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Volume I:
Neviim Rishonim - Early Prophets

Section F:
Melachim Bet - II Kings

III Kings

Chapter 1

Lord of the Flies

NOTE: It's going to get a little bit confusing soon if you don't pay attention, because some names are going to start repeating. Just as many British monarchs had the same name - and the US had two Presidents named John Adams and two named George Bush - there are some kings with duplicated names. We ended the book of I Kings with Achaziah, son of Ahab, king of Israel, but there will also soon be an Achaziah, son of Yehoram, king of Judah. That Yehoram is the son of Yehoshafat (Jehoshaphat), but there will be a king of Israel also named Yehoram before this chapter is through. Later, there will be a second king named Yaravam, also of Israel. So just watch to see whether it's a king of Judah (which included Benjamin and Levi) or a king of Israel (Ten Tribes) and you'll do just fine.

So, Ahab died and was succeeded by his son, Achaziah. Achaziah had a fall (Rashi says down the stairs, Radak says through a skylight) and was badly injured. He sent messengers to Baal-Zevuv, the idol of Ekron, to see if he would recover. (You probably know Baal-Zevuv by one or two other names. It's often Anglicized "Beelzebub" and it literally translates into "Lord of the Flies," as in the book of the same name.)

An angel came to the prophet Elijah with a message: G-d wasn't real happy about Achaziah inquiring of an idol, so he would die of his injuries. Elijah told the messengers, who returned to the king with that prophecy. Achaziah heard it and asked, "Who told you that?" They replied, "A hairy man with a leather belt." "Elijah!" he exclaimed.

Achaziah sent a squad of fifty men to bring Elijah to him, but Elijah called upon a Heavenly fire that consumed them. Achaziah sent another fifty, who were likewise consumed. A third squad of fifty was sent and the captain was none too keen to be consumed by a Heavenly fire, so he called out, "We don't really want to be doing this; we were ordered to by the king. So could you please not consume us?" This being a reasonable request, the angel instructed Elijah to accompany the troops back to Achaziah, secure in the knowledge that he would be safe.

When he got there, Elijah reiterated the prophecy that Achaziah would die of his injuries. Sure enough, he died. Achaziah had no sons, so he was succeeded by his brother, Yehoram. (The other Yehoram was king of Judah at this time, but we'll learn more about him in chapter 8.)

Chapter 2

“Over the Rainbow” (or “Bear with Me”)

G-d told Elijah that He was going to take him into so Elijah headed out for Beth-El with Elisha in tow. The other prophets they passed called out to Elisha, “Don’t you know that G-d is taking your master away today?” Elisha replied, “I know, so be quiet!”

Elijah asked Elisha to remain in Gilgal, and again he asked him to stay in Jericho, but Elisha refused to let his teacher go without him. They came to the Jordan and had picked up fifty prophets by this time. Elijah took his cloak and struck the Jordan with it; the Jordan parted so that he and Elisha could cross. (The fifty prophets remained behind.)

Elijah asked his disciple what he could grant him before his departure and Elisha asked for a “double portion” of Elijah’s spirit. (Rashi says this refers to Elijah’s blessing for a particularly high level of prophecy.) Elijah said, “That’s a tough one. If you see me taken away, you’ll know that it’s been granted.”

While they were talking, a fiery chariot drawn by fiery horses came down and separated them. Elijah was carried up to Heaven in a whirlwind, his cloak falling to the ground. Elisha cried out and tore his clothes in mourning. He picked up Elijah’s cloak and started back.

When Elisha got to the Jordan, he struck it and said, “Where is Hashem, the G-d of Elijah?” and the waters parted for him as they had for his master. The fifty prophets saw this and knew that G-d had appointed Elisha as Elijah’s successor. The prophets asked to go look for Elijah, but Elisha said, “Don’t bother.” They pressed the issue until Elisha relented. They looked for three days, but didn’t find him. Elisha said, “I told you so!”

The people of Jericho asked Elisha for help - their water had gone bad and people were dying. Elisha requested a new jar filled with salt. He threw the jar into the water, which became purified. (This is a “double miracle,” since salt normal spoils water for drinking!)

Elisha left Jericho to return to Beth-El. Some youths came and starting taunting him. “Get out of here, baldy!” they cried. He cursed them and two bears came out of the woods and tore them apart. (The commentators explain this story allegorically in a variety of ways, but it still seems to be an over-reaction on Elisha’s part. The Talmud in Sotah, 47a, says that Elisha was punished for this act with a serious illness.)

Elisha proceeded to Mt. Carmel, where Elijah had defeated the prophets of Baal, and from there Elisha proceeded to Samaria, the capital of the kingdom of Israel.

Chapter 3

Looks Like Blood From Here

Ahab’s son Yehoram became king of Israel after his brother Achaziah died and, like their parents, he was pretty rotten, just not as bad. He got rid of the altar to Baal that his father had made, although he left the asheira tree cult alone.

Mesha, king of Moav, had paid Ahab a hefty annual tribute of sheep and rams. When Ahab died, Mesha stopped making payments, so Yehoram went out to battle Moav. He asked Yehoshafat, king of Judah, to join him and Yehoshafat agreed. (Edom was a vassal state to Judah, so they were on board, as well.) They went to Moav by way of the desert of Edom. En route, they ran out of water. Yehoram expressed the concern that G-d was handing Israel, Judah and Edom over to Moav. Yehoshafat asked if there was a prophet close enough to consult. There was: Elisha.

When the three rulers arrived, Elisha asked Yehoram, "What do we have to do with one another? Go ask your father's prophets (of Baal) or your mother's prophets (of the asheira cult)!" Yehoram replied, "Don't be like that! G-d is delivering us into Moav's hands!"

Elisha said, "I wouldn't help you, except that Yehoshafat is with you and he's a respectable person." A prophet needs to be in a good mood to receive a prophecy and seeing Yehoram got Elisha all upset, so he sent for a musician to calm him down.

Elisha prophesied, "You won't see rain, but the valley will be filled with water and all your animals will drink. More importantly, G-d will deliver Moav into your hands. You are to strike down every city, cut down every tree (normally forbidden in warfare), stop up the streams and fill the fields with rocks." The next morning, water was flowing in from the direction of Edom and it filled the land.

The army of Moav had prepared for the invasion and were standing ready. When they saw the sun shining on the water, it looked red to them, like blood. They assumed that the three invading armies must have turned on one another and wiped themselves out. They went to loot the scene of the massacre and found themselves in the middle of the Israelite camp, surrounded by sword-wielding Israelites. The Israelites easily defeated them, then did all that Elisha had commanded them.

The king of Moav saw he was defeated. He tried to break through to attack the king of Edom, but he was unable. He then sacrificed his son. (It's unclear to whom "his" refers here. Rashi says it means the king of Moav sacrificed his own son, but Radak says it means the king of Edom's son.) The human sacrifice angered G-d and caused Him to recall the idolatry that was going on in Israel. G-d's favor removed, the siege was discontinued.

Chapter 4

"My head! My head!"

