

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

SEFER MELAKHIM BET: THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS
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Dedicated in memory of Gertrude Spiegel a"h
by Patti and Michael Steinmetz and Family.

Shiur #29: Chapters 24-25
The End

Sefer Melakhim has little to say about the life of the last king of Yehuda, Tzidkiyahu. Yes, he was Yoshiyahu's third son¹ and his original name was Matanya (24:17). He was crowned and renamed under the auspices of the king of Babylon, to whom he swore a pledge as a vassal.² However, *Melakhim* furnishes no specific happening or event that occurred during the first nine years of his eleven year rule, curtly describing him in generic terms: "...He did what was evil in God's sight, according to all that Yehoyakim had done" (24:19). For *Melakhim*, it is as if his reign was almost inconsequential.

But then we read the next verse: "Indeed, Jerusalem and Judah were a cause of anger to God, so that he cast them out from His presence" (24:20). This is a theological assertion, stated simply and clearly: The die has already been cast against Judah and Jerusalem, the nation has infuriated God, and, as such, He will now distance them – "cast them out from his presence." In this regard, Tzidkiyahu's story is quite irrelevant. God's patience has reached its end and the *Churban* just happens to transpire on his watch. In this context, the king's name, which translates as "the righteousness of God" strikes us with no little irony, reflecting so evocatively the vindication of God expressed in the lines of *Eikha*: "God is righteous; for I have disobeyed Him" (1:18).

When specific events are recorded of Tzidkiyahu's life, it will be merely to explicate the fall of the kingdom. Two milestones alone are worthy of mention by *Melakhim*: The first, Tzidkiyahu's political reversal as he renounces his loyalty to Babylon, and the second, Tzidkiyahu's cowardly flight from Jerusalem and his capture by the Babylonians.

TO REBEL OR NOT TO REBEL?

¹ See *Divrei Ha-yamim* I 3:15.

² See *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 36:13.

In contrast to the scant treatment of Tzidkiyahu's reign in *Melakhim*, other biblical books recount the turbulent events of this fateful period in detail. The most difficult political dilemma with which the king had to contend was the aspiration to renounce Babylonian hegemony.

One opportunity arose in Tzidkiyahu's fourth year. During the early years of Tzidkiyahu's reign, Nevukhadnetzar had absented himself from the region, attending to other pressing campaigns in his far-flung kingdom. It was the Akkadian rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar in 595/4 that aroused regional hopes of overthrowing Babylonian control. Jerusalem was the center of a southern conspiracy in which the kings of Edom, Moav, Ammon, Tzor and Tzidon convened in Jerusalem in Tzidkiyahu's fourth year.³ The kings were boosted by prophets who predicted the success of the rebellion and the return of the Temple vessels to Jerusalem.⁴ One such prophet, Chananya ben Azzur, even promised the imminent restoration of Yehoyakhin, the exiled king, to Jerusalem.⁵ Hopes of independence were high.

The opposition to these aspirations was the dour prophet Yirmiyahu, a sober counterweight to the heady optimism of the seditious group. He consistently argues in favor of submission to Babylon and denounces the aforementioned prophets as fakes:

Do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your dreamers, your fortune tellers, or your sorcerers, who are saying to you, "You shall not serve the king of Babylon," for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you ... Any nation that will bring its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him, I will leave on its own land, to work it and dwell there, declares God. Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him and his people and live... Otherwise this city shall become a ruin. (*Yirmiyahu* 27:9-12,17)

Yirmiyahu's consistent message is that the kingdom must submit to Babylonian rule. He even walks around Jerusalem wearing a wooden yoke in order to theatrically demonstrate his message.⁶ Yirmiyahu must contend with the violence and derision of the rival prophets, but he refuses to alter or revoke his morbid prediction. He knows that God has decreed the ascendancy of Babylon. Even as the siege engines stand outside Jerusalem, he insists that the people can save their lives if they surrender.⁷ But no one would listen. Instead, Yirmiyahu is perceived as a threat, weakening the national morale, or worse, siding with the enemy during a siege. He is thrown into jail.

And yet, it was certainly difficult for a king to remain passively under foreign domination, and the temptations of rebellion were too attractive. As

³ Although *Yirmiyahu* 27:1 refers to the first year of Yehoyakim's reign, Tzidkiyahu is explicitly mentioned in verses 3 and 12, and *Yirmiyahu* 28:1 suggests that we are referring to Tzidkiyahu's fourth year.

⁴ See *Yirmiyahu* 27:9,15-16; 28:3-4.

⁵ See *Yirmiyahu* 28:1-3.

