

Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings

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Shiur 4: Chapter #3: Shlomo's Spiritual Aspirations

Who is Shlomo? As we begin chapter 3 of *Sefer Melakhim*, we stand at the threshold of nine chapters that detail the formidable achievements of this king and the magnificent empire that he commands. What personality will we encounter in this young and promising king and what place does he hold in Jewish History? Perhaps we can phrase this question in another fashion: How does the author of *Sefer Melakhim* build our impression of the personality of Shlomo? What is the story that the book tells us about him?

There is no doubt that *Sefer Melakhim* embarks upon its description of Shlomo by portraying him in the most positive perspective. The opening line of this description is:

AND SHLOMO LOVED GOD, walking in the laws of David, his father. (3:3)

Shlomo is portrayed as a lover of God. The chapters that follow reinforce this glowing assessment, as *Sefer Melakhim* marks each stage of Shlomo's achievements and accomplishments, raising Shlomo's stature to unprecedented heights.

The following summary gives a clear impression as to Shlomo's impact:

Ch.3 – The wisdom of Shlomo

Ch.4 - Reorganization of the nation into twelve districts

Ch.5 – Shlomo's imperial power, international power

Ch.6-8 – The *Beit Ha-Mikdash* and the King's Palace:

Ch.6 – Construction of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*

Ch.7 – The royal building works and the crafting of the Temple's *keilim* (vessels)

Ch.8 - Dedication ceremony of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*

Ch.9 – God's response to Shlomo's prayer

Ch.9-10 - The grandeur and fame of Shlomo's kingdom

Despite this glowing description, anyone with even a cursory knowledge of Shlomo's biography is aware of his tragic and disappointing end. Chapter 11 describes Shlomo's sins and the forces that lie in wait, threatening the peace and wealth that prevails in his kingdom. This painful inversion and even undoing of Shlomo's magnificent achievements are expressed by the reversal of the phrase which so positively described Shlomo's beginnings:

AND SHLOMO LOVED many foreign women ... and in his old age, they caused his heart to stray. (11:1-3)

The love for God that characterized his youth has been replaced and subverted. And yet, there is no doubt that at this stage of our familiarity with Shlomo, the king is depicted enthusiastically, in a spirit of admiration and approval.[1]

In this *shiur*, we will study chapter 3, which is divided into two major sections:

3:3-15 – Shlomo's dream - his request for wisdom.

3:16-28 – The trial of the two women

The chapter is introduced by verses that seem perplexing, and we will begin by using these *pesukim* to give some context to the chapter.

GIVON

Shlomo went to Givon to sacrifice there, for it was the central altar; Shlomo offered 1,000 burnt offerings on that altar. (3:4)

This is the first act that we hear about in Shlomo's reign. What is its significance? Why does Shlomo go to Givon? What is his aim in bringing 1,000 sacrifices?

The Ralbag explains that Shlomo did this:

To induce prophecy, for offerings have a powerful effect in generating prophecy, as we have explained with the story of Bilaam.

In other words, Shlomo's first act is to attempt to connect with God, seeking an audience with *Hashem*. This pattern – *korbanot* followed by revelation - is found elsewhere in *Tanakh*, as in the case of Noach after the flood and Yaakov on his way to Egypt.[2]

We now understand the connection. The action of "Shlomo offered 1,000 burnt offerings" is designed to induce and to create the correct basis for "in Givon, God appeared to Shlomo in a nighttime dream" (3:5).

Shlomo's first act is to respectfully request an audience with God; God is at the forefront of his mind. But why is this communion with God so critical for Shlomo? Shlomo has a request for God. In his own words:

I am a young lad with no experience in leadership[3]... Grant your servant an understanding mind to judge your people, to distinguish between good and bad. (3:7-9)

MOVING THE MIKDASH

But a second possibility is also present in this inaugural act. Note how Shlomo travels to Givon, the central altar, in order to sacrifice. He could have sacrificed at the altar in Jerusalem.[4] Why Givon? What is the meaning of this designation of a "central altar"?

Let us also recall the *pesukim* that precede this:

The people, however, continued to offer sacrifices on *bamot* [local altars], for up to that times, no house had been built for the name of God. Shlomo loved God, following the practices of his father David, however he sacrificed and offered at the *bamot*. And Shlomo went to Givon...(3:2-3)

Shlomo's expedition to Givon comes on the backdrop of the issue of the *bamot*[5] – sacrificing on the local altars. A few words of explanation are in place here.