A prophet's widow came to Elisha crying that she couldn't pay her debts and that the creditor was going to take her children as servants to work it off. Elisha asked her what she had in the house; all she had was oil.

"No problem," he said. "Go to all your neighbors and borrow vessels - as many as you can! Pour oil into all these vessels until they're all full." This she did. She poured oil until she ran out of jugs to hold it. She sold the oil, paid off her debt, and was able to live on the balance.

Elisha traveled to a place called Shuneim. A local woman invited him for a meal. Eventually, he became a regular guest at this woman's table, as he passed her house on his travels. The woman asked her husband to build an addition to their home so that Elisha could have his own room there.

One time, when Elisha was staying there, he told his servant Gehazi to get their hostess. He told Gehazi to ask the woman, "You have done so much for us, what can we do for you?" Gehazi reported back that the woman had no children and would like one. Elisha told the woman that in a year's time she would have a son. She said, "Don't tease me," but he was serious and, sure enough, she had a son.

The boy grew. One day in the field, he called out "My head! My head!" and he collapsed. The boy's father had him carried to his mother, who held him in her lap until noon, when he died. She put the boy on Elisha's bed and told her husband to get her a donkey and an attendant so she could go see Elisha.

"Why?" asked the man. "It's not a special day." "Just do it." she said. She traveled to Elisha at Mt. Carmel.

When she saw Elisha, she threw herself at his feet. Gehazi took the role of body guard and pushed her away. (The Talmud in Brachos, 10b, says that Gehazi took the opportunity to grope the woman. If that seems random, it will make more sense the more we learn about Gehazi in the next chapter.) Elisha saw that the woman was distressed and told Gehazi to let her be.

The woman said, "I didn't come to you asking for a son - I asked you not to toy with me!" Elisha had Gehazi get his things and accompany the woman. Gehazi was to lay Elisha's staff on the boy's face. The woman insisted on staying with Elisha. Gehazi ran ahead and put the staff on the boy's face, but nothing happened. He ran back and told Elisha.

Elisha arrived. He entered the room with the boy and shut the door behind him. He prayed and stretched himself over the boy, warming him. He walked around, then stretched himself over the boy again. The boy sneezed seven times, then opened his eyes. Elisha called the woman to come and get her son.

Returning to Gilgal, Elisha passed a band of prophets who had a problem: they made a stew with some poisonous mushrooms and it was making everyone violently ill. There was a famine and they had no other food. Elisha had them pour the stew back into the pot. He added some flour and cooked it together. Then he told them to dish it out because it was now wholesome food.

A man came with bread for the prophets, but it wasn't nearly enough. (The simple reading is that there were 20 loaves to feed 100 people, which is actually pretty good. The Talmud in Kesubos, 106a, clarifies that there was one loaf for every hundred people - that's very different!) Elisha told them not to worry, just start handing out bread and not only would everyone be fed, but there would be leftovers! Sure enough, that's what happened. (Please note: If you ever hear a story about someone raising a person from the dead and feeding a large crowd with a few loaves, such things were recorded in this chapter first!)

Chapter 5

Want to see something kind of cool?

Naaman was a general in Aram, but he had tzaraas (a skin condition that for simplicity's sake we'll translate as leprosy, even though it's not exactly the same). Naaman's wife had a Jewish servant girl, who suggested that Elisha might be able to cure him. Naaman approached the king of Aram, who wrote Naaman a letter of introduction to Yehoram, king of Israel. Naaman brought with him silver, gold and clothes.

When Yehoram got the letter asking him to have Naaman cured, he was worried that Aram was merely seeking a pretext to go to war. Elisha heard about Naaman and sent word to the king that he should send Naaman to him so that he'll know there's a prophet in Israel.

Elisha instructed Naaman to bathe seven times in the Jordan and he would be healed. Naaman scoffed at this. "We have better rivers in Damascus and they haven't cured me!" Naaman's servant said to him, "If the prophet told you to do a difficult thing, wouldn't you have listened? This is so easy, it's at least worth a shot!" So Naaman bathed in the Jordan. Not only was he cured of his leprosy, his skin was completely rejuvenated, like a young boy's.

Naaman returned to Elisha and offered him the riches he had brought, but Elisha declined. Naaman pressed him to take a gift, but Elisha stood firm.

"Well, I'm asking YOU for a gift," said Naaman. "Please let me load my caravan with the earth of the Holy Land so that I can build an altar. From now on, I will only worship Hashem and no other god." (Naaman stipulated that, when the king of Aram would take him to worship his gods, he would have to let the king think he was doing so. Elisha told him not to worry about it; a Jew would not be permitted to do so, but it was okay for Naaman.)

Naaman departed. It was at this point that Gehazi revealed his true colors. He thought it was foolish of Elisha to let all that treasure get away and he resolved to get some of it. He ran after Naaman and said, "Elisha sent me. We just got some guests. Could you send a talent of silver and two sets of clothes?" (A talent is about 150 lbs.) "Please, take TWO talents of silver," Naaman insisted, so Gehazi did. He hid his ill-gotten gain and sent his attendants away.

The problem with working for a prophet is that they know things. If you think you can sneak around behind their backs, forget about it! Elisha asked Gehazi where he had gone and Gehazi said, "Nowhere." Elisha was livid. He had refused payment in order to sanctify G-d's Name, which Gehazi had now desecrated. He cursed Gehazi and his descendants with Naaman's leprosy.

After this incident, Gehazi only got worse; the Mishna in Sanhedrin (10:2) lists him as one of the people who forfeited their share in the World to Come. Nevertheless, the Talmud (Sanhedrin 107b) criticizes Elisha for rebuking Gehazi too harshly, discouraging repentance. This was the cause of the second illness Elisha had. (Refer back to the incident with the bears in chapter 2.)

Now, we promised to show you something kind of cool; here it is: We know that Torah is the blueprint of the universe. Everything that ever will be can be found somewhere in the Torah if one knows where to look. Allusions to future events, such as Chanukah and Purim, are famous examples of this phenomenon. So, where can we find an allusion to Naaman in the Torah?

In Hebrew, the name Naaman starts and ends with the letter Nun. There are only three verses in the Torah that start and end with Nun: Leviticus 13:9 ("If a person has leprosy, they should be brought to a Kohein"), Numbers 32:32 ("We will cross armed before G-d to Canaan and take our inheritance across the Jordan"), and Deuteronomy 18:15 ("G-d will raise a prophet like me from among you - to him you shall listen"). It's interesting to note that the only three verses that start and end with the same letter as Naaman's name refer to leprosy, the Jordan, and a prophet - all key features in the story of Naaman!

Make of that what you will...

Chapter 6

Stop This Cannibalism!

The student prophets said to Elisha that their study hall was too small. (Attendance was booming since Gehazi got kicked out.) They went to go build themselves a new school. When they arrived at the Jordan to cut down trees, one of the prophets suffered a mishap. The head of the axe flew off into the water and sank like a stone. This made the prophet especially distraught, as it was borrowed and he couldn't afford to replace it. "No worries," said Elisha. He cut a new axe-handle and threw it into the water. It floated back up with the axe-head attached to it. (You will note that under normal circumstances, iron does not float.)

