



THE SUN SETS IN THE AFTERNOON: YOSHIAHU AND THE LAST CHANCE TO AVERT THE CHURBAN

When we ask, “Why was the First Beit HaMikdash destroyed?” what precisely do we want to know? A historian or someone investigating leadership principles or political science may want to know what challenges the nation faced internally and externally, and what mistakes were made that caused the national disaster that resulted not only in the destruction of the nation’s spiritual center but also the successive exiles of its elite and then its population as a whole. A theologian might be more interested in understanding not political mistakes but the moral shortcomings and religious violations

that led God to remove His protective presence.

The question, in any event, has a long pedigree. Even before the churban, Jeremiah [Yirmiyahu] is told of the consequences for the nation should it continue to fail to fulfil the mandates of the Torah. The prophet imagines himself in a post-churban world: “Who is the wise man that he may understand this? And who is he to whom the Lord has spoken that he may declare it? Wherefore is the land perished and laid waste like a wilderness so that none passeth through?” (9:11, JPS 1917 tr. with minor modifications). God Himself

provides the answer to this still hypothetical question: “Because they have forsaken My law which I have set before them, and have not hearkened to My voice, neither walked therein. Rather have they walked after the stubbornness of their own hearts and after the Ba’alim as their fathers had instructed them.” (9:12–13).¹

It is not only in the prophecies of Yirmiyahu and his fellow prophets that we find such warnings. Even the historical works such as the Book of Kings are replete with warnings about the errors in the ways of the people of Israel and of their leaders.² While the major theme of the rebuke involves

idolatry and abandonment of God, there are also accusations of murder, perversions of justice, and oppression of the poor. The Gemara echoes these themes and, among a series of other explanations, lists the following: denigrating *talmiday chachamim*,³ not providing proper rebuke,⁴ not allowing for “*lifnim meshurat hadin*” in judgments,⁵ transgressing the three “*yehareg ve’al yavor*” sins — idolatry, adultery and murder.⁶ The common theme is a lack of respect for God and for the laws He commanded them, and for violating “*vehalkhta bedreachav*,” following in the path of God.⁷

As King Solomon (Shlomo) begins to build the Beit Hamikdash, God offers encouragement but also a caveat:

הַבַּיִת הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר-אַתָּה בִּנְיָה, אִם-תִּלְךָ בְּחֻקֵּי וְאֶת-מִשְׁפָּטֵי תַעֲשֶׂה, וְשִׁמְרַת אֶת-כָּל-מִצְוֹתַי, לִלְכֹת בָּהֶם — וְהִקְמֹתִי אֶת-דְּבָרֵי אֲתוֹן, אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתִּי אֶל-דָּוִד אָבִיךָ. וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל; וְלֹא אֶעְזֹב, אֶת-עַמִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

With regard to this House you are building — if you follow My laws and observe My rules and faithfully keep My commandments, I will fulfill for you the promise that I gave to your father David: I will abide among the children of Israel, and I will never forsake My people Israel.
Melakhim I 6:12-13

God agrees to dwell in the midst of Bnai Yisrael, in this house built by Shlomo, but only so long as Bnai Yisrael commit to following His laws.⁸ Shlomo echoed this commitment when he dedicated the edifice at the end of its construction:⁹

וַעֲתָה ה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, שָׁמֹר לְעַבְדְּךָ דָּוִד אָבִי אֶת אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתָּ לִּי לֵאמֹר, לֹא-יִכָּרֵת לְךָ אִישׁ מִלְּפָנַי, יֹשֵׁב עַל-בֵּסֵס אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל: רַק אִם-יִשְׁמְרוּ בְּנֵיךָ אֶת-דִּרְכֹּכִי, לִלְכֹת לִפְנָי, כַּאֲשֶׁר הִלְכָתָּ, לִפְנָי.

And now, O LORD God of Israel, keep the further promise that You made to

Your servant, my father David: “Your line on the throne of Israel shall never end, if only your descendants will look to their way and walk before Me as you have walked before Me.”

