YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Prophets vs. Empires: A Survey of Nevi’im Acharonim**

**Rav Yoel Bin-Nun**

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Dedicated in memory of Rabbi Jack Sable z”l and
Ambassador Yehuda Avner z”l,
by Debbie and David Sable

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Dedicated in memory of my recently departed father,
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**Shiur #01: Early Prophecies (I)**

**From the House of Achav to the House of Yehu – high, low, high**

This *shiur* will explore the course of four generations – two periods of economic prosperity and political and military success, and two periods of acute decline. [[1]](#footnote-1)

1. **First generation – first ascent**

The period of King Achav was a time of prosperity and success. It was also a time of pagan corruption, nurtured by Queen Izevel from Sidon – the “wife of harlotry” who persecuted the prophets who sought to rid the kingdom of her and her influence. Eliyahu the Tishbi raised the banner of revolt, and the showdown at Mount Carmel was almost a decisive victory – but Izevel asserted her power and dominance, and Eliyahu was forced to flee for his life[[2]](#footnote-2) to the wilderness.

1. **Second generation – first descent**

The revolution of Yehu rid Israel of Ba’al, with great bloodshed, following the assassinations of Yehoram, king of Israel, and Achazia, king of Yehuda. Ultimately, however, the politics of the divided kingdoms prevented what could have been. Aram Damesek grew very powerful, and an entire generation suffered the assaults of Chazael and his son. Elisha, along with the “sons of the prophets,” strengthened faith that salvation would come.

1. **Third generation – second ascent**

In the days of Yehoash and his son, Yarovam, the Kingdom of Israel-Shomron regained its prosperity and ascendancy. It even triumphed over Aram Damesek – far beyond what Achav had ever dreamed of.

The period of Uziyahu, king of Yehuda, and Yarovam ben Yoash, king of Israel, was one of material abundance and extraordinary military and political dominion, comparable in many ways to the time of King Shlomo.

* Under the leadership of Yarovam ben Yoash, the Kingdom of Israel controlled all of Aram, from Damesek to Levo Chamat, as promised in the prophecy of Yona ben Amitai, the prophet from the Galilee.[[3]](#footnote-3)
* Under the leadership of Uziyahu ben Amatzia, the Kingdom of Yehuda dominated Edom, up to the Yam Suf, and rebuilt the port in Etzion Gever.
* The two kings and kingdoms worked in close cooperation, unlike previous periods.
* Their success and power brought unprecedented economic wealth, and the kingdoms of Israel and Yehuda became a regional power in every sense.

This was the background to a burning question in the minds of those who followed the prophets and took their words to heart: perhaps this was the final redemption? A return to the time of David and Shlomo? After all, they had witnessed God’s revenge on the wicked nations for all their crimes against Israel, and they had seen God’s salvation of Israel and the fulfillment of the prophetic promises!

It was this idea that the prophets of the generation – Amos and Yeshayahu (Hoshea and Mikha) – sought to counter, calling for *teshuva* and repair. They told the people, in God’s Name, that the final and complete redemption was still far off and that it all depended on *Am Yisrael*. They also warned that the prosperity and abundance were having a corrupting influence and could lead to the nation’s downfall. God would judge the sins of Israel and Yehuda too, and this meant they were in danger.

1. **Fourth generation – second descent**

The harsh reality of the ascent of the Assyrians proved, within just a few years, that the prophets of the generation had spoken the truth. Following a severe earthquake,[[4]](#footnote-4) after Uziyahu’s removal from the throne owing to his *tzara’at*,[[5]](#footnote-5) and a short time after the death of Yarovam ben Yoash and the assassination of his son Zekharia,[[6]](#footnote-6) everything fell apart.

The prophecies of truth were seared into the nation’s psyche for all future generations.

