

Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings
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Shiur #15: An Interim "Introduction" to Sefer Melakhim

We have now reached the point of *Melakhim* I at which the tone of the *sefer* changes. Up until this point, we have been studying a flowing story: the tale of David's final days and the struggle for leadership; the achievements, and downfall of Shlomo Ha-Melekh; and of Yerovam and the split of the kingdom. Now, the rhythm of the *sefer* alters sharply. We read brief, rather dry and formulaic accounts of kings. These passages lack the dramatic energy of the narratives of Shlomo and Yerovam. They are formal and contain standardized language, with information supplied in brevity. We will list the critical elements of the depictions of these kings and explain how to harvest information from them. Moreover, we will see that these standardized paragraphs give us a window to understanding the central theme of *Sefer Melakhim*.

STRUCTURE

The passage that documents each king follows a specific outline containing the following elements:¹

1. The year that the king ascends the throne, synchronized against the parallel king in the North/South.
2. The length of his reign
3. For the kings of Yehuda, the king's age of ascent to the throne is recorded,² as is the name of the king's mother.³
4. We are given a religious assessment of the king. Either he "did that which was right in the eyes of *Hashem*"⁴ or "he did evil in the eyes of *Hashem*."⁵

¹ This style and these specific formulations are true for ALL of the kings recorded in *Sefer Melakhim*, but there are sections where we read a series of these. For example, see *Melakhim* I ch.15-16 and *Melakhim* II ch.13-15.

² The two exceptions to this rule are the kings Aviah and his son Assa (15:1,9)

³ It is possible that the king's mother, or at times his grandmother, had a special and elevated status in the palace. In 15:13, we hear of Ma'achah, who has a status of "*Gevira*." We do not know precisely how this position functioned. Another possible example may be Atalia (*Melakhim* II, ch.11) although she may reflect the practices of her mother Izevel more than the Judean "*Gevirah*" tradition.

Exceptions to this rule, cases in which the mother's name is not recorded, are Yoram ben Yehoshafat (*Melakhim* II 8:16) and Achaz (*ibid.*, ch.16).

⁴ See, for example, 15:1, *Melakhim* II 12:3, 14:3, 15:3, 15:34, 18:3, 22:2.

5. Frequently, a summary of the achievements of the king follows this introductory information. We may hear of wars, victories, or invasions, or events that concern the *Mikdash* and its treasuries. We also read about impressive construction and civil achievements, or alternatively of assassinations and conspiracies (particularly in the Northern Kingdom).

6. The account of the king closes with his death and burial. Frequently, it mentions his successor. At times, we are also referred to other sources, the "Book of Chronicles of the Kings of Yehuda," or its counterpart "Book of Chronicles of the Kings of Israel," which, we are told, contain more detailed information about the king. These books were clearly well-known to the author of *Sefer Melakhim*.

In the light of this last point, we should consider the fact that the author of the *sefer* had more information at his fingertips; he knew about parallel royal works. If he chose this brief format, then he made a specific decision to write in this style. His brevity is not a result of paucity of source information. The style here is deliberate.

7. Correlation and synchronization: We must also give mention that the text synchronizes the kingdoms of Yehuda and Yisrael, ensuring that as we progress with the one, we never lose hold of the other. In other words, *Sefer Melakhim* ensures that the stories of both kingdoms are told in tandem.

RELIGIOUS EVALUATION OF KINGS IN *SEFER MELAKHIM*

Before we progress to analyze this phenomenon, let us dwell a little upon the statements that assess the king in religious terms. These religious evaluations come in varying degrees and use a set of form-language phrases. We have already mentioned the core phrase: a good king "does that which is right (*yashar*) in *Hashem's* eyes," whereas a deviant king "does that which is evil in *Hashem's* eyes." But we also see more sophisticated phrases, for example, references to David Ha-Melekh:

He continued in all the sins that his father had committed; he was not wholehearted with *Hashem*... like his father David. (15:3)

... did what was right in *Hashem's* eyes, like his father David. (15:10)

We also find the following recurrent phrase, even for good kings of Yehuda:

But the *bamot* did not cease to function; the people still sacrificed and offered at the *bamot*. (22:44)⁶

⁵ See, for example, 11:1, 15:26, 15:34, 16:25,30, *Melakhim* II 8:37, 13:2, 14:24, 15:9, 21:2,20. (This is not a complete list.)

