

Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings
By Rav Alex Israel

This week's *shiurim* are dedicated by Rabbi Uzi Beer in honor of Rachel Beer.

Shiur #13: Chapter 13: The Altar, the Prophet, and the Lion

In this colorful chapter, a king's arm is paralysed, suspended in mid-air, and an altar breaks in two at the word of the prophet. We read of a double-crossing prophet and an otherwise placid lion that kill a guilty prophet. The chapter is gripping and captivating, but a little confusing to read. It clearly bears a message integral to the Yerovam story, but it's not so simple to decipher the lesson itself. We will begin our analysis with a series of questions and then attempt to give some answers.¹

(I strongly recommend that you familiarize yourselves with the *perek* before reading on.)

1. Who is the *Ish Elokim* from Yehuda? Why would a prophet from Yehuda be acceptable to the people of Yerovam, who had rejected Yehuda so fiercely?
2. The *navi* is given a set of restrictions: "Do not eat bread, nor drink water, and do return on the same route that you embarked." What is the meaning of these strange rules?
3. Who is the *navi zaken* who lives in Beit El? Why does he lure the *Ish Elokim* to break the rules set by God? Is he a false prophet, as the Targum Yonatan suggests?
4. Why does the *Ish Elokim* listen to the *navi zaken* and return to Beit-El in clear contravention of God's instructions?
5. Why does the *Ish Elokim* receive such a severe punishment of instantaneous death by means of a lion?

¹ There are some excellent articles on this chapter that are worthwhile reading for greater depth. See R. Elchanan Samet's article in Michlelet Herzog's *Tanakh* journal *Megadim*, vol 6, and the superb response by Tamar Verdiger in vol.8 of that journal:
http://www.herzog.ac.il/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=685
See also Uriel Simon's chapter in his "Reading Prophetic Narratives" (Indiana University Press 1997).

And what is the meaning of this confusing story? What does it teach us about Yerovam and the illegitimate altars and shrines that he had made?

THE *ISH ELOKIM* FROM YEHUDA

In classic prophetic tradition,² the *Ish Elokim* dramatically confronts the sinner, Yerovam, as he stands surrounded by his crime, in self-condemnation. In this case, Yerovam is worshipping upon his altar in Beit-El, offering the festive sacrifice.³ If we follow the flow of the *pesukim*⁴ from 12:33 to 13:1, we may surmise that this occasion is the dedication of the *Beit Ha-Bamot* in Beit-El, which is timed and staged in the style of the original *Chanukat Ha-Mikdash* in Jerusalem. Just as then, the occasion takes place on *Chag Ha-Sukkot* and the king presides over the proceedings.⁵ However, unlike in the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, where Shlomo is prohibited from offering upon the altar, here Yerovam sets his new rules and brings the *korbanot* himself. This is thus the perfect place and timing for the *Ish Elokim*, who comes to admonish Yerovam and to decry his new altar.

Interestingly, the *Ish Elokim* directly addresses the *mizbe'ach*, the altar, and not the king. Why does he do this? Moreover, he does not critique the new sacrificial service directly but offers a more oblique statement, that the bones of the priests will be burned upon the altar, as well as a sign, the breaking apart of the altar. It is possible that this is a deliberate snub of the king. By addressing the *mizbe'ach*, Yerovam is ignored and hence publicly shamed. Beyond this, we get the sense that this message has been choreographed to be delivered directly to the people - not the king. It articulates a frightful prediction of the bones of the priests being burned upon it, and hence a direct deterrent to the freshly appointed priests. Furthermore, it visually communicates a sense of the illicit nature of this altar, a message that will be seen (more than heard) by the crowds of *Am Yisrael* participating in the festivities. When the *Ish Elokim* designates the altar as a place for the future burning of the bones of the priests, he is relaying more than a prediction of retribution. He is creating an equation of sorts - the altar is so unfit that the current sacrifice is as illegitimate as the burning of human bones. The king is impervious to the message of the prophet, but maybe the people will heed God's word.

