

Shiur #2: Generating Stability - Chapter 2a

- Rav Alex Israel

Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings

By Rav Alex Israel

Shiur 2: Generating Stability (Chapter 2a)

THE STRUCTURE OF CHAPTER 2

Chapter 2 of *Sefer Melakhim* can be divided into two discreet sections, demarcated by the event of King David's death:

- I. v. 1-9: David's parting message to Shlomo
v. 10-11: David's Death
- II. v. 12-46: Shlomo's actions

Each section is clearly delineated by an “inclusio,” a technique of literary bracketing:

The first section begins (v.1) "And David's DAYS were approaching death" and ends (v.11)"And the DAYS that David reigned..."

The second section begins (v.12) "And Shlomo sat on David's throne ... AND HIS RULE WAS FIRMLY ESTABLISHED" and ends, "And the KINGDOM was ESTABLISHED in the hands of Shlomo."

This framing of the different sections clearly expresses the purpose of the two sections. The first articulates David's final will and testament to Shlomo, and the second describes and details how Shlomo acts to secure his position as king.

David's parting communication to Shlomo can itself be divided into four instructions:

1. Loyalty to God's laws

2. Ensure that Yoav does not die peacefully
3. Care for Barzilai Ha-Giladi
4. Kill Shimi ben Gera

It may be useful to visualize the chapter in the following manner:

INSTRUCTION (to Shlomo)	FULFILLMENT (by Shlomo)
(v.3-4) Keep the Torah	-
(v.5-6) Yoav	(v.13-34) The story of: Adonia (killed) Evyatar (exiled) Yoav (killed) - all key members of Adonia's coalition
(v.7) Barzilai HaGiladi	-.
(v.8-9) Shimi Ben Gera	(v.36-45) The story of Shimi

Two of the instructions are not explicitly followed through. The topic of Shlomo's faithfulness to Torah becomes a central feature of chapters 3-11, so it is well dealt with later. I imagine the *Navi* ignores Barzilai here because the chapter concerns itself with the potential threats and oppositions to the stability of Shlomo's sovereign status.

TWO APPROACHES

There are two fundamental approaches that one may take when approaching this chapter.

The first views David as instructing his successor, Shlomo, to punish and bring to justice certain criminal personalities whom he was unable to confront in his lifetime. Conversely, he was to reward friends for their past actions. This view may be represented by the Radak (2:5):

AND ALSO – The phrase "and also" states that beyond ... that he [David] commanded him [Shlomo] to walk in the paths of God, he wanted to say that this too is God's path - to destroy evil individuals.

This approach is reflected in several detailed discussions in the Gemara[1] and the traditional commentaries that debate the Halakhic legitimacy of Yoav's assassination of Avner and Ammasa. There are those who also add a further murder to this list:

"That Yoav did to ME:" This refers to Avshalom, when he [Yoav] defied his [David's] expressed command and killed him." (Ralbag 1:5)

According to this approach, David is asking Shlomo to settle old accounts and to repay debts of the past. But this interpretation, despite much textual backing, is problematic. After all, if these acts are legal and legitimate, why doesn't David deal with his own problems? Is Shlomo, a young and inexperienced king, in a better position to confront these key government figures?

He would not give his young, newly anointed son such a dangerous piece of advice as to kill top military figures at the very inception of his rule. (Abarbanel)

Furthermore, from a legal perspective, if David made a vow not to harm Shimi (see v.7-8), can that oath be morally, or even technically, circumvented by passing the act of retribution to his son?

POLITICAL ADVICE

The Abarbanel therefore presents a second approach, which views each instruction of David as representing a piece of guidance, forewarning, and the wisdom of experience.

David did not command Shlomo to execute Yoav and Shimi for earlier crimes, for which he himself did not have them executed... But his thinking and intention was to inform Shlomo of the manner in which Yoav and Shimi acted against him in order to caution him not to appoint them to high office, out of concern that they could manipulate him [Shlomo] and act in a similar manner to the way they had conducted themselves with him [David]. The purpose of this bequest was counsel and education, that he should be wary of them and to punish them vociferously should they betray him. (Abarbanel)

If we follow the Abarbanel, we can identify the primary messages that David wishes to impart to his son as follows:

1. Torah – Your spiritual orientation is of prime importance. It is this factor that will determine the success or failure of Shlomo personally and, more globally, of the royal House of David.
2. Yoav – Beware of governmental forces that express disloyalty, attempting to manipulate the national agenda. Be prepared to take action to eliminate them.
3. Barzilai Ha-Giladi – Reward loyal allies who support you in times of crisis. Hold them close.
4. Shimi – Beware of influential leaders who try to arouse old tribal divisions. They can cause a great deal of harm.

