



ORTHODOX
UNION

Nach Yommi

COMPAÑION

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Volume I:
Neviim Rishonim - Early Prophets

Section E:
Melachim Alef - I Kings

I Kings

Chapter Intro

Good King, Bad King - A Brief Introduction to the Book of Kings

Like the Book of Judges, Kings covers a huge amount of time. In fact, Kings covers slightly more time than Judges did - about four centuries. An analogous history of the United States would cover the period from Capt. John Smith being saved by Pocahontas in the winter of 1607-1608 through today in only 47 short chapters.

Of course, an analogous history of the United States would probably not give equal treatment to Lincoln, FDR, McKinley and Chester A. Arthur. While they were all important in their days, different presidents lived in different times, faced different challenges, and made different impacts on history. Similarly, the kings described herein all made different impacts on Jewish history, but they were also all kings. You may not know what President Harrison accomplished, but you know his name. Similarly, it behooves us to know that we had a king named Yehu and a king named Asa, even if we don't know their accomplishments immediately off the top of our heads.

What drives the current author absolutely insane is that the average person knows almost nothing of King Chizkiyahu (Hezekiah in English). Chizkiyahu was one of the greatest kings in Jewish history, on a level with David and Shlomo (Solomon). Chazal (the Rabbis of the Talmud) tell us that he was worthy of being Moshiach (the Messiah). Of all the people in Tanach, Chizkiyahu is my personal hero. If you don't know his story, you'll read it here, in the Book of Kings.

You'll also read about some bad guys. Some were truly evil, others were perhaps just misguided. The best known is probably Achav, with his wife Izevel. (In English: Ahab and Jezebel.) But Menashe, son of Chizkiyahu, could certainly give them a run for their money!

All told, there are 41 rulers whose reigns are recounted in this Book (not including David, who passes away at the beginning). Solomon ruled over a united kingdom; after his death there was a civil war. The Kingdom of Israel (the "Ten Tribes") had 20 kings before they were exiled by Sennacherib, almost 2,600 years ago. The Kingdom of Judah had 19 kings and a queen before Jerusalem was conquered and the Temple destroyed, about 2,400 years ago. (Some of the kings of Israel had really short reigns. All of the Kings of Judah were descendants of David and Solomon, but the throne of Israel occasionally changed hands through assassination.)

Also in this Book: great prophets. You'll read all about Eliyahu (Elijah) and Elisha, Yeshayahu (Isaiah) and Chuldah the prophetess. You'll see the first Temple built and ultimately destroyed. You'll see the assassination of Gedaliah, governor of Judah. (Attention all those who never really understood why we fast on Tzom Gedaliah: here's your chance!) You'll even see the invention of the pushka!

The Book of Kings is like its own graduate course in Jewish history. Those who have never had the pleasure of learning it before are about to discover a treasure they never knew they were missing.



Chapter 1

David is Cold, Adoniyahu is Ambitious and Solomon is King

King David had grown old and was showing his age. They covered him with blankets, but he still didn't warm up, so they fetched a young maiden to serve the king and also to keep him warm with body heat. They found a beautiful girl named Avishag the Shunamit. She took good care of King David, but he did not have relations with her.

Adoniyahu, son of David and Chagit, decided that he was the logical successor. (He was the fourth-born son; his older brothers Amnon and Avshalom were dead and Kilav didn't want the job.) He took a page from big brother Avshalom's book and got chariots and runners to go before him. Unlike Avshalom, he did not intend to depose David, he just meant to position himself for when his father passed on. Yoav and Evyasar signed on to Adoniyahu's team and encouraged the people to support his cause. But Tzadok, Benayahu, Nathan the prophet and others did not support Adoniyahu. Adoniyahu made a feast and did not invite David's supporters or his half-brother, Solomon. At this point in most people's minds, it was all but a done deal that Adoniyahu was going to be king.

Nathan approached David's wife Batsheva, mother of Solomon. G-d had said that Solomon would be king after David and David had promised this. Batsheva was to go to David and inform him as to Adoniyahu's actions, then Nathan would enter and back her up.

Batsheva went to David and told him that Adoniyahu was calling himself the next king. While she was still speaking, Nathan entered and asked David if he ordered Adoniyahu to be the next king. After all, he was having a party with most of David's other sons and counselors, who were all screaming out, "Long live King Adoniyahu!"

That was enough for David. He commanded that Tzadok, Nathan and Benayahu take Solomon and anoint him king, then publicly proclaim it. Solomon was then to sit on David's throne, so everyone would know he was the designated successor. This they did, and the people went wild with celebration.

Yoav, who was with Adoniyahu, heard the tumult and asked what was going on. Along came Evyasar's son Jonathan, so Adoniyahu asked him. "Good news, right?" asked Adoniyahu. "Uh...not so much for you, Adoniyahu," replied Jonathan, "seeing as our master King David has named Solomon the next king." This news broke up Adoniyahu's party real fast. They all ran away.

Adoniyahu was afraid that Solomon would have him put to death as a rebel, so he ran and grabbed hold of the altar, which was a place of sanctuary for all but murderers. Solomon sent word that if Adoniyahu acted as a loyal subject, no harm would come to him. (Please note that word: If. That's a bigger word than it would appear, as we shall see.)

Chapter 2

With Friends Like These, Who Needs Enemies?

David was nearing death, so he called Solomon to his side. He charged him with always following G-d and Torah so that he would be worthy of G-d's promise to be with their descendants. David then told Solomon to punish Yoav. Yoav killed Avshalom counter to David's orders, plus Avner and Amasa, who had defected to David's side. While David did not consider himself in a position to punish Yoav, Solomon could do so. David also told Solomon to treat the descendants of Barzilai well, for their father's aid when David fled from Avshalom. Finally, David warned Solomon not to trust Shimei ben Gera. Shimei was an opportunist; when David was down, he kicked him. When David was back up, he groveled. Shimei should be dealt with at the first sign of trouble, David said.

David passed away at the age of 70, having reigned a total of 40 years. Solomon assumed the throne.

Adoniyahu, Solomon's brother who had tried to assume the throne, approached Solomon's mother, Batsheva, with what seemed a reasonable request: he wanted to marry Avishag, who had served as David's attendant in his final days. Batsheva agreed to speak to Solomon about it.

Solomon, however, was pretty sharp. He saw Adoniyahu's request for what it was: a subtle attempt to get a foot in the door. No one may marry a king's widow or concubine except for another king. By marrying Avishag, Adoniyahu would be sending the message that he truly was fit to be king. Solomon had told Adoniyahu that he would be safe so long as he proved loyal. So that was it for Adoniyahu.

Solomon then fired Evyasar from being Kohein Gadol (High Priest). This was because he had supported Adoniyahu's bid for the throne. But he did not execute him because he had been a loyal servant of G-d and shared David's troubles.

Yoav heard what was going on and he was worried because he had sided with Adoniyahu. He ran to the altar and grabbed onto it but, as we said in the last chapter, the altar doesn't grant sanctuary to a murderer and Yoav was guilty of murder. Yoav refused to come out, so Solomon had him killed on the spot. Solomon then appointed Benayahu his new general and Tzadok became the new Kohein Gadol.

