

Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings
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Shiur #9: Chapters 9-11¹ - Shlomo's Sins

King Shlomo loved many foreign women in addition to Pharaoh's daughter – Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Phoenician and Hittite women from the nations of which God had said to the Children of Israel, “Do not join them and they should not join you, lest they divert your heart away to follow their gods.” Such Shlomo clung to and loved. He had seven hundred royal wives and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned his heart astray. In his old age, his wives caused his heart to stray after other gods, and he was not wholeheartedly devoted to God as his father David had been. Solomon followed Ashtoret, god of Phoenicia, and Milkom, the abomination of the Ammonites. Shlomo did evil in the eyes of God and did not remain loyal to God like his father David.

At that time, Solomon built a shrine for Kemosh, the abomination of Moav, on the hill near Jerusalem, and one for Molech, the abomination of Ammon. He did the same for all his foreign wives who offered and sacrificed to their gods. God was angry with Shlomo because his heart turned away from the Lord, God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice, and had commanded him not to follow other gods; he did not adhere to that which God commanded him.

And God said to Shlomo, “Because you have done this and you have failed to keep my covenant and the laws I commanded you, I will tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your servants...” (11:1-11)

These lines constitute a surprising and disturbing end to the story of the great king Shlomo. They are surprising because after ten chapters in which Shlomo has been depicted as a loyal servant of God and builder of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, these lines brand Shlomo as a sinner, committing the most serious of offenses towards God - idolatry. This drastic departure is as puzzling as it is disturbing. We recall quite well the verse in chapter 3, “And Shlomo loved God,” which has now perplexingly been replaced by their unanticipated corollary, “Shlomo Ha-Melekh loved many foreign women.”

What process transpired to transform the faithful Shlomo into a religious offender? How could the wisest of all men have become seduced by the lures of idolatry? Furthermore, the verses here do not merely depict Shlomo as being

¹ This week's *shiur* is focused on Shlomo's sins. The main text is chapter 11. I will not be writing a *shiur* directly relating to chapters 9 and 10, as we have related to many aspects of these chapters in our discussion of the empire (chs. 4-5) and in our past *shiur* (ch. 8.) Today's *shiur* also aims to place these chapters in a broader context. Rather than working with chapter 9 and 10 in a detailed fashion, I prefer to leave them in the broader framework that has been developed in these *shiurim*. Those who are interested can study them *be-iyun* independently.

attracted to other gods. In a sinister counterweight to his building of the Temple, these *pesukim* describe Shlomo as building pagan shrines in Jerusalem! How does one integrate and assimilate all this contradictory information?

Our sense of bewilderment is tested further as we digest this information in the wider context of what we know about this man. Shlomo is, after all, the author of *Mishlei*, in which he warns repeatedly about the dangers of straying after other deities, cultures, and worldly attractions, which he calls "foreign women:"

Why be infatuated, my son, with an outside woman,
Embrace the breast of a foreigner?
For a man's ways are before the eyes of God...
The wicked man will be trapped in his iniquities. (*Mishlei* 5:20-21)

Could the author of these lines warning of the dangers of foreign women fall into their trap?² Would the person who wrote so passionately of the love of God and Israel in *Shir Ha-Shirim* turn his back on his beloved God?

It was this sense of wonder, the discord between the stark transgression recorded in chapter 11 and the wider image of Shlomo, which led commentators to dig deeper, seeking avenues of explanation. We will present three approaches to grappling with and resolving this challenging problem.

APPROACH #1 - "WHOEVER SAYS SHLOMO SINNED IS MISTAKEN"

The *gemara*, in a famous aggadic section (*Shabbat* 56b), claims that Shlomo never personally served idols - it was his wives who were engaged in pagan pursuits.

R. Shmuel bar Nachmani says in the name of R. Yonatan: **Whoever says that Shlomo sinned is mistaken**, as it states: "...He was not wholeheartedly devoted to God as his father David" – not as devoted as David, but nonetheless he did not sin!

