

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings
By Rav Alex Israel

This shiur is dedicated in memory of Israel Koschitzky zt"l, whose yahrzeit falls on the 19th of Kislev. May the world-wide dissemination of Torah through the VBM be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements exemplified the love of Eretz Yisrael and Torat Yisrael.

Shiur #7: Chapter 7 – Majestic Buildings

In our previous *shiur*, we left off with a question as to the organization and ordering of chapters 6-7. We were concerned with the two disruptions to the logical flow of the narrative that charts the *Mikdash's* construction:

6:1-10 – The structure of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*
-> 6:11-13 – Communication from God
6:14-38 – The decoration of the *Mikdash*
-> 7:1-12 – Royal buildings
7:13-51 – The metalwork for the *Mikdash*
Chapter 8 – The dedication ceremony of the *Mikdash*

These interruptions are all the more disturbing when we consider the logically ordered flow of the topic segments (without the interruptions):

- Framing *passuk*¹ (6:1)
- 1 Stone construction (6:2-10)**
- Framing *passuk* (6:14)
- 2 Wood construction (6:15-36)**
- Framing *passuk* (6:37-38)
- 3 Metal construction (7:13-47)**
- Framing *passuk* (7:40-47)
- 4 Gold construction (7:48-50)**
- Framing *passuk* (7:51)

When we view this structure in its broad categorizations, the ill fitting sections or interpolations become all the more troubling.

THE FIRST INTERPOLATION: A Warning and a Promise

¹ These “framing verses” are introductions, conclusions, or summative comments concerning the project of building or finishing the *Beit Hashem*.

This house that you are building – if you follow my laws and observe my judgments and faithfully keep my *mitzvot*... I will reside amongst the Children of Israel and will never forsake my people, Israel. (6:11-13)

Metzudot David explains the thrust of this passage:

Notwithstanding that you are building the most beautiful of structures, nonetheless, I will not rest my Presence in it unless you walk in my commandments, etc.

Abarbanel puts God's message in the following way:

Do not think, Shlomo, that it [the *Mikdash*] will stand for eternity, and hence the need for such a sturdy and strong building. For its endurance is contingent upon the caveat of whether you, and those who follow you, will walk in my laws. If you do, then I will fulfill my words that I spoke to [King] David that I will dwell amongst the People of Israel and never abandon them.

If the structure of these chapters is in any way chronological, it appears that this divine message of encouragement and caution is transmitted at the point at which the outer shell, the stone structure, has been completed. This is prior to the decoration of the inside of the building and the fashioning of the *keilim* of the *Mikdash*. At this stage of construction, the building stands for all to see, but there is still much to build. God uses this opportunity to bring Shlomo into the correct mindset.

THE SECOND INTERRUPTION: The Royal Compound

The second interruption is entirely different in that it deals with the construction of the royal compound. Since these are not holy buildings, these *pesukim* are seemingly distinct from those regarding the *Mikdash*. Nevertheless, this digression is well disguised, appearing almost an integral part of the *Mikdash* text, as it bears a striking similarity to the *Mikdash* section and utilizes the identical vernacular. Here are the similarities:

- The detailing of the dimensions of the structure
- The precious stones and "*gazit*" (hewn) stones (5:31 and 7:9)
- The wood paneling from floor to ceiling (6:15-16 and 7:7)
- The "courtyard with three tiers of hewn stone and a row of cedar beams" (6:37 with 7:12)

The vocabulary matches perfectly.

This similarity is possibly the key to explain the awkwardness of this interjection. Is this section a foreign implant, a mismatch? Or is this section appropriately placed, architecturally integrated, a single piece? Phrased differently, what is the relationship between the *Beit Hashem* and the *Beit Ha-Melekh*?

A TALE OF TWO HOUSES

In the fourth year, the house of God was founded in the month of Ziv, and in the eleventh year... the house was completed ... he built it for seven years. And Shlomo built his own house for thirteen years until he completed his entire house. (Melakhim I 6:37-7:1)

Seven years for the Temple, thirteen for the Palace. How should we digest this information? Why did Shlomo spend almost double the amount of time on his royal compound than he spent on constructing the *Mikdash*? The *Pesikta* comments:

Anyone who hears that he [Shlomo] built his house for thirteen years and God's house for seven years thinks that possibly his [the king's] house was greater than that of God! That is not the case. He was slow in the construction of his own palace, whereas with God's house, he was industrious. Moreover, he prioritized God's honor to his own honor. (*Pesikta Rabbati* 6)

