Ahab and His Yes Men

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Rabbi Hayyim Angel

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In the 9th century BCE, the wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel began a reign of terror in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. They made the worship of Baal into the official religion of Israel. Although people worshipped God also, they constantly wavered between God and Baal. Jezebel massacred the prophets of God and others who spoke up for the truth.

King Ahab struck an alliance with the righteous King Jehoshaphat of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Ahab's daughter Athaliah married Jehoshaphat's son Jehoram. Although the alliance united the two kingdoms on the political level, it caused terrible religious and physical harm to the Southern Kingdom.

The fiery Elijah served as the primary prophet who courageously opposed the wicked regime of Ahab and Jezebel. In one of the Ahab narratives (I Kings chapter 22), a lesser-known prophet named Micaiah shines by maintaining his integrity against a powerful and corrupt establishment.

Following a three-year lull in an ongoing conflict between Israel and Aram, Ahab decides to attempt to regain control of Ramoth-gilead, which Aram had captured in earlier battles. Ahab invites his ally, King Jehoshaphat, to join him: "And [Ahab] said to Jehoshaphat, 'Will you come with me to battle at Ramoth-gilead?' Jehoshaphat answered the king of Israel, 'I will do what you do; my troops shall be your troops, my horses shall be your horses'" (22:4).

However, the righteous Jehoshaphat insists that they first consult the prophets to obtain the word of God: "But Jehoshaphat said further to the king of Israel, 'Please, first inquire of the Lord'" (22:5). Ahab had some 400 prophets at the ready, and they offered a unified positive response to go to war: "So the king

of Israel gathered the prophets, about four hundred men, and asked them, ‘Shall I march upon Ramoth-gilead for battle, or shall I not?’ ‘March,’ they said, ‘and the Lord will deliver [it] into Your Majesty’s hands’” (22:6).

With such a unanimous prophetic response, one might have expected Jehoshaphat to enter the war without further hesitation. However, the prophetic response somehow convinced Jehoshaphat that something was wrong: “Then Jehoshaphat asked, ‘Isn’t there another prophet of the Lord here through whom we can inquire?’” (22:7).

What signaled the need for a second opinion? The 400 prophets spoke in God’s Name! Radak and Abarbanel consider this narrative in light of the overall Ahab narrative. Ahab and Jezebel supported Baal worship, and therefore these prophets must have been prophets of Baal. These idolaters tried to deceive Jehoshaphat by using God’s Name, but the righteous king saw through their evil ruse. Although reasonable, this interpretation goes beyond the local text and requires interpretation from the global narrative.

It appears that the most likely approach requires a different way of thinking. Like the prophets of many ancient Near Eastern pagan nations, these 400 men were court prophets, on the king’s payroll. Receiving large salary packages and great royal honor, they understood that they must always support the king’s wishes. In this instance, Ahab clearly desired to go to war. Therefore, the 400 prophets repackaged the king’s intent into prophetic words. Any other message would have resulted in their getting fired, or worse.

Jehoshaphat understood that these 400 “prophets” were like pagan prophets, under their king’s thumb. True prophets of Israel served God alone. They regularly confronted kings and other powerful figures when they strayed from God’s ways. Therefore, Jehoshaphat demanded a true prophet, one who would honestly reflect God’s will.

There was indeed another prophet, Micaiah son of Imlah, available for consultation. The wicked Ahab despised him, and did all he could to cancel Micaiah and silence him.

First, Ahab expressed displeasure at the mere need to invite him: “And the king of Israel answered Jehoshaphat, ‘There is one more man through whom we can inquire of the Lord; but I hate him, because he never prophesies anything good for me, but only misfortune—Micaiah son of Imlah.’ But King Jehoshaphat said, ‘Don’t say that, Your Majesty’” (22:8).

When that strategy failed, Ahab let his henchmen intimidate the true prophet: “The messenger who had gone to summon Micaiah said to him: ‘Look, the words of the prophets are with one accord favorable to the king. Let your word be like that of the rest of them; speak a favorable word’” (22:13). Of course, the true prophet refused to kowtow to this pressure: “‘As the Lord lives,’ Micaiah

answered, ‘I will speak only what the Lord tells me’” (22:14).

When he arrives at the palace, Micaiah sarcastically mimics the false prophets. Irritated by the sarcasm, Ahab demands that Micaiah state God’s true prophetic message: “When he came before the king, the king said to him, ‘Micaiah, shall we march upon Ramoth-gilead for battle, or shall we not?’ He answered him, ‘March and triumph! The Lord will deliver [it] into Your Majesty’s hands.’ The king said to him, ‘How many times must I adjure you to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord?’” (22:15-16).

Micaiah then replies with the true prophecy, suggesting that Ahab will perish if he goes to war against Aram: “Then he said, ‘I saw all Israel scattered over the hills like sheep without a shepherd; and the Lord said, “These have no master; let everyone return to his home in safety”’” (22:17).

After dismissing the 400 prophets as false prophets who mislead Ahab, the prophets attempt to intimidate Micaiah: “Thereupon Zedekiah son of Chenaanah stepped up and struck Micaiah on the cheek, and demanded, ‘Which way did the spirit of the Lord pass from me to speak with you?’” (22:24). Micaiah stood his ground despite the insult and the overwhelming numerical superiority of the opposition.

Ahab had hoped his yes-men would convince Jehoshaphat. He attempted to discourage Jehoshaphat from inviting Micaiah. His emissary pressured Micaiah to join the 400 court prophets. Zedekiah struck Micaiah, attempting to intimidate the prophet. All of these strategies failed.

Unable to escape the truth of Micaiah’s prophecy, Ahab therefore ordered that the prophet be imprisoned: “Then the king of Israel said… ‘Put this fellow in prison, and let his fare be scant bread and scant water until I come home safe’” (22:26-27).

The process of cancelling Micaiah was complete. Ahab followed his initial decision and went to war, and met his fate on the battlefront as prophesied by Micaiah. What happened to the imprisoned prophet? We never find out. Perhaps he was released after Ahab’s death, perhaps he was forgotten and died in prison.

In addition to the tragic conclusions to the story, it is worth focusing on King Jehoshaphat’s role. He initially demanded a true, God-fearing prophet to convey God’s word. He knew Ahab’s 400 court prophets were fraudulent. He witnessed Ahab’s shameless intimidation of Micaiah. He heard Micaiah’s prophetic words. And despite all that, Jehoshaphat joined Ahab in war, almost losing his own life (see the rest of the chapter). He was a king and a powerful ally, and certainly could have opposed Ahab with greater force. However, Jehoshaphat demonstrates that he no longer has the strength to stand by God’s prophet against Ahab and his powerful establishment.

Ahab thus developed a self-serving and well-financed system of court prophets; he intimidated, silenced, and cancelled true prophets; and he kept righteous voices like those of Jehoshaphat adequately silent so that he could achieve whatever he wanted. If Jehoshaphat had shown more resolve, perhaps the story could have turned out differently.