² For example, Shmuel catches Shaul "red-handed" with the sheep of Amalek bleating behind him and Agag alive (*Shmuel* I ch.15) and Eliyahu meets King Achav in the field of Navot, whom he had killed (*Melakhim* I 21:19).

³ The Biblical verb "*le-haktir*," which seems to indicate the offering of *ketoret* (incense), can in fact also refer to bringing sacrifices. See, for example, *Vayikra* 1:9,13,15, which refer to animal sacrifice and not *ketoret*. See also *Shmuel* I 2:15, which clearly refers to animal parts. On the other hand, the use of this phrase in particular may specify that Yerovom offered *ketoret*, which is associated specifically with the *kehuna* (see *Bamidbar* 16) and is also viewed as a test of worthiness. (eg., Nadav and Avihu, Korach, King Uzziah). Hence, Yerovam, who has deregulated the *avodat ha-korbanot*, is specifically described and condemned with verb KT"R.

⁴ The opening word of 13:1, "*ve-hinei*," invites us to view this as a continuation of the previous scene.

⁵ See 8:1-2

But we would be remiss if we skipped the contextual references. The *perek* stresses the Judean origins of the *Ish Elokim*, and in his prophetic declaration, he pronounces that "A son shall be born to the House of David, Yoshiyahu will be his name ..." (13:2). There is clear implication that the House of David will persist and outlive the House of Yerovam. Moreover, the verb "KRA" – the TEARING of the altar - is reminiscent of the tearing of Yerovam's coat (see 11:30-31), and clearly indicative of the recanting and reversal of Yerovam's divine election.

If the audience doubted in any way the veracity of the *Ish Elokim's* identity, imagining him to be a political opponent sent by Rechavam's regime, then the "*mofet*"⁶ – a miraculous act to bolster the credibility of the agent of the message - clearly demonstrated the truth of his mission. And when Yerovam attempts to have the man arrested, the king's hand becomes frozen, paralysed; Yerovam himself must ask the *Ish Elokim* to appeal to God on his behalf. Yerovam thereby adds a second layer in demonstrating the superiority of this mysterious and disturbing visitor.

EATING, DRINKING AND RETURNING

Yerovam, unable to use force to dominate his prophetic antagonist, quickly adopts a tone of honor, deference, and appeasement. He invites the prophet to his palace, suggesting that he feast with him and offering him gifts. But the *Ish Elokim* refuses, intoning that God has restricted his eating, drinking, and his travel upon the same route upon which he arrived.

Many commentaries view the restrictions against eating and drinking as an act of rejection of *avoda zara*:

One is forbidden to enter a city of idolatry other than to warn or prevent them or to speak God's word. He was restricted from eating or drinking there so that the people would see that he had gone there only to deliver his prophecy. (Radak)

God commanded this to convey the message that there was no benefit or purpose to the place and they would all be destroyed eventually. (Ralbag)

In other words, the restrictions signify absolute severance from Beit-El and all that it represents. This certainly rings true.

But there is a further dimension of "eating bread" with prophets.⁷ Many years after this event, another prophet confronts a king and *Kohen Gadol* in Beit El:

⁶ See Uriel Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, pp. 138-39, who dwells upon the difference between an "*ot*" and "*mofet*;" an *ot* is more of an illustration and reminder, whereas a *mofet* proves credibility. See the usage of this word in *Shemot*: 7:9 and, for our purposes, regarding the veracity of a prophet in *Devarim* 13:3.

⁷ See Nili Samet's excellent article, <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/tanach/rishonim/beyn-2.htm>

And Amatziah [the *Kohen Gadol*] said to Amos, "Seer, go, run away to the land of Judah and **eat bread there** and prophesy there. But do not continue to prophesy in Beit-El, for it is the sanctuary of a king and the capital of the kingdom." And Amos replied and said to Amatziah, "I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I am a cattle herder and an inspector of sycamores. And the Lord took me from following the flock, and He said to me: 'Go, prophesy to My people Israel.' And now hearken to the word of the Lord. You say, 'Do not prophesy concerning Israel and do not prophesy concerning the house of Isaac?' Therefore, so said the Lord: Your wife shall play the harlot in the city, and your sons and daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be divided by lot, and you shall die on unclean soil, and Israel shall be exiled from its land.