Solomon also put the troublemaker Shimei on probation - he was not to leave Jerusalem ever, for any reason. The day he violated this, he would be executed. Shimei was grateful for the clemency and agreed to the terms. (As if he had a choice!)

Three years later, two of Shimei's slaves escaped and he went to retrieve them. (He either figured that he had been on such good behavior that Solomon wouldn't mind, or he was so preoccupied with recovering his lost property that he just forgot.) Solomon found out and kept his word.

Having dispatched Adoniyahu, Yoav and Shimei - about whom one might say, "with friends like these, who needs enemies?" - Solomon's kingdom was firmly established.

Chapter 3

Get Smart!

Solomon married the daughter of the Pharaoh in order to cement a treaty with Egypt. (He married the daughters of many other nations. They converted, but were insincere, as we will see.) Being faithful to G-d, Solomon traveled to Gibeon to offer sacrifices. While he was there, G-d appeared and offered to grant Solomon whatever he desired. All Solomon requested was the wisdom to rule his people well. He could have asked for riches or to subjugate his enemies, but he didn't; G-d gave him these things anyway. Solomon was promised honor and wealth all his life, unconditionally. (He was also promised a long life if he lived up to David's example, but he fell short of that goal.)

When Solomon awoke, he thought his "conversation" with G-d was just a dream, rather than a true prophecy. According to the Midrash, he found that he could understand the language of the animals and birds. Solomon returned to Jerusalem and made a feast.

Soon it was time to put his prowess to the test. Two prostitutes shared a house and they had given birth within days. But one of the babies had died. One woman said that the other switched the live baby for her own dead son; the other said the live boy was truly her own. Solomon did the only rational thing one can do when presented with such a situation: he called for a sword.

Sword brought, Solomon then said, "Cut the living baby in two and give half to each woman." One woman screamed, "What are you, nuts? Give it to her!" (Loosely paraphrased.) The other woman said, "Let it be neither mine nor hers! Cut away!" From their reactions, Solomon knew that the first woman, who had compassion and preferred that the child be given away and live, was the true mother. (The other woman didn't really want the child, she preferred that the mother of the living baby share her pain.) Everyone was impressed with the test Solomon had devised to discover the true mother's identity and his reputation spread.

Chapter 4

Role Call

As the Navi did with David, we are now given a list of Solomon's officers. These included Benayahu the general and Tzadok the Kohein Gadol, whom we already know. Evyasar, the previous Kohein Gadol, whom Solomon dismissed, continued as Deputy Kohein Gadol, filling in on an as-needed basis. Other officers included Jehoshaphat, Solomon's personal secretary, who had served in the same role for David, and the minister of taxes, Adoniram, who also served in this function for David, but is called Adoram in II Samuel chapter 20. (Read the text of this chapter for a full list of Solomon's court.)

There were also twelve local officers, corresponding not to the twelve Tribes, but to the months of the year. Each was responsible to gather the needs of Solomon's palace for one month of the year. (We'll see in the next chapter what a big job that was!) Two of these officers later married daughters of Solomon.

The chapter ends by telling us that the people of Judah and Israel were very numerous, prosperous and secure in their land.

Chapter 5

Hiram Hires 'em

Solomon ruled from the Euphrates River to the Philistine territory to the border of Egypt; the kings of neighboring lands paid him tribute. One day's supplies for Solomon's household included well over 1,000 bushels of wheat, 30 oxen, 100 sheep and goats, as well as many other types of meat and fowl. It is estimated that this fed 60,000 people. (Now you know why the 12 local officers of the previous chapter had to work so hard!) The whole country lived securely in peace during Solomon's tenure as king.

Solomon had 40,000 horses for chariots and 12,000 riders. This may seem impressive, but the Torah (Deut. 17:16) commands a king not to have more horses than necessary. We'll discuss this more in chapter 10.

Solomon's wisdom became renowned and he was famous for his proverbs, collected in (of all places) the Book of Proverbs (Mishlei). He was also the author of famous songs, including Ecclesiastes (Koheles) and, appropriately, The Song of Songs (Shir HaShirim).

Hiram, king of Tyre (modern day Lebanon), had been a friend to David and he sent servants with greetings and an offer of assistance. Solomon replied that, while David was not permitted to build the Temple, he was about to do so and could use Hiram's help. According to the arrangement made between the two kings, Hiram's men would cut down cedars in Lebanon and Solomon would pay their wages. The logs would be made into rafts and sailed as far as possible, then disassembled and carried over land.

Solomon drafted 30,000 men in a three-month rotation; 10,000 would work for a month in Lebanon, then go home for two months. There were 70,000 porters, who would carry stones from the mountains and 80,000 masons who chiseled the stones into shape before shipping them. (No iron tools could be used on-site, but they could be used off-site.) In this way, the builders of Solomon and the builders of Hiram prepared the wood and stone for the Temple.

Chapter 6

The Temple is Built

480 years after the Jews left Egypt, the Temple was begun; this was in Solomon's fourth year as king, in the month of Iyar. (The Navi calls it "Ziv" because the names by which we call the Hebrew months were not adopted until later.) The Temple was twice the length and breadth of the Tabernacle (Mishkan). It was 60 cubits long and twenty cubits wide. (A cubit is somewhere between 18" and two feet.) The Temple was three times the height of the Tabernacle: 30 cubits. The Ulam (Hall) in front of the Temple proper was 20 cubits long by ten cubits wide. The windows of the Temple narrowed from the outside toward the inside, to say that outside light was not required.

There was a storage space in the walls that ran around the sides and back of the Temple, broken into individual rooms. There were three storeys of these storage rooms, each wider than the one below, therefore extending deeper into the walls for additional support from the lower levels. The storage annex was entered from the south and a winding staircase would take one to the second and third storeys. The storage area was lined with cedar and the ceiling of the Temple was decorative wood over cedar planks.

G-d spoke to Solomon through a prophet. (Radak quotes the Seder Olam that it was the prophet Achiyah, who we will “officially” meet in chapter 11.) He said that so long as Solomon remained true to Him, He would dwell among the Jewish people.

Back to the Temple: The walls were lined with cedar, overlaid with gold. The floor was cypress, likewise overlaid. The cedar walls were ornately carved with flowers and other designs. The Holy of Holies, where the Ark was kept, was 20 cubits in each direction. The partition in front of it was covered with the finest gold and the altar used for incense was cedar covered in gold. The verse goes on to name a few more things - pretty much everything was covered in gold!

In the Holy of Holies were two figures of cherubs (cherubim, properly) made of olive wood. Each one was ten cubits high, with five-cubit-long wings. They extended wings from wall to wall, and the tips of the inner wings touched, making the cherubim twenty cubits wide. And, of course, they were covered in gold.