In general, the Torah legislates a single place of worship, a *Mishkan* or *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, which is designated as the sole site of *korbanot*, sacrificial service, throughout the land.[6] However, ever since the destruction of the *Mishkan* at Shilo in the days of Eli, [7] there had been no *Mishkan*. Throughout the period of Shmuel, Shaul, and David, *bamot* were permitted due to the absence of a central place of worship.

Until the *Mishkan* was erected, *bamot* were permitted... When the *Mishkan* was erected, *bamot* became forbidden... They came to Gilgal and the *bamot* were permitted... [When] they came to Shilo, the *bamot* were forbidden... [When] they came to Nov and to Giv'on, the *bamot* were [again] permitted... [When] they came to Jerusalem, the *bamot* were [again] forbidden, and were never again permitted... (*Zevachim* 14:4-8)

As is clear from this text in *mishna Zevachim* and from the *pesukim* in our chapter, Shlomo enters the scene in a time in which the notion of a *Mikdash* is suspended and noticeably absent. In truth, the *Mikdash* is in a state of division, of rupture; the *aron* (ark) is in Jerusalem while the altar is in the city of Givon.[8] The "*bama gedola*" is a term that implies that public sacrifices – *korbanot tzibbur* - are offered at this altar; in other words, it is the central national site of *korbanot*. As the text indicates, "The people... continued to offer sacrifices on *bamot*, for up to that times, no house had been built," and yet this situation was clearly undesirable. The text deliberately raises this sense of deficiency, of the absence of the *Mikdash*. Givon is a poor substitute.

Shlomo's revelation in Givon (ch.3: 5-10) is followed by another interesting *passuk*.

And Solomon awoke, and, behold, it was a dream; and he came to Jerusalem, and stood before the ark of the covenant of *Hashem*, and offered up burnt-offerings, and offered peace-offerings, and made a feast for all his servants.

The introductory verse and epilogue verse to this dream thus form a couplet. Shlomo's dream is preceded by his sacrifices at Givon; it is followed by his return to Jerusalem, a feast, and more *korbanot* in Jerusalem.

What is Shlomo doing? In *Divrei Ha-yamim*, this trip to Givon is described as a joyous event of national importance:

Shlomo summoned all Israel – officers of thousands and hundreds, and the judges and the chiefs of all Israel... Then Shlomo and the assemblage that was with him went to the altar at Givon, for the Tent of Meeting... was there. But the ark of God David had brought... to the place which David had prepared for it... in Jerusalem." (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 1:2-3, 4)

Our suggestion is that Shlomo's public spectacle in Givon is his announcement, his "launch," of his initiative of transferring the altar to Jerusalem and eventually building the Temple there.^[9] He starts by offering sacrifices on the altar at Givon as a sign of respect to the "old" altar, but then he immediately follows by travelling to Jerusalem and offering sacrifices there.

Through this gesture, he demonstrates his intent to build the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*. This historic announcement deserves an audience of national leaders; it is a momentous national event. This is why we read about the *bamot* as the lead-in and the context to this visit to Givon. Shlomo intends to put an end to the *bamot*. The time has come to build the *Mikdash*.

If we are correct, it would appear that as a result of this historic decision, Shlomo is amply rewarded. He is honored by God appearing to him in a dream.

INTERIM SUMMARY

We have suggested two motives for Shlomo's first action. The first is simply his desire to receive prophecy, to converse with God. The second is his desire to immediately begin work on the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*.^[10]

THE REQUEST OF WISDOM

It is Shlomo's dream, his request for special judicial intuition, and the story that displays Shlomo's wisdom that form the bulk of the chapter. Clearly this is a significant aspect of Shlomo's persona.

God appears to Shlomo in a dream and grants him an open offer: "Ask what I may grant you." In a request imbued with a sense of public service, personal mission, and humility, Shlomo requests the wisdom to "judge Your people... for who can judge this vast people of Yours?" God acknowledges Shlomo's unusual request, uncharacteristic of royalty. The Torah has already warned us that the king has a certain negative tendency, a temptation to indulge in the trappings of luxury and power.^[11] Shlomo did not fall into the trap. He wishes not for wealth, military victory, or long life, but only wisdom. This wisdom is directed toward his nation; he seeks to dispense justice. God, clearly impressed with Shlomo, accedes to his request.^[12]

This passage is followed by the famous trial of two women who contest the identity of a little baby, each claiming it is her own. Shlomo resorts to unusual extra-legal methods – "cut it in two" - and solves what would appear to be an irresolvable case. This judgment is clearly brought in order to exemplify this God-given gift of wisdom in the context of judgment.