The King of Aram planned a series of raids on Israel and he set an ambush. Elisha knew about it prophetically and sent word to Yehoram, king of Israel, to avoid certain places. When the king of Aram saw that his traps were being avoided, he asked his advisors which of his subjects was tipping off the Jews. "None of us, your majesty!" they replied. "There is a prophet named Elisha who knows even what you discuss in private!" The king of Aram sent his soldiers to arrest Elisha.

Elisha got up in the morning and saw the army of Aram waiting for him. His attendant was worried, but Elisha was unconcerned. He prayed to G-d to "open the eyes" of the attendant. He did, and the servant saw that they were protected by a fiery Heavenly army. Elisha then prayed to G-d to blind the army of Aram, which He did. But, just as "opening the eyes" of the attendant enabled him to perceive certain things, "blinding" the army kept them from seeing certain things. (Had they been literally blinded, they would have no doubt "freaked out.") Elisha said to the army, "You're going the wrong way! Let me lead you to the one you seek." He led them to the capital in Samaria, where he prayed that G-d enable them to see. Their vision restored, they found themselves surrounded by the fully-armed Israelite army.

King Yehoram asked Elisha whether they should strike down the army of Aram, but Elisha said no. "You wouldn't kill prisoners you captured with conventional weapons. Rather, feed them well and send them home." They served the army of Aram a feast and sent them back in safety. Ben-Hadad, king of Aram, heard about what happened and decided that sending raiding parties into Israel was a strategy that was not going to work, so it was discontinued.

There was a period of peace for a while, but then Ben-Hadad laid siege to Samaria. There was a famine in the land and people were starving. Such normally disgusting things as a donkey's head (for food) and pigeon dung (for kindling) were going for exorbitant prices. Yehoram was walking on the city wall, when a woman cried out to him. He assumed she was going to ask for food (which he didn't have); instead, she wanted him to judge a case. "This woman said to me that we should cook and eat my son today and then we'd cook and eat her son tomorrow. Well, we ate my son, now it's her turn and she's hidden him!" This so upset the king that he tore his clothes and people could see he was wearing sackcloth under his robes. Yehoram swore that he would execute Elisha. (Why? What did Elisha do? Well, Yehoram reasoned that Elisha had the power to end the famine just as Elijah had ended the drought in his day.)

The king sent a messenger to Elisha, who was sitting with the Sanhedrin. Of course, Elisha, being a prophet, already knew what was going on and he said to his companions, "Do you see what that son of a murderer has done? He sent this man to chop off my head! When he gets here, throw him out, because his master is no doubt behind him!" However, when the messenger arrived and heard this, Yehoram realized that the famine was due to his own evil, not due to inaction on Elisha's part.

Chapter 7

Better Than a Donkey's Head!

Elisha said "Listen up! At this time tomorrow, a single shekel will buy a seah of flour or two seah of barley!" (A seah is a measure between three and four gallons. Contrast this with the previous chapter in which a half gallon container of pigeon dung for fuel cost five silver pieces and a donkey's head cost eighty silver pieces!) One of the king's officers mocked this prophecy, saying, "Even if G-d opened windows in the sky, could such a thing happen?" Elisha replied, "You will see it, but you will not benefit from it."

There were four lepers outside the city gates. (Traditionally these were Gechazi and his sons - see Talmud Sotah 47a.) They said, "Why sit here until we starve to death? Let's go to the camp of Aram - they'll either save us or kill us quickly." They entered the camp at twilight and found it empty. G-d had caused the army of Aram to hear the sound of a great invading force and they had run away. The lepers ate and drank and helped themselves to valuables, which they hid. (You know: typical Gechazi behavior.) Then one of them said, "You know, it's only a matter of time before people find out about this. We should go and report it so we don't get in trouble." They went and reported it to the authorities. Yehoram suspected a trap. "They're hiding. They're waiting for us to come for food, then they'll ambush us." So, they sent two horsemen to check it out. The soldiers followed the tracks of the army of Aram all the way to the Jordan; they found the way littered with equipment that Aram had discarded in their haste to escape. They reported to the king that things were indeed as they seemed. The people looted the camp of Aram and, sure enough, a seah of flour and two seah of barley went for a shekel each.

The officer who mocked the prophecy was assigned duty at the gate and was trampled by the people in their haste for food. As Elisha said, he saw the prophecy come true, but he did not live long enough to enjoy it himself.

Chapter 8

A New King for Aram

Before the famine of the previous chapter, Elisha told the Shunnamite woman (see chapter 4) that it was coming and that her family should relocate. They went and lived in the land of the Philistines for a few years. When they returned, they found squatters living on their land, who wouldn't move. The Shunnamite woman went to the king so he would force the squatters to vacate.

Gechazi (the leper, still hanging around from the previous chapter) was telling King Yehoram about his adventures with Elisha, including how Elisha revived the dead boy. In walked the Shunnamite woman and Gechazi said, "Speak of the devil! This is the mother of the boy I was just telling you about!" (As usual for these synopses, this is translated in the vernacular, rather than literally.) The king questioned the woman, who corroborated Gechazi's stories, then the king ordered her property returned to her.

Meanwhile, Ben-Hadad, king of Aram, had become ill and Elisha went to visit him. The king sent his servant Chazael to Elisha with forty camels, laden with gifts. Chazael was to ask Elisha if Ben-Hadad would recover from this illness. Elisha told Chazael, "Tell him yes, but he will indeed die." (The ambiguity is because Ben-Hadad WOULD die - just not of his illness! This is reflected in a kri/ksiv, in which the text has two meanings. It is read "lech amar lo chayo tichyeh." The kri is lo spelled lamed-vav - "Go tell him 'you shall live.'" The ksiv is lo spelled lamed-alef - "Go tell 'you shall not live.'" Elisha started crying and Chazael asked why. Elisha replied, "I can see the evil you will wreak on Israel." "Me?" asked Chazael, "What can I do?" Elisha replied, "G-d has shown me you as king of Aram."

Chazael returned to Ben-Hadad, who asked what Elisha had said. "He told me you'll recover," said Chazael. The next day, Chazael smothered Ben-Hadad in his bed and became king.

In the fifth year of the reign of Ahab's son Yehoram as king of Israel, Yehoshafat's son, also named Yehoram, became king of Judah. The kings of Israel were generally a pretty rotten bunch, but the kings of Judah were usually okay. Yehoram of Judah was an exception. He married Ahab's daughter who was the same kind of influence as him as Jezebel had been on Ahab (i.e., not a good one). Yehoram of Judah reigned for eight years. During that time, Edom, which had been a vassal state, rebelled and appointed a king over themselves. Yehoram of Judah went to fight, but they were unable to re-conquer Edom.

Yehoram of Judah died and was succeeded by his son Achaziah. (This is our second Achaziah; the first was king of Israel before the other Yehoram.) Achaziah's mother was Atalya, granddaughter of Omri (Ahab's father). We don't normally tell you about the mothers of the kings, but Atalya will be important to us in chapter 11. Like his father, Achaziah was an evil king, comparable to the family of Ahab, to whom they were related by marriage.