There were two doors in the partition to the Holy of Holies, made of olive wood, carved with flowers, palm trees and cherubim, and covered in gold. Instead of being rectangular, the doorway was five-sided, with a point at the top. Another set of doors was rectangular (as per usual), made of cypress with the hinges inserted into depressions in the lintel and the threshold. (Those are the horizontal pieces at the top and bottom of a doorway, respectively.) These doors were also ornately carved and covered in gold. The wall around the chatzer (courtyard) was three rows of stone and a row of cedar.

Construction of the Temple took seven years. It was completed in the eleventh year of Solomon’s reign, in the month of Bul (Marcheshvan or, as most people call it, simply Cheshvan).

To better understand the layout of the Temple, look in the tractate of Mishna called Middos, a volume of which would typically have a floor plan printed in it. (Yes, the tractate deals with the layout of the SECOND Temple, but they were essentially the same.)

Chapter 7

The Sea Stands on the Backs of Twelve Oxen

To build his own palace, Solomon took 13 years. This is not to say that he spent almost twice as long on it than he did on the Temple, rather it is to show how much effort he put into completing the Temple as quickly as possible. He had a summer home called “The Forest of Lebanon,” which was located near the Temple. The Forest of Lebanon was 100 cubits long, 50 cubits wide and 30 cubits tall. (Remember, a cubit is somewhere between a foot and a half and two feet.) The roof was composed of 45 cedar boards in three rows of 15 each. There were

three rows of windows, each window directly across from a corresponding window on the opposite side. The doors were also placed directly across from their counterparts. (All of this was for cross-ventilation.) There was an entry hall 50 cubits long and 30 cubits wide, made up of pillars. Solomon also had a throne room, lined with cedar, where he would pass judgment on cases brought to him.

His personal residence was in a different building, but built similarly to the judgment hall (i.e., lined with cedar). He also made a similar house for his wife, Pharaoh's daughter. The buildings themselves were made of marble and other expensive stone, filed smooth. The foundation stones were eight and ten cubits in size. The wall of the courtyard was three rows of stone and a row of cedar, just like the wall in the Temple courtyard.

Solomon took a workman named Hiram from Tyre. This was NOT the same as King Hiram of Tyre! This Hiram was the son of a widow from the Tribe of Naftali and a Tyrian coppersmith. (The Radak says that Hiram's mother was from Dan and his father was from Naftali; he is only called Tyrian because that's where he lived.) Hiram made two 18-cubit pillars of copper. The tops of the pillars were ornate designs of copper, with mesh and chains and sculptures of flowers and pomegranates. The pillars were placed on opposite sides of the entrance to the Temple. The one on the right was named "Yachin" ("He will establish") and the one on the left was called "Boaz" ("strength is in it").

Hiram also made the "sea," a huge copper tank from which the Kohanim would wash to purify themselves. The sea was thirty cubits in circumference and was decorated with knobs that were part of its construction, not soldered on. The sea stood on the backs of 12 copper oxen, three facing in each direction. The sea held 2,000 "baths." (That's a Hebrew word, it doesn't mean bath as in bath tub, despite the fact that we're talking about water here.) There are different opinions about the size of a bath, but we can safely say that the sea was in the 20,000-gallon range, plus or minus 5,000 gallons or so.

There were also ten stands made of copper, which held smaller water tanks. These stands were four cubits wide and three cubits high and were decorated with carvings of lions, oxen and cherubim. Each stand had four copper wheels like chariot wheels. (Rashi says like THE Chariot's wheels, i.e. like the vision of the Heavenly Chariot shown to Yechezkel - Ezekiel - in the first chapter of the book that bears his name.) The ten stands were all identical, made from the same mold.

Then there were the tanks that sat upon these stands. Each held 40 baths (perhaps 400 gallons, plus or minus 100 gallons). Five stands were placed to the right side of the Temple and five to the left. (The sea went on the right.)

Hiram made a wide variety of implements for the Temple, including pans and bowls and shovels, all of copper. Solomon had all the utensils put away unweighed because they were so numerous.

The rest of the furniture of the Temple included the altar, the shulchan (table), ten menorahs that flanked the original Menorah that Moses made, and various bowls, spoons, tongs, pans and door sockets, all of gold. Solomon also brought the gold, silver and other objects that his father David had put aside for the Temple. (For an example of this, see II Samuel chapter 8.)

Chapter 8

Solomon's Prayer

Solomon gathered the various leaders of the country in Jerusalem, bringing the Ark from the Tent where David had kept it. The entire nation joined them; this was before the holiday of Succos and the people made the requisite pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The Kohanim brought in the Ark and the Leviim (Levites) brought the Tabernacle and all of its vessels. Solomon offered numerous sacrifices.

The Ark was placed in the Holy of Holies, under the cherubim. The poles of the Ark could be seen pushing upon the partition, but they did not extend outside of it. (The Navi tells us that the Ark is there "until this day," but that doesn't mean until the 21st century. It means until the time of Jeremiah, when that sentence was written.) When the Kohanim left the Holy, the Temple filled with the glory of G-d's Presence. Solomon recognized this cloud as a sign of favor, as the same thing happened when Moses assembled the Tabernacle way back in Exodus chapter 40.

Solomon blessed the nation and praised G-d for allowing him to build the Temple, fulfilling the wishes of his father, David. Solomon asked that just as the promise that he would build the Temple was fulfilled, so should G-d also fulfill the promise to safeguard the Davidic dynasty. He also recognized that G-d wasn't literally "in" the Temple, as such a thing is not possible. Rather, the Temple is a place for people, where their prayers will be given special attention. If one person wrongs another, Solomon prayed that G-d would judge between them. If the people are unworthy and G-d permits an enemy power to overrun them, may He forgive them and return them to the land. If the people sin and are punished with drought, may they repent so that G-d will forgive them and send rain. Similarly, in the case of famine, pestilence, locusts, or other disasters, whenever the people cry out to G-d from the Temple, may Hashem forgive them and act accordingly, for He alone knows the inner thoughts of mankind.

Non-Jews were also welcome in the Temple. They would travel to Jerusalem to pray there, so Solomon asked that Hashem also grant their prayers, helping the whole world to recognize G-d. (Solomon actually asked G-d to be more generous with non-Jews than with Jews. He asked that G-d grant all of a non-Jew's prayers, but he only asked that Jews be granted what they merit.)

Solomon continued his prayer with a plea for military success. He then added that no one is without sin, so would G-d please accept repentance and forgive His people. He asked for all this because Israel is G-d's nation that He took out from Egypt.

When Solomon finished his prayer, he stood up and spread his hands out toward Heaven. He blessed the gathered crowd that Hashem had granted them rest from their enemies and fulfilled all of His promises to Moses. Solomon asked that G-d be with them as He was with their ancestors and that the people should turn their hearts to G-d, to walk in His ways and to follow His laws. He asked that G-d grant his prayer appropriately so that the whole world would recognize the One G-d.