Melakhim I 8:25

Following its dedication, the Temple drew crowds — from Bnai Yisrael and from other nations. The mikdash represented wisdom.¹⁰ It represented justice.¹¹ It represented the love God has for the nation of Israel in giving them a king who does “*misphat u’tzedakkah*,” justice and righteousness.¹² For a brief, shining moment the tribes of Israel had united, built a house for God, and become a regional power with international alliances.

But even toward the end of Shlomo’s reign we see signs of discontent among the people and seeds of both revolution and idolatry spreading around the country. Yerav’am ben Nevat, who would become the first king of the seceding northern tribes, leads a protest in response to a royal building project that closed a convenient path pilgrims had used to access the Temple Mount.¹³ And Shlomo, influenced by his foreign wives, is said to have built altars to various foreign gods.¹⁴ The protests ultimately led to the splitting of the United Monarchy into two kingdoms.

Yerav’am introduced images into religious practice, images meant to represent God and offer an alternative to visiting the Beit HaMikdash in Jerusalem. He wanted to offer a religious alternative to the Mikdash in order to discourage pilgrims from their thrice-annual trek from his Northern Kingdom to Jerusalem. This action is described by the narrator of Kings as “*chatat*,” a sin.¹⁵ The first to worship foreign gods was Achav,

son of Omri. Achav married Izevel, daughter of the king of Tzidon, and built temples and altars to Baal. Peace treaties between the Northern and Southern Kingdom¹⁶ and eventual intermarriage¹⁷ may have helped transfer the idolatry of the Northern Kingdom into Judah. In addition, justice was perverted. We are told over and over in the Book of Kings — with respect to virtually all the kings of Israel and not a few of the kings of Judah — that so and so had done evil in the eyes of God.

Of these, the most notorious was Menashe, son of the quite excellent King Chezekiah. During his long reign, Menashe reversed the actions of his father, reverting to worship of Ashera and Ba’al. Various abominations were performed in the courtyards of the Temple itself (2 Kings 21:2–8.). As a result of the actions of Menashe, God tells his prophets that Jerusalem will suffer the fate of Shomron; it will be captured by its enemies and destroyed (21:10–15). This, then, is the reason given in Sefer Melakhim to explain why God decided that the Temple was going to be destroyed. Judah was destroyed, its people exiled, and the Temple destroyed, for much the same reason as the Northern Kingdom had been decimated by the Assyrians in 722/721 B.C.E. There is no mystery about why God condemned the Ten Tribes: a detailed explanation focused on idolatry and abandonment of the Torah is set out at 2 Kings 17:7–23. Verse 13 there alludes to Judah as deserving the same fate, and verses 10–15 of chapter 21 affirm that destruction is indeed coming to Jerusalem.

The heavenly decision, then, was apparently made during Menashe’s life, or perhaps at its end. How then

are we to understand the verses at 23:26–27 that appear at the end of the narrative about Menashe’s grandson Josiah (Yoshiahu)? Yoshiahu has been a king whose actions pleased God. And yet at the end of the day his efforts to restore the Torah seem to have fallen just short: “However, the LORD did not turn away from His awesome wrath which had blazed up against Judah because of all the things Menasseh did to vex Him. The LORD said: I will also banish Judah from My presence as I banished Israel; and I will reject the city of Jerusalem which I chose and the House where I said My name would abide” (JPS 1985 translation). These verses seem to suggest that despite the decree set at Menashe’s death dooming Jerusalem and the Temple, there was a chance to overcome it. With Yoshiahu’s death, that chance is blocked, and the destruction follows inexorably.¹⁸

Who was Yoshiahu then, whose tragic end dooms Jerusalem and the Temple? His father (Menashe’s son) Amon was killed in a palace coup (21:20–23) for reasons we are not told. The pesukim merely tell us that he followed in the ways of his father Menashe. How remarkable then that Amon’s son becomes one of the great and righteous kings. Yoshiahu was thrust onto the throne when he was only 8 years old. From the beginning, he is known to do that which is right in the eyes of God. Yoshiahu begins a series of reforms, scaffolding each new reform on the previous one, and begins to literally clean up the land from the impurities of idolatry and reinstate “*tzedek* and *mishpat*” into the fabric of the realm. In the 8th year of his reign [when he is 16], Yoshiahu begins to seek out “the God of David his father,” and in the 12th year of his reign he starts get rid of the idolatry,¹⁹

not only in the Southern Kingdom, but in the Northern Kingdom as well.²⁰ During the 18th year of his reign, he began to do much-needed repairs to the Beit HaMikdash.²¹ The last time repairs were done to the Mikdash was during the reign of his great-grandfather, Chezekiah.