On the positive side of things, the critical message that David imparts to Shlomo is the centrality of Torah.[2] However, the bulk of David's message relates to potential threats to Shlomo's ability to govern. David knows that once he has left the scene, political forces will be unleashed, factions that have remained concealed due to David's presence and authority. Interest groups will move quickly to maneuver or even unseat the young, fledgling king. This is why David opens his speech with the phrase: "Be strong and show yourself as a man." Furthermore, a word that recurs throughout David's speech is an appeal to Shlomo's wisdom[3] and acumen (1:6, 9). David is appealing to Shlomo's intelligence, his shrewdness, so that he be prepared for the pressures that will be brought to bear in the period following David's death.

ADONIA AND THE CONCUBINE

The first of the pressures that rears its head comes in the form of Adonia's appeal to Batsheva with a request to marry Avishag. What is this request, and why is it seen as so threatening as to cost Adonia his life?

There are several instances in *Tanakh* in which a son seeks to engage in sexual relations with his father's concubine. The precedent which illustrates this more than any other is the story of Avshalom.[4] Avshalom staged a rebellion against his father, King David, and temporarily deposed him from the throne, exiling him from Jerusalem. Avshalom, interested in making a firm statement about his new status as king, asks his advisors how he might publicise his new role as monarch. They reply:

Lie with your father's concubines, whom he left to mind the palace; and when all Israel hears that you have dared the wrath of your father, all who support you will be encouraged. (II Samuel 16:21)

In these stories, the motive for this act is political rather than sexual. The assumption is that the son, in engaging in the ultimate intimacy with his father's concubine, is taking his place not simply in the conjugal realm but in the political sphere as well. He is assuming his father's position as king with all its political significance. The son is assuming the throne.

Avshalom and Adonia are not the sole instances. One might also mention Avner and King Saul's concubine (II Samuel 3:7), as well as the story of David's wife Michal (II Samuel 3:13-16), a story that fits into this category as well. More prominent is the story of Reuven, as we read in *Sefer Bereishit*: "When Israel dwelt in that land, Reuven went and slept with Bilha, his father's concubine. Israel heard" (33:32). This troubling episode would appear to relate to precisely this dynamic. If we adopt an approach based on *peshat*, rather than the traditional midrashic reading,[5] the following story emerges: Rachel has recently died. While Rachel was alive, she was quite clearly preferred, as were her children. But with Rachel's death, the sons of Leah seek to claim their rightful place in the family. Reuven, firstborn of Leah, in his illegitimate intimacy with Bilha, is expressing in the most explicit way that he intends to succeed his father as the family leader. He wanted to express the fact that the children of Leah will take the place of their father Yaakov, and not Rachel's sons.

This background should go some way to decode the request of Adonia. Adonia has already made an attempt to seize the throne. Now, in a furtive and devious move, Adonia asks Batsheva for permission to marry King David's concubine Avishag.[6] Shlomo responds in horror:

"Why request Avishag the Shunnamite for Adonia? Request the kingship for him!"... Thereupon King Solomon swore by the Lord: "So may God do to me and even more, if broaching this matter does not cost Adonia his life... Adonia shall be put to death this very day!" (I Melakhim 3:21-24)

Shlomo seems to have no doubt at all as to the significance of this request. It is not an innocent wish or an expression of romance. This is a quintessential act of politics; the son targeting his father's position and status. Shlomo reads the situation correctly.[7] He has no hesitation in identifying this as an act of betrayal, tantamount to treason. It is a request that costs Adonia his life.

PUTTING AN END TO THE COALITION – EVYATAR

Adonia had not acted alone. It is clear from the text of the *perek* that everyone understands that there is a conspiracy in the air.

Shlomo says it explicitly: "He is my older brother and EVYATAR Ha-Kohen and YOAV ben Tzeruya are on his side" (v.22). Yoav understands it too: "The news reached Yoav." When Shlomo starts taking action against the renegade government figures, Yoav understands that he is a target.

It is interesting that Shlomo treats each member of the conspiracy differently. Adonia – the pretender to the throne – has been killed. Yoav will also be put to death. Evyatar isn't killed. Why?

Due to the fact that Evyatar was a High Priest, he did not want to execute him, lest his House be treated like that of Shaul, who killed the priests of Nov.[8] (Abarbanel)

It may be that Shlomo was reticent to kill a High Priest. But with further investigation, it would appear that the connection between Evyatar, David, and the town of Nov is deeper still.

Let us return to the text here:

To Evyatar the *kohen*, the king said: "Go to your field in Anatot. You are a dead man, but I shall not put you to death at this time, **because you carried the ark of the Lord God before David my father, and you endured the hardships that my father endured.**" (v.26)

In what way did Evyatar carry the *aron* before David? What did they endure together? We can find the answers in the book of *Shmuel* I. There we read about how David, a fugitive from King Shaul, finds protection in the priestly city of Nov. Later, Shaul takes retribution from that town and murders all its inhabitants, man, woman and child. However, one person escapes and survives - that man is Evyatar:

One son of Achimelech... escaped. His name was Evyatar, and he fled to David. When Evyatar told David that Shaul had killed the *kohanim* of God, David said to Evyatar: "...I am the cause of the deaths of your father's house. Stay with me; do not be afraid, for whoever seeks your life seeks my life also. You will be in my care" ... And when Evyatar ...fled to David at Keila, he brought an *efod* with him. (*Shmuel I* 22:20-23; 23:6)