Achaziah (of Judah) and Yehoram (of Israel) went to war against Chazael, king of Aram. Yehoram was wounded and was sent to recuperate. Achaziah went to visit Yehoram. This sets the stage for what happens in the next chapter.

Chapter 9

What a Meshugga Wants

Elisha called one of his students. (Rashi says this is Yonah - Jonah, who was later swallowed by a fish. We'll officially meet Yonah later, in chapter 14.) Elisha instructed him to take a flask of oil and anoint Yehu as king of Israel. After doing so, Yonah was to run away, before Yehoram, the current king, could find out about it.

Yonah found Yehu, a commander in the army, sitting with the other officers. He took him aside privately to give him a message. When they were alone, Yonah anointed Yehu and informed him that G-d was making him king. Part of his job was to strike down the house of Ahab, as per G-d's word. Yonah then ran away, as instructed.

Yehu's colleagues thought Yonah was a lunatic. "What did that meshugga want?" they asked. (The Navi actually uses the word "meshugga," by the way.) Yehu replied, "Nothing - just the ramblings of a crazy person." They didn't believe him and pressed for details. He told them what happened and they proclaimed him king. Yehu said, "Fine, if it's what you want, then I'll be king. But no one may leave the city so that Yehoram doesn't find out yet."

Yehu rode to Jezreel, where Yehoram was recuperating from his wounds and Achaziah, king of Judah, was visiting him. (This is where we left them at the end of the last chapter.) The city watchman reported to Yehoram that a group on horses was coming. Yehoram sent a rider to ask if they came in peace. When asked, Yehu said, "What's it to you? Get in the back of my ranks!" The watchman reported that the messenger hadn't returned, so Yehoram sent a second and the same thing happened again. (The soldiers were easily intimidated by a high-ranking officer leading a large force.) As the invading force drew closer, the watchman recognized the leader as Yehu. Hearing this, Yehoram got out of his sickbed and took his chariot to meet Yehu. They crossed paths by the vineyard that Yehoram's parents, Ahab and Jezebel, had killed Naboth to acquire.

Yehoram asked Yehu what if he came in peace. Yehu replied, "What does peace mean to your idolatrous witch of a mother?" From this antagonistic response, Yehoram knew it was a trap. He tried to flee, but Yehu killed him with an arrow. He then had the body thrown into Naboth's field as a sort of retribution for the murder.

Achaziah, king of Judah, had accompanied Yehoram and had also fled. Yehu pursued him and had him killed, as well. He was brought back to Jerusalem and buried with the other kings of Judah.

Yehu entered the city. Jezebel knew he was coming, so she got dressed and put on make up. (She might have wanted to meet death with dignity, but Rashi and Radak both suggest that she hoped to seduce Yehu into sparing her.) Jezebel stood there looking out her window, nonchalantly. When he entered, she said, "Is that you, Zimri?" referring to the Zimri who assassinated King Elah and seized the throne for himself in I Kings chapter 16. Yehu instructed his men to push Jezebel out the window. Her blood ran down the wall and Yehu trampled her with his horse. After eating and drinking, Yehu ordered that Jezebel be given a proper burial, but it was too late. Dogs had eaten her, as prophesized. The only parts remaining were her skull, feet and hands. Chazal (the Rabbis) tell us that the reason these parts were spared is because, for all her evil, even Jezebel wasn't completely bad. She used to dance at weddings in order to gladden the brides. This one mitzvah was rewarded, even as she had to pay for all the evil she had wrought (see Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 17).

Chapter 10

And that's the story of Ahab...

Jezebel may have been the queen, but Ahab had other wives and concubines. Through them, he had 70 sons and grandsons, most of whom were in Samaria. Yehu wrote to the governors of Jezreel and Samaria asking if they were going to support him or try to prop up one of Ahab's descendants as a successor. Seeing that Yehu had defeated both Yehoram and Achaziah, the elders of the cities decided not to oppose him. Yehu said, "If so, you must send me the heads of Ahab's heirs." Having no alternative, the elders complied. Yehu had the heads placed in two piles by the gates. He addressed the nation assuring them that they were guiltless in the death of these men, as it had been ordained by G-d in Elijah's prophecy (I Kings 21).

Yehu struck down Ahab's remaining descendants in Jezreel, as well as Ahab's supporters, until none remained. Yehu was returning to Samaria when he met some relatives of Achaziah, the king of Judah he had killed. Yehu had them captured and killed as part of his purge. (Remember that Ahab's children had married into the royal line of Judah, as well.)

Next, Yehu met Yehonadav, a distinguished person. He asked Yehonadav if he had his support. When Yehonadav said yes, Yehu brought him into his chariot. They came to Samaria where Yehu finished the job of wiping out Ahab's heirs. He then did a seemingly-bizarre thing. "Ahab only worshipped Baal a little," he proclaimed. "Just wait until you see how much I'M going to worship Baal!" He called all the priests of Baal to him, but he was really "working undercover" in order to trap them. He called a big "Baal festival" and Baal-worshippers came from all over the country to the Temple of Baal in Samaria. No G-d-worshippers allowed. Yehu gave each attendee a special garment to wear (this enabled them to be identified). Yehu posted 80 guards and charged them, on pain of death, not to let any of the Baal-worshippers escape. Yehu waited until after the sacrifice was completed, then he had his men strike them down. They burned the idols and demolished the temple of Baal. The site where it stood was turned into a public restroom, for good measure.

He may have destroyed the worship of Baal in Israel, but Yehu left the golden calves of Yeravam in place. His intention wasn't religious but political: like Yeravam, he didn't want the Jews of Israel going to the Temple in Judah. Nevertheless, this was a grievous oversight. However, he had done very well in destroying the house of Ahab and the worship of Baal, so G-d sent word through a prophet (Rashi says Jonah again) that Yehu's dynasty would last four more generations. With this assurance, he could have then safely removed the golden calves without fear, but he still didn't. This displeased G-d, which led to Yehu's kingdom being weakened, not strengthened. Chazael, king of Aram, started making incursions on Israel's borders.

Yehu reigned 28 years and was succeeded by his son Yehoachaz.

Chapter 11

And One Queen

Atalya, mother of Achaziah, saw her son was dead and took the opportunity to eradicate his heirs, her own grandchildren. (Remember, she was the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel - the apple doesn't fall far from the tree!) She wiped all the descendants of Solomon, through whom the throne is transmitted, except for one. This one was saved by Yehosheva.

Who was Yehosheva? She was: Yehoram's daughter, Achaziah's sister, wife of Yehoyada, the Kohein Gadol (High Priest). She was Atalya's own daughter.

So, Yehosheva took her infant nephew Yoash and hid him from Atalya. He was hidden in the Temple for six years, while Atalya usurped the throne. In the seventh year, Yehoyada called together the leaders of the people and revealed to them that a rightful heir was still alive. It was time to restore him.

