

Shiur #3: Between War and Peace^o Chapter 2 (Part II)

- Rav Alex Israel

Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings

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Shiur 3: Between War and Peace – Chapter 2 (Part II)

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Last week, we studied the first half of chapter 2. We discussed David's final message to Shlomo as a means of priming Shlomo, alerting him to forces that would lie in wait and threatening to destabilize his fledgling administration. David provides him with guidelines for action. Last week, we detailed Shlomo's interaction with Adonia and Evyatar. In today's *shiur*, we turn our attention to the powerful and controversial character of Yoav ben Tzeruya.

1. YOAV

Who is Yoav? Yoav was David's formidable military chief,[1] leading the army in expanding the borders of David's kingdom to the size of an empire. Yoav was a fearless warrior,[2] and (although it is not mentioned prominently) he was related to the king – he was David's nephew.[3] Beyond his immediate military role, Yoav functioned as a

central figure of government and a personal friend and advisor to David. In fact, they appear to have had a close relationship, which enabled Yoav to address the king quite directly and forcefully. In several episodes,[4] Yoav chose to confront David and was not rebuffed nor rebuked.

However, it is also evident that the relationship with Yoav was not without a negative aspect. In this vein, no text is more blatant than the message that David imparts to Shlomo:

You, too, know all that Yoav ben Tzeruya did to me - what he did to the two officers of the hosts of Israel, to Avner ben Ner and to Amasa ben Yeter, that he killed them, and shed the blood of war in peace, and put the blood of war upon his belt that was around his loins and in his shoes that were on his feet. Act according to your wisdom, and do not let him die a peaceful death of old age. (*Melakhim I 2:5-6*)

It is this condemnation that we seek to examine. What is irking David? What concerns David regarding Yoav to the point that Yoav is specified as a threat to Shlomo? Our prime data are the two stories noted by David in which Yoav killed rival military commanders, "and shed the blood of war in peace." Let us examine these episodes.

AVNER

Avner was King Shaul's Chief of Staff. For seven years following the tragic death of King Shaul, the nation was divided into two rival groups.[5] King David had been crowned by the tribe of Yehuda, but the other tribes retained their allegiance to Shaul, allying themselves with Shaul's son, Ish Boshet. During this period of civil war,[6] Avner continued to function as the head of the army and was effectively the leader of Ish Boshet's administration.

During one particularly bloody clash in the course of the war between *Beit David* and *Beit Shaul*, Avner found himself hotly pursued by David's forces, and specifically by the young warrior Asa'el ben

Tzeruya, Yoav's brother. Avner killed Asa'el in self-defence.[7] This point is quite critical to understanding the events that follow.

Some years hence, with Ish Boshet's leadership ineffective and unsuccessful, Avner travelled to King David in Chevron seeking to strike a peace deal, a reconciliation, uniting the nation under David's leadership. It would seem that Avner left Chevron with an agreement. But then:

Yoav came to the king and said: "What have you done? Behold, Avner came to you - why did you then send him, so he is gone away? You know Avner ben Ner, that he came to seduce you, and to know your going out and your coming in, and to know all that you are doing!" And Yoav went out from David and sent messengers after Avner, and they brought him back from the well of Sira, but David did not know of it. So Avner returned to Chevron, and Yoav took him aside inside the gate to speak to him in private, and he struck him there in the belly, and he died, for the blood of Asa'el his brother. (*Shemuel II* 3:23-27)

So Yoav murdered Avner. Why? There are THREE logical possibilities as to Yoav's motivation:

1. Vengeance – for the blood of Asa'el his brother.
2. Personal interest – It is likely that with Avner in alliance with David, Avner would get the top military post and lead the army. This would remove Yoav from his position as Chief of Staff. Was there some personal motivation here?
3. National interest - Yoav may not have trusted Avner. In the *pesukim* above, he clearly views Avner as a diehard opponent and a substantial national threat. Did he feel that David, in his pursuit of national control, had let his guard down and made a deal with a man who could not be trusted?

Looking at the *pesukim* above, we remain unsure as to Yoav's motives. On the one hand, the "narrator" informs us that Yoav murdered

Avner as revenge for his killing Asa'el. But on the other hand, Yoav's speech expresses deep distrust towards Avner; he suspects Avner's peace deal is a deception, a ruse. Did Yoav act in vengeance and malice or for the higher values of the kingdom? The issue is complex.