Amatzia tells Amos that he should "eat bread" in Yehuda. What does he mean? And why does Amos reply by telling him about his professional background? This passage gives us a perspective to the sociology of the place of the prophet in Biblical times. In the ancient world, kings employed prophets, who frequently prophesized on their behalf; allied with the king's political worldview, these "prophets" bolstered the regime granting the king religious leverage. Thus, we read about the prophets of Ba'al, "who ate at the table of Izevel."⁸ Izevel had hundreds of prophets on the royal payroll, who boosted her status and her domestic agenda. So when Amatzia suggests that Amos "eat bread" back in Yehuda, he is ejecting him from the temple, assuming that his financial support came from the king. Amatzia tells Amos: In this Temple, you can only prophesize in support of the king. If you are looking for a pay check, then go to Yehuda - "Eat bread there – and there you can prophecy!" If you want to stay here, then change your message. Amos explains to him that he has a job; he doesn't need anyone's money. And he explains to Amatzia what it really means to be a prophet. Amos is a prophet because God called upon him to deliver a terrible message that had to be heard. "I am not a [government sponsored, 'professional'] prophet, nor the son of a prophet." There were many "prophets, sons of a prophet" around ancient Israel, who told monarchs precisely what they wanted to hear. Amos insists that he does not deliver government sponsored prophecy; he does not "eat bread" at anyone's table! Only under these independent conditions may the voice of God emerge as it criticizes the ruling powers when they sin.

Perhaps the essence of the command to the *Ish Elokim* in our story was that the prophet was not allowed to eat with the king **in particular**. God was not willing to allow any form of compromise, any sense that this *navi* could be "bought" or his opinions sold to the highest bidder. The *navi* who truly carries the word of God does not eat bread or drink water at the table of the king.

THE WAY HE CAME

⁸ See *Melakhim* I 18:19; see also ch. 22, where we see the prophets simply chanting the message that the king wants to hear.

The restriction of taking a different route home is also symbolically significant.

We must clarify how the biblical worldview understands *route* or *way*, both as an experience and as a concept. For our starting point, we may cite the injunction against returning to Egypt to buy horses, because “the Lord has told you that you must not go back that way again” (*Devarim* 17:16). Commentators, both ancient and modern, have had difficulty explaining this rationale; evidently we should understand it in the light of the punishment that concludes the list of retributive catastrophes... “The Lord will send you back to Egypt in ships by a route for which I told you, you should not see again. There you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves but none will buy” (*Devarim* 28:68). Returning to Egypt is the harshest of punishments because it cancels out the Exodus... The fact that this conception of returning to one's starting place as the cancellation of the original journey appears as part of the legal proscription indicates that this was the real mental attitude of those who retraced their steps, willingly or otherwise, and not merely rhetoric.

Moreover, just as returning to one's point of departure may be regarded a cancelling out the journey, retracing one's footsteps can be regarded as negating one's mission and abandoning its goal. (Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, p.140)⁹

In other words, the *navi* may not be seen retracing his steps, lest he convey that he is metaphorically reversing his mission and the decree that he has pronounced. This prophecy is non-negotiable and irrevocable.

THE "NAVI ZAKEN"

At this point, we meet the *navi zaken* who lives in Beit-El. Most traditional commentaries follow the Targum in viewing this man as a false prophet. After all, he tricks the prophet of God and seduces him with a lie, eventually leading to his death. The *navi zaken* does not come out looking particularly noble in this story.

But I am going to follow a different approach. Let us try to understand this man's background. We will begin by noting a few details.

1. The *navi zaken* hears about the incident with the *Ish Elokim* from his sons, who attended the inauguration of Yerovam's sacrificial altar. Why didn't he attend the event? If he is a false prophet and one of Yerovam's supporters, why was he not there? If he deliberately kept away, then we may suggest that it is because he had his own doubts as to the correctness of Yerovam's new religious practices. (We cannot argue that he was old and therefore housebound, as he has no trouble travelling later in the story.)