It is interesting and important to note that the most prominent elements of Divine prophecy during both periods of ascent were moral and spiritual rebuke, and powerful, outspoken struggle. Eliyahu and Amos both demonstrate these features, despite their decidedly differing styles, origins, and ways of operating.[[7]](#footnote-7) In contrast, during the periods of descent, we find prophecies of consolation and encouragement – both as voiced by Elisha[[8]](#footnote-8) and at the end of *Hoshea* and in *Yeshayahu*. Here, too, while the general idea is the same, the style and manner of operating are very different. Therefore, the reason for this phenomenon should be understood as the change on the historical horizon.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**“Like the dust in threshing”[[10]](#footnote-10)**

**The profound military deterioration in the days of Yehu and Yehoachaz**

As Yehu pursued his revolution, Chazael came to power in Damesek. Chazael eradicated the royal house that had preceded him, as foretold in the prophecy to Eliyahu at Mount Chorev, especially with regard to the Israelite tribes on the eastern side of the Jordan[[11]](#footnote-11):

In those days, the Lord began to cut Israel short, and Chazael struck them in all the borders of Israel: from the Jordan eastward, all the land of Gil’ad, the [children of] Gad and of Reuven and of Menashe, from Aro’er, which is by the valley of Arnon, and Gil’ad and Bashan. (*Melakhim* II 10:32-33)

Chazael led his army through Israel, placed a siege, and captured Gat – the most important Philistine city[[12]](#footnote-12) at the time – and threatened Jerusalem.[[13]](#footnote-13) Chazael and his son celebrated the victory of Damesek with great crimes against the separated, weakened kingdoms of Israel and Yehuda, each of which had undergone a shocking, bloody revolution and neither of which had yet recovered.

Elisha had anointed Chazael at God’s command, prophesizing with great weeping:

And Chazael said, “Why does my lord weep?” And he said, “For I know that you will do evil to Bnei Yisrael: you will set their strongholds on fire, and will slay their young men with the sword, and will dash their little ones in pieces, and rip up their women with child.” (*Melakhim* II 8:12)

Attention must be paid here to the chronological placement of some of the stories of Elisha, within *Sefer Melakhim*.

The stories of Elisha are largely grouped together as a single unit, following on the stories of Eliyahu. We therefore tend to read these stories – Chapters 4-8 in *Melakhim* II – as a continuation of Chapters 1-3. Thus, when we encounter “the king of Israel” in Chapters 4-8, we think of Yehoram ben Achav, who is mentioned in Chapter 3, and our impression is that that all the stories take place within his relatively brief, 12-year reign.[[14]](#footnote-14) In contrast, the text seems to have nothing to say about Elisha throughout the entire period of the reigns of Yehu and Yehoachaz, his son, lasting more than 40 years. Only at the beginning of the reign of Yehoash, son of Yehoachaz, do we meet him again, just before his death, when he places a bow and arrows in the hand of King Yoash, foretelling the great victories of Aram that will occur in his time and afterwards, during the days of Yarovam ben Yoash.[[15]](#footnote-15)

However, this historical picture seems highly unlikely. If the siege on Shomron[[16]](#footnote-16) had taken place in the time of Yehoram ben Achav, this would have meant yet another severe military humiliation after Achav’s defeat at Ramot Gil’ad,[[17]](#footnote-17) and an extraordinary military recovery (of which there is no mention anywhere in the text), all within the space of twelve years – a recovery that brought the Israelite army back to the border with Aram, at exactly the same Ramot Gil’ad, where (after such surprising achievements, of which no mention is made during the reign of Yehoram ben Achav) King Yehoram is wounded in the battle against Aram and goes to Yizre’el to recover, leaving as commander in his stead Yehu ben Yehoshafat ben Nimshi, who is then anointed as king of Israel by a “lad prophet” from Elisha’s cohort of “sons of the prophets.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

This double turnaround seems altogether unlikely.

The more probable scenario is that the military front against Aram remained at Ramot Gil’ad throughout the reign of Yehoram, and Yehoram ben Achav was wounded in that same war against Aram, and in the same area, in which Achav, his father, fell. The weakening of the army, that had been so powerful in the time of Achav, was gradual and is illustrated by the rebellion of Mesha, king of Moav, and the ultimate lack of success of the campaign against him.[[19]](#footnote-19)

As this war dragged on, Izevel gradually gained complete control over the administration of the kingdom from within. The bitterness and hostility towards her tyrannical and foreign regime grew in tandem with the ongoing military and moral deterioration. Thus, conditions were ripe for the revolution spearheaded by Yehu, who had commanded the forces at Ramot Gil’ad and was acutely aware of a long list of incidents that had occurred from the time of Achav until the end of Yehoram’s reign. He was also well familiar with the world of the prophets (Eliyahu and Elisha and their disciples) and had heard clearly the message of their prophecies.[[20]](#footnote-20) He had witnessed Achav’s fall in battle, and the wounding of his son, Yehoram, in the prolonged conflict with Aram, and he knew all about the weakening of the army and the danger of its collapse. He was therefore uniquely suited to lead the revolution that the prophets and their disciples had hoped for over endless years of terrible suffering and cruel persecution on the part of Izevel and her court.