What is not complex, however, is David's response. At the time of Avner's assassination, David marched at the head of the funeral procession, eulogized Avner, and took upon himself the rites of mourners. He wanted to make a public and absolute statement of his innocence and his administration's non-involvement in this act of violence. He cursed Yoav publically with a series of terrible misfortunes:

David heard afterwards, and he said: "I and my kingdom are guiltless before God forever for the blood of Avner ben Ner. It shall rest upon the head of Yoav and all of his father's household. May Yoav's house never lack a *zav*, a *metzora*, one who walks with crutches, one who falls by the sword, and one who lacks bread." (*Shemuel II* 3:28-29)

This profession of innocence on David's part is echoed in our chapter in *Melakhim*. The text here is beautifully crafted to emphasise this point. In the words of Shlomo (*Melakhim I* 2:31-33):

- A Remove the innocent blood from me and my father's house
- B And let the blood guilt be returned on his own head
- C For he attacked two righteous and good men and killed them by the sword
- D AND MY FATHER DID NOT KNOW
- C2 Avner ben Ner, the army commander of Israel, and Amasa ben Yeter, army commander of Yehuda
- B2 Let their blood be returned on Yoav's head and his descendents forever
- A2 And to David and his descendents, to his House and his throne, may there be peace from God forever.

This perfect chiasm has at its axis, at its apex, the clear statement that "my father did not know," that Yoav was working on his own; there was

no conspiracy to double-cross Avner and have him assassinated. This was Yoav's act, and his alone.

AMASA

In a similar scenario at a later point in David's life, David made the identical strategic decision of embracing his enemy rather than distancing him. Again, some background information is necessary. Avshalom, David's son, had staged a mutiny against his father, taking over Jerusalem and planning to destroy his father's military forces in war. Amasa^[8] was Avshalom's military chief. After the rebellion, with Avshalom dead, there was an acute need to reunite the nation behind David's leadership. As an act of reconciliation – "to redirect the hearts of all Yehuda as one man"^[9] - David appointed Amasa as the Chief of Staff of the army. When Amasa failed to mobilize the troops in the prescribed three day period,^[10] Yoav became suspicious and took unauthorized action:

Yoav said to Amasa: Are you well, my brother? And Yoav grasped Amasa's beard with his right hand to kiss him. And Amasa took no heed of the sword in Yoav's hand, and he smote him... (*Shemuel II* 20:9-10)

THE CENTRAL FACTOR

These are the two stories singled out by David. What characteristics do they share? What is the common denominator between these two acts of Yoav ben Tzeruya? What links the two is the manner in which Yoav thwarts the possibility of national unity, of a peaceful reconciliation, by murdering the newly appointed Chief of Staff. Apart from the killing of an innocent man, there are several things wrong here.

First, there is the simple act of dishonor to the king, as Yoav subverts the king's plans, challenging and frustrating David's political strategy. With what audacity does Yoav decide to kill the men whom the king seeks to embrace as allies and partners?

But second, there is Yoav's dangerous political perspective. Whereas David *Ha-Melekh* seeks to heal national wounds and bridge divisions through appeasement, by appointing Avner and Amasa to the leadership of the military, Yoav murders them. Of course, Yoav's acts seriously jeopardize the prospect of national peace and unity.

What was Yoav thinking? Unlike in the case of Avner, Amasa's murder could not have been motivated by family vengeance. It could have been personally motivated; as we suggested earlier, a new Chief of Staff meant a demotion for Yoav. Did Yoav kill just to keep his job? Or maybe his actions were political, strategic. Yoav harbored a pathologically suspicious mind - once an enemy, always an enemy. Yoav was quick to pounce upon anyone who he perceived as a potential threat to David and his leadership.[11] Yoav rejected the risks that David made for peace. He felt secure only when he had eliminated the enemy completely.