This *midrash* suggests that the disparity between the Palace and the *Mikdash* as regards the period of construction is to Shlomo's credit, rather than a mark of shame. He expedited the building of the *Mikdash*, finishing it in record time, as he was enthused to complete the project. For his own palace, he was less agitated to hurry and he built at a more relaxed pace. This is evidence that Shlomo had his priorities correctly ordered.²

But there are contrary perspectives as well. For example, the *gemara* states (Shabbat 30a):

When Shlomo built the Temple, he wanted to bring the Ark into the Holy of Holies, but the gates cleaved to each other. Shlomo recited twenty-four prayers, but was not answered. He said, "Lift up your heads, O you gates... and the King of glory shall come in" (*Tehillim* 24:7). The gates ran after him and sought to swallow him. They said, "Who is the King of glory?" He answered, "*Hashem*, the strong and mighty."

In this phenomenal reading of *Tehillim* chapter 24, set at the inauguration of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, Shlomo seeks entry into the *Kodesh Ha-Kadashim* in order to install the *aron*, but the gates are surprisingly and mysteriously locked together. Shlomo orders them to open so that "the King of glory may come in." Of course, this is a reference to God. However, the gates perceive that Shlomo is referring to and describing himself as the king of glory. They threaten to swallow Shlomo, and the gates then challenge him with the next line in that chapter of *Tehillim*: "Who is the King of glory?" to which he professes that God is the true King.

This powerful *midrash* articulates certain reservations concerning Shlomo. Why is Shlomo's house depicted in the same manner as the *Mikdash*? Why does he build his house for thirteen years, certainly suggesting that his palace is more splendid than the Temple? How does Shlomo – a king who has become an emperor

² See Yehudah Keil's notes in *Da'at Mikra* (p. 158 - summary of chapter 7), where he views the section dealing with the royal buildings as a sign of the sanctity of the monarchy and the close ties between the palace and the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*. In that case, there is no tension in this section, and the interruption fits in as a powerful statement that Shlomo's reign upholds God's kingship on earth. We shall adopt a more skeptical approach.

- perceive himself? And maybe most important, does he view the *Mikdash* as HIS house or God's house? The gates accuse Shlomo of perceiving himself as a god, of failing to see God's authority, His supremacy. The gates are sceptical, and we too can identify some apprehension regarding Shlomo!

I believe that the perplexing structure of our chapter, in which the text interjects discussion of the royal buildings into the section dealing with the *Mikdash*, consciously raises precisely this ambiguity. What is the relationship between Shlomo's royal compound and God's compound? Each is built of similar materials, pillars, courtyards, etc. Whereas it is clear that the *Mikdash* is the focal point here, we do wonder whether the focus is a little blurred.

THE HOUSE OF THE LEBANON FOREST

To illustrate the question of whether the royal establishment is competing with or eclipsing the Temple, it may be worthwhile to dwell upon the House of the Lebanon forest described in 7:2-5. These *pesukim* describe a building that is the largest in Jerusalem³ – 50 cubits by 100 cubits with a height of 30 cubits. It has a floor area three times that of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*.

The commentaries were intrigued by the building's name. Targum Yonatan translates it as "the cooling house." The Radak explains:

It seems that the practice of kings in those days was to build houses in the forest to cool off in the summer.

In other words, that this is a summer home, airy and cool. Some commentators suggest that this regal building was situated in a forest and not in Jerusalem, but the huge dimensions of this building, the cryptic architectural terms, and the bombastic name leave these interpretations as unsatisfying.

What function did this structure serve? If it was situated adjacent to the palace, could it indeed be cooler than the royal residence? And what is the relationship between a Lebanon forest and this building? Metzudat David initiates an explanation:

The effect of the multiple pillars made it appear as a forest full of trees.

Noga Hareuveni⁴ takes this idea further with a wonderfully creative and vibrant recreation of this building. He bases his explanation upon the phrases "*kerutot arazim*" and the "*mekheza*" mentioned in the *pesukim*:

We believe Solomon used a sophisticated gimmick to create for the visitor the illusion that he was in some kind of forest rather than a simple pillared hall. To

³ This building seems to be mentioned centuries later in the book of *Yeshayahu* 22:8, where it is simply called "*Beit Ha-Ya'ar*."