⁹ A similar approach is suggested by both R. Yoel bin Nun, "*Derekh Eretz Pelishtim*," *Megadim* 3, and R. Yaakov Medan in his article on the sin of the *meraglim* in *Megadim* 10.

2. The *navi zaken* owns a burial site at Beit El, as indicated by the story in *Melakhim* II 23:16-19, which records King Yoshiyahu's burning of the bones of the priests on the *bama* in Beit-El and the nearby gravesite of the *Ish Elokim* and *navi* from Shomron. He has clearly been living there for some time.
3. This man is a real prophet - he receives prophecy! In 13:20-22, he receives prophecy regarding the dreadful fate of the *Ish Elokim*. Moreover, when he tells an untruth in the story, it is noted (see v.18), which indicates that this man is generally trustworthy.

Thus we shall propose that this *navi zaken* is a man who has prophesied in the past.¹⁰ He now finds Beit-El transformed into a sacrificial site by Yerovam and his innovations. On the one hand, he knows the *halakha* that Jerusalem is chosen and eternal and that after the building of the Temple, *bamot* are forbidden. On the other hand, he understands that Yerovam has been divinely mandated to establish his own monarchy. Is Yerovam legitimate?

Because of his dilemma, his doubts as to Yerovam's legitimacy, he does not attend the opening ceremony of the *Beit Ha-Bamot*. But when he hears about the *Ish Elokim* from Yehuda and the miracles he performs, paralyzing Yerovam's hand and then freeing him, he recognizes that this man is the key to understanding whether Yerovam's new religion is legitimate or reprehensible.

His lie to the *Ish Elokim* is a test of sorts. He imagines that if the *Ish Elokim* backtracks upon his own words, then he is a fraud. If, however, he persists with his defiance regarding "eating, drinking, and returning," then the *navi zaken* will have to investigate further as to the source of his message.

When he meets the *Ish Elokim*, who is taking shade under an *elah* tree, the *navi zaken* suggests that he return home with him. The *Ish Elokim* refuses, restating his divine restriction and reinforcing his authenticity. And we, the reader, become confused as the *navi zaken* unveils his own contradictory "prophecy" that the *Ish Elokim* should return home with him to eat. *Pasuk* 18 leaves us confused. Whose prophecy is valid? Is it possible that *Hashem* commanded the *navi zaken* to show the *Ish Elokim* hospitality in Beit-El? How can there be two contradictory *nevuot*? The text does not leave us with this uncertainty for long, however. It clarifies the truth by informing us that "he lied."

Clearly, the *Ish Elokim*, possibly a young novice prophet, was fooled by the older man. It is only when they are dining together that *Hashem's* word emerges loud and clear (with an unusual mid-*pasuk* break that demonstrates a trauma of sorts¹¹) - he has contravened God's word, and hence will die a premature death.

¹⁰ Of course there are other options which do uphold the wholly negative and pernicious status of the *navi zaken* – see the articles by Samet and Simon listed earlier. Some suggest that the *navi zaken* wishes to annul the prophecy of the *Ish Elokim* by coercing him deceitfully to return. In this view, the prophecy can be undone by "rewinding" the journey of the prophet.

¹¹ See also *Bereishit* 35:22 and *Shmuel* II 12:13

Indeed, this is what happens. Just as the *navi zaken* "found him" (*va-yimtza'ehu*), luring him and seducing him to defy God's word, a lion "finds him" (*va-yimtza'ehu*) and kills him. This unusual spectacle demonstrates to all that this is a divine sign; God has killed the *Ish Elokim* for his contravention of the terms of his mission.