⁶ See also 3:2, 15:14, *Melakhim* II 12:4, 14:4, 15:4, 15:35. In *shiur* 3, we noted that despite the fact that the *bamot* were unproblematic before the building of the *Mikdash*, *Sefer Melakhim* still mentions them (3:2) so as to generate this unity of phraseology throughout the *sefer*.

In the Northern kingdom of Israel, the phrase usually relates to Yerovam:

... and he walked in the path of Yerovam and his sins (15:34)⁷

One of the most interesting instances of this standardized religious assessment regards the Zimri, the king of Yisrael. Zimri was king for only seven days! Yet the *navi* tells us that "he did evil in the eyes of *Hashem*, to walk in the path of Yerovam and the sins that he had committed and caused Israel to commit" (16:20). Did he really manage to do all of this in seven days? This accentuates the fact that this is a code introduced by the author of *Sefer Melakhim* to assess every king, whether for good or bad, within a standard format and motif.

THE NATURE AND MESSAGE OF SEFER MELAKHIM

Why do we have this strict, formalized language? What do these curt, information laden, telegraphic paragraphs add to the *sefer*? What is the point of it all?

A few statements must be made regarding the nature and purpose of this *sefer*. According to *Chazal*, "Yirmiyahu (Jeremiah) wrote his book (*Sefer Yirmiyahu*), *Sefer Melakhim*, and the Book of Laments (*Eikha*)"⁸ (*Bava Batra* 14b-15a). Yirmiyahu is the prophet who endured the tumultuous and horrific tragedy of the Destruction and Israel's subsequent exile. *Chazal* identified him as the author of *Sefer Melakhim* based on the fact that the *sefer* is penned from the vantage point of the Temple's destruction and the period of national ruin.

As with any tragedy, people ask the question - what went wrong? Because this is a prophetic work, it seeks to function as a religious probe and critique, a spiritual evaluation of an era. The focus and time-frame are clear. The focus is to be on the *Mikdash*. The book begins with the rise of Shlomo and the building of the *Mikdash*, and it ends with its destruction. The blame is also clear. This is a book that targets the leaders, and hence it assesses the leadership – king by king - to discern which national figures accelerated the path to that great calamity of *churban* and which tried to reverse or stem that process, steering the nation on a path of repentance. Every king is listed and surveyed in order to understand their part. Hence, no link in the chain from building to destruction may be omitted.

But *Sefer Melakhim* goes further. It focuses on a single problem: that of idolatry. It knows precisely where to place the blame, which area of deviance constitutes the core of the problem. Our book is focused and locked-in upon idolatry and its associated practices. From the very start, the *bamot* are recorded in the era of Shlomo (3:2) and Shlomo is accused explicitly of

⁷ See also 15:26, 16:7,19, 26,31; 22:53, *Melakhim* II 3:3, 10:29-31, 13:2,11; 15:18,24.

⁸ There is a huge amount of internal evidence suggesting that Yirmiyahu authored *Sefer Melakhim*. See *Da'at Mikra's* introduction, pp. 202-208. Academic sources suggest a similar time-frame for its composition even if they do not pinpoint Yirmiyahu as the author.

building shrines to and serving other gods. In general, each and every king is evaluated in accordance with this sole criterion.⁹ When a king is described as "doing what is right in the eyes of *Hashem*" or "doing evil in *Hashem*'s eyes," it is always related to a the sin of idolatry. Thus, this "simplistic" formulation has a certain directedness and clarity to it.

Beyond this, the *sefer*, through its comprehensive coverage of BOTH Yehuda and Yisrael, makes a clear statement that *Am Yisrael* is a single unit. Both Yisrael and Yehuda constitute equal and legitimate organs of the Jewish nation, and they both bear the blame for its destruction.