This Talmudic passage, clearly written with the explicit agenda of exonerating Shlomo, leaves no stone unturned in its attempt to reread these *pesukim* in a manner that will cast Shlomo in a favorable light. The first point of defense is the verse that states, "In his old age, his wives caused his heart to stray after other gods/ and he was not wholeheartedly devoted to God as his father David had been."

This verse contains two clauses. The first states that his wives were instrumental in directing him towards other deities. The second clause states that he was not as wholehearted – "*lo haya levavo shalem in Hashem*" – as his father. Of course, the thrust of each clause pushes in opposite directions. The first clause implies Shlomo's idolatrous practices and reorientation away from God (although not at Shlomo's initiative). The second says that he was not quite as good as King David, that he didn't reach David's perfection. But this second clause is an absurd

² See also in *Mishlei* 2:16, 6:24, 7:7-8:6. *Mishlei* is quite obviously attributed to Shlomo. See the opening line!

statement if Shlomo is actually guilty of cardinal transgressions. The two statements seem inconsistent with one another. The Ralbag argues that were Shlomo guilty of classic idolatry, the first clause alone would have sufficed. The inclusion of the second clause gives us room to investigate further.

Thus, the *gemara* surmises that Shlomo never served idols. But then what do we do with the first clause? The Talmud suggests guilt by proxy; Shlomo failed to rebuke his wives for building shrines to other gods, and he did not protest their flagrant idolatry.

Because he should have protested his wives' acts and he failed to do so, he is treated as if he served himself.

In the perspective offered here by the Talmud, the *Tanakh* judges *tzaddikim* with extreme severity. The text speaks **as if** Shlomo had practiced idolatry, but in truth he is taken to task for failing to stop his wives.

This approach is adopted by the great medieval commentators Rashi, Ralbag, and Radak, and the modern commentary *Da'at Mikra*. Since the weight of traditional commentary follows this approach, it is worthy of our closer attention. Some will protest that this approach conflicts with the straightforward reading of the text and actually twists it. It is true that this Talmudic passage belongs to a series that aims to "cover up" and whitewash the flagrant actions of many biblical characters.³ Nonetheless, in the spirit of this *sugya*, we can reconstruct a scenario in which Shlomo could be blamed for idolatry even though he himself never worshipped other gods.

Shlomo had one thousand wives from many nations. These were most probably the result of his political alliances rather than romantic relationships. It is difficult to imagine that these women, even if they converted in some official manner,⁴ had seriously adopted a Jewish frame of mind. Culturally, they were affiliated with their native kingdoms. I imagine that the more powerful among them managed to gain permission and royal funding to set up their own shrines or worship sites around the outskirts of the city, at which they could worship their gods, Kemosh, Milkom, Molech and the like. Being buildings under royal command, they would use the king's construction teams and were emblazoned with Shlomo's royal insignia. Just imagine the confused visitor to Jerusalem who came to the city with intent of worshipping at the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, to experience a metropolis in which *Hashem* is the true king, and yet found government sponsored idolatrous shrines scattered around the city!⁵ It certainly sounds discordant. Did Shlomo actually build these temples? Well... Yes! In the same manner in which we could say that Shlomo built anything, we could correctly say that "Shlomo built a shrine to X.Y and Z." Moreover, according to the Torah, idolatry is something that one is supposed to relate to with a zero-tolerance policy; it is not an area about which one is permitted to

³ The series discusses Reuven, the sons of Eli, David Ha-Melekh, Shlomo, and King Yoshiyahu. The opinions are all attributed to R. Shmuel bar Nachmani in the name of R. Yonatan, and all involve serious convolutions of the text in order to recast explicit sins as legitimate.

⁴ See the Radak on 3:1, who grapples with this issue on the basis of the *sugya* in Yevamot 76a.

⁵ See Rav Yitzchak Levi's article in which he discusses the physical location of these shrines in Jerusalem and their contrast to the *Mikdash*: <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/yeru2/15yeru.htm>

be vague or unfocused. Shlomo's lackadaisical attitude towards his wives' idolatry made him to some degree complicit.