Yehoyada divided his forces so as to protect the young king from any who would harm him. With everyone in place, Yehoyada crowned Yoash with David's ceremonial crown (see II Samuel 12) and gave him the Torah scroll that all kings must carry. The people cheered, "Long live the king!"

Atalya heard the commotion coming from the Temple and went to investigate. When she saw what was going on, she tore her clothes and shouted, "It's a coup!" (Like she should talk!) Yehoyada had Atalya arrested, so that she wouldn't be executed in the Temple. She was marched through the back streets to the service entrance of the palace and was executed there.

Yehoyada then forged a covenant between the people and G-d, and between the people and the king. The people tore down the temple of Baal in Judah and smashed the idols. They marched the new king to the palace via the public thoroughfare and placed him on the throne. The Navi doesn't tell us any specifics of Atalya's reign, except that the people rejoiced that it was over.

Chapter 12

Yehoyada Invents the Pushka

Yoash - also known as Yehoash - became king of Judah at the age of seven. He was a righteous king, but he did not remove the private altars.

When Yehoash saw the Temple in a state of disrepair, he decided that it was time to fix things up. He instructed the Kohanim ("priests") to solicit donations and to use them to repair the Temple. Many years passed and the work still was not done. (The Kohanim were not motivated to act as fundraisers.) Yehoash therefore hit upon a new plan. Yehoyada the Kohein Gadol (High Priest) took a chest and drilled a hole in the top, effectively inventing the pushka. The donation box was placed next to the altar. When it was full, the money would be counted out and given to the workmen, who would buy lumber and stones. In this way, the repairs of the Temple were finally carried out.

Chazael, king of Aram, conquered Gath and then set his eye on Jerusalem. Yehoash took all the treasures of the Temple and his palace and sent them to Chazael as a pay-off not to invade. Yehoash then fled Jerusalem.

His own men rebelled against him and murdered him. Yehoash reigned for forty years and was succeeded by his son, Amatzyah.

(It is not recounted here, but in Divrei HaYamim - II Chronicles chapter 24 - Yehoash's spiritual decline is discussed. Although he started out righteous, after the death of Yehoyada, he allowed himself to be worshipped and he ordered the death of the prophet Zechariah, who chastised the people. We will IY"H discuss these events in greater detail when we reach Divrei HaYamim.)

Chapter 13

A Posthumous Miracle

Yehoachaz, son of Yehu, had become king of Israel and he was one of the bad kings, perpetuating the evil of his predecessors. The people were led into idolatry and G-d became angry with them, so He allowed Aram to invade and oppress them. Yehoachaz pleaded to G-d, so G-d provided relief and they dwelled securely again. Nevertheless, the golden calves of Yaravam and the asheira trees remained in place. The army of Israel was all but destroyed by Aram.

Yehoachaz reigned 17 years and was succeeded by his son Yehoash (not the same as the king of Judah by the same name). Yehoash the son of Yehoachaz was an evil king, who sinned and led his nation to sin.

The prophet Elisha became sick with what would be his final illness. Even though he was a wicked king, Yehoash of Israel went to visit him. Yehoash mourned the loss of Elisha's merits from the nation.

Elisha had Yehoash take a bow and shoot an arrow in the direction of Aram. He then prophesized that Israel would beat Aram into submission. (A prophecy accompanied by a physical act is irrevocable.) Elisha then told Yehoash to shoot the remaining arrows into the ground. Yehoash shot three, then stopped. Elisha became angry. "Had you emptied the quiver, you would have totally destroyed Aram! Now you will only strike them three times!" Elisha died and was buried.

Later, some people were burying a body when soldiers from Moav started approaching. They quickly threw the body into Elisha's tomb and ran away. When the body touched Elisha's bones, the corpse woke up and walked out of the tomb. (The Talmud, Sanhedrin 47a, and Rashi there, say that the person buried with Elisha was the false prophet from I Kings 13. Being unworthy of being buried with Elisha, the false prophet got up and walked out, only to collapse again. The Midrash Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 32, says that it was Shalom, the husband of the prophetess Chuldah, and that he remained alive and fathered children after being revived.)

Chazael, king of Aram, oppressed Israel throughout the reign of Yehoachaz, but G-d did not permit the Jewish nation to be destroyed. Chazael died and was succeeded by his son, Ben-Hadad. Yehoash, son of Yehoachaz, struck Aram three times, as Elisha had said, and retrieved the cities that Chazael had captured from Israel.

Chapter 14

The Cedar and the Thornbush

Yehoash, king of Judah, was succeeded by his son Amatzyah. (Remember, there were two kings named Yehoash. The one from Judah was the last surviving descendant of Solomon, who was hidden and raised in the Temple.) Amatzyah was like his father - overall good, but not righteous to the extent David had been. When his position was secure, he executed the assassins who had killed his father. He did not kill the assassins' sons, because the Torah prohibits such behavior. (Such action could have been justified as a deterrent to future rebels, but Amatzyah wouldn't have it.) Amatzyah defeated Edom in battle and became haughty; he thereupon challenged Yehoash, king of Israel, to war.

Yehoash, king of Israel, replied with a metaphor. "The thornbush wanted to marry his children to the cedar's children. Not only is the thought ridiculous, the thornbush got trampled by an animal." (In short, Yehoash was telling Amatzyah not to think too much of himself or he would come to regret it.) Amatzyah wouldn't listen, so they went to war. Sure enough, Israel completely routed Judah. Yehoash captured Amatzyah, he breached the wall of Jerusalem, and he plundered the Temple and palace. (Even if the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were at war, Amatzyah should still have refrained from plundering the Temple.) Yehoash of Israel reigned for 16 years. He died and was succeeded by his son Yaravam (Jeroboam).

Amatzyah lived for fifteen years after Yehoash died. There was a plot against him and he ran away to Lachish, but his enemies pursued him and killed him there. He was succeeded by his son Azaryah, who was 16 years old.

Yaravam (the second king of Israel to bear that name) was just as sinful as his namesake. He reclaimed land that had been captured from Israel in accordance with a prophecy from Jonah (which is not recorded). Even though Yaravam was evil, G-d saw the people were suffering and sent salvation through him. Yaravam reigned for 41 years and was succeeded by his son, Zecharyah.

Chapter 15

Business as Usual in the Kingdom of Israel

Azaryah became king of Judah at the age of 16 and he was a righteous king. Like his predecessors, however, he did not dispose of the private altars that people were accustomed to using. He became a leper, so he had to be isolated for the rest of his life. (The reason is discussed in II Chronicles 26. He insisted on offering incense in the Temple, a job reserved for Kohanim. There, Azaryah is called Uziyahu, but it's the same person.) Azaryah reigned for 52 years and was succeeded by his son Yosam.

Zecharyah succeeded his father Yaravam as king of Israel. He was an evil king and reigned just six months. (Back in chapter 10, the prophet told Yehu that his dynasty would last four more generations; Zecharyah was the fourth generation from Yehu.) Zecharyah was assassinated in public and nobody seems to have protested. His assassin, Shalum ben Yaveish, claimed the throne in his place.