Solomon offered 22,000 head of cattle and 120,000 sheep as a sacrifice to G-d. The Temple was dedicated and the courtyard was sanctified for use, because that's where certain offerings were made. Solomon made a week-long celebration, that led straight into the holiday of Succos. (Yes, that means that the week-long party included Yom Kippur. There is a difference of opinion as to whether they celebrated while fasting or whether G-d suspended the fast that year. The Talmud in Moed Katan, page 9a, says that the fast was actually suspended.) After Shemini Atzeres (the holiday on the eighth day, immediately after Succos), the people went home, full of joy over all of G-d's blessings to them.

Chapter 9

Bob (I Mean Sol) the Builder

After the Temple was completed, G-d appeared to Solomon a second time, as he had in Gibeon. G-d repeated his promise that if Solomon would serve Him as purely as David did, then his descendants would hold the throne securely, forever. But, if they turn away from G-d, He would make an example of them. The Temple would be destroyed and its site would be a topic of conversation. "How could G-d do this to the people who served Him?" people will ask. "Because they ignored G-d and followed other gods."

It took twenty years to build the Temple and Solomon's palace. King Hiram of Tyre provided trees and gold. Solomon gave him 20 cities in the Galilee as a gift. (The corresponding verse in II Chronicles chapter 8 says that Solomon gave Hiram 20 cities; apparently they traded cities.) Hiram found the cities he was given to be inferior, and he told Solomon so. He then sent Solomon 120 talents of gold. (A kikar - "talent" - is 3,000 shekel - about 150 pounds. That's about 18,000 pounds of gold!) Solomon and Hiram were such good friends that they could have an honest difference of opinion about the quality of Solomon's gift without it affecting their relationship.

Solomon built a lot of things: the Temple, his palace, the Millo (an open area around Jerusalem, possibly used as a landfill), the walls of Jerusalem, various cities (including Gezer, which was a city conquered by his father-in-law, the Pharaoh, which Solomon rebuilt), and various cities for storage and military use. Solomon drafted the descendants of the Canaanite nations who remained in the land to work on these projects. Many Jewish citizens volunteered, but they were not drafted for labor; they were soldiers. Pharaoh's daughter moved into the home that Solomon built for her and Solomon closed the area of the Millo near her palace, to reduce local traffic. (This did not sit well with some people, as we shall see.)

Solomon regularly offered sacrifices at the Temple. He had a ship (or, perhaps, a fleet of ships) in the Red Sea, near Edom. His friend Hiram sent ships to help Solomon bring 420 talents (around 63,000 pounds) of gold from the land of Ophir.

Chapter 10

The Queen of Sheba (Probably)

The Queen of Sheba heard about Solomon's wisdom, so she came to Jerusalem to ask him riddles and see if he was as smart as his reputation. At least, most people say it was the Queen of Sheba; the Talmud (Baba Basra 15b) seems to translate malkas-sh'va as a delegation from the Kingdom of Sheba. In any case, Sheba is possibly Ethiopia. (Ethiopian Jews have a tradition that supports this, although we consider Ethiopian Jews to be descended from the Tribe of Dan. And don't confuse the Queen of Sheba with Bath-Sheba, who was David's wife and Solomon's mother. But I digress.)

Back to the Queen of Sheba: she brought an entourage and many gifts, including gold, gems and spices. She asked Solomon her riddles, which he answered with his incredible wisdom and insight. She was impressed by his palace and his servants, his food and drink, and by the stairway connecting his palace to the Temple. Not only were these things extravagant, they were all extremely intelligently-designed. She acknowledged that everything she had heard about Solomon was true; she never would have believed it all, had she not seen it for herself. She then gave Solomon 120 talents of gold (9 tons!), more gems and the largest spice collection ever.

Aside from gold, Hiram's fleet had brought Solomon a precious wood called almog (Rashi and Radak translate it as coral), which Solomon used to make the passageway between his palace and the Temple; the smaller pieces he had made into musical instruments for use by the Levites in the Temple.

Solomon gave the Queen of Sheba as a gift whatever she desired and she returned home.

We are then told that Solomon's received a total of 666 talents of gold that year (50 tons!), aside from regular taxes and income. He had so much gold, he had 200 shields made of gold and placed in the palace.

Solomon's throne was made of ivory, covered with gold. There were six steps leading up to it with statues of lions at the arms and on either side of each step. All of Solomon's utensils were made of gold; gold was so plentiful in Solomon's day that silver was practically worthless. Every three years, Solomon's fleet would arrive with fresh shipments of gold, silver, ivory, and exotic animals such as peacocks and apes, which were not indigenous to Israel. Solomon's wisdom was so renowned that people came from all over the world to hear his wisdom. Each one brought him precious gifts.

But... Solomon kept enormous stables and horses came from Egypt. A guild was established that set a price for horses and nobody could buy without going through this guild. The result was that Jews moved to Egypt to engage in the horse trade. The Torah warns a king not to have too many horses because it will make people go back to Egypt (Deut. 17:16). Solomon was wise, but he wasn't perfect. He thought, "The Torah says why I'm not to have too many horses; I can do it and just make sure nobody goes back to Egypt." But, as you can see, he failed at this goal. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 21b) says that the Torah told us the reasons for two mitzvos and the wisest person ever managed to mess up with them. How much more so we, who are not as wise as Solomon, should be careful with the other mitzvos, at whose reasons we can only guess! (What was the other of the two mitzvos into whose trap Solomon fell? Just wait until the next chapter.)

Chapter III

The End of Solomon's Reign

If you didn't read the last paragraph of the synopsis for chapter 10, take a look; it describes how Solomon erred by having enormous stables despite the Torah's directive not to. Here we see Solomon's other, larger error.

As we've already discussed, Solomon married the Pharaoh's daughter in order to cement a treaty with Egypt. Here we see that Solomon married princesses from many other countries in order to forge alliances with them. The first problem was that we are forbidden to marry people from certain Canaanite nations, even if they convert. The other problem is that the Torah forbids a king from having too many wives (see Deut. 17:17). The "magic number" of wives that a king is permitted is 18. Solomon had 700! The reason, the Torah tells us, is that too many wives will turn the king's heart away from G-d. That's exactly what happened.

Even though they were converted, many of Solomon's wives were not sincere converts and they continued to worship their idols. Solomon even facilitated it by building them places to perform their service, which was really wrong. As the Torah and Nach do with great people who err, he is spoken of in the strongest possible terms. In this case, the Navi speaks of Solomon as if he himself had served the idols, though of course he clearly did not do so literally.

Because Solomon allowed himself to be swayed from wholehearted devotion to G-d, G-d decided to remove the kingdom from him - but not immediately and not completely. The kingdom would be divided after Solomon's death, with ten Tribes following another king. However, because of His promise to David of an everlasting dynasty, the descendants of Solomon would continue to rule Judah. (Benjamin and Levi would remain loyal to the Davidic kings, as well.)

Until this time, everything in Solomon's life had been hunky-dory. After this decree was made, Solomon for the first time had opposition. One critic was Hadad, a member of the royal family of Edom. David's general Yoav eradicated Hadad's people and he escaped to Egypt, where he became a member of Pharaoh's household. He married Pharaoh's wife's sister. He went to Israel to make trouble for Solomon, but he didn't tell Pharaoh this, since Pharaoh was Solomon's father-in-law.