I know that this won't satisfy the more rigid textual reader of *Tanakh*, but this is possibly the way in which the *gemara* managed to resolve its disbelief that the faithful Shlomo could in fact have become entangled with *avoda zara*. The Talmud's solution is that his wives served the idols, but he failed to protest their actions.

For those who are disturbed by the dissonance between the text and this Talmudic explanation, we may suggest another direction.

APPROACH # 2: A SLIPPERY SLOPE OF SINS

Sefer Devarim legislates a series of restrictions that apply to a Jewish king:

He shall not keep many horses and not send the people back to Egypt to add to his horses, since the Lord has warned you, "You must not go back that way again."

And he shall not have many wives, lest his heart go astray;
nor shall he amass silver and gold to excess.

The king is denied excess in three areas: horses, wives, and wealth. These restrictions may have their own validity in sculpting the texture of appropriate royal culture, but the Torah specifies that these restrictions are in place to safeguard against more serious infractions.

Our text in chapter 11 would appear to be a classic exemplar of this warning. Shlomo abrogates the command restricting the king's number of wives "lest his heart go astray." And that is precisely the fate that befalls him. (In our case, it is worse, in that Shlomo chooses to marry foreign women.) But what of the previous two clauses, placing limits on horses, and the military ties with Egypt, and that of amassing silver and gold? How did Shlomo fare in these areas?

The *Yerushalmi* says explicitly:

R. Aha said: Shlomo said, Three things I violated for which I was punished: "He shall not have many wives," for it says, "King Shlomo loved many foreign women" (*Melakhim* I 11:1)... "He shall not keep many horses," for it says, "King Shlomo had four thousand stalls for horses and chariots, and twelve thousand horsemen" (*Divrei Ha-Yamim* II 9:25) ... and "nor shall he amass silver and gold to excess," for it is written, "The king made silver as plentiful in Jerusalem as stones" (*Melakhim* I 10:27). (*Yerushalmi Sanhedrin* 2.6):

In other words, Shlomo violated the entire code of the king. A casual reading of chapter 9 and 10 of *Melakhim* clearly shows Shlomo's penchant for luxury, and 10:26-29 details Shlomo's central role in the international horse trading market, a business with its hub in Egypt. Shlomo had certainly broken every rule! How did Shlomo come to disregard the Torah so flagrantly? The *gemara* articulates Shlomo's overconfident attitude:

R. Yitzchak said: Why were the reasons of Biblical laws not revealed? Because in **two verses, reasons were revealed, and they caused the greatest in the world [Shlomo] to stumble.**

It is written: "He shall not exceed in wives [lest his heart go astray]." **Shlomo said, "I will exceed and not let my heart stray."** Yet we read, "When Shlomo was old, his wives turned away his heart."

Again it is written: "He may not exceed in his horses [and not send the people back to Egypt to add to his horses]. **Shlomo said, "I will exceed, but will not cause [Israel] to return [to Egypt]."** Yet we read: "And a chariot came up and went out of Egypt for six hundred *shekels* of silver." (*Sanhedrin* 21b)

Shlomo ignored the warnings of the Torah, miscalculating his personal resilience. He professed that he could control his impulses and instincts, but the wisdom of the Torah exceeded his own wisdom. Shlomo had lost control!

What we are claiming, then, is that beyond the crime of idolatry, Shlomo has consistently disregarded his mandate as king. If we adopt this approach, we will discover that it does not simply widen the range of Shlomo's misdemeanors, but actually restructures the chapters that deal with Shlomo.