⁶ See *Yirmiyahu* 27:2.

⁷ See *Yirmiyahu* 21:8-9; 27:12,17; 38:2,17.

Yirmiyahu had warned, disloyalty to a superpower was a hazardous enterprise, and by doing so, Tzidkiyahu risked everything. The revolt against Babylon never materialized in the fourth year⁸; it was only in Tzidkiyahu's ninth year that the kingdom eventually rejected Babylonian rule.⁹ The Babylonian army arrived without delay to snuff out the revolution. The city was besieged on the tenth of Tevet and was penetrated a year and seven months later on the ninth of Tammuz. The true horrors of the protracted siege are depicted in *Eikha*:

The tongue of the nursing infant sticks to the roof of its mouth for thirst; the children beg for food, but no one gives to them. Those who once feasted on delicacies perish in the streets; ...their skin has shriveled on their bones; it has become as dry as wood.... The hands of compassionate women have boiled their own children; they became their food during the destruction of the daughter of my people. (4:3-10)

From the book of *Yirmiyahu*, King Tzidkiyahu emerges as a weak leader, a spineless and fickle character. On the one hand, he seeks Yirmiyahu's advice and assistance,¹⁰ and then, when intimidated by his own officials,¹¹ he submits to their demands that Yirmiyahu be imprisoned as a traitor.¹² When conditions get dire, Tzidkiyahu tries to escape Jerusalem, saving his own life but abandoning his nation still entrapped within. The Babylonians apprehend him, kill his sons before his eyes, and then blind him so that the death of his children would be his final image. He is deported to Babylon and dies there.¹³

THE BURNING OF THE TEMPLE

If *Melakhim* focuses upon neither Tzidkiyahu and his dilemmas nor the tribulations of Yirmiyahu, upon what does it focus? In essence, chapter 25 lists a terrible but detailed inventory of destruction and exile.

The destruction of the Temple itself is narrated in just a few short phrases. Nevukhadnetzar is not present; instead it is his henchman Nevuzaraddan, known as "*rav ha-tabbachim*," who enacts the terrible deed. "*Rav Ha-tabbachim*" may be his official government title, literally meaning "the chief cook,"¹⁴ but in Hebrew, the root T-B-Ch can be translated as either

⁸ We don't know quite how the revolt crumbled, but Yirmiyahu records how, in his fourth year, Tzidkiyahu was summoned to appear before Nevukhadetzar (*Yirmiyahu* 29:3, 51:59) indicating that the emperor got wind of the fledgling rebellion and demanded a gesture of fealty from his subordinates.

⁹ The political backdrop is unexplained by the *Tanakh*; some speculate that it was associated with the ascent of a new Pharaoh and the hopes that Egypt could back Yehuda in resisting Nevukhadnetzar. However, in the critical moments, Egypt failed to deliver effective military firepower. See *Yirmiyahu* 37:7.

¹⁰ See *Yirmiyahu* 21:1-2; 37:3,17; 38:10-27.

¹¹ See *Yirmiyahu* 38:19.

¹² See *Yirmiyahu* 38:3-5.

¹³ See *Yirmiyahu* 52:11 and *Yechezkel* 12:13.

¹⁴ This reminds us of Potifar, who held the same title (*Bereishit* 37:36). Also see *Daniel* 2:14. These titles may have originated with simple culinary positions, but in time they became the

“cook” or “slaughter.” As such, Nevuzaraddan has been seared into the Jewish memory as the “chief executioner.”¹⁵

Melakhim records the arrival of Nevuzaraddan on the seventh of Av and the subsequent burning of the Temple (25:7). A cross reference to *Yirmiyahu* (52:12) dates the *Churban* to the tenth of the month. The Talmud offers a resolution which explains our commemoration of the destruction of the Temple on the ninth of Av:

...Entrance to the Temple was gained by the enemy on the seventh, and they ate and did damage therein on the seventh, on the eighth and on the ninth. Toward the evening of the ninth, they set it on fire, and it continued to burn all day on the tenth... And this bears out the statement of R. Yochanan, who said as follows: “Were I living in those days, I would have ordained the fast for the tenth of Av, for on that day the greater part of the temple was burned.” The sages of that day, however, maintained that the day when the calamity began should be observed as a fast day. (*Ta’anit* 29a)

THE CHURBAN INVENTORY

From this point onwards, chapter 25 engages in a slow, meticulous listing of the destruction and exile, as it haltingly rolls out the different facets of the national tragedy. It begins with the burning – in descending order – of, first, the Temple, then “the king's palace, all the residences of Jerusalem and every large house” (9). It continues next with the razing of the city walls (10). Then, Nevuzaraddan begins deporting the residents, the “people” and the “masses,” exiling even those who had surrendered to the Babylonians, leaving only a pitiful group – “the lowly of the land” – who would maintain the agriculture (11-12).