Another troublemaker was R'zon. R'zon was a former servant of David's old nemesis, King Hadadezer of Tzova. He caused problems for the rest of Solomon's life.

Finally, there was Yaravam (Jeroboam). Yaravam "bawled out" King Solomon when he closed up the Millo (see chapter 9). Yaravam had been a man of distinction - Solomon had appointed him a minister of taxation over the Tribes of Ephraim and Menashe.

Yaravam was leaving Jerusalem when G-d sent the prophet Achiya to see him. Achiya took a brand-new garment and tore it into 12 pieces. He then told Yaravam to pick up ten of them. This represented the ten Tribes that G-d was giving Yaravam to rule. (A prophecy can be "thwarted" by repentance unless it is accompanied by a physical act. This decree was effectively a "done deal.") Achiya told Yaravam that G-d promised that David's descendants would continue to reign in Jerusalem, but he would rule over the rest of Israel. And, if he would follow G-d's Torah, G-d would establish for Yaravam an eternal dynasty, just like David's. (Hint: he didn't.)

Solomon sought to execute Yaravam for opposing him in the matter of the Millo, so Yaravam ran away to Egypt. He stayed with Shishak, who had succeeded Solomon's father-in-law as Pharaoh. Yaravam stayed in Egypt until Solomon died.

Solomon ruled Israel for 40 years. When he died, he was succeeded by his son Rechavam (Rehoboam).

Chapter 12

Read Our Lips: No New Taxes

Solomon's son and heir, Rechavam, went to Shechem to be crowned. The people had summoned Yaravam back from Egypt and he was among them. The people said to Rechavam, "The tax burden under your father was very great. If you alleviate this burden, we will be your loyal subjects." Rechavam showed poor leadership by asking for three days to consider it.

His elder advisors, the ones who had served his father, gave him good advice: Choose your battles. If you give in to this request, you'll have won their support. But his peers were "yes men." They advised him to exert his authority and show the people who was boss. Not only that, they told him to be more demanding than Solomon ever was and to make sure the people knew it. Sadly, Rechavam took the advice of the young and impulsive advisors over that of his elder statesmen. (The whole scenario was orchestrated by G-d in order to fulfill the prophecy conveyed to Yaravam by Achiya.)

The problem with saying "My way or the highway" is that, when given that ultimatum, the answer is often "okay, highway." When they heard Rechavam's harsh reply, ten Tribes seceded from the union. When Rechavam sent Adoram to collect taxes, the people stoned him to death.

Conversely, Yaravam, who was also a tax collector by trade, was quite popular with the people. So much so that they asked him to rule over them. In response, Rechavam gathered his troops to force the ten Tribes to re-join the nation. G-d sent the prophet Shemaya to tell Rechavam not to go to war, so Rechavam stood down.

Yaravam, however, had a terrible idea. Realizing that the Kingdom of Judah still had Jerusalem and the Temple, he became concerned that his people would gradually long to reunite with them. To prevent that, he decided to offer alternatives to the Temple. What did he come up with? He built two golden calves and placed them at opposite ends of the country, for the people's convenience.

Now, you and I might think that a golden calf is the worst possible thing one could make, given the obvious association with the golden calf in the desert. But it was easy for Yaravam to rationalize that the golden calf must be an appropriate vehicle. His advisors convinced him that in rejecting Rechavam, G-d was also rejecting Jerusalem and the Temple. And, since Aaron made a golden calf in the absence of Moses, Yaravam should make golden calves in the absence of the Temple...

So Yaravam barricaded the roads to Jerusalem, set up idols, appointed non-Levites as priests, and made up his own holidays. Yeah, his reign was off to a great start.

Chapter 13

A False Prophet Has a True Prophecy

G-d sent a prophet to see Yaravam. (Radak quotes the Midrash that it was Iddo, but we'll call him "the man of G-d" here because that's what he is called throughout the chapter.) The man of G-d came to Yaravam as he was burning incense on his altar. The man of G-d addressed the altar saying, "A son will be born to the house of David and his name will be Yoshiyahu (Josiah). He will kill the false priests of this place and human bones will be burnt on you. As a sign that this will come to pass, the altar will split and the ashes on it will spill!"

Yaravam was not happy that this prophet was interrupting his service with such dire predictions. He stretched his arm out towards the man of G-d, but it became paralyzed and he could not bring it back. And then... the altar broke and the ashes spilled off, just as the man of G-d had said.

This concerned Yaravam. He asked the man of G-d to heal his hand, which he did. He then invited the man of G-d back to his home for a meal. The man of G-d declined, saying that G-d had commanded him not to eat or drink or to return by the same road on which he came. The man of G-d then departed (by a different road, of course).

There was a retired prophet living in Beth-el who heard that the man of G-d was in town. (There is a difference of opinion as to whether he was a real prophet or a false prophet. Rashi and the Targum Yonasan both say he was a false prophet, so let's go with that.) The false prophet invited the man of G-d to his home for a meal and the man of G-d replied with the command not to eat or drink. At this, the false prophet lied to him. "I'm also a prophet and G-d told me to go and get you." So the man of G-d accompanied the false prophet to his home.

G-d wasn't happy that the man of G-d disobeyed His directions. He lost his gift for prophecy, so G-d spoke to him through the previously-false prophet. "Because you disobeyed the word of G-d and ate and drank in this place, your corpse will not be buried in your family's grave!" (The Radak explains that this means he would not reach home. Rather, he would be killed en route.)

On his way out of town, the man of G-d was attacked by a lion and killed. Miraculously, the lion did not eat the body, nor did it touch the man of G-d's donkey. The donkey and the lion just stood there by the body. This was pretty unusual and the people reported it to the old prophet. The old prophet retrieved the corpse and buried it in his own family plot. He instructed his sons that, when he would die, he should be buried in the same grave as the man of G-d, in hopes that his own bones would not be among those burned on Yaravam's altar. (See II Kings chapter 23 to see how the prophecy of the man of G-d turned out. Hint: it takes place three hundred years later, during the reign of King Yoshiyahu/Josiah!)

And Yaravam? Despite the prophecy, the paralyzed hand, the sign of the altar splitting coming true, and the incidents with the false prophet's prophecy and the lion, he remained unmoved. He continued in his idolatrous ways. Instead of fulfilling his potential of having a lasting dynasty like David, he caused destruction to be declared on his descendants. The Talmud in Tractate Sanhedrin (102a) describes how G-d offered Yaravam a prominent place in Paradise if he repented. Instead, the Mishna there (10:2) lists Yaravam among those rare exceptions who managed to forfeit their shares in the World to Come.

