

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings
By Rav Alex Israel

This *shiur* is dedicated by Mr. and Mrs. Alan Kravitz on behalf of Elie Kravitz

Shiur #12: Chapter 12

The Rebellion of Yerovam - Part II: New Kingdom, New Religion

SHEKHEM

Rechavam went to Shekhem, for all of *Bnei Yisrael* had gone there to make him king. When Yerovam ben Nevat heard this (and he was still in Egypt, where he had fled from King Solomon, and he dwelt in Egypt). They sent for Yerovam, and he and the whole assembly of Israel went to Rechavam and said to him, "Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but now lighten the harsh labor and the heavy yoke he put on us, and we will serve you." Rechavam answered, "Go away for three days and then come back to me." So the people went away.

The capital city was Jerusalem. Why did Rechavam stage his coronation so far from the capital, all the way in Shekhem? This seems to be a strange choice. In the light of the events of the *perek*, the recalling of the renegade Yerovam from Egypt and the request for a tax reduction, one can only assume that Rechavam was expecting some sort of internecine trouble. He realized that the northern tribes were agitated, and as a gesture towards the disgruntled nation, he stepped out of his "safe zone" in order to meet the people. Some suggest that far from being perceived as a positive gesture, this move was viewed as a sign of weakness, inviting further political pressure.¹

WHY SHEKHEM?

Why choose Shekhem in particular? First, Shekhem was known as an optimal site for a mass-gathering. It is Shekhem that the Torah designated as the site of the ceremony of the national covenant – the blessings and curses - when Israel entered the land.² Likewise, Joshua's final address to the nation, encouraging their commitment to God, takes place in Shekhem.³ From the

¹ See *Da'at Mikra*.

² The instruction is found in *Devarim* 11:26-32 and in ch.27; the historical account of the event is in *Yehoshua* ch.8.

³ *Yehoshua* ch.24

staging of these national ceremonies, we can conclude that Shekhem had an ideal infrastructure – access, water resources, acoustics - to facilitate mass national events.⁴

Shekhem functioned as an entry point to the country, as we see in the stories of Avraham⁵ and Yaakov;⁶ it was the first stop for travelers entering the country from Mesopotamia. Its central and accessible location as a crossroads between the north-south and east-west highways made it an accessible city and a critical juncture point for those entering Canaan. This gave it its status as a city of enormous national-strategic importance. Indeed, its central location is certainly the reason that Shekhem constituted one of the Cities of Refuge.⁷ Shekhem was the most prominent city and the capital city of the expanse of the tribes of Yosef. And the tension between the tribes of Yosef and that of Yehuda lies at the focal point of the Yeravam-Rechavam story.

An Old Rivalry: Yehuda and Yosef

A *Tanna* taught a teaching of R. Yossi: Shekhem is a place prone to tragedy:... There Yosef was sold; there the Kingdom of David was divided. (*Sanhedrin* 102a)⁸

The splitting of the kingdom is a story with deep roots. This national division is a resurgence of the ancient tension between Yosef and Yehuda, which is rooted in turn in the rivalry between Rachel and Leah. Yosef and Yehuda are both contenders for the leadership of the family,⁹ and subsequently of *Bnei Yisrael*. This struggle erupts with the episode of Yosef's sale, which was instigated by Yehuda.

It appears that even as the nation moved towards a more coherent national entity, the rift between Yehuda and Yosef persisted nonetheless.¹⁰ Evidence to this is that centuries later, in the period of Shaul, there is a clear division between Yehuda and the rest of Israel:¹¹

⁴ On the acoustics of Shekhem and the "natural amphitheatre" that is created by the topography of the mountains, see:

<http://blog.bibleplaces.com/2008/12/acoustics-of-mounts-gerizim-and-ebal.html>

<http://bibleandtech.blogspot.com/2008/12/using-digital-mapping-tools-mount-ebal.html>

⁵ *Bereishit* 12:7

⁶ *Bereishit* 33:18

⁷ *Yehoshua* 20:6

⁸ *Bereishit* 37:13 tells us that Shekhem was the place from which Yosef was sold. R. Yossi also mentions that it is the place where Dina was raped. Of course, we have mentioned a number of positive covenantal events that took place there, so Shekhem is not all bad, but the geographical linkage between Yosef's sale, instigated by Yehuda, and its corollary, the rejection of Yehuda by the Tribes of Yosef, is a striking feature here.