Earlier, we suggested that chapters 1-10 present the religiously faithful Shlomo, whereas chapter 11 unexpectedly recasts Shlomo as a sinner. In the light of these *midrashim*, we can see that this latter perspective is revealed in a far wider swath of the chapters devoted to Shlomo:

Chs. 3-5	Rise of an empire	Shlomo's wisdom and imperial success
Chs. 6-8	The objective	Building the <i>Beit Ha-Mikdash</i>
Chs. 9-11	Fall of an empire	Shlomo's excess and resultant sins

Far from chapter 11 being surprising and unexpected, when we view the chapters from this perspective, we can chapter see 9 and 10 transcribing a pattern in deliberate detail. These chapters detail a kingdom of opulence and luxury, of ostentatious and unnecessarily lavish décor, an extravagant throne,⁶ in general what

⁶ Shlomo's throne is a topic in its own right; powerful *midrashim* were written about it. It is entirely midrashic in nature and hence beyond the cope of our *shiurim*. See *Vayikra Rabba* 20:1, where we read: "Pharaoh Nekho... sought to sit upon the throne of Shlomo. He did not know its workings, so a lion struck him and maimed him." Louis Ginzberg, in "Legends of the Jews," describes it in the following manner: "On each of its six steps were two golden lions and two golden eagles, a lion and eagle to the left and a lion and eagle to the right... The royal seat was at the top, which was round... On the first step leading to the seat crouched an ox, and opposite him a lion; on the second a wolf and a lamb, on the third a leopard and a goat, on the fourth perched an eagle and a peacock, on the fifth a falcon and a cock; and on the sixth a hawk and a sparrow - all made of gold. At the very top rested a dove, her claws upon a hawk, to betoken that the time would come when all peoples and nations shall be delivered into the hands of Israel... when Solomon set foot upon the first step to ascend to his seat, its machinery was put into motion. The golden ox arose and led him to the second step and there passed him over to the care of the beasts guarding it, and so he was conducted from step to step to the sixth where the eagles received him and placed him upon his seat. As soon as he was seated, a great eagle set the royal crown upon his head. Thereupon a huge snake rolled itself against the machinery, forcing the lions and eagles upwards until they encircled the head of the king. A golden dove flew down from a pillar, took the sacred scroll out of a casket, and gave it to the king, so that he might obey the injunction of the Scriptures, to have the law with him and read therein all the days of his life."

seems to be an empire that has become obsessed with the trappings of grandeur and excess.

I believe that there the Tanakh actively contrasts the images and emphasis of the positive early chapters (3-5) with those of the later ones (9-11) that detail the problematic and entangled situation that has developed. They tell a story in which in the later years of the empire, Shlomo's humble beginnings gave way to an empire that had a very different tone. The nation had become affected by wealth, but prosperity was not necessarily good for the nation.

In the early days of Shlomo, the people did their own labor, cutting down the trees in the Lebanon and building their own Temple, as we saw in chapter 5:

And king Shlomo raised **a levy out of all Israel**, and the levy was thirty thousand men. And he sent them to Lebanon, ten thousand a month by courses. A month they were in Lebanon, and two months at home; and Adoniram was over the levy. (5:28-30)

Now, years later, the manual labor, the "dirty work," is performed by foreign workers:

All the people that were left of the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, who were not of the Children of Israel... of them did Shlomo raise a levy of bondservants, unto this day. **But of the children of Israel did Shlomo make no bondservants; but they were the men of war, and his servants, and his princes, and his captains, and rulers of his chariots and of his horsemen.** (9:20-22)

Israelites were exempt from manual labor and they worked in administrative positions or in the army.

The effects of this shift - a move away from manual labor to administration, tax collection, and a huge military – takes its toll on the national economy and eventually has severe consequences. A good case study is the import/export trade-exchange deal with King Hiram of Lebanon. Originally, the deal was expressed as:

Hiram gave Shlomo as much as he desired of the cedar and cypress timber. In return Shlomo then gave Hiram 20,000 kors of wheat as food for his household, and twenty kors of beaten oil; thus Shlomo would give Hiram year by year. (5:10-11)

In other words, the country was producing so much farm produce that they could import luxury goods with their basic commodities. But it would appear that some years later, Shlomo cannot pay up:

It came about at the end of twenty years in which Shlomo had built the two houses, the house of God and the king's house. Hiram king of Tyre had supplied Shlomo with cedar and cypress timber and gold according to all his desire; then King Shlomo gave Hiram twenty cities in the land of Galilee. So