So why doesn't Shlomo execute Evyatar? First – Evyatar had not been earmarked explicitly by David as a threat. He was not on David's warning list. Furthermore, David made an explicit promise to take care of Evyatar. David clearly felt a sense of guilt that his presence in the town of Nov had induced Shaul to decimate Evyatar's family. David shelters this sole survivor and offers him protection. Shlomo may well have been aware of that legacy. But what is explicitly mentioned here is the many years that David and Evyatar shared when on the run from Shaul, in caves and hideaways. During that difficult period, Evyatar served a critical function to David and his group, as he provided a direct link to God by means of the *efod* that he carried. It could be this *efod* that is referred to as the "*aron Hashem Elokim*" in our verses.[9] It would seem that Evyatar has a lifelong history of loyalty to David, and the composite effect of these factors makes Shlomo act differently with Evyatar than the others.

It would appear that Shlomo acts here with his characteristic wisdom. First, he marks Evyatar as a "dead man." In other words, Evyatar must realize that he has a price on his head. He has been formally cautioned. Next, Shlomo removes Evyatar from the capital city, thus disengaging him from the corridors of power. He commands him to devote his time to his farm and thus to cease functioning as a *kohen*. It is difficult to imagine that the *kohen*, while offering spiritual support and standing, would present the same degree of threat as the pretender to the throne or the chief of staff of the army. Evyatar is banished to Annatot, and in this multiplicity of actions, Shlomo neutralizes any threat that Evyatar may pose.

One postscript is in order, however. Later in the book, in chapter 4, we read a list of Shlomo's "cabinet," his government ministers. In that list of state officials, we read of "Tzadok and Evyatar – *kohanim*." It would appear that Evyatar is recalled to high office and that after the crisis of the Adoniah, once the dust has settled, Shlomo sees Evyatar as a worthy figure to function in a leadership position in the Temple.

There are many points of comparison between Yoav and Evyatar. Yoav was also David's companion throughout years of exile and flight. Yet we will see that even as head of the military, Yoav's loyalty to David is open to question. Yoav is a contentious character. Towering in determination and drive, he is a person who protects David and turns his kingdom into an empire. But he is problematic in many ways. Our next lecture will study Yoav and the outstanding topics of Chapter 2.

[1] *Sanhedrin* 49a

[2] We will discuss this message in-depth in our lecture on chapter 3.

[3] Shlomo's wisdom will be the topic of the next chapter, chapter 3. It is also mentioned in 5:9-14. See also *Divrei Ha-yamim* I 24:12

[4] The story of Avshalom is noticeably present in the backdrop of this chapter. Not only is his name strangely referenced in v.28 (and more logically in v.7), but Shimi and Barzilai are both major characters from that story. We have already made note of the Rabbag who claims that Yoav is killed not only by dint of his guilt for Avner and Amassa, but also for the killing of Avshalom.

[5] I am aware of the *midrash* that Reuven did nothing more than adjust Yaakov's sleeping arrangements. I have chosen to learn this episode, at least in this context, according to *peshat*. To understand more about the relationship between the *midrash* of the Reuven story and its relationship to the *peshat*, see my lecture: <http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/intparsha67/08-67vayishlach.htm>.

[6] One wonders why he approached Batsheva in particular. The *Da'at Mikra* assumes - on the basis of verse 19, which describes Shlomo's special throne for his mother - that she in fact held an official position. Some have suggested that this is the first instance of the "*gevira*" - a female semi-official position in the Israelite royal system. The explicit example of this is *Melakhim* I 15:13, but Izevel and Athalia would all qualify for a similarly influential status. Note that the name of the ascendant King's mother is frequently recorded in *Sefer Melakhim*, indicating the significance of her identity.

[7] Adonia clearly exposes his state of thinking in his appeal to Batsheva in verse 15, incriminating himself quite clearly: "You know that the throne was mine, and

all Israel had turned their face to me as king. But the kingship was rechanneled to my brother."

[8] See *Shmuel* I, ch.22

[9] Rashi suggests that Evyatar's role with the *aron* relates to his flight from Jerusalem in the Avshalom mutiny (see *Shmuel* II 15:29 and 17:15), but in that story, Evyatar is told to RETURN the *aron* to Jerusalem. He does function as an informer for David against Avshalom, but the profile of Evyatar in our verses doesn't fit with the details of the Avshalom story particularly well. I have adopted the approach of the *Da'at Mikra* regarding Evyatar.

As to the identity of the Ephod and the Aron, of course in the Mishkan as described in Sefer Shemot, these are totally different pieces of the Mishkan. One is at the epicenter of the Mishkan and the other is worn by the High Priest. But in Sefer Shmuel there appears to be some overlap. See for example Shmuel I ch.14 v.3 and 18. Is the Ephod the same as the Aron or are they distinct implements?