One point of interest is the way that *pasuk* 25 describes the passers-by looking on at this strange sight and then reporting it in the town. One wonders what this detail contributes to the story. The *Ish Elokim* was sent on a Godly mission, and if we did not know that his words were true from the start, we certainly comprehend this fact by his bizarre death. I believe that there is a parallel between the people looking on as the *Ish Elokim* decries the *mizbea'ach* in Beit-El and the image of people staring as they pass by his corpse flung by the roadside. Both events testify to the legitimacy of his prophecy.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY

The uncertainty and confusion that we have depicted as animating the *navi zaken's* actions, and which resurfaces at various points in the story, reflects an uncertainty about Yerovam that must have gripped the entire nation. The people were similarly unsure and bewildered as to whether a divinely mandated Yerovam should be setting up calves and new altars. On the one hand, he was appointed by God. On the other hand, his actions seem to defy His word.

This story is about a man, an *Ish Elokim*, who is clearly a man of God in every sense. But when he defies God's law, he is deemed guilty and will pay the price. He had good reason to contravene God's word; he was tricked in a seditious act of treachery. When it comes down to it, however, even if God mandates your mission, if you fail to comply with his laws, you lose your divine legitimacy.

This is true for the *Ish Elokim*. It is similarly true for Yerovam.

Yerovam may have been appointed by the prophet, but his subsequent actions betray his original election by God, and he will be removed from the monarchy.

A CALL TO YEROVAM: RETURN!

This is a story about whether one may "return." Is it permissible? Is it feasible? There is a clear play throughout the chapter on the *leitwort* verb, SH"V. Yerovam asks that his hand be restored (SH"V) to him, and he receives his hand in return. But can Yerovam's flagrant violation of the ritual centrality of Jerusalem be restored once it has been abrogated? Will Yerovam recant? The *Ish Elokim* is forbidden to "return" (SH"V), and when he does, he is not granted a second chance. What of Yerovam?

I would suggest that, unlike the prophet, Yerovam still has the possibility of returning by abandoning, reversing, and annulling his forbidden acts, just as his hand is returned to him. This chapter, then, is a wake-up call to Yerovam. It is his final warning. But he fails to heed the warning. He fails to return.

How do we know that this is a call to repent? How do we surmise this? From the final lines of the chapter:

EVEN AFTER THIS INCIDENT, Yerovam did not TURN BACK (SH"V) from his evil ways, but kept on appointing priests from the ranks of the people for the *bamot*... Thereby, the House of Yerovam incurred guilt, to their utter annihilation from the face of the earth. (33-34)

CONCLUSIONS

This story then, expresses the confusion that Yerovam's new religious centres thrust into the nation. This chapter communicates that even a leader designated by God may not abrogate God's word.

What were Yerovam's options? Yerovam knew that the Torah had mandated a single place of worship (See Devarim ch.12.) His *bamot* were clearly against Torah law. There were kings of the Northern and Southern kingdoms who cooperated and collaborated (Achav and Yehoshafat for example.) Yerovam had been designated by God to establish a new administration for the nation. However Jerusalem and the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* were to retain their status as the religious focal point of the nation. Has Yerovam collaborated with Rechavam, had he had not allowed the tension and resentment of the House of David to dominate, then the nation might have remained allied and united, with separate administrative and religious centres, one in Shekem and one in Jerusalem. In the final reckoning, the total and absolute national division instigated by Yerovam weakened and devastated the nation religiously and nationally.

APPENDIX: DID YEROVAM INSTITUTE IDOLATRY?

In last week's *shiur*, we discussed Yerovam's political-religious considerations that motivated him in initiating his two religious centers in Dan and Beit-El. This week, we have related to the religious confusion that ensued from Yerovam's new *Batei Ha-Bamot*, and God's condemnation of them. This negative view of Yerovam's altars and religious practices rests upon the creation of an alternative to Jerusalem in total defiance of the Torah's intent and command to have a single united site of *avodat Hashem*. At this level, the *Batei Ha-Bamot* and the altars that fragmented the nation are problematic in their own right.