Chapter 14

A Blind Man Sees Through a Disguise

Yaravam had a young son named Aviyah, who became ill. Yaravam sent his wife to see the prophet Achiya, who had predicted his ascension to the throne. It wouldn't do for people to know the idolatrous Yaravam was consulting the prophet of G-d, so he told his wife to disguise herself and to take a more modest gift than the king would normally send. (Achiya was blind, but they didn't want other people to know, either.) Yaravam's wife traveled to Achiya in Shiloh. G-d had told Achiya to expect her, so when she got there, he greeted her by name even though she was disguised and he was blind!

Achiya said, "I have a message for your husband from G-d: I took most of the kingdom from David's house and gave it to you, but you are worse than any of your predecessors! Therefore, I will eliminate all your male descendants. They won't even be properly buried! If they die in the city, dogs will eat them. If they die in the country, birds will eat them. Now, as for why you're here, Mrs. Yaravam, as you enter your city, the boy will die. He alone of Yaravam's descendants will be buried, because in him is what little good is left in your husband's house. A new king will wipe out Yaravam's house."

Yaravam's wife left and, sure enough, as she re-entered her city, the boy died. He was buried and mourned as G-d had said. Yaravam reigned in Israel for 22 years and was succeeded by his son, Nadav.

Rechavam reigned in Judah for 17 years. The people of Judah descended into idolatry and immorality worse than any previous generation, so G-d allowed them to be invaded by Shishak, king of Egypt. He carried away all the treasures of the Temple, as well as the golden shields that Solomon had made. (Rechavam replaced them with copper shields.) Rechavam and Yaravam were in a perpetual state of war. When Rechavam died, he was succeeded by his son, Aviyam.

Chapter 15

Good King Asa, Bad King Baasa

Aviyam succeeded Rechavam and was just as bad as his father had been. He was only tolerated by G-d because of the promise made to David. Yaravam was still king over Israel when Aviyam became king over Judah and Aviyam continued the animosity his father had shared with Yaravam. Aviyam only reigned three years; when he died, he was succeeded by Asa. (Yaravam was still ruling Israel.)

Unlike his father and grandfather, Asa was a righteous king. He chased the idolatry and immorality out of the kingdom of Judah. He even deposed the Queen Mother (his grandmother Maacah) because she had made an idol. He chopped up her idol and burned it. The one thing he didn't do was abolish personal altars to G-d, which were prohibited from the time the Temple was built. But he did contribute large amounts of silver and gold to the Temple.

Yaravam's son Nadav was succeeded by Baasa. (More about him at the end of the chapter.) There was war between Asa and Baasa. Baasa invaded Judah and built a fortress to seal Asa in. Asa took the gold and silver from the Temple and sent it to Ben-Hadad, the king of Aram. He reminded him of the pact between their countries and asked him to accept the gold and silver in order to drive away Baasa's forces. Ben-Hadad agreed and Baasa was repelled. The people of Judah dismantled Baasa's fortress. While his strategy worked, Asa is faulted for using the Temple treasury to hire a foreign army rather than turning to G-d.

When Asa died, he was succeeded by his son Yehoshaphat (Jehoshaphat).

Baasa was not a descendant of Yaravam and Nadav. He was from the Tribe of Issachar and he assassinated Nadav only two years into his reign. This eliminated the house of Yaravam, as G-d had said would happen. Baasa reigned 24 years and was as evil as his predecessors.

Chapter 16

"Heard about a king, he was doing swell.."

G-d spoke to the prophet Yehu about Baasa. Yehu was to tell Baasa that he really blew it. G-d elevated him to replace the sinful Yaravam, but all he did was perpetuate Yaravam's evil. Therefore, his house would receive the same curse of extinction as Yaravam's had suffered. Same deal: die in the city, eaten by dogs. Die in the field, eaten by birds.

When Baasa died, he was succeeded by his son Elah. Elah reigned only two years, when he was assassinated by Zimri, one of his head charioteers. Zimri struck Elah down when Elah was drunk and easy prey. He then declared himself king and eliminated Baasa's descendants, just as Yehu had foretold. If you think Elah's two-year reign was short, just look at Zimri's: seven days. Assassins are not the most popular people and when the army heard that Zimri assassinated Elah, they made Omri their king and went after Zimri. Zimri took refuge in the palace, but Omri burned it down and Zimri died.

Some of the people wanted Omri for king, but others favored a man named Tivni. They struggled for a while, but Tivni died and Omri became the undisputed king of the Ten Tribes.

Omri ruled for 12 years. He purchased Samaria and made it his capital. Even though he was an evil king, even worse than Yaravam and Baasa, he is praised for building up Eretz Yisrael, the land of Israel. (See Sanhedrin 102b. Hey, at least he did something right! As an aside, did you ever notice that all the land in Israel that was clearly purchased in Tanach - Hebron, Samaria, the Temple Mount - are among the most disputed?)

Omri was succeeded by his son Ahab (Achav). As bad as Omri was, Ahab managed to surpass him. Yaravam's worst sins were just the start of Ahab's evil. To make matters worse, he had an evil wife, Jezebel (Izevel) who only reinforced his already-reprehensible behavior. (Contrary to the lyrics of the Elvis song, the king was NOT "doing swell, 'til he started playing with that evil Jezebel." Ahab was rotten before; she just made him worse.) Jezebel was the daughter of the king of Tzidon and she was a Baal worshipper. (Baal was a popular idol of the time.) Ahab worshipped Baal and built altars for it. He also planted asheiras, which were trees used for idolatry.

Now refer back to Joshua chapter 6. There, Joshua pronounced a curse on anyone rebuilding Jericho. Ahab's buddy Hiel rebuilt Jericho and, even though his children kept dying, he just said, "Curse? What curse? It's just a coincidence!" It's amazing how people like Yaravam, Baasa and Hiel can see the Hand of G-d up close and personal and still keep on doing their own thing.

Chapter 17

Eliyahu HaNavi, Eliyah HaTishbi, Eliyahu HaGiladi

Elijah (Eliyahu) was a prophet (navi), who came from Tishav (making him a Tishbi) and lived in Gilad (also making him a Giladi - now you get the song!). Elijah went to Ahab with the following message: I swear by G-d that there will be no rain until I say so. (This was Elijah speaking, not G-d.) G-d then told Elijah to go hide by a certain stream off of the Jordan. Elijah was to drink from the stream and G-d would send ravens with food. (The Talmud in Chulin, 5a, says the ravens stole the food from Ahab.) After a year, the stream dried up, so G-d told him to go to a city called Tzarfas, where a local widow would support him.

When he arrived at Tzarfas, Elijah asked the widow for bread and water. She went to get the water, but she told him that she only had enough flour and oil to prepare one last meal for her son and herself. Elijah assured her that if she fed him, her flour jar and her oil jug would not run out until the rains resumed. She fed him and her oil and flour became never-emptying supplies.

After this incident, the woman's son became very sick. The Navi says that his breath stopped, but it is unclear whether or not he actually died. In either case, the woman cried to Elijah, who took the boy and laid him on his bed. Elijah cried out to G-d and stretched himself out over the boy and he was revived. He brought the boy back downstairs to his mother and said, "Look, ma'am, your son is alive!" (Modestly, Elijah did not say, "Look what I did!") Despite the previous miracle of the flour and oil, this miracle enabled the woman to see how great a prophet Elijah truly was.