Shalum reigned for one month before he was assassinated by Menachem ben Gadi, who became king in his place. Menachem was another evil king. (That's kind of what one expects from people who ascend to the throne by murder.) Menachem tried to subjugate Tifsach, an adjacent city in Aram. Because they would not submit, he used unnecessary and unacceptable levels of force. (Rashi explains verse 16 to mean that Menachem cut open the pregnant women.)

Pul, king of Assyria, made inroads into Israel, so Menachem paid him off not to invade. He taxed his citizens heavily to cover costs. Pul left. Menachem reigned ten years and was succeeded by his son Pekachyah.

Pekachya was also evil. He reigned two years and was assassinated by Pekach, one of his own officers.

Pekach reigned for twenty years and was yet another evil king. During his reign, Tiglas Pileser, king of Assyria, captured the Tribe of Naftali and exiled them. (This was Assyria's modus operandi; they would exile conquered peoples to other conquered lands, mixing them up in the process. It's how ten Tribes later came to be "lost.") As we will see in Isaiah chapter 8, the Tribe of Zebulun was exiled at this time, as well. Hoshea ben Eilah assassinated Pekach and became the last king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Back to Judah: As mentioned above, Azaryah, AKA Uziyahu, died and was succeeded by his son Yosam. Yosam was righteous but, again, he did not remove the private altars. He did make improvements to the Temple gate. Yosam reigned sixteen years and was succeeded by his son Achaz.

Chapter 16

The Reign of King Achaz

Evil kings were the norm for Israel, but the exception for Judah. Sadly, Achaz was one of those exceptions. He was extremely idolatrous, going so far as to pass his son through fire as a form of worship to the idol Molech. Aram and Israel teamed up to make war on Judah, but they did not defeat Achaz in battle. Aram did recapture one city and they evicted the Jews who were living there. (Some things never change!)

Achaz sent messengers to Tiglas Pileser, the king of Assyria. He sent as much gold and silver as was in the Temple and the palace for Assyria to drive away the invading forces of Aram and Israel. Tiglas Pileser drove away the invading armies and killed the king of Aram, but he did not return the captured territory to Judah.

When the idolatrous Achaz went to visit Tiglas Pileser, he saw the altar of the Assyrian idol and had a replica built in the Temple courtyard. He instructed that this was to be the main altar from now on, and Uriah the Kohein Gadol (High Priest) complied. Not only did this altar not belong in the Temple, Achaz insisted on bringing sacrifices on it, even though he was not a kohein (priest). The true altar became secondary.

Achaz went further to undermine the Temple service. He had the stands under the wash lavers and the "sea" removed and he disposed of the awning that the Kohanim would use for shelter on Shabbos when they changed shifts. He also made a personal shortcut to the palace. (One may not make a shortcut through a synagogue and certainly not through the Temple!)

The reign of Achaz was sixteen years. When he died, he was replaced by his son Chizkiyahu (Hezekiah), one of the greatest of all Jewish kings.

Chapter 17

Lost: Ten Tribes

Hoshea, the last king of Israel (the Northern Kingdom of the Ten Tribes) reigned for nine years. He was conquered by Assyria and became a vassal state.

Israel paid Assyria a yearly tribute. One year, Hoshea did not pay his tribute. He also tried to get Egypt to help him fight off the Assyrians. Shalmaneser, then king of Assyria, found out and he didn't care much for Hoshea's insubordination. Assyria started a three-year siege of Israel.

Assyria finally captured Samaria, the capital of Israel. The people were exiled and resettled in other lands.

That was it for the Ten Tribes. They would not be swayed from their idolatrous ways, even though G-d had corrected them many times. He sent many prophets, but the people persisted. So, G-d permitted them to be exiled and only the kingdom of Judah (including Benjamin and Levi) remained. Judah wasn't perfect, but the kingdom of Israel had pushed away from G-d with both hands. (The Navi describes this in some detail, but that's the gist of it.)

So, the Jews of Israel were exiled and the conquered people of other nations were moved into Samaria. G-d sent lions to attack the people in Samaria. When the king of Assyria found out, he had a kohein (priest) brought to Samaria to convert the people there to Judaism. They started to worship G-d, but they also continued to worship their old idols. They continued to serve G-d, but not sincerely. One of the major populations in Samaria was originally from a place called Kusa. These people are the Kusim (Cutheans) whose status as Jews is frequently discussed in the Talmud. (Let's just say they get partial credit.)

Chapter 18

Greatest of All Kings

Chizkiyahu (Hezekiah) succeeded Achaz as king of Judah. He was the greatest of all Jewish kings, excluding David and Solomon. (There are opinions that he was the greatest of all kings including David and Solomon!) Even the righteous kings of Judah did not abolish the private altars that the people used; Chizkiyahu did. And that's not all. Back in Numbers chapter 21, G-d commanded Moses to make a copper snake. When a person was bit by a snake, they would stare at this effigy, pray and be healed. But 800 years had passed and in the interim, people started worshipping the snake as an idol. Chizkiyahu destroyed it, even though it was made by Moses at G-d's command. The rabbis applaud this action as appropriate (Pesachim 56a). Chizkiyahu successfully rebelled against Assyrian rule, at least initially.

The siege of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (the "Ten Tribes") began in the fourth year of Chizkiyahu's reign in Judah. By the sixth year of his reign, the Ten Tribes had been exiled. In the fourteenth year of Chizkiyahu's reign, Assyria turned their attention to Judah and captured many cities. Chizkiyahu sent word to Sancheriv (Sennacherib), king of Assyria, offering to pay whatever he asked if they would just leave. Sancheriv imposed a heavy tribute; Chizkiyahu was forced to strip the gold from the Temple doors to meet the payment. The Assyrians took the money, but waited for a pretext to resume their conquest.

Sancheriv sent messengers to King Chizkiyahu. They impudently stood outside and called for him. Several of the king's senior officers went out to meet with the Assyrian delegation.

The Assyrians said:

"Give Chizkiyahu this message. What are you going to do, rely on Egypt like the Kingdom of Israel did? They'll do you more harm than good! You trust in your G-d? The One Whose altars Chizkiyahu removed? Tell you what, you give us a security deposit to ensure your faithfulness and we'll give you 2,000 horses - as if you have 2,000 horsemen left to use them! Is it against your G-d that we're acting? We're fulfilling the orders of your G-d!"

Since all this was going on outside, in public, the Jewish delegation asked the Assyrians to speak in Aramaic so the average person walking by wouldn't over hear, but the Assyrians refused. "Did my king send this message only to your king? It's for all these people! When we conquer you, they'll eat their own waste along with you! Don't let Chizkiyahu fool you! He can't save you. If you give in, the king of Assyria will relocate you all to other lands just as nice as this one, where you can live in peace. Your G-d won't save you - none of the gods of the other nations we conquered saved them!"

Chizkiyahu had instructed his men not to reply to the Assyrians, so they just took the message and left. They tore their clothes in mourning. (The Talmud in Sanhedrin, page 60a, says that Ravshakeh, the Assyrian officer who did most of the talking, was actually an apostate Jew and they tore their garments because he blasphemed against G-d.)