Let me add that these are not the only two occasions in which Yoav seriously intervened and redirected situations critical to the future of the nation, aggressively pushing his own personal agenda forward and forcing its acceptance:

- After the king had distanced his son Avshalom, Yoav decided to use devious means to have him return. Here, Yoav clearly manipulated national politics and the corridors of power.
- In the war against Avshalom, the king explicitly instructed the troops not to kill Avshalom. When Avshalom was seized, no foot-soldier would dream of attacking him against David's direct orders. But Yoav did; Yoav had his closest soldiers execute Avshalom.
- Yoav backed Adonia bid for the monarchy, apparently without consulting David.

We have built a convincing case that Yoav repeatedly acted AGAINST the expressed wishes of the king. Moreover, he was not hesitant to press ahead with his independent political agenda even when this clashed with royal policy. This man was thus a formidable political liability for Shlomo.

Let us not forget that in our chapter, the event that triggers Yoav's flight to "the Tent of *Hashem*," holding on for dear life to the corners of the *mizbe'ah* (altar), is Yoav's support for Adonia. After Adonia and Evyatar are apprehended, Yoav begins to run. Yoav's political meddling costs him his life.

WAR AND PEACE

Let us return to the text. David specifies only TWO stories to Yoav's discredit - those of Avner and Amasa. David does not mention that Yoav betrayed him or disobeyed him. He forgets to mention that Yoav killed his son! Apparently, this is not the principle issue. What DOES David specify? That Yoav "shed the blood of war in peace." Note the repeated words "blood" and "peace." Where does this word choice lead us?

Divrei Ha-Yamim describes^[12] the way that David perceived Shlomo's era, as opposed to his own reign:

David told his son Shlomo, "I had my heart set on building a temple for the name of God. But this word of God came to me: "You have shed much **blood** and have fought great **wars**. You are not to build a house for My Name, because you have shed much **blood** before me. You will have a son who will be a **peaceful** man. I will give him **peace** from all the enemies around him. His name will be **Shlomo [peace]**, and in his time I will give Israel **peace** and quiet. He shall build a house for My name... I will establish the throne of his kingdom over Israel for ever." (*Divrei Ha-Yamim* I 22:9)

Shlomo's name, his identity, his generation is one of peace. His agenda is not military or violent, but rather a peaceful, civilian environment in which a temple will be built so that the nation may turn their attention to God.

Yoav, on the other hand, is a man of blood and war. He belongs to a different age. David knows this. He instructs Shlomo to "put the blood

of war upon his belt that was around his loins and in his shoes that were on his feet"[13] because that blood is already present in Yoav's personality. This is not simply an issue of punishing Yoav for his past crimes. David is concerned that Yoav's legacy is the blood of war. That led to his success in the period of David. But David realizes that Yoav does not know how to end the war; he cannot recognise peace. He places the "blood of war in peace." In other words, he cannot allow peace to be born; violence is his method of solving problems. To this end, Yoav as a central governmental figure is incompatible with Shlomo, especially in this inaugural period as a "young lad with no experience of leadership" (3:7).[14] They are opposites.[15] Shlomo's era, designated as a time in which Israel will live in peace and quiet, finds its antithesis in Yoav. Yoav has no place in the world of Shlomo.

2. FLIGHT TO THE ALTAR

Yoav flees to the altar when he realizes that his life is in danger.[16] We have already witnessed this strange practice with Adonia in 1:51. What is the origin of this act and how does it work?

We read in the Torah in *Parashat Mishpatim*:

And if a person comes maliciously against his fellow to kill him with guile - you shall take him from My altar to die. (*Shemot* 21:14)

The text in the previous verses (21:12-13) relates to deliberate murder and accidental murder. What does this verse teach us? What do we mean when we suggest that the murderer be taken "from the altar" to be executed? On the *peshat* level,[17] it would appear that this is a reference to an ancient tradition predating even *Parashat Mishpatim*. The sacrificial altar, as a classic instrument of atonement, could provide protection to fugitives from the law. (Later in history, this Right of Asylum became a law of the Christian Church, granting protection to criminals and others in flight from the authorities for breaking a law as long as they took protection in the church.[18]) The Torah does not sanction this mode of escape, this "sanctuary." The *pasuk* in *Parashat Mishpatim* utterly rejects this arrangement of asylum, stating instead that even when criminals seek

protection at the altar, they will be taken from there to their deaths – even from the altar itself.[19]

Of course, this *pasuk* presents serious problems for our story. Is it possible that Yoav and Adonia were unaware of a simple *halakha* explicit in *Sefer Shemot*? Moreover, if this institution of asylum was widely known, why have we never encountered it elsewhere in *Tanakh*?