During the renovations,²² a scroll²³ is found in the deep recesses of the Temple, possibly hidden away during the reign of Menashe (2 Kings 20:8–23:3). Yoshiahu convenes the people and reads to them from the newly found scroll, reestablishing their commitment to God and His covenant.²⁴ Yoshiahu continues to remove all traces of idolatry from the land and, with Bnai Yisrael, celebrates Pesach in a way that had not been celebrated since the times of Shmuel.^{25 26}

There is much that Yoshiahu accomplishes during his 31 years on the throne. As Yehudah Kil²⁷ outlines, Yoshiahu expanded the kingdom in many different arenas. He worked on the religious level of the nation — eradicating the idolatry, renewing the *brit*, setting an example of how to live a just and righteous life. He worked on the infrastructure of the Mikdash — undertaking much-needed repairs, making it like new. He worked on the international level — taking advantage of the shifting powers of the superpowers of the time to annex portions of the Northern Kingdom and expand the borders of the Southern Kingdom. On a judicial level, he reinstates *tzedakah* and *mishpat*. In reflecting on all that Yoshiahu accomplished, we are left with several unanswered questions: Why did he not succeed in averting the evil decree and why did he die such an ignominious death?

As scholars have noted, the recounting of his death at the hands of (or at the command of) Pharaoh Necho in Sefer Melakhim is remarkably free of details (23:29–30). The version found in Chronicles is the one that we are familiar with (as in the Kinot for Tish’a B’Av): Yoshiahu set out to confront the Egyptian army and was killed by a hail of arrows from the Egyptian archers. Grievously wounded, he asks his men to take him back to Jerusalem where he breathes his last and is buried.

The route of the Egyptian army up the coastal road leading to Megiddo was the traditional route by which Egyptian kings and traders journeyed, or fought their way, to the Assyrian or Babylonian heartlands. Historians have suggested reasons for the Egyptian move: Necho and his advisors may have been trying, fruitlessly it turned out, to prop up their long-time rival the Assyrian Empire against the ascendant and newly dangerous Babylonians.²⁸ Why, precisely, Yoshiahu opted to challenge the Egyptians (as set out in Chronicles) is hard to know. The Pharaoh makes clear that he has no issue with Judah: “What is there between us?” he tells Yoshiahu. “Stop provoking me.” But Yoshiahu refuses to stand aside and the archers took aim.²⁹

We are left to guess about Yoshiahu’s intentions. Was even Judah subservient to Egypt and itching to throw off the yoke? Was the king suspicious of Egyptian and Assyrian motives and intent on cooperating with the Babylonians? The Tanakh simply does not tell us. Similarly, we are left to guess as to why Yoshiahu thought he would succeed against the powerful army of Egypt. The

Gemara, in *Taanit* 22a, suggests that Yoshiahu misread a verse in Vayikra and as a result refused to pay heed to Yirmiyahu [and in fact did not consult with Yirmiyahu before going to Meggido]. The pasuk³⁰ describes an ideal moment in which Bnai Yisrael are following the laws of the Torah. “This will be a time of peace when no (foreign) sword shall pass through the land.” What sort of sword is there in a time of peace? thought Yoshiahu. He assumed that this must refer to even the peaceful sword of an enemy who is merely trying to pass through the land. Yoshiahu further assumed that Bnai Yisrael were keeping the laws of God and were worthy of the protection promised by the Torah. Yoshiahu did not realize how wrong he was. The midrash in *Eikha Rabbah* (in a passage familiar to many of us from the Kinot) describes how many of the people of his generation were secretly mocking the reforms of Yoshiahu and continuing with their idolatrous ways, almost in plain sight. Yoshiahu would send men into the houses to search for idolatry, and his emissaries would enter through the open door, look to the right, look to the left, and give an “all clear.” As the emissaries were leaving, they were asked to close the door behind them, and by so doing would reconnect the idols. For the idols had been fashioned to the back of the door so that when the doors were open, nothing was seen. It was only upon closing the doors that the idols were intact.³¹ Yoshiahu’s miscalculation, as described in the Midrash, foreshadows the mistakes of his successors who wrongly assume that God will protect His Temple against all enemies.