When all Israel heard the decision that the king had rendered, they stood in awe of the king, for they saw that he possessed divine wisdom to execute justice.
(3:28)

WISDOM FOR THE NATION^[13]

We will make a few brief comments about this story:^[14]

1. This story is about two women from the lowest stratum of society. Two prostitutes present a case, and they find an audience with the king! This point should not be taken for granted. It would appear that there was a tradition of open access to the king in matters of judgment. We see this in several episodes in *Tanakh*:^[15]

Once when the king was walking on the city wall, a woman cried out to him: "Help me your majesty!" (*Melakhim II* 6:26)

The woman of Tekoa came to the king, flung herself down face on the ground... She cried out, "Help, O King!" The king asked, "What troubles you?" (*Shmuel II* 14:1-6)

Random people are apparently given an audience with the highest authority in the land! The accounts in *Tanakh* describe the king as open and accessible to his citizens when he is outside the palace, but also detail how the king holds court in his palace with an open-door judicial policy.^[16] He allows access to the whole gamut of citizens who seek his counsel. His palace contains a special court room.^[17] Our story of the two prostitutes deliberately presents the case of these two women from the murky depths of society in order to exhibit the fact that Shlomo sought to apply justice throughout the nation, and not simply to the upper classes.

2. This is a hearing with no evidence ("and there was none with us in the house") and two competing claims. Shlomo somehow intuits the solution, or else conjures up a successful ploy to force a resolution of the claim. His method is controversial to say the least, and yet he clearly senses the solution to the case.

What impression is the *Tanakh* giving us with this story? What dimension of Shlomo does it seek to convey?

HALLMARK OF THE IDEAL KING

I would like to answer this question with a few *pesukim* that describe the ideal king as described by the prophet Yishayahu:

And there shall come forth a shoot out of the stock of Yishai and a sprout out of his roots. And the spirit of God shall rest upon him, **the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of Hashem.** And his delight shall be in the fear of *Hashem*; and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither decide after the hearing of his ears. **But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and decide with justice for the lowly of the land...** And **righteousness** shall be the girdle of his loins (11:1-5)

This prophecy in *Sefer Yishayahu* envisions an idyllic king in an era in which "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb." This is a messianic image. In an earlier chapter of *Yishayahu*, the king is described in a similar fashion:

For a child has been born to us, a son has been given us, and the authority has settled on his shoulders ... **a peaceable ruler ... peace** without limit, on **David's throne** and kingdom. That it may be firmly established in **justice** and **righteousness** (*tzedaka*) now and evermore. (9:5-6)

Shlomo is not the only king that has been associated with the championing of justice,[18]but this is Shlomo's first accolade. When we see how Yishayahu's messianic depiction is so reflective of the imagery and language of Shlomo, we sense that Shlomo's high aspirations are a beacon of the archetypal concept of the monarchy.

IN SUMMARY

Chapter 3 is the first chapter in which Shlomo can show his true colors. We have argued that Shlomo demonstrates, in his foundational acts, a desire for God and a quest to serve the nation. The style in which his interest in judgment is phrased matches the idyllic visions of messianic times. This depiction of Shlomo forms the foundation, the starting point, at which the *Tanakh* wants us to view him.

In our upcoming *shiur*, we will begin to understand the extent and grandeur of Shlomo's empire.

Please read chapters 4 and 5 for next time.

[1] There are many hints and textual innuendos embedded in the text that contain a hidden critique of Shlomo, even in his earlier life. One classic example is the phrase that opens our chapter referring to Shlomo's marriage to the daughter of Pharaoh. This marriage punctuates the story at regular intervals (7:8; 9:16; 11:1; 11:26-27.) We will discuss this relationship at its appropriate time, but in the meantime, we will follow the rhythm of the text in its admiration of Shlomo.

To see more of these subversive textual undercurrents, especially in the context of Chapter 3, see Yoav Barzilai's article (from *Megadim* 26) at <http://www.vbm-torah.org/vtc/0033959.html>.

[2] *Bereishit* 8:20-9:1: "And Noach built an altar to God... and offered burnt sacrifices on the altar. And God smelled the sweet smell and God said... and God blessed Noach and his sons..." *Bereishit* 46:1-2: "He came to Be'er-Sheva and offered sacrifices to the God of his father, Yitzchak. And God spoke to Israel in a nighttime vision..."