There is also a discussion as to the status of Yerovam's golden calves, which is worthy of our attention. We have already related to the interesting

parallels with the *egel ha-zahav*, regarding which there is a similar discussion about whether it constituted idolatry.¹²

Yerovam's calves are viewed by *Tanakh* with great severity. *Sefer Melakhim* consistently refers to "Yerovam's sins," his "other gods and images," as a "great sin" that angered God. Moreover, these are acts that bring punishment and destruction upon the House of Yerovam and constitute one of the causes of the eventual national exile.¹³ Furthermore, not only altars and the golden calves are mentioned in this context, but *ashera* as well.¹⁴ This would thus appear to be an open and shut case.

But many traditional commentaries were troubled by the status of Yerovam's golden calves and questioned whether they were in fact idolatry. What are the issues here? What would lead us to believe that the golden calves were NOT idols?

1. In chapter 13, when the *Ish Elokim* arrives in Beit El to denounce Yerovam for his religious deviance, the prophet addresses his reproach to Yerovam's altar, but fails to mention the calves. One would certainly think that the molten images would be worse than the altar. Why does the calf go unmentioned?

2. Later on in *Sefer Melakhim* when there are religious campaigns aimed at eradicating idolatry in the times of Eliyahu, Yehu, and Chizkiyahu, the Ba'al is targeted as a national problem. The golden calves are never removed! If they were idolatry, why weren't they destroyed?

3. After the exile of the Northern Tribes, the Assyrians settle a non-Jewish population in place of the exiled Israelite tribes. These non-Jews experience a mysterious attack of lions,¹⁵ which is perceived as a sign that God is furious with their foreign worship, their idolatry. The solution to the problem is that the exiled Israelites teach these foreign people how to worship: "So one of the priests who was exiled from Samaria came and settled in Beit-El and taught them how to worship the Lord" (*Melakhim* II 17:28). If the northern priests practiced idolatry in Beit-El and Dan in the same manner as the pagan nations, how does this Samaritan priest bring a resolution to the problem?

For these reasons, many *mefarshim* suggest that the calves were forbidden images, but not idols. For example, the Ibn Ezra argues:

"Do not make any gods of gold **with me**" (*Shemot* 20:20): Just like "You shall not make graven images" (*Shemot* 20:3). The rationale here is that they will make images in order to receive the divine power and they will think that they are acting in God's honor, as

¹² See, for example, Nechama Leibowitz's *Studies in Shemot* (vol.2), "The Golden Calf." For a different *Tanakh*-based approach mitigating the idolatry aspect of the sin, see the article by Menachem Leibtag, <http://tanach.org/shmot/kitisa.txt>

¹³ See in particular *Melakhim* I 13:33-34; 14:7-11, 14-15; 15:30, 16:26; *Melakhim* II 17:21-23.

¹⁴ *Melakhim* I 14:14-15

¹⁵ There would certainly appear to be a direct link between the lions in that context and the lion in our chapter.

intermediaries, just like the golden calf that Israel made, where Aharon acted for the honor of God... That is why it states “with me” - as if to say – “I have no need for intermediaries.”

The Golden Calf, as understood by the Ibn Ezra (and more famously by the *Kuzari*) was an intermediary for worshipping God. It was not *elohim acherim*, a foreign deity. It WAS inappropriate, but it was paradoxically directed at the service of God. Similarly, Radak in his commentary to *Melakhim* states that the golden calves of Yerovam at Beit-El and Dan were used to worship *Hashem* in a forbidden manner. Here we quote a relevant passage from the *Kuzari* (4:13):

In truth, there is a need to make a major distinction between the worship of [golden calves by] Yerovam and [the Ba'al] worship of Achav. **Only the Ba'al worshippers are idolaters**, and it is in reference to this group that Eliyahu said, “If you are for *Hashem* our God then follow him, and if you are for Ba'al then follow him’ (*Melakhim* I 18:21)... And it was against the Ba'al worship that Eliyahu made his call of, “I am zealous for *Hashem*, the God of Israel.’ But he never called out against [the calves of] Yerovam. The men of Yerovam’s group were “for *Hashem* the God of Israel” in all their deeds, and their prophets were the prophets of God, whereas Achav’s prophets were the prophets of Ba'al. God sent Yehu to wipe out the memory of Achav ... but he did not destroy the calves [of Yerovam].