Yoshiahu’s death is also a catalyst for the calamitous events to come. While it will be 22 years until the churban,



there is a rapid turnover in kings, and the kings quickly become vassals of first Egypt and then Babylon.³²

It seems, in short, that even after God’s decree of destruction at the time of Menashe, there was a window of opportunity for Bnai Yisrael to repent from their evil ways before the decree was sealed. Perhaps, during this window, a change could have been effected. Certainly, if there was anyone who could have implemented or inspired the change it would have been Yoshiahu. But, as Rav Yuval Cherlow notes,³³ in some ways it was already too late. The people were not successful in their teshuva, and therefore, the decree could not be averted.

Yoshiahu was the sun who set in the afternoon,³⁴ the precious gem spilled on the street.³⁵ Like Avraham, he managed to “discover” God in a time where the society around him was mired in idolatry. Like Moshe, he taught Bnai Yisrael the laws of God, and how to live a life based on *avodat HaShem*.³⁶ His death was a national tragedy, leaving the righteous of Bnai Yisrael in despair, and inevitably leading to that terrible day on which the Temple was burned.³⁷

Endnotes

1. The Talmud discusses these pesukim in various places including *B.M.* 85a-b, and *Nedarim* 81a, where the sin is explained to be not violation of the Law, per se, but of not making the mandated *berakha* prior to learning Torah. Various commentators over the centuries have suggested that this interpretation is based at least in part on the assumption that if there truly was widespread violation of the Torah, the question would hardly have needed to be asked and, in any event, would not have stumped the wise men, thus requiring God Himself to respond. None of this is necessary, though, if the question was rhetorical (contrary to the translation cited above in the text), and implied, to the contrary, that any wise man would be able to understand the reason for the nation’s fate. See Menachem Bula’s explanation in the *Da’at Mikra* series. The interpretive problem is also avoided according to the explanation in Hartoum/Cassuto: Looking into the future, the prophet rebukes the elites and supposed wise men who ignored the word of God for so long in advance of the churban. The narrative surrounding Yirmiyahu’s prophecies also strongly suggests that many of the generation of the churban felt that the people of Israel had divine protection and that the Temple could not be destroyed; the “wise” among them would indeed have been shocked when the disaster struck.

2. At least to some extent, there is a clear difference between the Bible’s purely prophetic works and the historical works in establishing a causal background for the national disaster. The notion of dual causality (*sibatiut kefula*) is well established in biblical studies — the idea is that the text credits both

natural and supernatural causes to explain various events. A clear example is presented by Elhanan Samet with respect to the creation of the divided monarchy: 1 Kings 11 explains the cause as the sins of Shlomo ha-Melekh (King Solomon), while chapter 12 ascribes it to the failures of the next king Rechav'am and his advisors to properly navigate the just claims of the people. Samet's excellent development of the theme may be found online at the Virtual Beit Midrash, Shiur 11 of a series on the Book of Kings, etzion.org.il. The phenomenon must have been recognized at least on some level in earlier generations but was highlighted in modern times by Professor Yechezkel Kaufman, primarily in his lectures. The term appears in his *Commentary to the Book of Joshua* (Jerusalem 1963), p. 128. See, too, Jonathan Grossman, "The Design of the 'Dual Causality' Principle in the Narrative of Absalom's Rebellion," *Biblica*, Vol. 88 No. 4 (2007), pp. 558–566. Here, too, it is perfectly possible to read the downfall of Judah as the natural result of power politics in the Ancient Near East. As noted in the text above, though, even the biblical historical texts, while providing evidence of natural causation, highlight God's anger as the ultimate cause of the downfall of Judah.

3. TB *Shabbat* 119b.

4. Ibid.

5. TB *Bava Metziah* 30b.

6. *Yoma* 9b.

7. *Devarim* 28:9.

8. 1Kings 6:11–13.

9. 1Kings 8:25.

10. 1Kings 10:3–5. See explanations of Rashi, Radak, Metzudat David and Ralbag ad loc.