⁴ Israel Prize winner Noga Hareuveni made it his life's work to discover and explore the animals, plants, and landscape of the *Tanakh*. To this end, he founded Neot Kedumim (near Modiin), an agricultural park aiming to help people visualize and understand the plant life of the Bible. This passage is from the book *Tree and Shrub in our Biblical Heritage*, pp. 100-104.

achieve such an illusion, it would be necessary to make the pillars look like actual trees, and for the few dozen "trees" to become a "forest."

The Hebrew word *kerutot*, translated as beams, is derived from the root *karot*, meaning to cut down a tree or branch... Therefore, we can assume that these "beams" were actually ramified cedar branches still covered in needles (the "leaves" of the cedar). These branches could be bracketed horizontally into the cedar pillars and together **simulate live cedars**.

... We believe that this unique Hebrew word (*mekheza*), which does not appear anywhere else in the Bible, may be rendered as mirror, stemming from the root *khazo* (to see)... **The use of facing mirrors at both ends... gave the visitor the illusion of being in a literally infinite forest – the "trees" reflected endlessly in the opposing mirrors.**

... Clearly, the House of the Forest of Lebanon was most carefully planned to astound the diplomatic and trade delegations that came to Solomon from far and wide...

This magnificent building stands not far from the Temple and makes the Temple look like a small structure! When we read about this building, whose only real purpose is to dazzle and impress, one begins to question Shlomo's orientation.

And yet, when all is said and done, these are interjections within the narrative, undercurrents, warning lights. The dominant thrust of the story is highly positive. Shlomo is building the Temple! Let us not take the credit away from him. The section that deals with the Temple totals 133 *pesukim*. The interjections that raise questions about Shlomo's motives constitute fourteen verses in total. With that sort of ratio, we may conclude that the overwhelming momentum supports Shlomo.

YAKHIN AND BOAZ, THE YAM AND THE MECHONOT

The bulk of chapter 7 deals with the elaborate metalwork of the *Mikdash*. Much like the descriptions of the *Mishkan* in the Torah, the text here revels in the technical details, proportions, and dimensions of the various *keilim*, a feature that makes these chapters quite difficult to access. Typical for Shlomo, we read how he engages an imported Jewish-Phoenician craftsman, Chiram. The *Navi* emphasizes the fact that Chiram is endowed with the virtues of "*chokhma, tevuna* and *da'at*," a reflection of the accolade awarded to the chief artisan of the *Mishkan*, Betzalel.⁵ Furthermore, Shlomo, using advanced mining techniques for his age, does not import copper but mines his own in the Jordan valley.⁶

The major *keilim* recorded here are:

- v. 15-22 – The two pillars – *Yakhin and Boaz*
- v. 23-26 – The *Yam* (or reservoir)

⁵ See *Shemot* 31:3

⁶ See *Da'at Mikra*, who makes an identification of this location in the upper Jordan Valley on the basis of the topography and archeological evidence. See a more recent widely publicized suggestion: <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/10/081027174545.htm>

v. 27-37 – Ten *mekhonot*
v. 38-39 – Ten *kiyorim*
v.40-47 – Summative *pesukim*

These *keilim* are difficult to probe. With the exception of the *kiyor*, they all lack a precedent or equivalent in the *Mishkan* and are new additions by Shlomo to the landscape of the *Mikdash*. We will use the literature at our disposal to investigate their significance.

The two grand copper columns of ***Yakhin and Boaz*** stand at the entrance to the *Heichal*. They are eighteen *amot* tall, with a circumference of twelve *amot* each. According to *Sefer Yirmiyahu*,⁷ they are hollow, constructed with copper that is four finger-breadths thick. The top of the column is elaborately decorated with lilies or pomegranates,⁸ and they appear to have a sophisticated lattice type decoration.

Yakhin and *Boaz* could, of course, simply be impressive architectural features, found in many temples of the times throughout the Near East.⁹ Even if this is so, we need to focus upon their names.¹⁰ If the pillar is given a title, that name confers a meaning. What do the names indicate? The Radak explains:

The pillars at the entrance to the House he named for good fortune. One was called *Yakhin*, indicating that the House would last forever, and *Boaz* was indicative of strength, made up of a composite word, *Bo-Oz* [lit. "strength in it"] – that God should instill strength and standing to the Temple, as it states: "God shall give vigor to his nation."¹¹

The pillars thus indicate themes of eternal reign as well as power or strength. The massive dimensions and sturdy nature of the pillar or column, certainly conveys a feeling of power and permanence. Whether these refer to the *Mikdash*, God, or Shlomo shifts as we read one commentator or another.