⁹ See *Divrei Ha-yamim* I 5:1-3

¹⁰ See the excellent article by R. Yaakov Medan, which gives a comprehensive picture to this pan-historic divide: <http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/parsha65/11-65vayigash.htm>

Recent thinkers have attempted to sketch typological studies of Yehuda as opposed to Yosef. See Rav Kook's "*Ha-Misped Bi-Yerushalayim*" in *Ma'amrei Ha-Ra'ayah* and R. Adin Steinsaltz's wonderful book *Biblical Images* in the chapters on Rachel and Leah.

¹¹ See also *Shmuel* II 24:9

He numbered them in Bezek; and the sons of Israel were 300,000, and the men of Yehuda 30,000. (*Shmuel I* 11:8)

So Saul summoned the men and counted them at Telaim — 200,000 foot soldiers and 10,000 men from Judah. (*Shmuel I* 15:4)

Why was Yehuda counted separately from everyone else? Why were they viewed as a separate unit? Later, after the death of King Shaul, the kingdom split into two for a period of seven and a half years. Yehuda was led by King David, but all the other tribes followed Shaul's son, Ish-Boshet:

Ish-boshet, Shaul's son, was forty years old when he became king over Israel, and he was king for two years. The house of Yehuda, however, followed David. (*Shmuel II* 2:10)

For over seven years, Yehuda functioned as a separate sub-state. David eventually united the kingdom, but even then, the seam line between Yehuda and the other tribes was prone to becoming unravelled. When David was deposed by his son Avshalom, allowing an opportunity for charlatans to stir up inter-tribal friction, one such character, Sheva Ben Bichri, manipulated an apparent insult to the tribe of Binyamin¹² and attempted to once again split the nation. His rallying cry:

He blew the trumpet and said, "**We have no portion in David, nor inheritance in the son of Yishai! Every man to his tent, O Israel!**" (*Shmuel II* 20:1)

I mention this history, because that very phrase can be found in our chapter:

When all Israel saw that the king did not listen to them, the people answered the king, saying, "**What portion do we have in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Yishai! To your tent, O Israel!** Now look after your own house, David!" (*Melakhim I* 12:16)

Yerovam's public rejection of the rule of the House of David preserves and resuscitates a secessionist statement that was declared more than a generation earlier.

We have already discussed the manner in which Yerovam represented the tribes of Yosef in opposition to Shlomo's leadership, which favored Yehuda. This rebellion then, is yet another revival of the historic differences and rivalry between Yehuda and Yosef (Efrayim).¹³

THE WISDOM OF THE CHILDREN

¹² See *Shmuel II* ch.19 and the extreme tribal antagonism found there.

¹³ Many years later, Yechezkel prophesized that at a future time, this split will no longer exist and that Israel will become "one people in the land... and a single king over them" (*Yechezkel* 37:16-30).

As we proposed at the outset, the very fact that Rechavam held his coronation in Shekhem reflects his understanding that trouble was brewing. He knew he had to make a gesture towards the tribes of Yosef. But here we see his first mistake. When the people asked for a rather sensible and modest request – a tax break – Rechavam asked for three days to reflect and take advice. This consultation, which ordinarily would be commendable, proved disastrous. The three day wait intensified the malcontents and the opposition. King David, when similarly faced with a tribal revolt,¹⁴ insisted that the army had three days to get into action and to put down any opposition. He knew that the flames of political unrest need to be doused fast. Rechavam, on the other hand, let the unrest fester for three days. By the time he returned with an answer, things had reached a fever pitch, as we can see by the stoning of Adoniram, the reviled tax minister.