11. See *Tehillim* 122:6.

12. 1Kings 10:9.

13. 1Kings 11:27.

14. 1Kings 11:1–10, or, as many commentators, including Rashi, *Metzudat David* and Malbim, note, Shlomo allowed his

foreign wives to build the altars, and the pasuk therefore "credits" him with doing the actual building.

15. 1Kings 12: 29.

16. 1Kings 22.

17. 2Kings 8:18. Yoram the son of Yehoshafat marries the daughter of Achav.

18. The pesukim in 2Divray HaYamim, 34:23-38, suggest that the prophetess Huldah specifically told Yimiyahu that he was doomed to fail. But it is important to note that not all prophecies are actualized. Often a bad prophecy will inspire prayer and teshuva, as happened with Chezikiah in 2Kings 20: 1-3.

19. 2Divray HaYamim 34:3.

20. 2Kings 23, 19. From this it appears that he expanded the boundaries of his kingdom to reclaim areas that had been captured by the Assyrians.

21. 2Divray HaYamin, 34:14.

22. 2Divray HaYamim 34:15.

23. The story of the finding of the scroll, one of the most famous in Tanakh, is the subject of an enormous literature. For a traditional approach, see Yehudah Kil's interpretation of the parallel version in Chronicles (Divray HaYamim) which may be found at <http://www.daat.ac.il/he-il/tanach/iyunim/ktuvim/divrey-hayamin/maamarim/kil-metsiat.htm>. See also Kil's summary of the reign of Yoshiahu in the *Daat Mikra to Sefer Melakhim Bet*, pp. 806–811.

24. 2Divray HaYamim 34:29–33.

25. 2 Divray HaYamim 35:19–25.

26. 2Divray HaYamim 35:18.

27. See note 22.

28. See, for instance, A. Malamat, "Josiah's Bid for Armageddon," *Journal of the Ancient Near East Society* 5 (1), 2159, 1973; T. Talshir, "The Three Deaths of Josiah and the Strata of Biblical Historiography," *Vetus Testamentum* 46 (2), 213–236, 1996; B. Schipper, "Egypt and the Kingdom of Judah under Josiah

and Jehoiakim," *Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University*, 37:2, 200–226, 1996.

29. 2Divray HaYamim 35:23.

30. *Vayikra* 26:3.

31. *Eikha Rabba* 1:18.

32. Yoshiahu's son Yehoachaz rules for three months until he is imprisoned by Pharaoh Necho. Pharaoh Necho appoints and renames the next king [Elyakim is an older brother of Yehoachaz, and his name is changed to Yehoyakim]. Yehoyakim will rule for three years and then becomes a vassal to Babylon when Nevuchadnetzar invades Jerusalem. Yehoyachin, son of Yehoyakim, succeeds his father and rules for three months when Nevuchadnetzar surrounds Jerusalem and lays siege. The siege will last for three years until the year 586 BCE. Nevuchadnetzar breaks through the ramparts of Jerusalem, exiles Yehoyachin to Babylon, and loots the king's palace and the Mikdash. Matanyah, son of Yoshiyahu, is appointed as "king" in Jerusalem and his name is changed by Nevuchadnetzar to Tzidkiyahu.

33. הרב יובל שלר, "רוח אפיונו משיח ה' נלכד בשיחיתותם", מגדים תשרי תשמח, 66-36.

34. *Moed Katan* 25b, based on the pasuk in Amos 8:9 והיה ביום ההוא... הבאתי שמש בצהריים and it will be on that day... I will make the sun set in the afternoon.

35. *Eikha* 4:1 איכה ... תשתפחנה אבני קדש בראש כל חוצות, the sacred gems are spilled at every street corner.

36. From the piyyut ירמיהו את יאשיהו by Rav Elazar HaKalir, 7th-century paytan from Israel who notes that there was no king like Yoshiahu, no one like him since the time of Moshe. גם בְּכֹל מַלְכֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר קָמוּ לְגֹדֵה לֹא קָם כְּמוֹהוּ מִיָּמֹת אַבְרָהָם.

37. A reason for his name is suggested by Rav Shlomo Aharon Wertheimer in *מדרש חסרות* in *בתי מדרשות ורטהימר רלד*.



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