Melakhim then turns its attention to a painstaking catalogue of the plundered temple vessels¹⁶: First, the large bronze furnishings (13), then the smaller bronze items (14) followed by a list of sacred gold and silver receptacles, as well as firepans that were used in the Temple ritual. The account lingers on the two huge decorative pillars that adorned the entrance to the inner sanctum of the *Mikdash*, lavishly detailing their fine latticework and adornments. At times, this passage feels like a eulogy, the lists and detailed language seeking to capture a hint of the lost beauty and grandeur of the Temple, now being carted as booty to Babylon.

The exile inventory ends with a group of city notables – the high priest, his deputy, other guards and royal officials, including the minister of defense and sixty of the *Am Ha-aretz* – who are deported to Nevukhadnetzar's

titles of central government appointments, totally disconnected from any culinary context, preserving the title in name only (*Da’at Mikra* and *Olam Ha-Tanakh*).

¹⁵ This is the translation of the *Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan)*. His Babylonian name, meaning “The god (Nebbo) will give seed” also rings with bitter irony.

¹⁶ *Yirmiyahu* pays special attention to the exiled vessels; see for example *Yirmiyahu* 27:19-22. These also become a focal point of the Return; see *Ezra* 1:7, 6:5.

administrative center in Rivla, Syria, and publically executed. This segment ends with the epitaph: "Yehuda was exiled from its land" (21).¹⁷

THE ASSASSINATION OF GEDALYA¹⁸

The kingdom has experienced punishing humiliation, death and destruction, and yet, if we imagined that the situation had reached rock bottom, we would be mistaken. One further event will deal a final knockout; the assassination of Gedalya, described in verses 22-26.

Over the people who remained in the land of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had left, he appointed Gedalia the son of Ahikam, son of Shaphan, as governor. When all the captains and their men heard that the king of Babylon had appointed Gedalia governor, they came with their men to Gedalia at Mitzpa, ... Gedalia swore to them and their men, saying, "Do not be afraid because of the Chaldean officials. Live in the land and serve the king of Babylon, and it shall be well with you." But in the seventh month, Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, son of Elishama, of the royal family, came with ten men and struck down Gedalia and put him to death along with the Jews and the Chaldeans who were with him at Mizpa. Then all the people, both small and great, and the captains of the forces arose and went to Egypt, for they were afraid of the Chaldeans. (25:22-24)

Gedalya was appointed by the Babylonians as governor of Yehuda. He was an ideal candidate for the job; his father Achikam had served Yehoyakim,¹⁹ and his grandfather Shafan had served Yoshiyahu.²⁰ – His pedigree gained him the trust of many Jews. On the other hand, he supports cooperation with the Babylonian government: "... serve the king of Babylon, and it shall be well with you." One imagines that some Jews accepted Gedalya's collaboration with the Babylonians, but for others it was deeply offensive.

Gedalya's appointment presented a return to stability for the war-torn country. In response, Jews who had fled the country during the war now returned, repopulating their villages and farms:

When all the Judeans who were in Moav and among the Ammonites and in Edom and in other lands heard that the king of Babylon had left a remnant in Judah and had appointed Gedalya the son of Achikam, son of Shafan, as governor over them, then all the Judeans returned from all the places to which they had been driven and came to the land of Judah, to Gedalya at Mitzpa. And they gathered wine and summer fruits in great abundance. (*Yirmiyahu* 40:11-13)

¹⁷ This is a direct parallel to the language of the exile of Shomron; see *Melakhim* II 17:23.

¹⁸ The story is told in far greater detail in *Yirmiyahu* 40-43. For a timely reading of this story, see Uriel Simon's "The Murder of Gedalia: An Anatomy of Self Destruction" in U. Simon, *Seek Peace and Pursue it, Topical Issues in the Light of the Bible*, pp. 218-226 [Hebrew].

¹⁹ See *Melakhim* II 22:12, 14 and *Yirmiyahu* 26:24.

²⁰ See *Melakhim* II 22:3.

After Gedalya's appointment, there was a genuine possibility that, despite their loss of self-government, and notwithstanding the tragedy of the destruction of the Temple, Jewish life could continue in the Land of Israel, and Jews could have set their efforts to rebuilding their lives and their national infrastructure.