The above analysis leads us to conclude that the “king of Israel” mentioned in the stories of Elisha that appear in *Melakhim* II Chapters 4-8, is not Yehoram ben Achav, but rather Yehu, and later his son, Yehoachaz. However, the story of their kingship, with the anointment and the revolution, has not yet appeared in the text; therefore, their names do not appear yet either. It would further seem that the battles against Aram took place in Eretz Yisrael in the days of Yehu and Yehoachaz: the battalions of Aram set up ambushes in different places, and the prophet Elisha warned the “king of Israel” concerning them[[21]](#footnote-21); the battalions of Moav did as they pleased,[[22]](#footnote-22) and even the siege of Shomron occurred during the time of Yehoachaz, as recorded in the text’s brief note that “Chazael, king of Aram, oppressed Israel all the days of Yehoachaz” (*Melakhim* II 13:22).

The price of Yehu’s revolution, in terms of defense and administration, was steep. The Kingdom of Israel was greatly weakened and could not stand up to the army of Aram, led by Chazael and his son. According to Assyrian sources, Yehu was forced to prostrate himself and pay tribute to the king of Assyria. The opportunity for the reestablishment of a unified kingdom for *Am Yisrael* in its land was lost,[[23]](#footnote-23) and both kingdoms remained helpless in the face of hostile neighbors on all sides following their internal revolutions.

There were doubtless many people who longed for the glorious days of Achav, despite the persecution of the prophets by Izevel, and who perhaps even openly accused the prophets and their disciples of instigating a bloody revolution that had not only failed to bring the desired result, but had led directly to military, political, and economic disaster. To the reader who has followed the events from the prophetic perspective, it is clear that the blame lies squarely with Achav and Izevel on account of their regime of oppression; however, it seems that not everyone agreed at the time. Even today, there are those who criticize the prophets for acting against Izevel and leading to the revolution.

**The “low” – a study of *Sefer Melakhim***

In addition to the logic of the historical flow, the above analysis has several textual supports:

1. As mentioned, during the time of Yehoram ben Achav, there is no mention of a shattering military defeat followed by a recovery and a series of victories leading the Israelite army back to Ramot Gil’ad. In the time of Yehu and Yeohachaz, on the other hand, there are clear references in the text[[24]](#footnote-24) (as well as in external sources[[25]](#footnote-25)) to the military and political decline and to the recovery and great victories only a generation later – meaning more than 40 wretched years of decay, followed by more than 50 years of growth and glory that surpassed by far the achievements of Achav.
2. Elisha’s attitude towards Yehoram ben Achav is clearly demonstrated in the prophet’s angry outburst in view of the army’s desperate thirst in the military campaign against Moav: “And Elisha said to the king of Israel, ‘What have I to do with you? Go off to the prophets of your father and to the prophets of your mother!’” (*Melakhim* II 3:13). Or, echoing the style of Eliyahu: “… As the Lord of hosts lives, before Whom I stand, surely, were it not that I regard the presence of Yehoshafat, king of Yehuda, I would not look at you, nor see you.” (ibid. 14)

In contrast, the relations between the prophet and the “king of Israel” are characterized by affection, respect, and admiration, to the extent that the king calls the prophet “my father.” [[26]](#footnote-26)

From all of the above it would seem that in the stories of Elisha, the expression “king of Israel” refers to Yehu, whom Elisha had anointed, and to Yehoachaz, his son, rather than to Yehoram ben Achav. The stories of Elisha cover a lengthy period – more than 40 years, until the ascent of Yehoash, grandson of Yehu, to the throne in Shomron.