The Rambam applies the *halakha* in a particular context:

One who was afraid to be killed by order of the king or by emergency order of the court, and he escapes to the altar and leans on it, then even if he is a non-*kohen*, he is saved. We do not ever take him from the altar to die, unless he is liable for the death penalty by the court with complete testimony and forewarning, like others who are executed by the court at all times. (Laws of the Murderer and Protection of Life 5)

In other words, the power of asylum applies explicitly to people who are entangled with the ruling powers, with the king. If a person is a murderer, the case is tried in court. But people who are fugitives from the king because they are accused of treason - "*mored be-malkhut*" - have the advantage of the protection of the Temple. Why? We may argue that the Temple, the altar, is in some way extraterritorial; it is God's province, under divine hegemony and not under the jurisdiction of the king. Torah law may apply at the altar (the Sanhedrin sits adjacent to the *mizbe'ach*), but the authority of the king has no place in the palace of the King of Kings. Perhaps this is what underlies the thinking here.

Possibly, then, the central point here is that Yoav seeks to say that his offence is a crime against the king, but that he is not guilty of murder in the standard sense. Shlomo insists that he be treated like a wilful murderer; he is guilty as a criminal and must pay for his crimes.

3. SHIMMI BEN GERA

We will only discuss Shimmi's personality in brief. Shimmi, a relative of Shaul, took advantage of David's lowest moments, when he

was on the run from Avshalom, to curse David publically, hurling stones at the king and yelling and humiliating him (*Shmuel II* 16:5-13). Later, when David regained the throne, the same Shimmi led a delegation of 1,000 men from the tribe of Binyamin to greet David and support him. Shimmi apologized publically, and David promised not to harm him (see *Shmuel II* 19:16-23). But in our chapter, David warns Shlomo about this man.

What danger does Shimmi pose? I think it is the possibility that he will rile up old grievances, the tribal animosity between *Beit Shaul* and *Beit David*, between Binyamin and Yehuda.[20]

Shlomo keeps Shimmi under "house arrest," under surveillance. But Shimmi makes a wrong move, as "two of his servants flee to Akhish... king of Gat." If this is an innocent act of retrieving runaway slaves, then Shlomo may be exacting an extreme price for a simple and innocuous act. But the mention of "Akhish ben Ma'akha, King of Gat" by his official royal title leads us to believe that we, along with Shlomo, should sense that this is a venture of political maneuvering on Shimmi's part, an appointment with a rival king and not a simple return of slaves. It smells suspicious. Shimmi, vacillating and unreliable, who has huge influence in the tribe of Binyamin, who curses people when they are down and apologizes later, is not to be trusted. Shlomo does not wait to find out what lies behind this visit, and he sends a clear message to Binyamin and other political factions as to who is the boss.

4. The Rise of Shlomo in *Divrei Ha-Yamim*

Our final topic relates to the account of the rise of Shlomo as recounted in *Divrei Ha-Yamim*.^[21] The educated reader should know that the transition between David and Shlomo is told in a very different style in *Divrei Ha-Yamim*.

Whereas here in *Melakhim*, there is a scramble for power, with Shlomo wresting power at the eleventh hour, in *Divrei Ha-Yamim*, there is a formal, regal, ceremonial, public, and sedate ascension to the throne. In *Melakhim*, David is described as weak, without knowledge of tumultuous events happening behind the scenes; in *Divrei Ha-Yamim*,

David guides and orchestrates the enterprise of the royal succession. (For further reading, see *Divrei Ha-Yamim* I ch.22, 23:1, 28:1-11,20, 29:1, 23-24.)

Far from being a contradiction, it is entirely possible that both accounts are true. We would reconstruct events somewhat as follows. As we read in *Melakhim*, Adonia takes advantage of the period of David's sickness in order to attempt to assume the throne. David has Shlomo anointed. Later, David regains his health and strength somewhat, and the events as described in *Divrei Hayamim* transpire. There we read of an official state coronation and the formal transfer to Shlomo of the concept, the vision, and blueprints for the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*. Likewise, David passes on political directives and warnings to his son, which forms our chapter 2.

