms, dutifully comply with his orders. Making their way from Yizrael to Shomron, Yeihu and his followers meet a group of royalty from the kingdom of Yehuda. Yeihu doesn't hesitate, and he executes them as well – forty-two people, in all.

At this point, Yeihu turns his attention to illicit religious worship. He announces a public festive sacrifice to Ba'al, inviting Ba'al devotees to the celebration. However, this is a trap, as Yeihu's men surround the idolaters, and all the illicit worshippers are slaughtered. He then proceeds to obliterate all the monuments and temples dedicated to the Ba'al deity.

ACTING FOR GOD

When we study the figure of Yeihu and his revolt, we should be cognizant that Yeihu is designated and dispatched by God to act as the instrument of retribution against the idolatry of the Northern kingdom. Yeihu's appointment was preordained by God to Eliyahu,^[3] he is anointed by prophetic mandate (*II Melakhim* 9:1-3) and as such, the story itself is underscored with continual references to his divine mission:

“Thus says the Lord, the God of Yisrael: ‘I anoint you king over the Lord's people, over Yisrael. You are to strike down the House of Ach'av your master ... The whole House of Ach'av shall perish. I will cut off from Ach'av every last male – bond and free – in Yisrael. I will make the House of Ach'av like the House of Yerav'am ben Nevat and like the House of Basha ben Achiya. The dogs shall devour Izevel in the field of Yizrael and no one will bury her.’” (9:6-10)

This prophecy of devastation echoes the words with which Eliyahu condemned Ach'av,^[4] announcing the termination of his royal line. Similar language predicts the demise of the royal Houses of Yerav'am^[5] and Basha.^[6] And so, from start to finish, Yeihu acts under divine agency.

At several points in the story, Yeihu takes care to point out that his actions fulfill God's prophecies:

1. When he kills Yehoram in Navot's field:

Yeihu said to Bidkar, his chariot officer, "Pick him up and throw him on the field that belonged to Navot ... Remember how you and I were riding together in chariots behind Ach'av his father **when God made this prophecy** about him ... Now then, pick him up and throw him on that plot, **in accordance with the word of God.**" (9:25-26)

2. When Izevel's body is eaten by the dogs

"It is just **as the Lord spoke** ... "The dogs shall devour the flesh of Izevel in the field of Yizrael." (9:36)

3. After the officers of Shomron kill the seventy brothers of Ach'av, Yeihu commends them:

"Know then that nothing that **the Lord has spoken** concerning the House of Ach'av shall remain unfulfilled ... " (10:1-11)

4. The final summation of the chapter confirms this assessment:

The Lord said to Yeihu, "Because you have acted well and done what is right in My eyes ... to the house of Ach'av, your descendants will sit on the throne of Yisrael to the fourth generation." (10:30)

MADNESS, ZEAL, AND ELIYAHU

Yeihu's confident, rapid, and aggressive style calls for some examination. When the sentry identifies Yeihu's chariot, he knows it is Yeihu because "he drives as a madman" (9:20). Yeihu's "madness" or "ferocity" needs further exploration. Is he

essentially a maverick who is unable to follow rules, an anarchic insubordinate? Or, alternatively, is he the quintessential firebrand, an idealist, a person driven by the rage of truth and responsibility? Perhaps his craziness lies simply in his strength and speed; after all, he is a military officer. The text fails to offer sufficient clarity to fully answer this question, but certainly everything here happens at lightning speed. Two explicit references illustrate the startling pace of the entire episode: the "deranged" running of the prophet (9:10-11) and Yeihu's furious riding (9:20).

But beyond the mere speed of things, the text articulates the manner in which Yeihu views himself as a zealot, avenging the enemies of God. When he meets an associate, Yehonadav ben Reikhav, he addresses him:

"Come along with me and see my zeal for the Lord." (10:16)

Yeihu repeatedly references Eliyahu, a prophet who professes his own status as a zealot, ^[7] a figure who ferociously opposed Ba'al and the idolatrous king who supported it. Yeihu and Eliyahu are kindred spirits, and indeed Yeihu makes frequent reference to Eliyahu:

"It is just as the Lord spoke through His servant Eliyahu Ha-Tishbi." (9:36)

"The Lord has done what he announced through his servant Eliyahu." (10:10)

Arriving in Shomron, he struck down all the survivors of the House of Ach'av until he wiped it out, fulfilling the word the Lord had spoken to Eliyahu. (10:17)

Yeihu's slaughter of the worshippers of the Ba'al is highly reminiscent of Eliyahu's public execution of the Ba'al prophets at Mt. Carmel. They both oppose the

idolatrous House of Ach'av with equal contempt and are uncompromising in their opposition to idolatry even when it is supported in the highest circles.