Yehoash visits Elisha before his death and weeps over the prophet’s imminent death using the same language that Elisha had used in reference to Eliyahu: “My father, my father; the chariot of Israel and its horsemen”[[27]](#footnote-27) and also echoing the “king of Israel” who had consulted with him regarding whether to slay the Aramean forces that Elisha had led into captivity in Shomron: “Shall I slay them? Shall I slay them, my father?” (ibid. 6:21).

Clearly, Elisha was a fortress of security for the kings of the House of Yehu during the dark days of the Israelite kingdom, following Yehu’s revolution. He performed both open and hidden miracles for them, and they relied on him in every way.

The historical view offered above presents two difficulties. One is the order of the text, since Yehu’s revolt is recorded in *Sefer Melakhim* only after the above-mentioned chapters about the “king of Israel.” The second problem is the description of the relations between the king and the prophet at the lowest, most despairing point in the siege of Shomron, and especially in Elisha’s reference to the king as “son of a murderer.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

The first difficulty is easy to resolve:

The series of stories about Elisha were recorded as an official royal document in the case involving the woman, at the gate of Shomron, and thus they were preserved at this point in *Sefer Melakhim* in accordance with the well-known maxim that “there is no chronological order in the Torah.” However, since the story of Yehu’s revolt appears only afterwards, the names of the kings of Israel are omitted in these chapters, and they are referred to only as “king of Israel.” Thus, a superficial reading creates the impression that the reference is still to Yehoram, son of Achav, who is mentioned in Chapter 3. Only a more in-depth and careful reading reveals that the text is in fact referring to Yehu and his son Yehoachaz.

The second difficulty is more of a problem, but its resolution sheds new light on the prophecy of Hoshea, and on prophecy in general. At the height of the famine, during the Aramean siege on Shomron, the “king of Israel” passes over the wall and hears a woman berating her neighbor for having joined her in eating [the corpse of] her son, and then hiding [the corpse] of her own son the next day, thereby withholding their next meal. The king tears his garments, revealing the sackcloth that he is wearing over his body, and he swears to have “Elisha ben Shafat” beheaded that same day. Elisha, who is sitting in his home with the elders, tells them: “…Do you see how this son of a murderer has sent to behead me?” (Ibid. 6:32). These words recall the relations between the prophets and the House of Achav and Izevel, who murdered prophets.

Deeper consideration of the situation reveals that the threat to have the prophet beheaded was an expression of terrible despair, when the Divine curse of destruction had reached its climax with women consuming the flesh of their own children. For these kings, Elisha was a pillar and refuge against all-out destruction; he was the hope of the generation. Both Elisha’s cry, “My father, my father; the chariot of Israel and its horsemen”[[29]](#footnote-29) as Eliyahu is swept up to heaven, and the cry of King Yehoash, son of Yehoachaz, son of Yehu, as Elisha is about to die, using the exact same words,[[30]](#footnote-30) express the same feeling: *What will we do without you? Who will fight for us against all our merciless enemies?* The prophet’s final response likewise attests to his role: he promises Yehoash a string of victories, symbolized by handing over the bow and arrows; he appointed the king to continue the function of the prophet after the latter’s death, and to bring great salvation to Israel.

The desperate vow of the king of Israel to have the prophet beheaded that same day may therefore be understood as follows: “Elisha the prophet was our security that Shomron would not be destroyed, and that we would eventually recover from our abysmal decline. But now that the people are reduced to consuming the flesh of their own children, as in the warning of the Torah’s rebuke – have Elisha’s prophecies then proved false?!”

In response, Elisha foretells the salvation of Shomron, promising that the marketplace will be full of cheap produce, the very next day. Only the kings of the House of Yehu could regard the prophet as such a source of hope and confidence; “the chariot of Israel and its horsemen.”

But who, then, is the “son of the murderer”?

The “son of the murderer” is Yehoachaz, son of Yehu, for Yehu had murdered the entire House of Achav in Yizre’el and in Shomron, as well as many from the House of David, in the days of the revolution. If he would have the prophet beheaded, he would reveal himself to be just a serial killer, instead of the hope of Israel.