Each *sefer* follows its particular agenda. *Divrei Ha-Yamim* is focused on the Temple, particularly its positive aspects, such as mass gatherings of the nation at the Temple and national revival and celebration.[22] The positive view of the *Mikdash* allows *Divrei Ha-Yamim* to see David as actively founding the Temple. Furthermore, *Divrei Ha-Yamim* has a strong allegiance to *malkhut Beit David* and the kingdom of Yehudah. To this end, it fails to mention any of David's rivalry with Shaul. It tells a more positive history. Thus, it prefers to depict Shlomo as rising smoothly and sedately to the leadership. *Sefer Melakhim* however, wants us to sense the swirling undercurrents that can destabilize a kingdom, the moral complexity of governance, and the manner in which Shlomo overcame these obstacles in his rise to the throne.

[1] *Shmuel* II 8:16

[2] It was Yoav who captured Jerusalem; see *Divrei Ha-Yamim* I 11:6

[3] Yoav was David's sister's son: "Yishai gave birth to Eliav, the eldest... and the seventh was David. And their sisters; Tzeruya and Avigail, and the sons of Tzeruya were Avishai, Yoav and Asa'el – the

three of them. And Avigail gave birth to Amasa..." (*Divrei Ha-Yamim* I 2:13-17).

[4] See in particular the aftermath of the Avshalom rebellion, *Shmuel* II 19:6-8 and 24:3. In both instances, Yoav confronts the king, disagreeing with him. There are also times when Yoav is concerned for the welfare of the king, even acting behind his back and manipulating David, for example in *Shmuel* II ch.14.

Yoav is also the king's confidant (and accomplice) in the killing of Uriah; see *Shmuel* II 11:16-25. Yoav was clearly a person whom David felt he could trust.

[5] *Shmuel* II 2:10-11

[6] *Shmuel* II 3:1

[7] Avner, was clearly distressed at the prospect of killing Asa'el – "How will I be able to look your brother, Yoav, in the face?" He tried to convince Asa'el to stand down, but when Asa'el persisted in pursuit, he killed him; see *Shmuel* II 2:18-23.

[8] Amasa was also a nephew of David; see *Divrei Ha-Yamim* I 2:17.

[9] *Shmuel* II 19:15

[10] The question of why he failed to gather the army remains. Was it simply the fact that he was new at the job, or was he, in fact, reluctant to fight for David, in which case Yoav's suspicions were correct?

[11] David repeatedly remarks about violent tendencies of the "sons of Tzeruya" (see *Shmuel* II 3:39) but it is Avishai's violent streak that David has to restrain more than others. See *Shmuel* I 26:8-9, *Shmuel* II 16:9.

[12] I believe that this chapter in *Divrei Ha-Yamim* I, as well as *Shmuel* II ch.7, have a strong connection to our chapter in *Melakhim*. Shlomo's major achievement will be the building of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, and it is in these chapters that God outlines why David is unsuitable for that task. Just as David's speech in *Melakhim* I 2:2-4 begins with the crucial issue of allegiance to Torah as the prime assurance of the continuation of the Davidic monarchy, these chapters do as well. There is more to be said about the connection between these chapters, but that will wait for another time.

[13] This unusual phrase referring to Yoav's belt and his shoes bewildered the commentators. The "belt around the loins" is always an instrument of war. "Girding of loins" by means of a belt meant tightening the belt at the waist. This belt a) held weapons on the body; b) lifted up

the robes of the warrior, affording him greater movement so that he could run fast, and c) firmed up the body (like weightlifters use nowadays) and assisted in fighting.

But how does this relate to shoes? It is possible that shoes also relate to war. Yishayahu is told to dress like a prisoner of war (*Yishayahu* 20) and is instructed to present himself "naked and barefoot." A barefoot person cannot escape, cannot run. Shoes or boots are part of army apparel. In this regard, see also *Yishayahu* 5:27, which also links belt and shoes in the context of the warrior.