But this was not to be. People like Gedalya's assassin, Yishmael ben Netanya "from the royal family," loathed Gedalya's cooperation with the Babylonians and perceived it as an act of treachery, collaboration with the enemy: "They killed [Gedalya] because the King of Babylon had put him in charge of the land" (*Yirmiyahu* 41:2). They were so ardently opposed to any mode of compromise with the Babylonian forces that they justified an act of murder.

The people panicked. They knew what the assassination of the Babylonian governor meant for them. They understood that soon, Babylonian troops would sweep through the country on reprisal raids to teach the civilian population a lesson of loyalty. And they decided not to wait around. The leaders of the community, along with the peasantry, decided to migrate to Egypt to escape the Babylonian retaliation.

And so, in the final analysis, these unscrupulous monarchists, who cruelly murdered in the name of their idealistic opposition to any cooperation or accommodation with the governing Babylonians, directly caused the flight en masse of the remaining Jewish population in Yehuda. As such, Gedalya's demise signaled the absolute death knell for the continuity of a Jewish presence in Yehuda. Those whom the Babylonians had failed to exile were now frightened away by the violence and political meddling of their own people.

When we fast on *Tzom Gedalya*, we are certainly mourning a terrible moment of Jewish infighting, but, more significantly, we are marking the self-inflicted act by which the land of Yehuda became empty of Jews for the first time in seven hundred years.

REPRIEVE

In the thirty-seventh year of the exile of Yehoyakhin, king of Judah, in the twelfth month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, Evil Merodakh king of Babylon, in the year that he began to reign, graciously freed [lit. raised the head of] Yehoyakhin king of Judah from prison. And he spoke kindly to him and gave him a seat above the seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon. So Yehoyakhin put off his prison garments. And every day of his life he dined regularly at the king's table, and for his allowance, a regular allowance was given him by the king, according to his daily needs, as long as he lived. (25:27-30)

This is an enigmatic finale to *Sefer Melakhim*. Jerusalem is in ruins, its people exiled. Suddenly, we read a snippet of information about the exiled king as we

jump forward twenty-seven years and learn that, with the advent of a new Babylonian monarch, Yehoyakhin has been released from his Babylonian jail and treated well – royal garb and food, all expenses paid by the Babylonian government. He is even granted an elevated status amongst other exiled kings. Why is this story included as the epilogue to the *Churban*? What does it seek to convey?

Some²¹ look at this section as a tale of pessimism and despair continuing the pessimism and doom of *Sefer Melakhim*. In this reading, the king languishes in exile with any hope of a collective return to Zion an absolute impossibility. The Judean king is absolutely dependent upon his Babylonian benefactor. *Churban* in this reading is final and definitive.

Others,²² however, disagree, pointing to the release of the king as optimistic news. Corroboration for this may be found in the restoration of Yehoyakhin's "throne," and the manner in which the king "raised the head" of Yehoyakhin, a phrase that, in its parallel usage in *Sefer Bereishit* (40:13), meant that Pharaoh not only freed his incarcerated butler, but in fact returned him to his former position and prestige. Do the change in Yehoyakhin's physical conditions and his newfound rise in status leave some hope that better times are ahead?

One phrase that strikes me describes Yehoyakhin's food supply: "*Devar yom be-yomo*" (25:30) – on a daily basis. This particular phrase appears in only one other place in *Sefer Melakhim*, at the dedication of the Temple. There Shlomo says:

Let these words of mine, which I have pleaded before God, be close to the Lord, God, day and night, and may He maintain the judgment of His servant and the judgment of His people Israel, *devar yom be-yomo*. (*Melakhim I* 8:59)

This, then, is a phrase of prayer and divine response to Man. Evil Merodakh's provision of Yehoyakhin's daily requirements is indicative that God is, in some manner, responding to His nation and acting with closeness. We should add that just a few verses earlier in that chapter, Shlomo envisages a situation of exile:

If they sin against You ... and You are angry with them ... so that they are carried away captive to the land of the enemy, far off or near, ... if they repent with all their mind and with all their heart in the land of their enemies, who carried them captive...forgive Your people who have sinned against You, and ... grant them mercy before their captors that they pardon them. (*Melakhim I* 8:46-50)

Yehoyakhin's reprieve gives a glimmer of hope, a sense that the tide has turned back and events will, yet again, turn in Israel's favor with the

²¹ These include Cogan and Tadmor, in the Anchor Bible.

²² See *Da'at Mikra*.

restoration to land, Temple and self-governance. Indeed, it shall be none other than Yehoyakhin's grandson Zerubavel²³ who will, one generation hence, lead the exiles back to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple.

²³ See *Divrei Ha-yamim* I 3:17-19.