"FLEE WITHOUT DELAY!" (9:3)

Let us take a moment to examine the opening scene, which triggered the revolt. Its clandestine atmosphere is thick with intrigue and subversion. Why is one of the *benei ha-nevi'im* selected to anoint Yeihu rather than Elisha? After all, Elisha traveled to Damascus to instigate Chaza'el's rise to power; what impedes his active role in this instance? Furthermore, the prophet's instructions to "flee without delay" suggest highly irregular behavior; even Yeihu's colleagues assume he is a madman. What do we make of this unusual conduct? The Abarbanel offers an explanation:

[Elisha] could not travel to Ramot Gilad to anoint Yeihu as the excitement of his arrival would expose the event [of Yeihu's anointing]. He thus performed the act by proxy, giving instructions to one of the *benei ha-nevi'im* who sat before him ... to enact [the anointing] in an inner room so that the king not be informed ... and to ensure that the prophet not be endangered, and he commanded him to flee so that he not remain there.

Treason is dangerous business. One cannot openly spur a loyal army officer to revolt without risking one's life. In a similar situation, when the prophet Shmuel was commanded by God to anoint the young King David, he remarked: "How can I go? If Sha'ul hears of it, he will kill me" (*I Shmuel* 16:2). In our story, the prophet is about to interrupt a meeting of the joint chiefs of staff of the army, a group of men who are, by definition, loyal to the king, and to anoint one of them, commanding him to exact God's vengeance on the reigning monarch. We appreciate Abarbanel's point. Elisha's public profile will not allow him to incite the rebellion. The youthful prophet, who rushes in and exits quickly, may just get away, even if the plan backfires.

The reaction of Yeihu's fellow military officers is quite unpredictable. We should note that the privacy of the anointing affords Yeihu the option of revealing his newfound status or, alternatively, keeping it a secret. Initially (9:11), Yeihu tries to deflect their enquiries. But when they press him for the truth and he reveals the prophet's mission, they immediately stage an ad-hoc coronation, using a staircase to "enthroned" Yeihu on a raised platform. Their spontaneous backing of the mutiny is indicative of their deep dissatisfaction with King Yehoram. We have shown how he failed in his military campaign against Moav (chapter 3) and how he was defeated in his conflict with Aram (8:28-29), although information is sparse as to other areas in which Yehoram's performance was lackluster. The unanimous and instantaneous response of these high ranking officers exposes a deep loss of confidence in the extant leadership.^[8]

A RELUCTANT PROPHET

Elisha's reluctance to personally anoint Yeihu may stem not from fear of the king, but rather from certain reservations regarding the mission itself. Rav Elchanan Samet sees the obstacle in Elisha's personality:

This is the reason that Elisha failed to appoint Yeihu personally as king. The legacy that is placed upon Yeihu is a harsh and cruel one. The command to eliminate the house of Ach'av, when issued from the merciful Elisha, will be insufficiently caustic, less brutal than it must be. Moreover, Elisha, unlike his master Eliyahu, has never confronted the House of Ach'av, and has barely rebuked Yehoram, Ach'av's son... Under these circumstances, it is hard for Elisha to restate Eliyahu's prophecy of the decimation of the House of Ach'av directly to Yehoram without his voice wavering, without tearing up. This mission goes against Elisha's personality.

A SUBVERSIVE SUBTEXT

A different possibility may also be entertained. Prof. Yisrael Rozenon, in a series of articles,^[9] charts what he views as a subtext to the Yeihu narrative. Prof. Rozenon perceives Elisha's reluctance to be involved directly as reflective of Elisha's deep reservations regarding Yeihu and his furious and violent methods. Whereas, on the one hand, Yeihu is clearly the instrument of God's vengeance as we have delineated, the depiction of his revolt is accompanied by a negative subtext, one which may be identified in several details of the story:

EXCESSIVE VIOLENCE: Even if the murder of injured, bedridden King Yehoram is justified, one wonders why Yeihu had to kill the king of Yehuda, Achazyahu. Admittedly, Achazyahu's mother is Atalya, Ach'av's daughter (8:27), but that hardly qualifies him as part of the "House of Ach'av." And even if one might validate his execution, when Yeihu kills forty-two members of the royal family of Yehuda (10:14), it is difficult not to feel that he has more than exceeded the reasonable limits of his prophetic mandate.

The death of Izevel is depicted in gory detail, as she is hurled from an upstairs window: "and her blood spattered on the wall and on the horses, and they trampled her" (9:34). This gratuitous violence is unprecedented in other royal coups in *Tanakh*. In the very next chapter, the kingdom of Yehuda deposes an evil queen, Izevel's daughter Atalia. She too is guilty of idolatry and murder, and yet, her execution is narrated clinically – "she was put to death" (11:16) – without bloody details, relish, or glee.