Rechavam's second mistake was the identity of his advisors. He abandoned Shlomo's sage consultants for the "children with whom he had grown up."¹⁵ What is wrong with young advisors? There are two ways of looking at it:

If elders say "destroy" and children say to "build" – destroy and don't build, for the destruction of elders constitutes an act of construction, and the building of youths is, in fact, an act of destruction. The indication of this principle is the story of Rechavam, son of Shlomo. (*Megilla* 31b)

According to this approach, in general one should prefer the mature wisdom of the elder to the unripe and inexperienced word of the youth, which lacks perspective. In this biting critique of youth, which sounds rather crotchety to a modern ear but is possibly a necessary balance to the contemporary worship of youth, even the attempted achievements of the young are deemed as useless and destructive. One should always consult with those of seasoned years and possessed of the wisdom of experience.

This reading ignores the second characterization of these children, indicated by the phrase: "with whom he had grown up." I feel that the text here is describing a group of youngsters whose entire life experience has been framed by the wealth and luxury of the Shlomo era. They are the palace-set, the wealthy and privileged who have never known a day of hardship in their lives. Maybe their faulty advice is not simply a question of age, but a matter of upbringing. They contemptuously issue their advice, dismissive of the burden of the common peasant:

Say to them, "My little finger is thicker than my father's loins. My father imposed a heavy yoke on you; I will add to your yoke; my father flogged you with whips; but I will flog you with scorpions!" (12:10-11)

¹⁴We have already noted the parallel with the Sheva ben Bichri story; this three day period is a second parallel. See *Shmuel* II 20:4.

¹⁵ Obviously, these were not children but youths, perhaps people in there 20's or 30's. I believe that the text calls them "children" to emphasize their foolishness and their juvenile wisdom.

This does not simply ring of conceit; it reflects a detached "Let them eat cake" attitude.

REHAVAM – A POSITIVE PERSPECTIVE (12:20-24)

But Rechavam was not all bad. In fact, he exhibited tremendous respect for prophecy and acted with remarkable restraint. When he saw the northern tribes renounce his authority and withdraw from the kingdom, one would imagine that any normal king would muster his army and re-establish full control. This is precisely what Rechavam did, mobilizing 180,000 troops. But when the prophet Shemaaya,¹⁶ of whom we have never heard before, informed him that this was all God's doing and warned him not to engage in a civil war, Rechavam listened to him and called off his attack. Can you imagine? The king was in the process of losing 90% of his country, and he simply obeyed God's command to back down and let it happen! We should not minimize the depth of the challenge here and the formidable religious faith that Rechavam must have held in order to follow this particular prophecy.

A NEW RELIGION (12:26-33)

Up to this point in the story, Yerovam has been depicted in the most positive terms. It is at this juncture that things start moving downhill and we see the events that bestow upon Yerovam his infamous reputation. It all begins with a specific concern:

Yerovam said to himself, "Now the kingdom may well return to the House of David. If this people go up to offer sacrifices at the House of God in Jerusalem, the heart of these people will turn back to their master, King Rechavam of Yehuda..." (12:26-27)

Yerovam's worry should not to be minimized. In the ancient world, there was a close affinity between the king and the Temple. If Jerusalem was designated as the religious center of worship, it would be only natural for the people to associate the regal city of Jerusalem with national government as well. Moreover, Rechavam would preside over the religious event held at the Temple, and Yerovam would be shamed and discredited.¹⁷

¹⁶ The name Shemaaya translates as "Hear God" and is highly fitting for a prophet. Similarly, Yerovam means "will fight for the people" and is highly evocative, representing with great precision his main identity. Some have proposed that the name Yerovam is a deliberate wordplay on the name of his rival, Rechavam, and was taken up by Yerovam as a political gesture as part of his opposition to the rule of the House of David. Rechavam's name is also significant; it means "wide nation," probably representing the expansive national situation of Shlomo's era, and it resonates retrospectively with a certain irony, as his reign represents the loss of 9/10ths of the nation.

¹⁷ See the traditional *mefarshim* (Rashi, Radak etc.), who all quote *Chazal* to the effect that at any event in the Temple, only royal descendents of David were allowed to be seated. In that case, Rechavam would sit and Yerovam would remain standing. This halakhic language effectively articulates Yerovam's concern of de-legitimization.