[3] JPS translation. In footnote 14 of our last *shiur*, we examined this phrase. See the *mefarshim* (Rashi and Radak) on 3:7 for an analysis that concludes that Shlomo was only twelve years old when he assumed the reins of leadership.

[4] *Shmuel II* 6:17

[5] The language in this verse is part of a standard, recurrent, "form" language of *Sefer Melakhim*. As we shall see as we progress through the *sefer*, *Melakhim* has fixed textual formulae with which to introduce each king. One function of this formulaic language is to evaluate and mark each king spiritually – whether they "do that which is right in the eyes of God" or "that which is evil." This assessment is largely a function of their record in the area of idolatry and cultic worship, as opposed to loyal *avodat Hashem*. Similarly, even for the good kings, part of the standard "*nusakh*" – the recursive formulaic language – relates to the *bamot*. See, for example, Assa (*Melakhim I* 14:14), Yehoshafat (*Melakhim I* 22:44), Amazia (*Melakhim II* 14:4), and Uzzia (*Melakhim II* 15:4) – **"But they did not remove the *bamot*; the people continued to sacrifice at the *bamot*."** This phrase occurs in particular regarding kings of Yehuda. In our context, a time in which *bamot* are legally permitted, this phrase is out of place and one wonders about its occurrence. One answer may be that it is a standard formulation and hence included here as well, but this rigidity of style is not applied so comprehensively.

We are left to suggest that this deliberate reference to *bamot* at the start of chapter 3 is an attempt to set the scene for Shlomo's action at Givon, which, as we shall see, is directed at building the *Mikdash* and

eradicating the *bamot*. The formulaic language that resonates with negative associations is used to underscore the pressing need for Shlomo's actions.

[6] See *Devarim* ch.12

[7] See *Shmuel* I ch.4, *Yirmiyahu* 7:12, *Tehillim* 78:60.

[8] See *Divrei Ha-yamim* I 16:37-40. Archeologists have identified Givon as the city of El-jib just north of Nebi Samuel, a few miles north of Jerusalem of today. Impressive archeological finds of many wine jar handles bearing the word Givon (GVN) along with the Arabic preservation of the name made the identification of the site relatively certain. They discovered impressive water systems and one huge cistern from the time of the Iron Age – 12th century BCE – the time of Yehoshua. People have speculated that this could be the "pool" mentioned in *Shmuel* II 2:13.

[9] Suggested by Barzilai; see note 1.

[10] Some commentators understand that this event takes place four years into Shlomo's reign, and they critique him for the delay; see Rashi 3:2. However, if we follow the flow of the *perekboth* here and in *Divrei Ha-yamim*, this journey to Givon is the very first act of his monarchy. In *Divrei Ha-yamim*, the decision to build the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* is stated explicitly almost from the start. Thus, from a literary perspective, I see this act as being enacted with expediency.

[11] See *Devarim* 17:14-20, the laws of the king. The key phrase, repeated three times, is "He may not exceed to his own interest – *Lo yarbe LO ...*" Specified is money, "He must not amass silver and Gold for himself," the military, "He shall not keep many horses," and the number of wives that he may marry.

[12] Note the warning or caution (in v.14) that Shlomo follow the Torah, reminiscent of David's instruction to Shlomo in 2:3-4. This constant demand – that blessings and success are predicated upon loyalty and commitment to Torah practice – is a reflection of Jewish values. These verses, so innocuous in context, become rather ominous in hindsight as we realize how susceptible Shlomo was to negative influences.

[13] My thanks to my friend and colleague Michael Hattin for his assistance with this section.

[14] The story is a complex one and has been amply discussed in other places. See these articles in Hebrew: <http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/miketz/miketz1.html> and <http://tinyurl.com/ygkg5xq>

[15] See also *Melakhim* I 21:39.

[16] See the request for a king: "appoint for us a king to JUDGE US," (I Samuel 8:5) although the intent may be in the realm of leadership more than judicial functions. However, later with David Ha-melekh we see very clearly that he sat as a judge, see II Samuel 15:1-6. Maybe we should also recall one of our first glances at Moshe amongst the people of Israel, as they stand before him from morning to night, waiting for judgment. (See *Shemot* 18:16) Through all these stories, we can see the function of dispensation of justice as most central to the leadership role.

[17] See *Melakhim* I 7:7

[18] One in particular comes to mind - Yehoshafat (even the name is evocative) as described in *Divrei Ha-yamim* II ch.19