Hiram came out from Tyre to see the cities which Shlomo had given him, and they did not please him. He said, "What are these cities which you have given me, my brother?" (9:10-12)

Why is Shlomo giving away cities of *Eretz Yisrael*? What happened to the excess wheat and oil being produced by Israel? We can explain it very simply. When Shlomo rose to the throne, the nation was primarily made up of farmers, agriculturalists. The national consumption was relatively modest, and there was a national surplus that could be used to the benefit of national projects, hence the deal with Hiram. But if we jump forward twenty years, Israel has abandoned their fields and are now running the empire, engaging in higher pursuits such as commerce and trade. Now, the country is taking in taxes, but failing to produce anything near what they are consuming. This is what we call a deficit. And Shlomo eventually has to give away land in order to pay the national debt!⁷

What we are suggesting is a far broader national decline. Shlomo began with a plan to build an empire with God at its helm in order to spread the name of God far and wide. Eventually, the empire took on a life of its own, overpowering its master. The wealth, the horses, the rise in standard of living, the trappings of grandeur become an end in and of themselves, rather than a means to higher things. Shlomo went astray from his original orientation and goals.⁸

From this perspective, the process of deterioration is charted already from chapter 9. Chronologically, it began mid-way into Shlomo's reign.⁹ In chapter 11, we read that Shlomo sinned in his "old-age," but the handover of lands to Hiram took place after the twenty years of building the *Mikdash* and the royal buildings, that is, in the twenty-fourth year of Shlomo's forty year reign. The downturn was already setting in. So we see a wide range of failures, a sense of spiritual disorientation identified by Shlomo's overconfident abrogation of the Torah's restrictions for a king. All these lead in a direct line to the more serious offenses of chapter 11.

APPROACH #3 – THE DAUGHTER OF PHARAOH

But it is conceivable that the story goes back even further, to the very beginning. The story of Shlomo as king opens with a *passuk* that seems entirely out of place. Even before we hear of Shlomo's love of God, we read:

⁷ Many *mefarshim* see this differently. See Ralbag and Radak and *Da'at Mikra's* comments, especially in light of *Divrei Ha-Yamim* II 8:2.

⁸ See the wonderful article by Professor Avraham Grossman, who articulates this beautifully: <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/tanach/rishonim/grosman3.htm>

⁹ In this section we have spoken about different periods in Shlomo's life. The Midrash in Shir Hashirim Rabba also talks about a developing biography in Shlomo's life. A Midrash brought in the name of R. Yonatan suggests that Shlomo wrote Shir Ha-shirim in the exuberance of his youth, Mishlei in his mature middle-age, and then the sombre Kohelet in his elderly years. (Shir Ha-shirim Rabba 1:10)

The Gemara also records a decline in Shlomo's power: " Resh Lakish said: At first, Solomon reigned over the higher beings, as it is written, Then Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord as king; afterwards, [having sinned,] he reigned [only] over the lower ...so did he reign over the whole world. But eventually his reign was restricted to Israel ... Later, his reign was confined to Jerusalem alone...And still later he reigned only over his bed... And finally, he reigned only over his staff. (Sanhedrin 20b)

Shlomo married [allied himself with] Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he took the daughter of Pharaoh as his wife, bringing her to the city of David until he had completed his house and God's house ... and Shlomo loved God... (3:1-3)

Why is this marriage the first detail that we hear about Shlomo?

From this point on, the figure of the daughter of Pharaoh makes regular appearances in the storyline:

...and the throne room in which he judged, the Court of Justice ... he made a house for the daughter of Pharaoh who he took [as a wife] in the same style. (7:8)

Pharaoh, King of Egypt, arose and captured Gezer and burnt the city and killed all the Canaanites who lived there, and he gave it as a gift to his daughter, wife of Shlomo. (9:16)

The daughter of Pharaoh ascended from the City of David to her house which [Shlomo] had built her. That was the building of the Milo. (9:24)

Shlomo Ha-Melekh loved many foreign women in addition to Pharaoh's daughter. (11:1)

This story is intertwined into the very fabric of the Shlomo narrative. Furthermore, it functions as a grim and deeply troubling bracket to the story of Shlomo. His story opens (3:1) with *Bat Pharaoh* and it closes on the same tragic note (11:1).¹⁰ It is almost as if the *Tanakh* is telling us that from beginning to end, Shlomo had an ominous attraction to this particular (foreign) woman.