This is unquestionably a dramatic revelation: Elisha, the prophet, calls Yehoachaz ben Yehu “son of a murderer” in a moment of anger, despair, and fright – both for the king and for the prophet. In saying this, Elisha – who had dispatched the lad prophet to anoint Yehu, who had killed so many people in Yizre’el and Shomron during his revolution – is revealing that in a moment of hopelessness, Yehu’s son is capable even of killing the prophet who had had his father anointed. From here, it is only a short distance to the prophecy of Hoshea:

Call his name Yizre’el, for yet a little while and I will visit the blood of Yizre’el upon the house of Yehu, and will cause the Kingdom of the House of Israel to cease. (*Hoshea* 1:4)

But the distance remains: the “king of Israel” (Yehoachaz, the “son of the murderer”) makes no attempt to carry out his threat to behead the prophet. When the king actually reaches the prophet, we hear a very different message:

… And [the king] said, “Behold, this evil is from the Lord. Why should I wait for the Lord any longer?” (Ibid. 6:33)

Here, the prophetic account meets the accounts of the kings in *Sefer Melakhim*. In the section dealing with Yehoachaz ben Yehu, we read:

And Yehoachaz besought the Lord, and the Lord listened to him, for He saw the oppression of Israel, how the king of Aram oppressed them. (Ibid. 13:4)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. This graphic illustrates the ascents and descents of Yehuda and Israel during the First Temple Period.

 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Melakhim* I 19:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Melakhim* II 14:25. “Gat ha-Chefer” in the portion of Zevulun (*Yehoshua* 19:13), identified as Mashhad, between Natzrat and Tzippori. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In the time of Uziyahu, as described in *Zekharia* 14:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Melakhim* II 15:5; *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 26:16-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Melakhim* II 15:8-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Eliyahu was a prophet of action, while Amos was a prophet of words, with a unique style. However, in neither case do we find words of consolation; there are no expressions of compassion and love. Eliyahu revived the son of the woman who had given him refuge, and fought zealously against Izevel and her cronies. Amos uttered prophecies of destruction against the Kingdom of Israel that were even fiercer than Eliyahu’s efforts, and the redemption he describes will come only in the future. What is common to them stands out against the background of the two periods of prosperity and success. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Elisha encourages the “sons of the prophets,” and the kingdom as a whole, over the course of an entire generation. Hoshea is full of expressions of love and compassion – even in his prophecies of rebuke, and all the more so in his prophecies of consolation (Chapters 2, 11, 14). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In times of decline there is more room for consolation, since the circumstances themselves strike fear into people’s hearts. In times of prosperity and abundance, the circumstances lead to apathy, and so warnings of impending crisis need to be sounded loudly and firmly. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Melakhim* II 13:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Eliyahu received God’s word but did not carry it out (*Melakhim* I 19:15-17). Elisha went to Damesek and carried out God’s word, with weeping (*Melakhim* II 8:7-15). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Recent excavations in Tel Tzafit (the Philistine city of Gat) have revealed the size of the city and the enormous moat dug by Chazael as part of the siege warfare that led to the city’s submission; see Aharon Meir, *Kadmoniot* 133 (2007), pp. 15-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Melakhim* II 12:18-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. 3:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. 13:14-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. Chapters 6-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. And no such military humiliation is described anywhere in *Sefer Melakhim*. It also does not sit well with the story of the military campaign against Moav, ibid. Chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid. 9:1-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid. Chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid. 9:25 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. 6:8-12 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid. 13:20-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Yehu killed Achaziyahu, king of Yehuda, but made no attempt to reunify the two kingdoms, and Atalia’s hegemony in Jerusalem eradicated the House of David almost entirely – Ibid. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid. 10:32, 12:18, 13:3, 13: 7 – and the turnaround – 13:15-19, 13:22-25, 14:23-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See above, n. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. In the episode of Na’aman’s *tzara’at* (ibid. 5:8); in the warnings concerning the ambushes of Aram, the strong bond between prophet and king in Israel was known even in Damesek (ibid. 6:8-12); when Elisha takes the Aramean host captive, the “king of Israel” calls the prophet “my father” (ibid. 6:21-23); in the case concerning the inheritance and the land of the woman from Shunam, stories are told of “the great things which Elisha had done” (ibid. 8:4-6). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid. 13:14; cf. 2:12 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid. 6:32. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid. 2:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid. 13:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)