Other scenes are filled with gore and savagery. The depiction of the arrow piercing Yehoram's heart (9:24) seems unnecessary. The demand that the elders of Samaria send the heads of Ach'av's seventy sons in baskets and the awful image of their heads piled at the gates of Yizrael (10:6-8) has no precedent in *Tanakh* and exceeds the reasonable limits of zealous action. It is difficult to view this order other than a display of barbarism and savage delight in killing. The only other instance of killing seventy sons of a single man is the story of Avimelekh (*Shoftim* 9:5), a tale of tyrannical abuse of power. The leaders of Shomron are terrified of Yeihu: "They were overcome by fear for they thought, 'If two kings could not stand up to him, how can we?'" (10:4). As Yeihu rides his chariot in a

mood of swashbuckling bravado, inviting his colleague to "come along" and boasting that he will "see my zeal for the Lord," (10:16) we sense that this revolutionary is wildly insensitive to the trail of blood that he is leaving in his wake.

"PEACE" AND OTHER WORDS: Twice, as Yeihu charges towards Yizrael, the following exchange ensues:

The horseman went to meet him, and he said: "The king inquires, is all well [*ha-shalom*]? (literally: Is it peace?)"

And Yeihu replied: "What have you to do with peace [*ma lekha u-leshalom*]?"

This conversation – the appeal "*ha-shalom*?" and its rejection by Yeihu – is repeated twice. The third time, it is King Yehoram who greets Yeihu in the name of peace, only to be rebuffed by the man who quickly becomes his assassin. This refrain of the word "*shalom*" is addressed by Prof. Yehuda Kiel:

Yeihu resorts to a strategy of "falsehood"(9:12), "betrayal" (9:23), and "chicanery"(10:19). The word, "*shalom*," which is mentioned ten times in this section, loses its normal meaning, and is totally inverted to mean cold-blooded murder. (*Daat Mikra* pg. 589)

Kiel points to the ironic, even grotesque usage of the word for "peace" alongside other words indicative of deviousness and betrayal. And so, we might claim that beyond the overt story that informs us of Yeihu's prophetic mandate to eliminate the House of Ach'av and the Ba'al worship, there is a covert subtext that indicates that Yeihu took his path of zealotry too far, instigating a frightening and bloody coup.

IN CONCLUSION

This ambivalence may be found in the closing lines of the chapter. On the one hand, the *Tanakh* testifies about him:

The Lord said to Yeihu, "Because you have acted well and done what is right in my eyes ... to the house of Ach'av, your descendants will sit on the throne of Yisrael to the fourth generation." (10:30)

But on the reverse side, Yeihu is not perfect in his service of God:

Yeihu was not careful to follow the Torah of Hashem the God of Yisrael wholeheartedly; he failed to abandon the sins of Yerav'am who lead Yisrael astray. (10:31)

In other words, Yeihu removed the Ba'al, but still retained traces of images and foreign sites of worship. His heart was not "whole" with God, not fully in tune to the sensitivities of God. Of course, this is deeply problematic. If one is determined to purge the kingdom of idolatry with a bloodbath, one better ensure that one's religious integrity is flawless, impeccable. This point is made in the opening lines of the book of Hoshea, which declares vengeance on the royal house of Yeihu:

"I will soon punish the house of Yeihu for the blood of Yizrael, and I will put an end to the kingdom of Yisrael." (1:4)

Why should Yeihu be punished for the "blood of Yizrael?" Rashi explains:

"Because Yeihu and his children also worshipped idolatry, thus I consider the blood of the House of Ach'av to have been spilled in vain."

We leave Yeihu with a complex understanding of this man. On the one hand, he is a zealot for God, and removes the royal dynasty that was most ardently devoted to Baal, in Israel's entire history. For that he is surely praiseworthy. But at the same time, here is a man who failed to adopt for himself the high standards that he demanded from others. His ferocious defeat of the House of Achav rings hollow, and seems unethical in the light of his failure to apply his personal zeal to his own monotheism.

^[1] *II Melakhim* 9:25

^[2] See *II Melakhim* 8:28, 9:1,14.

^[3] *I Melakhim* 19:16

^[4] *I Melakhim* 21:20-24

^[5] *I Melakhim* 14:10-11

^[6] *I Melakhim* 16:3-4, 11

^[7] *I Melakhim* 19:10,14. For a full treatment of the Yeihu-Eliyahu connection, see *Pirkei Elisha* pgs. 628-637.

^[8] *Daat Mikra* pg. 589

^[9] Rozenson, Yisrael, "The Story of Yeihu and the Question of Mixed Messages." *Megadim* 25 (5756) : pp. 111-124. [Hebrew] ; Rozenson. Yisrael, "A Plotter or the "King of God's People"? – Yeihu Compared to David." *Megadim* 32 (5760) : pp. 69-82. [Hebrew]. See also *Daat Mikra* (ibid).