The worshippers of the golden calf [in the wilderness] and **the altars of Yerovam and the idol of Michah** (*Shoftim* chs.17-18) **only sought to serve the God of Israel**. Nonetheless, they transgressed a commandment for which there is a death penalty. They can be compared to a person who marries his sister... but who observes all the Halakhic restrictions of marriage, or to someone who eats pork, at the same time being particular to slaughter it according to the strictures of *shechita*, and to drain the blood, and keeps all the other *kashrut* restrictions.

Now, I admit that eating pork with *shechita* and draining of the blood does not sound like a *Mehadrin* meal. It certainly isn't! These commentators are far from legitimizing Yerovam. But they make a significant and fundamental distinction.

There are two basic forms of idolatry.¹⁶ There is a type of idolatry in which a person worships another god; he abandons service of God and switches Him for a different deity. But there is another type of forbidden act in which one worships *Hashem*, but through an improper and illicit medium. This obviously transgresses the second of the Ten Commandments, as it involves images and physical forms. Nonetheless, it is not the worship of another deity. It is merely worship of God through incorrect means.

¹⁶ I have discussed this distinction in greater depth in a *shiur* on *Parashat Va-Etchanan*: <http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.62/40vaet.htm>

These commentaries claim that it is wrong to categorize both forms of idolatry together; there is a huge difference between them in that one abandons God and the other still serves Him. Yerovam's *Beit Ha-Bamot*, his altars and calves, were directed at serving the God of Israel and did not signify a rejection of *Hashem*.

This approach has a distinct advantage. It explains clearly why the *pesukim* in *Sefer Melakhim* condemn Yerovam outright for his new religious centers - these shrines did break with the Halakha. At the same time, it explains why these shrines are not singled out by the prophets or destroyed in later purges of idolatry. They were, at the very least, dedicated to God.

Abarbanel¹⁷ adopts a more extreme approach and suggests that the calves were not intended for any manner of worship:

The calves were not for the purpose of idolatry and not for any type of worship – for sacrifice or bowing down – as was the calf in the wilderness... Their purpose was that in the same manner that Shlomo had built two pillars, placing them at the entrance to the sanctuary of the House of God as a sign of David and Shlomo;¹⁸ similarly, he decided to make a symbol for his rule. Because he was from the tribe of Yosef... who Moses had blessed: "Like the firstling bull in his majesty, his horns are the horns of a *re'em*..." (*Devarim* 33:17). Yerovam decided to use the symbol of the calf as the insignia of his family ... made of gold which designates eternity and the splendor of royalty ... and this calf was at the entrance to his temple at Beit El, where the *bamot* stood, just like the pillars in the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*.

According to this interpretation, these calves are simply royal insignia, figurines that reflect the strength of the royal house of Yerovam, and not representative of gods in any way. It is interesting that the Abarbanel suggests that the Temple in Jerusalem was the model for Yerovam, it being strongly associated with the monarchy. Yerovam's calves – reflecting the ox from the blessings of Yosef – connect the tribal symbol with Yerovam's new temple. It is not surprising, then, that the shrine at Beit-El is denoted by *Sefer Amos* as a "*Mikdash Melekh*" – a temple under royal authorization. The connection between the *Beit Bamot* and the king was openly manifest.

This discussion mirrors the sense of confusion that we expressed in our discussion of chapter 13. How much of a sinner was Yerovam? Were his calves simply a royal symbol, symbolic representation of God, or idolatry? As we have seen in *Sefer Melakhim* and as we sense from the *mishna* that tells us that Yerovam "has no portion in the World to Come," the verdict is clear. Yerovam was judged with severity for his active role in the religious decline of the nation.

¹⁷ Commentary to ch.12 (p. 557 in the standard printing).

¹⁸ The Abarbanel's view is that Yachin and Boaz were meant to symbolize the power of the monarchy.