A clever Rashi on Parshas Noach: The Torah tells us that before sending the dove, Noah tried sending a raven. The raven went back and forth "until the waters dried up" (Genesis 8:7). Rashi quotes the Midrash in Bereishis Rabbah, that this means that the raven was put aside for a different job, namely delivering food to Elijah when "the waters dried up" in our chapter.

Chapter 18

Hashem Hu Ha'Elokim! Hashem Hu Ha'Elokim!

This chapter tells of one of the most significant events in Jewish history: the "showdown" between G-d and the Baal on Mt. Carmel. (It wasn't much of a showdown since one of the parties - the Baal - never actually showed up. But that's because he doesn't exist.)

Let's start at the beginning:

The drought lasted three years and G-d told Elijah to go to Ahab and end it. The head of Ahab's household was the righteous Obadaiah, a convert from Edom (see Sanhedrin 39b). When Jezebel was wiping out all the prophets, Obadaiah hid 100 of them in caves and supported them with his own money. As a reward, he became a prophet, one of the twelve "minor prophets" whose books make up the volume called Trei Asar. Elijah approached Obadiah and said, "Tell Ahab that I'm here." Obadiah balked. "Oh, no. Ahab has been looking for you everywhere. I'm going to go get him, G-d will whisk you away to safety, and Ahab will kill me." Elijah replied, "Don't worry, I'll still be here when you get back." So Obadiah went and got Ahab.

When Ahab saw Elijah, he blamed the prophet for causing the drought. Elijah replied, "It's not my fault, it's yours." He told Ahab to get the 450 prophets of Baal as well as the 400 prophets of the asheira tree worshippers.

Elijah, the people, and the prophets of Baal gathered on Mt. Carmel. (The asheira prophets were no shows.) Elijah said, "Either G-d is the L-rd or Baal is - it's time to pick one!" He proposed the following contest. There were two bulls. The Baal worshippers would prepare one and he would prepare the other. Whichever one would be consumed by a fire from Heaven must be an offering to the one true Ruler. Everyone thought this was a good idea and the priests of Baal got to go first. They prepared their sacrifice and prayed, danced and cut themselves for hours, but there was no reply, because nobody was listening. Elijah mocked them. "Shout louder! Maybe Baal is sleeping, or perhaps he's in the bathroom!" Eventually the prophets of Baal had to give up.

Then it was Elijah's turn. He had a huge trench dug around his altar. He then had water poured over his sacrifice until it filled the trench. (Keep in mind that this was during a drought and water was very precious!) A fire came down from G-d and consumed the sacrifice and licked up all the water in the trench. The people cried out "Hashem Hu Ha'Elokim! G-d is the L-rd!" (We say this seven times at the conclusion of the Yom Kippur service - this is where it comes from.) Elijah told the people to seize the prophets of Baal and the people executed them.

Fasting is a traditional way of praying for rain. Elijah told Ahab, "Go and eat because rain is coming." Elijah prayed and sent his attendant out to check the horizon for clouds. Nothing. He checked seven times; on the seventh, he saw a small cloud, like a man's fist. Elijah told Ahab to hit the road so the rain wouldn't affect his journey. The skies darkened and rain came down. Ahab headed for home and Elijah accompanied him, out of respect for the king.

Chapter 19

The Thin, Still Voice

Ahab told Jezebel about what Elijah did on Mt. Carmel and she was not impressed. Just the opposite, she swore to kill Elijah for what he had done, so Elijah got out of town. (One cannot rely on a miracle to protect oneself from danger.) Elijah ran into the desert and took refuge under a lone tree. There he said that it would be better if G-d took his life than Jezebel. Then he fell asleep.

He awoke to find an angel offering him food. He ate and drank and went back to sleep.

When he got up, the angel was back with more food. The angel told Elijah to fill up because he was going on a long trip. That meal gave him the strength to walk forty days and nights, to Mt. Sinai. He spent the night in the cave where Moses stood to see G-d's glory pass by (see Exodus 33:22). Then G-d opened the conversation by asking Elijah why he had come. (Of course G-d knew, but He often starts conversations with a question, such as "Where's your brother?" to Cain or "What's that in your hand?" to Moses.) Elijah replied, "I have acted very zealously on Your behalf. I alone among the prophets am still doing Your business and Jezebel is trying to kill me."

G-d told Elijah to leave the cave and stand on the mountain, which he did. There, Elijah had a vision. First he saw a great wind smashing rocks, but he said "G-d is not in the wind." Then he saw an earthquake, but he said "G-d is not in the earthquake." Next, he saw a fire, but he said "G-d is not in the fire." Finally, he heard a tiny, quiet voice. Elijah knew that G-d was in the voice. (Long before Shakespeare, Elijah knew that things full of sound and fury often signify nothing.)

Elijah humbly covered his face and the quiet voice repeated the question, "Why are you here?" Elijah repeated his answer about how he acted zealously for G-d's sake and now his life was in danger. G-d told Elijah to go to Damascus and anoint Chazael as king of Aram, to anoint Yehu, grandson of Nimshi, as king of Israel and to appoint Elisha ben Shafat as his own successor. Among them, Chazael, Yehu and Elisha would wipe out the wicked people. G-d told Elijah not to worry: though there were only 7,000 righteous people who never worshipped Baal left in the kingdom, they would all be spared.

Elijah left and went to Elisha ben Shafat, who was driving twelve pair of oxen before him. Elijah allowed his mantle to pass over Elisha as he walked by, signifying that Elisha should follow him. Elisha asked permission to say goodbye to his parents first. Elijah gave his approval. Then Elisha slaughtered a pair of oxen and made a feast to celebrate being chosen Elijah's disciple. After the feast, Elisha followed Elijah and served him.

Chapter 20

"Hit Me!"

Ben-Hadad, King of Aram, attacked Samaria, Ahab's capital. He sent messengers telling Ahab, "Your silver and gold are mine and your wives and children are mine." Ahab took this to mean that Ben-Hadad was claiming him as a vassal and he cowardly replied, "Whatever you say: I and all that I own are yours." Ben-Hadad replied, "No, I meant that quite literally. I'm sending my army to carry away all your stuff." This made Ahab grow a spine. He consulted his advisors, then he replied, "I did everything you asked, but that's where I have to draw the line." The correspondence continued: Ben-Hadad said he would raze Samaria; Ahab told him not to count his chickens before they hatched.

Ben-Hadad was drinking with his colleagues when he got this last message and he immediately attacked Samaria. A prophet (Seder Olam says Michayahu, whom we'll meet by name in chapter 22) told Ahab that he would defeat Ben-Hadad and recognize G-d through the victory. Ahab asked through whom the victory would be wrought and he was told through the inexperienced youths, who were hardly trained combat soldiers. The youths were 232 in number; Ahab's whole army was 7,000. (These may be the 7,000 who never worshipped Baal referred to in the previous chapter.)