The *Yam*, the *kiyor* and the *mekhonot* are all related to the presence of water in the *Mikdash*. The *Yam* is a huge water receptacle, circular in shape and ten cubits in diameter. According to *Divrei Ha-yamim* (II 4:6), its purpose is "for the washing of the *kohanim*."¹² The volume of water that it held is described as "Two-

⁷ See *Yirmiyahu* 52:20-23 and *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 3:15-17, as well as our chapter.

⁸ I wondered whether there is any room to establish a connection between *Shir Ha-shirim* and these pomegranates, lilies, and pillars.

⁹ For example, see the lecture of Prof. Nachman Avigad in "Iyunim BeSefer Melakhim" (the group for Tanakh study in the Prime Minister David Ben Gurion's residence) vol I, pgs 84-85.

¹⁰ Names frequently given to objects of religious service have deeper significance. See, for example, the name of the altar called "God is my miracle/banner" by Moshe (*Shemot* 17:15).

¹¹ Interestingly, the source of Radak's opinion is the *Midrash Tadshe*, which attributes the source of these names to two *pesukim* (*Tehillim* 89:37 and 19:6), attributing one to the sun and the other to the moon. The *passuk* of *Yakhin*, however, indicates eternal reign to the king, recording a divine promise regarding the everlasting monarchy of David: "I will not be false to David. His line shall continue forever; his throne is the sun before me; as the moon established forever, *yikon olam*." The verse of *Boaz* indicates strength, but in context it refers to the sun and the moon, which eternally praise God. It can refer also to Torah as an everlasting and perfect law. Thus, we have the perfect hybrid of kingship of Man and of God contained in these verses.

¹² The Rambam, basing himself on the Yerushalmi, states that the *halakhot* of *mikvaot* applied to this pool, as it received a constant inflow from a reservoir that led to the *Mikdash*, and that the feet of the

thousand *bat*¹³ (7:26), but we don't know how to measure the volume of a "*bat*"! We are also confused as to its precise shape. We know that it was five cubits high, but what shape were its sides?¹⁴ Because of these unresolved questions, assessments of its volume vary wildly between 20,000 and 66,000 liters of water - not a very accurate picture!

What is even more mysterious are the twelve oxen upon which the *Yam* sits. The oxen faced outwards, three in each direction. Why would Shlomo place twelve molten oxen in the Temple itself?

The ten washbasins (*kiyorim*) are also described, measuring four cubits in diameter and standing on decorative frames (*mekhonot*) and resting upon four wheels (*ofanim*.) Once again, we find certain unexpected features; the *mekhonot* are decorated with images of "lions, oxen, and *keruvim*."

MERKAVA IMAGERY?

Representations of *keruvim* are far from foreign in the environment of the *Mikdash*; in *Sefer Shemot*, we find that many fabrics were woven with these images.¹⁵ But oxen and lions found no place in the *Mishkan*. Twelve molten oxen do seem to be treading a little too close to the line of a golden calf! The conglomerate of all of these images, the lions, and oxen, along with the wheels called "*ofanim*", and a carrying base of twelve oxen, led various commentators to view these images as symbols of divine beings:

Images of lions, oxen, and *keruvim*:... These are the images that were seen by Yechezkel in his vision of the *Merkava*, but here the image of an eagle is not mentioned. (Ralbag)

The crafting of these wheels was as the form of the wheels of the chariot (7:33), the holy chariot that was seen in the vision of Yechezkel, and this is how Targum Yonatan translated it. Shlomo in his wisdom saw that which Yechezkel ben Boozi saw in his prophecy. (Radak)

These commentators are of course referring to the vision of Yechezkel in which "The heavens opened and I saw visions of God" (1:1); Yechezkel is given a

oxen were hollow, allowing for a constant connection between this artificial pool and a living water source (*Hilkhot Bi'at Mikdash* 5:15). There are no archaeological remnants of the First Temple, and hence verification of this tradition is impossible. One does wonder, however, whether this tradition is influenced by either the images of water flowing through the Temple in the book of *Yechezkel* (chapter 47), or alternatively the aqueduct that ran through the Second Temple, a channel of which we DO have considerable archeological evidence.