Yerovam's solution¹⁸ is to create an alternative to Jerusalem, instituting an entire array of new religious practices. His religious reforms consist of the following elements:

1. Shrines at Dan and Bet-El (v.29-31)
2. Golden calves (v.27-28)
3. The people are invited to be *kohanim* (v.31)
4. Changing the date of *Sukkot* (v.32)
5. The king functions as a *kohen*, performing the *Avoda* on the *mizbe'ach* (12:22-13:1)

Let us examine each of these in turn.

1. SHRINES AT DAN AND BET-EL

These two sites represent the northern and southern extremities of Yerovam's kingdom, and it would be natural for Yerovam to establish royal and religious gathering points at these locations. But this is not the sole reason why these locations were selected. Each location has a rich religious past.

Bet-El, of course, was the site of Yaakov's prophetic dream, in which he saw a ladder linking heaven and earth. He awoke and proclaimed:

God was in this place and I didn't know?... How awesome this place is! This is none other than the House of God and this is the gateway to the heavens. (*Bereishit* 28:16-18)

The very name Bet-El – House of God – attests to the fact that it was viewed as a religious site. It is apparent that even in Shaul's time, it was a place of worship and sacrifice to *Hashem*.¹⁹ Whereas Bet-El's credentials are explicit in the Torah, Jerusalem is never mentioned outright as a site of revelation. *Chazal* claim that Yaakov's dream actually took place in Jerusalem,²⁰ but one imagines that Yerovam would have argued that Jerusalem's history of revelation²¹ is nothing but a fabrication of the House of David, whereas the true "House of God" was in Bet-El.

¹⁸ Note the interesting verb "*va-yiva'atz*," relatively rare in *Tanakh*. This word has already featured in our chapter in connection with Rechavam's unsuccessful act of consultation with his young advisors. Now it reappears as Yerovam consults his (anonymous) advisors and emerges with his foolhardy and pernicious religious reforms.

¹⁹ See *Shmuel* I 10:3

²⁰ See Rashi on *Bereishit* 28:17: "Yaakov called Jerusalem - Bet-El."

²¹ According to tradition, the Temple Mount is the site of Har Ha-Moriah; see also *Shmuel* II ch.24, where the threshing floor of Aravna is a site of revelation, sacrifice, and forgiveness. See Rambam, *Hilkhot Beit Ha-Bekhira* 1:3. Some association here is linguistic; the site of the *akeida* is described as "*ha-makom*," and the Temple site – later revealed as Jerusalem - is always called "*ha-makom asher yivchar Hashem*." However, Bet-El is also called "*ha-makom*"! See *Bereishit* 28:11, 16,17.

Dan also had a rich history of worship.²² *Sefer Shoftim* tells us that a syncretic site of worship had existed there throughout the *Shoftim* period:

The tribe of Dan set up the molten image, and Yonatan ben Gershom ben Menashe and his sons were priests... until the day of the exile of the land²³... all the days of the House of God in Shilo. (*Shoftim* 18:30-31)

Dan had been an "alternate" worship site to God throughout the Shilo period. From the perspective of *Tanakh*, it was illicit and illegitimate because it mixed God worship with a molten image. But from the vantage point of the people, who were on so low a religious level, it was most probably viewed it as a legitimate place to worship *Hashem* and they were unbothered by the mix of contradictory religious elements.

And so, Yerovam could build his new religious sites upon a substantial tradition of history and worship of God in both locations.

We have already spoken (*shiur #4*) about the *bamot*, the local altars or shrines that existed prior to the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* and were considered fully legitimate. Let us quote again the *mishna* in *Zevachim*:

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)

Today, we look back with the perspective of our heritage of a *Beit Ha-Mikdash* - a history of a single, central site of worship, with a particular emphasis upon the city of Jerusalem. For people in those times, however, there had been regular fluctuations of whether *bamot* were legal or illegal, permitted or forbidden. I imagine that there was a great deal of confusion regarding these matters at the level of the people. So when the king officially launched two new religious sites, it did not cause the shock that we might expect. Local altars had been religiously appropriate prior to Shlomo - maybe after Shlomo, they were permitted yet again!