The Midrash makes things look more worrying still when it suggests that the day of the dedication of the *Mikdash* was also Shlomo's wedding day to *Bat Pharaoh*:

R. Yudan said: All the seven years of building the Temple, Shlomo never drank wine. When he built it and married the daughter of Pharaoh, that night he drank wine, and there were two dances: One was the celebration of the building of the Temple and the second was the celebration of the daughter of Pharaoh. God said: Whose should I find acceptable, these or those? At that moment, He thought of the possibility of destroying Jerusalem¹¹...

R. Honia said, "The daughter of Pharaoh danced eighty dances that night and Shlomo slept until the fourth hour. The keys of the Temple were under his

¹⁰ We should add 11:27, which ties the Yeravam rebellion to the daughter of Pharaoh. See also the *Midrash Vayikra Rabba* cited below in this section.

¹¹ The Rabbis drew a direct connection between Shlomo's marriage to the daughter of Pharaoh to the destruction of the Temple, as if the former made the latter inevitable: "R. Yitzchak said: At the moment at which Shlomo married Pharaoh's daughter, the angel Gavriel came down [to earth] and stuck a cane into the sea. It gathered a sandbank around it, and there the great city of Rome was built." Rome, which is synonymous with the destruction of the Second Temple, had its origins at this terrible moment!

head. This is the instance that [the Rabbis] taught about in which the *tamid* [daily] sacrifice was brought [as late as] the fourth hour. His mother came in to rebuke him, and some say it was Yeravam who came in to rebuke him. (*Vayikra Rabba* 12:1)

This *midrash* presents Shlomo's "two loves" – his love of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* and the love of the daughter of Pharaoh. The two celebrations take place in tandem, in parallel, as if they are equal in weight. Of course, in the midrashic story, until this point in time, Shlomo had never slept late and had not indulged in wine. In other words, up to this moment, he was a person in control. But from this moment on, he oversleeps, not knowing how to tear himself away from his one love – his wife - to his other love and loyalty – the Temple service. And in this text, he is the linchpin; the service depends upon him because he holds the keys.

Bamidbar Rabba, a far later Midrash, develops this idea even further, adding some new colorful elements:

The Rabbis said: The daughter of Pharaoh introduced one thousand songs and everyone was commanded before Shlomo that night to listen to them. She would say to Shlomo: This is the song for this idol; that is the tune for that idol... (*Bamidbar Rabba* 10:4)

The daughter of Pharaoh with her one thousand songs personifies all of Shlomo's one thousand wives. Her singing demonstrates how the wives lured Shlomo to the world of *avoda zara*. Which groom can fail to accede to his bride's request to listen to her singing? And yet these songs come from her cultural world, a pagan world that embraces a pantheon of gods and that should be alien to Shlomo and Jerusalem.

If Shlomo is described at the opening of the story as marrying *Bat Pharaoh*, then there may room to claim that these competing loves struggle and contend for Shlomo's heart from the outset. Shlomo is caught ideologically between competing worlds. *Bat Pharaoh* represents Egypt, the power and trade, the skills and crafts, wealth and international control that appeal to Shlomo's imperial mind. Of course, these come along with a religious worldview that is polytheistic and pagan. And on the other side is the Torah, the *Mikdash*, the path of David Ha-Melekh. Shlomo is committed to both. He identifies with each side. He seeks to balance the two. But Shlomo does not know which dance to dance, which party to attend. He tries to mix and combine the two, but he fails.

In this *shiur*, we attempted to grapple with the difficult chapter of Shlomo and his sins. Next week, we will turn our attention to Shlomo's punishment.