¹³ A further complication is that *Divrei Ha-yamim* (II 4:5) tells us that the volume was 3,000 *bat*! The Talmud (*Eiruvim* 14b) resolves this contradiction by explaining that its volume is 3,000 if it is holding an overflowing pile (of some dry substance) and 2,000 if it is holding liquid. Whether or not that solution is acceptable or realistic, we can say that an accurate assessment of the dimensions of this reservoir eludes us.

¹⁴ We know that the height was five cubits, but we don't know the shape of the sides. For example, the Gemara in *Eiruvim* 14b talks about the top two cubits as spherical and the lower three cubits as "square." What that means exactly is open to debate.

¹⁵ See the covering on the top of the *Mishkan* (*Shemot* 26:1) and the *parokhet* (*ibid.* 26:31).

glimpse of the "*merkava*," the "carriage," of God. This image is seen as mystical and impenetrable by the uninitiated,¹⁶ and yet, even from a superficial perspective, the words resonate with the depiction of the *Mikdash*:

And in the center of it were also the figure of four creatures... each of the four had a human face, the face of a lion..., an ox..., an eagle.¹⁷ (*Yechezkel* 1:10)

Moreover, angelic creatures known as *ofanim* feature prominently in Yechezkel's vision (ten times in chapter 1). All of this leads us to think that Shlomo is drawing upon this mystical imagery, attempting to reflect the divine majesty figuratively in the Temple.

A further support to this may be the unfortunate fate of these items. A later king of Yehuda, Achaz, turns away from God and adopts an Assyrian deity (see *Melakhim* II chapter 16). He then attempts to transform the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* into a pagan Assyrian shrine. Along with a series of devastating acts with which he expresses his rejection of God, we read how:

Achaz cut the frames of the *mekhonot* and removed the *kiyorim* (washbasins) from them. He removed the *Yam* from the copper oxen which were underneath it and placed it on the stone floor. (*Melakhim* II 16:17)

What does this express? Why deliberately cut out these images? If these images represent the *merkava*, then Achaz's statement in cutting them down would be an expression of the impotence of God and his loss of power.¹⁸

This *merkava* idea has its opponents. One passionate and vociferous challenger is R. Yosef Kra, a student and contemporary of Rashi, and a staunch advocate of *peshat* readings of Tanakh. He protests:

This view is a perversion of the truth to anyone who has the Torah of *Hashem* within him. It inverts the words of the living God and leads all Israel astray in its solution. Have you seen any human who says... in regards to something that he finds difficult to understand... "Look at the heavens! What you see in the heavens, so it is on earth"? And to this we reply, "Who can ascend to the heavens and bring it down to us?" (*Devarim* 30:12)... God never sought to teach future generations that which can be seen from that which is unknown and invisible. If you wish to know the correct meaning of the verse "like the construction of the wheels of honor" (Targum Yonatan to 7:33), go investigate the wheels of the carriages of kings, which are significantly different in their construction to those of transportation wagons. (R. Yoseph Kra 7:33)

I have quoted this piece at length to give some insight into the depth and intensity of his objection here. Similarly, the Abarbanel has no time for Kabbalistic explanations of these *keilim* and prefers to view them as decorative, regal ornamentation.

¹⁶ See *mishna Megilla* 4:10 and *mishna Chagiga* 2:1

¹⁷ See *Yechezkel* 10:14, where it would appear that the human face is in fact a *keruv*.

Of course Yechezkel postdates Shlomo by 300 years, but if this the "truth" regarding the essence of God's "chariot" then it is timeless.

¹⁸ I heard this idea once from Rosh Ha-Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion, R. Yaakov Medan.

As we have mentioned, these twelve oxen and the decorative basins were detached by King Achaz. But apparently they were not destroyed entirely and they remained in the vicinity of Jerusalem. We read about the pillars of *Yakhin* and *Boaz*, along with the *Yam* and the *mekhonot*, in a sad lament; all their details are deliberately re-recorded as the *Mikdash* is destroyed and they are carted off to Babylon:

And the copper pillars in the House of God, the *mekhonot*, and the copper reservoir (*Yam*) that were in the House of God were broken up by the Kasdim, and they took their copper to Bavel. (*Melakhim* II 25:13; see also 16-17)

Next week, we will move ahead to the celebrations of the dedication of the *Mikdash*, an appropriate discussion for Chanuka, and Shlomo's spectacular prayer.