Chapter 19

Isaiah's Prophecy

The officers repeated the Assyrians' message to Chizkiyahu, who likewise tore his clothes. He sent the officers to consult Yeshayahu, the prophet Isaiah. They said in Chizkiyahu's name "We are like a fetus in distress whose mother has no strength to push it out. If only G-d would punish Ravshakeh for his blasphemy against Him! Please pray for the remaining Tribes that have not already been exiled!"

Isaiah told them, "Reply to Chizkiyahu, thus says G-d: don't be worried about these servants of the king of Assyria who blasphemed Me. Sancheriv will be sent back to his own land and will be defeated there."

Ravshakeh returned to Sancheriv. Sancheriv received a message that the king of Cush had gone out to battle him, so he headed back to Assyria. Before he left, Sancheriv sent some threatening letters to Chizkiyahu, to remind him who was boss. Chizkiyahu took the letters to the Temple. He spread them out and prayed to G-d:

“Please see how Sancheriv insults You by comparing You to the idols of the nations he has defeated! Please save us from his hand so the whole world will see that You alone are G-d!”

Isaiah sent word to Chizkiyahu regarding his prayer. (The prophecy speaks “to” Assyria, even though it was delivered to Chizkiyahu.) “Israel mocks you, Assyria,” the prophecy went. “You know Whom you’ve insulted? G-d. Because you provoked Me, I will place a ring through your nose and a bridle in your mouth, and lead you like an animal back where you came from. Now, Chizkiyahu, here’s your sign that this prophecy is true: even though the Assyrians have destroyed your crops and famine is on the way, there will be enough growing wild to feed everyone until the third year. The king of Assyria will not enter this city - he’ll go back the way he came. I protect this city (Jerusalem) because of My servant David.”

That night, an angel struck the Assyrian camp and killed all 185,000 soldiers. Only five survived to tell the tale: Sancheriv, his two sons, Nebuchadnezzar and Nebuzaradan (Sanhedrin 95b). More about Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 24 and Nebuzaradan in chapter 25. Suffice it to say that, between them, they destroyed the Temple. Like Pharaoh in the time of Moses, witnessing miracles did not sway them from the path of evil.

After this crushing defeat, Sancheriv retired to Ninveh, unable to show his face in shame. While he was worshipping his idol Nisroch (which the Talmud - Sanhedrin 96a - says was made from the wood of Noah’s ark), his two sons killed him and ran away, leaving another son to reign in his place. (In a strange example of kri/ksiv, when a word in Tanach is spelled and pronounced in two different ways, the word “banav,” his sons, is read aloud but does not appear at all in the text! One explanation for this rare oddity is that they were illegitimate sons.)

Chapter 20

What’s Wrong with this Sundial?

Chizkiyahu became deathly ill. Isaiah came to visit him. “Get your affairs in order,” Isaiah said, “because you’re going to die.” Chizkiyahu turned to face the wall and he prayed to G-d, crying sincerely.

Isaiah was on the way out when G-d spoke to him, so he went back to Chizkiyahu. “G-d has listened to your prayer,” he said. “I am healing you. In three days, you’ll go to the Temple. You will live another 15 years and I will protect Jerusalem from Assyria.” Isaiah then placed a cake of figs on Chizkiyahu’s boil and it was healed.

The favor of curing the symptom was not a sign to prove Isaiah’s prophecy, so Chizkiyahu asked for one. “No problem,” said Isaiah, “pick one: Shall the sundial move ahead ten hours or back ten hours?” Chizkiyahu picked moving back ten hours. (Not only is making time move backwards more impressive than speeding it up, Chizkiyahu’s whole point was to add time to his life, not remove it!) It went from late afternoon back to early morning (Sanhedrin 96a).

Berodach Baladan, king of Babylonia, inquired as to what the heck was going on with the sun. When he found out a miracle of such magnitude was worked for Chizkiyahu, he was duly impressed and he sent gifts. Chizkiyahu took the opportunity to show off for his visitors. After they left, Isaiah returned.

"What was that?" Isaiah asked.

"I had guests from Babylonia," replied Chizkiyahu. "I showed them everything."

Isaiah chastised Chizkiyahu for the missed opportunity. It was G-d who worked the miracle - he should have been "showing off" G-d, not bragging. "All that stuff you showed them?" Isaiah said, "Someday it will be carried off to Babylonia. Some of your descendants will be officers in the courts of Babylonia, as well."

Chizkiyahu did not protest. He accepted G-d's judgment as good. (Not even "for the good." He said "this IS good." That's a very high spiritual level!) Chizkiyahu was relieved, at least, that the exile would not happen in his lifetime. (Please note that Chizkiyahu's actions did not cause the exile, he merely failed to prevent it.)

The reign of Chizkiyahu was 29 years. When Chizkiyahu died, he was succeeded by his son Menashe.

Chapter 21

Sometimes, the Apple is Thrown REALLY FAR from the Tree

If Chizkiyahu was one of the greatest kings of Judah, his son Menashe was one of the worst. (His mother's name was Hephzibah, by the way. Just mentioning.) Menashe surpassed the worst kings of Israel when it came to idolatry. He restored Baal worship, Asheira worship, and Molech worship. He introduced the worship of heavenly spheres and put altars to them in the Temple. He practiced astrology, necromancy and divination. And he did much of it just to antagonize G-d. Menashe seriously led his people astray.

G-d sent the prophets Nachum, Yoel and Habakkuk to Menashe with a dire message: Because Menashe exceeded all his idoltrous predecessors, G-d would punish Judah and Jerusalem so severely that just hearing about it would be enough to make one's ears ring! G-d would judge Menashe and Judah the way He did Ahab and Israel. He will wipe out Jerusalem like one wipes a dish then turns it upside down. The Jews will be at the mercy of their enemies.

Almost as an afterthought to Menashe's evil, the Navi mentions that he also spilled innocent blood. Menashe reigned 55 years - longer than any other king of Israel or Judah! When he died, he was succeeded by his son Amon. (That's spelled with an alef; the nation Ammon is spelled with an ayin.)

Amon was an idolator like his father. He reigned for a mere two years, when he was assassinated by his servants. The people of the nation executed the assassins and installed Amon's young son Yoshiyahu (Josiah) as king.

We have to explain Menashe's addiction to idolatry, because nowadays we just don't get it. In the Talmud (Sanhedrin 102b), Rav Ashi made a disparaging remark about Menashe. That night, Menashe appeared to Rav Ashi in a dream and asked him an obscure question of Torah knowledge. Rav Ashi didn't know the halacha, but Menashe did. Rav Ashi was flabbergasted. "But - - if you're such a Torah scholar, how could you worship idols?" "You don't know the temptation we had for idolatry," Menashe replied. "If you had lived in my day, you'd have been a bigger idolator than I was!" After that, Rav Ashi referred to Menashe, Ahab and company more respectfully.