Moreover, Jerusalem was also a new city for worship of God. From an anti-Yehuda and pro-Yosef perspective, one can well imagine the accusation that Shlomo had displaced the *Mishkan*, tearing it from its historic site in Efrayim – Shilo – to the new location of Jerusalem. One imagines that there

²² Tel Dan has been excavated by Avraham Biran, who discovered the *bama* and altar site at the tel. It is an incredibly rich archeological site, and the place at which scholars have discovered the most ancient archeological finds citing of the "House of David."

²³ The "exile of the land" in this context indicates the destruction of Shiloh and the loss of the ark as described in *Shmuel* I ch.4.

were many followers of Yerovam who were waiting for the opportunity to restore the site of *korbanot* to the tribes of Yosef.

2. THE GOLDEN CALVES: AHARON AND YEROVAM

What is unexpected and rather staggering are the two golden calves that were displayed at these shrines. What was Yerovam up to? Did he not know the prohibition against molten images? This certainly appears to be *bona fide* idolatry! And when we hear about calves, it sounds rather like a repetition of another Golden Calf episode – the great sin of the *Midbar*. There are several parallels:

1. The figure of a molten golden calf
2. The pronouncement here, made by Yerovam:

Enough for you to go up to Jerusalem! **THIS IS YOUR GOD, O ISRAEL, WHO BROUGHT YOU UP FROM THE LAND OF EGYPT!**
(v.28)

This statement mirrors precisely the proclamation in *Sefer Shemot*:

These are your Gods, O Israel, who brought you out from the Land of Egypt" (*Shemot* 32:4)

Recall that the Golden Calf of the wilderness also had altars associated with it, just like each of these calves.

3. Aharon's sons were named Nadav and Avihu. Yerovam's sons were called Nadav²⁴ and Aviya²⁵!
4. Aharon became High Priest. In 13:1, we see Yerovam functioning as a priest on the top of the altar!

Why did Yerovam perpetrate a recurrence of the Golden Calf? It is clear from these parallels that Yerovam cast himself as a second Aharon of sorts. But didn't the people know that the Golden Calf was a severe sin? Why would Yerovam portray his rituals in the light of an act with such negative associations?

One can only conclude that Yerovam successfully portrayed Aharon as a hero, a *tzaddik*, and that he managed to minimize and rationalize the sin of the Golden Calf. Possibly, he presented the sense that the *Egel Ha-Zahav* had not been that terrible a crime. After all, the Torah records that God forgave the nation. And Aharon, the actual builder of the Calf, was "promoted" to the position of *Kohen Gadol*. If Aharon had perpetrated idolatry, why wasn't he executed? One imagines that this type of reasoning legitimized Yerovam's actions.

²⁴ *Melakhim* I 14:20

²⁵ *Melakhim* I 14:1

The Radak adds a further dimension:

His [Yerovam's] rhetoric convinced them: "Don't you know that the kingdom has been split by God's desire, as transmitted by Achia Ha-Shiloni? Therefore, God has expressed his rejection of the rule of the House of David and also of Jerusalem... so we need an alternative place to worship." And why a calf? He said: "When Moshe was absent and they sought an alternative, didn't Aharon create a calf upon which to rest God's presence? Now, in the absence of Jerusalem, let us make a calf to receive the *Shekhina*." (Radak 12:28)

Let us add that in Shlomo's temple, the *Yam* (water reservoir) stood on a base of twelve oxen. Oxen were not absent from the arena of sacrifice. Other figures also featured in the Mikdash. Shlomo had also installed two huge *keruvim*. And let us not ignore the pagan shrines built to other gods in Jerusalem itself! Yerovam had ample room to claim that his sites of worship had a deeper history, and were just as legitimate as Jerusalem itself. Furthermore, he has seized power by divine sanction. What better approval than this?