Chazal took this unusual reference to footwear and developed a fascinating and fantastic reading:

He asked him guilefully: "A widowed woman who frees her brother-in-law of the obligation to marry her (*yevama*) - if she is a dwarf, how does she perform the *halitza* (a ritual performed with the man's shoe)?" He began telling him and showing him: "She takes his shoe thus, with her teeth..." - and he drew his sword and killed him." (*Rashi, Sanhedrin*49a)

In this *midrash*, *Chazal* recognized the prominent place of the shoe in our *pesukim*. They made a connection to another place that shoes are mentioned (there are precious few) – regarding the command of *halitza*. In the images created by this *midrash*, as Yoav draws Avner into the gateway – the place of the judges (*Devarim* 16:18), and hence the place of Torah analysis – he engages Avner in a detailed halakhic discussion as a ruse to avert his attention. When Avner's back is turned, Yoav murders him.

Interestingly, this *midrash* portrays this group of army generals as steeped in Torah, discussing halakhic minutiae even at a chance-meeting in a lonely alley. This reinforces the Rabbinic portrayal of David and his men as highly spiritual characters (see, for example, the depictions of David in *Berakhot* 3a-4b.)

But do pay attention to the specific reference to *halitza*. After all, *halitza* is performed to release a woman when a husband dies and his wife is supposed to marry his brother so that she may perpetuate her husband's name. Here, too, Yoav wishes to finish the incomplete work of his brother. Moreover, the transfer of Avner from Shaul (the dead king) to David may be seen as *ayibum* of sorts, as the general of a dead king

binding himself in "covenant" to a new master. It is this "*yibum*" that Yoav finds suspect.

[14] This is the JPS translation of 3:7, where Shlomo describes himself as "*na'ar katan*." This is an interesting self-depiction, and it finds parallels elsewhere in the David-Shlomo stories. Shlomo is repeatedly referred in his inaugural stage as "young" (*na'ar*) and "tender" (*rakh*); see *Divrei Ha-Yamim* I 22:5 and 29:1. This precise phrase appears with David in regard to the violence of Yoav:

And I am this day tender (*rakh*), although anointed king, and these men the sons of Tzeruya are too savage for me. The Lord shall reward the doer of evil according to his wickedness.
(*Shmuel* II 3:39)

Many mepharshim see Shlomo as only 12 years old when he ascends the throne. See the commentaries to Melakhim I 3:7 (Rashi and Radak,) who do the analysis of the timeline.

[15] Interestingly, the *gemara* sees a similar dichotomy – and partnership - between Yoav and David: "If it weren't for David's Torah study, Yoav would not have succeeded in war; and if not for Yoav's effort in battle, David would not have been able to learn Torah, as in the verse, 'David administered justice and charity for all his people, and Yoav was over the host' (*Shmuel* II 8:15)" (*Sanhedrin* 49a).

[16] It is clear to me that both Adonia and Yoav ran to the altar in the tent that was pitched for the *aron* (Ark of the Covenant) in Ir David-Jerusalem; the *Metzudat David* says this explicitly.

[17] *Chazal* learn a variety of things from this *pasuk*; see the *Mekhilta* and Rashi. Among them: "From the altar" - the Temple service is suspended to extract a murderer from the Temple. The phrase "maliciously" is used to teach that a person who kills while performing a premeditated act, such as a doctor who makes a mistake during a medical procedure – in other words, intending to perform the act, but not to kill - is not guilty. The act must be performed with intent to kill in order to incur guilt. But this fails to relate to the "altar" aspect.

Another opinion sees this verse as teaching that the Sanhedrin should be seated by the altar.

[18] A modern illustration of the power of a church to harbor criminals was the siege at the Church of the Nativity in 2002, when Palestinian

terrorists took shelter in the church. The IDF was unwilling to attack the church.

[19] For a deeper understanding of this *pasuk* in *Mishpatim*, see the *shiur* by Rav Yaakov Medan <http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/parsha65/18-65mishpatim.htm>

[20] Shlomo is planning on moving the Mishkan from Givon in the tribe of Binyamin, to Jerusalem in the portion of Yehuda – See our upcoming *shiur*. The potential political fallout of such a move could be devastating if there were parties interested in stirring the "insult" to the Tribe of Binyamin.

[21] According to Chazal (*Bava Batra* 14a), *Divrei Ha-Yamim* was authored by Ezra.

[22] To see a summary of themes in *Divrei Hayamim*, see the introduction in *Daat Mikra* which highlights several characteristic aspects of the book.