Chapter 22

Readers of the Lost Scroll

Yoshiyahu was only eight years old when he became king. When he was 18, he decided that it was time again to have repairs made in the Temple. He told the Kohanim (priests) to collect money and give it to the workmen, as had been done in the time of King Yoash. Chilkiah, the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) told Shafan the Sofer (scribe) that he found a Torah scroll in the Temple. Shafan brought it to the king and read from it, which terrified Yoshiyahu, who tore his clothes. The king instructed his servants to ask a prophet about what they just read. He was concerned that G-d must be angry with the nation for not following what he had heard read from the Torah.

The king's men went to Chulda the prophetess. (They had hoped that a woman prophet might give them a better reply than Jeremiah. Sadly, this was not to be the case.) Chulda said that G-d was going to bring evil upon Judah for being unfaithful to Him. Regarding what the king read, because he softened his heart and tore his clothes, G-d will listen to him, so that he would not witness the destruction in his lifetime. The messengers returned this information to the king.

The question must be asked: What's so shocking about finding a Torah scroll in the Temple? Several explanations are given. One is that his wicked predecessors (Achaz, Menashe, Amon) destroyed Torahs. Private owners no doubt hid theirs, so Yoshiyahu may never have seen one. Another answer is that the Navi doesn't say they found "A Torah," it says they found "THE Torah." What's "THE Torah?" The original manuscript, as it were, that Moses wrote down and from which all later Torah scrolls were copied. (This would be as important and interesting a find as, say, King David's tefillin or Aaron's staff.) In any case, the Torah appears to have been rolled to the Tochacha, the Rebuke in parshas Ki Savo (Deuteronomy chapter 28), which was not taken as a good sign.

Chapter 23

At Long Last, A Prophecy Fulfilled

King Yoshiyahu gathered the elders of the nation and headed for the Temple. He read the rebuke from the Torah to the assembled people of his nation. He and the people committed to uphold the words of the Torah.

The king had the Kohanim remove all vestiges of idolatry from the Temple. He had them (the idols) burned and the ashes carried away. He fired the priests who served those idols and burned the asheira tree that was planted on Temple grounds. He trashed the rooms used for immorality for these idols and desecrated the altars of the idols. Yoshiyahu wrecked the place where children would be passed through fire for Molech and abolished the practice of dawn chariot racing for sun worshippers.

Yoshiyahu destroyed a lot more places of idolatry, including the altar of Yaravam, first king of the Ten Tribes. He exhumed the bones of the idolaters buried nearby and burned them on the altar, as was prophesized back in I Kings chapter 13, more than three hundred years earlier!

Spying a nearby tomb, Yoshiyahu asked who was buried there. When he was informed that it was the prophet of G-d who had foretold these things, he left that grave undisturbed.

Not only did Yoshiyahu purge Judah of idols, he also removed them from territories that had previously been part of the now-exiled Northern Kingdom.

Yoshiyahu's campaign against idolatry culminated in the spring, in time for Pesach (Passover). A Passover such as this had not been celebrated since the time of the Judges, since Yoshiyahu removed all taints of idolatry and sorcery.

The Navi tells us that no king returned to G-d with the zeal and enthusiasm that Yoshiyahu did. (This suggests that he wasn't always righteous, but repented because of what was read to him from the Torah.) However, G-d's decree was not swayed, as Menashe's evil influence was too deeply ingrained in the people.

Yoshiyahu died in battle against the army of Egypt. He had reigned for 31 years and was succeeded by his son Yehoachaz.

Yehoachaz was an evil king and he reigned for only three months. He was imprisoned by the Pharaoh, who imposed a fine on the people of Judah and installed Yehoachaz' brother Elyakim as king. (Really, Elyakim was the true heir; Yehoachaz had been installed by the masses.) Pharaoh changed Elyakim's name to Yehoyakim, then took Yehoachaz back to Egypt with him. (Yehoachaz died there.)

Yehoyakim taxed the people to pay the fine imposed by Pharaoh, but he did so fairly; every person was charged according to his means. Despite this, Yehoyakim was another evil king, taking after Menashe and Amon rather than Yoshiyahu.

Chapter 24

Nebuchadnezzar Strikes

During the reign of Yehoyakim, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylonia, invaded Judah. Yehoyakim served him for three years, then rebelled. The armies of Kasdim, Aram, Moav, and Ammon all mobilized against Judah. This was orchestrated by G-d, as He had said through the prophets.

Yehoyakim reigned for 11 years. When he died, he was succeeded by his son Yehoyachin. Egypt was no longer the military threat, since the Babylonians had moved in.

Like Yehoachaz, Yehoyachin reigned for a mere three months. Another evil king, he was captured in battle by the forces of Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar also carried off some of Yehoyachin's family, his officers, and all the treasures of the Temple and his palace, as had been foretold by Isaiah to Chizkiyahu. 10,000 people were exiled from Jerusalem, leaving only the weakest and poorest, who would pose no threat.

Nebuchadnezzar crowned Yehoyachin's uncle Matanya king of Judah and changed his name to Tzidkiyahu. Tzidkiyahu would be the last king of Judah.

Tzidkiyahu was one of the bad kings and he reigned for 11 years. Perhaps unwisely, he rebelled against the powerful Nebuchadnezzar, who had appointed him.

Chapter 25

The End

In the ninth year of Tzidkiyahu's reign, on the 10th day of the 10th month (Teves), Nebuchadnezzar started his siege against Jerusalem. In the eleventh and last year of Tzidkiyahu's reign, on the 9th day of the 4th month (Tammuz), the city wall was breached. (In the days of the second Temple, this was done on 17 Tammuz rather than 9 Tammuz; the Sages declined to make fasts on both days.) The army of Judah fled. Tzidkiyahu was captured by the army of Kasdim and brought him to Babylonia. They killed his sons in front of him, then blinded him and kept him in chains.

On the 7th day of the 5th month (Av), Nebuzaradan came and looted Jerusalem. He burned the Temple (on the 9th of Av), as well as all the synagogues and yeshivos. Nebuzaradan exiled the remainder of the people, leaving behind only enough to work the fields.

The Babylonians demolished all the copper objects in the Temple and took the metal back to Babylonia. The fine craftsmanship of the pillars, utensils and the "sea" didn't matter to them against the value of the copper itself.

Nebuzaradan took prominent Kohanim (priests) and royal advisors and had them executed, just so people would get the message. The kingdom of Judah was officially in exile.

Nebuchadnezzar appointed Gedaliah, son of Achikam, as governor over the small number of Jews remaining in the land. The soldiers who had run away returned and Gedaliah encouraged them to be faithful servants to Babylonia. In the seventh month (Tishrei), Gedaliah was assassinated by a party led by Yishmael ben Nesanya. This extinguished the last remnant of hope for the Jews in Judah, as they had to flee to Egypt to avoid repercussions for killing the king of Babylonia's appointed representative.

Remember that Tzidkiyahu's predecessor, his brother Yehoyachin, reigned three months and was captured. In the 27th year of Yehoyachin's captivity, Nebuchadnezzar's successor, Evil Merodach, released him from prison. Evil Merodach honored Yehoyachin over the other conquered kings. Yehoyachin changed out of his prison garb and ate at the king's table for the rest of his life.