Ben-Hadad got word that soldiers (the youths) were advancing. He gave orders to take them alive. The youths led the army and they struck the army of Aram, who ran away. Then Ahab came out with his horses and chariots and defeated Aram. The prophet told Ahab to be on guard, because Aram would attack again in a few months.

The servants of Ben-Hadad told him that G-d must be a god of mountains, which is why Israel could defeat them there, but if they fought in a valley...! So, a few months later, Aram attacked Israel in a valley. The prophet told Ahab he would defeat Aram there, too. Israel killed 100,000 of the army of Aram, who fled into the city. The wall fell on 27,000 of them. Ben-Hadad hid.

His servants told Ben-Hadad that the Jewish kings are supposed to be merciful, so they should give themselves up. They went to Ahab to ask for Ben-Hadad's life and Ahab erred by referring to Ben-Hadad as his brother. The servants leaped on the opportunity and said, "Yes, your brother." They brought him out and Ahab made friends with him. Ben-Hadad promised to return the cities Aram had previously conquered and the two kings forged a treaty.

Change the scene: A prophet approached a man on the street and said, "Hit me!" The man refused to hit him and was killed by a lion. The prophet told another man to hit him, and this man (wisely) obliged. The prophet, now wounded, put a bandage over his eyes as a disguise and approached Ahab. He told the following story:

"I was in the battle and I was charged with watching a prisoner. I was told that if he got away, I would have to pay a talent of silver (an exorbitant amount) or my life would be forfeit. While I was preoccupied, the man got away. Am I responsible?" The king replied, "You yourself have said so!" The prophet removed his disguise and said to Ahab, "G-d says that He delivered Ben-Hadad into your hands and you let him get away! Now it's your life for his and your nation for his!" Ahab returned to Samaria appropriately distressed by this message.

Chapter 21

Ahab and the Vineyard of Naboth

Despite the victories that G-d permitted him, Ahab didn't improve. His neighbor Naboth (Navos) had a vineyard next to the palace. Ahab wanted to purchase the vineyard and make a vegetable garden out of it. He offered Naboth a better vineyard or cash for it, but Naboth replied, "G-d forbid that I should sell my ancestral property!" Ahab had a temper tantrum and pouted. He lay down and faced the wall, refusing to eat. His wife Jezebel asked what the problem was. He replied, "Naboth won't sell me his vineyard." (Ahab conveniently left out the part about the land being Naboth's ancestral property.) Jezebel said, "Don't worry - I'll get it for you."

(A king had the authority to seize land for eminent domain in the case of the public's good, but not for his personal use, otherwise Ahab no doubt would have done so. And don't kid yourself - Ahab knew exactly what Jezebel was planning to do, if not the details of how.)

Jezebel had a fast day proclaimed and seated Naboth at the head, next to two false witnesses who lied and said that Naboth cursed G-d and the king. Naboth was stoned to death on the strength of their testimony. (When someone is executed for rebellion against the king, the king inherits his property.)

So, Ahab had his vineyard, but when he went to enjoy it, he was met by Elijah. Elijah had a message from G-d: "Just like the dogs licked Naboth's blood, so shall they lick yours. Since you've dedicated your life to doing evil, I will eradicate your household, as I did to Yaravam and Baasa - those who die in town will be eaten by dogs and those who die in the field will be eaten by birds. And Jezebel will be eaten by dogs."

Even though Ahab was the worst, most sinful king so far, he did something his predecessors hadn't: he showed remorse. When he heard the prophecy, he tore his clothes, fasted and put on sackcloth. G-d said to Elijah that since Ahab humbled himself, the prophecy would not be fulfilled during his lifetime. Instead, it was suspended until his son's reign.

Chapter 22

Jumping Jehoshaphat!

Aram and Israel had peace for three years. King Yehoshafat (Jehoshaphat) of Judah was visiting Ahab when Ahab mentioned that Ben-Hadad had not returned the city of Ramot Gilad. (Remember his promise in chapter 20 to return all the captured cities?) He asked Yehoshafat if he would join him in battle against Aram. Yehoshafat said, "Let's check with a prophet first." Ahab called his prophets of Baal and they all said Israel would be victorious.

"Um...maybe there's an actual prophet of G-d we could ask?" asked Yehoshafat.

"Well, there's one," replied Ahab, "Michayahu, but I hate him because he always prophesies evil about me!"

They sent for Michayahu. Meanwhile, another prophet had made iron horns and was saying that Ahab would gore Aram. Michayahu was told by the messenger who got him that all the other prophets had predicted good things; Michayahu replied that he would only say what G-d told him.

When Michayahu arrived, Ahab asked whether he should attack Aram. "Well, good luck with that!" said Michayahu. "Come on, out with it!" prompted Ahab. "Fine," said Michayahu, "You asked for it. I see Israel scattering like sheep without a shepherd. They have no leader and they all run home to safety." (This means that their leader - Ahab - would be killed.)

"What did I tell you?" Ahab asked Yehoshafat. "He always predicts bad things about me!"

Michayahu continued. "I see G-d on His throne asking who will lure Ahab to his doom in Ramot Gilad. The spirit of Naboth stepped forward and volunteered to do so, by placing a false prophecy in the mouths of all these men."

Tzidkiyahu, who had made the iron horns, struck Michayahu and asked, "You think your prophecy is better than mine?" Michayahu replied, "You'll find out when you have to go into hiding because your prophecy was wrong!"

Ahab had Michayahu arrested. "Lock him up and feed him nothing but bread and water until I return," Ahab ordered. "If you return, then G-d didn't speak through me," replied Michayahu.

So Ahab and Yehoshafat led their armies to battle against Aram in Ramot Gilad. Ahab's idea was to disguise himself and fight among the troops. Yehoshafat remained in his royal robes. Meanwhile, the king of Aram was commanding his charioteers to focus all their attention on Ahab. Since Yehoshafat was the only one wearing royal robes, they initially assumed he was Ahab, but when they realized he wasn't, they withdrew from him. An archer of Aram randomly fired and hit Ahab between the plates of his armor. Wounded, Ahab was removed from the battlefield. He was propped up in a chariot and ultimately died of his wounds. His blood pooled in the bottom of the chariot.

When his army realized he had died, they dispersed. The chariot in which Ahab had died was washed out and - you guessed it! - dogs lapped up the blood, as Elijah had predicted (in chapter 21).

Let's talk about Yehoshafat, king of Judah: Yehoshafat reigned 25 years. He was righteous, like his father Asa, although he didn't stop the Jews from offering sacrifices on private altars. Yehoshafat was the king of Judah who made peace with Israel. He drove out religious cults that used prostitutes that had remained from his father's day. Yehoshafat built ships to bring gold, but they were never used because they got wrecked. Achaziah, who succeeded Ahab, suggested that his sailors travel with Yehoshafat's, but Yehoshafat declined. Yehoshafat was succeeded by his son Yehoram.

Achaziah reigned for two years, but he was just as rotten as his parents, Ahab and Jezebel. He worshipped Baal and angered G-d. His story continues in II Kings.