Now, we do have to examine to what degree these calves were, in fact, unadulterated idolatry. We shall relate to this question in our upcoming *shiur*. At this point, I would like to refer to a number of the other features of Yerovam's reforms.

3. KOHANIM FROM ALL THE PEOPLE

He appointed *kohanim* from the ranks of the people who were not of Levite descent. (12:28)

In our previous *shiur*, we noted two features of Yerovam's rebellion:

- His democratic, people-based approach, together with his anti-elitist worldview.
- His insistence upon popular access to the places of worship.

This is expressed here in his desire to allow the people, whoever they were, to gain access to the sacrifices and ritual services. Adding to what we said earlier, the *bamot* were most certainly democratic; we have no record of *kohanim* from the tribe of Levi acting as functionaries at *bamot*. Similarly, Yerovam was able to take up his popular people's uprising and grant access to religion for all.²⁶

Interestingly, if we further our *Egel Ha-Zahav* parallel, we should recall that it was the tribe of Levi in particular that opposed its worship (*Shemot*

²⁶ The phrase "*rav lakhem*" in *pasuk* 28 is a direct parallel to the phrases used in *Bamidbar* 16 in the context of the Korach rebellion. Korach also sought to legitimize non-*kohanim* as candidates for the Temple service, and he also represented an challenge to the established authorities. He also led the bringing of *ketoret* (as Yerovam does in 13:1), an illicit act of worship instigated by the leader of the rebellion himself.

32:26.) Possibly, Yerovam steered clear of Levi for this very reason, or perhaps the *kohanim* refused to comply. In fact, *Divrei Ha-yamim* (II 11:13-14) records a huge influx of *kohanim* and *Leviim* to the Southern kingdom of Yehuda; as they saw the manner in which Yerovam disdained the *kohanim*, they migrated to the only place in which they could correctly serve God, in the *Mikdash*.

4. CHANGING THE DATE OF SUKKOT – OR THE CALENDAR

Of course, if the people would decide to make "*aliya la-regel*" to Jerusalem, then Yerovam's entire plan would collapse.²⁷ To solve this problem, Yerovam engaged in an ingenious plan.

And Yerovam established a festival on the fifteenth day of the eighth month – the month he contrived of his own mind to establish a festival. (12:32-33)

If the festival was to be celebrated in the eighth month, a month AFTER *Sukkot*, then how did that help at all? People would make the trip to the *Mikdash* for *Sukkot* in the seventh month! How would this deter people from *aliya la-regel*? Furthermore, what is "the month he contrived of in his own mind?"

Many suggestions have been made as to how Yerovam convinced the people to celebrate in the eighth month. The simplest and most elegant solution is that Yerovam added a month to the calendar, instigating a leap-year of sorts (Abarbanel). This is the "month which he contrived of." Hence, the calendar in the North was running a month LATER than in the Southern Kingdom. (When it was the 6th month in the North, it was the 7th month in the South.) At the point in the year at which people ordinarily began to consider going to Jerusalem for *Sukkot* (in what they THOUGHT was the seventh month), they were shocked to discover that *Sukkot* had already been celebrated in Jerusalem a month previously! With the addition of an extra month, the "seventh month" was, in fact, the "eighth month!" *Sukkot* was over in Jerusalem! With no other recourse, the people were forced to celebrate in the Northern Kingdom. Hence, the addition of a month meant that people had no choice. There was no point in going to the Temple for a Holiday that had taken place a month previously. Quite ingenious in fact!

This carefully crafted shift, an extensive assortment of religious changes, assured Yerovam that his subjects would not drift in the direction of Jerusalem. However, these actions represented a drastic departure from legitimate practice.

NEXT WEEK

²⁷ *Chazal* suggest (*Bava Batra* 121b) that Yerovam stationed sentries on the way to forcibly prevent *olei regel* from reaching Jerusalem. The text here does not reflect that and seems to indicate more subtle techniques.

We have discussed the scope of Yerovam's revolutionary reforms and the creation of new religious centers around the country. However, one discussion has eluded us. The commentaries debate the degree to which Yerovam's calves constitute classic idolatry. If they were not idols, what were they? We will open with that discussion next week.