TWO EXAMPLES

We have established the fact that *Sefer Melakhim* uses these accounts of kings to generate a sense of continuity and a direct chain from the building of the *Mikdash* to its destruction. But these paragraphs, despite their sparse language, are quite effective in conveying and articulating a large volume of significant information. Two examples, one very localized and another general, will illustrate our point. Let us begin with the very section that follows our previous study:

Rechavam was 41 years old when he became king and he reigned 17 years in Jerusalem, **the city the Lord had chosen out of all the tribes of Israel to establish His name there.** His mother's name was Naamah... (14:21)

In the context of Rechavam, Yerovam's counterpart, we read the classic introduction with the years and his mother's name. But there is a deviation here (bolded) that appears with NO OTHER king. Why mention the information about Jerusalem? Why mention that Jerusalem is chosen from all tribes for God's name? I think the answer is clear - Yerovam had torn religious practice away from Jerusalem for 90% of the nation. He had contested Jerusalem's central role regarding religious service. The text here therefore alters the standard language and directs it to make the point that from God's perspective, from His vantage point, Jerusalem still remains the place of the *Shekhina*; it still retains its former status. This is a point that deserves stating specifically by Rechavam, but it is less relevant in later generations. It thus appears at this point exclusively.

Another usage of this system is not through deviation, addition or omission, but rather by granting a certain clarity that can be conveyed in particular by transmitting the "big picture." If we tabulate the sparse information of chapters 15 and 16, we will be able to explain what we mean.

Yehuda	Yisrael
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⁹ It is true that other crimes do feature. For example, the sin of Achav in the vineyard of Navot (ch.21) and other issues do find their place. However, the bottom line of whether a king is declared "good" or "bad" is certainly a product of the idolatry issue. Moreover, comparison with parallel books, such as *Divrei Ha-yamim* and *Amos*, demonstrates that other religious values were at play and that are sidelined by *Sefer Melakhim*.

King	ys	Good/ bad	military	King	ys	Good/ bad	military
Rechavam	17	Bad	Invasion + Civil conflict	Yerovam	22	Bad	Civil conflict
Aviyam	3	Bad	Civil conflict	Nadav	2	Bad	Civil conflict
Assa	41	Good	-	Baasha	24	Bad	Civil war + Invasion
				Elah	2	Bad	
				Zimri	7 days	Bad	
				Omri	12	Very bad	

(The waved lines indicate an assassination of the king, an act of treason, and a disruption of the royal line.)

By viewing this simple chart, which records basic information found in the text, we can visualize things quite effectively. We see that Yehuda experiences a tough period following Shlomo's era, both nationally and religiously. But things turn around during the lengthy reign of Assa both religiously and also regarding economic prosperity and national security. Furthermore, we can identify a stable line of succession in Yehuda. In contrast, a glance at the kingdom of Yisrael gives an impression of deep instability. We see one assassination after the next, one king lasting only seven days. The spiritual trajectory is wholly negative. One can immediately see that Yisrael is in deep trouble. Moreover, the invasion during the reign of Baasha (from Aram in the north) indicates serious weakness of the kingdom.

In this case, sometimes, less is more. The brief depictions of each king help us track the basic contours of the nation regarding spiritual climate, military and international relations, internal Yisrael-Yehuda relations, as well as the economy. These basic pointers allow us to see a great deal if we read closely.

TIMING PROBLEMS IN SEFER MELAKHIM

One of the problems endemic to *Sefer Melakhim* is numerical disparity; the years of the kings of Yehuda and Yisrael don't always quite match up.

For example, we are told that in Yerovam's 18th year, Aviyam reigned for 3 years. In his 20th year, Assa reigned (see 15:1-2 and 15:9-10). But if Aviyam was king for 3 years, then Assa should ascend the throne in Yerovam's 21st year! This is just a minor example in which years seem to go "missing." A number of solutions offer themselves:

1. Overlap of years. Sometimes, two kings reigned in a single year. That was probably the case with Aviyam and Assa. If Aviya reigned for 2 years

and 4 months, it is called 3 years because he died in the 3rd year of his reign. But Assa ascends the throne in the 3rd, and not the 4th, year. Hence, a single year is listed twice, for the deceased king and the ascendant one. (Phrased differently, a fraction of a year is considered a full year.)

2. Breaks in succession. This is the opposite of the previous problem. See the following:

16:15 - In Assa's 27th year, Zimri was king for 7 days.

16:23 - In Assa's 30th year, Omri ruled ...

What happened to the missing 3 years? In this case, the text gives us a clear indication.

Then the people divided into two, half following Tivni ben Ginat to crown him, and half following Omri; and the Omri faction was stronger... and Omri ruled. (16:21-22)

In this case, there is a break in succession because the leadership struggle takes 3 years.

3. Two Kings concurrently: Other models exist. For example, what happens when a king is incapacitated? A good example is the difficulty of the years around the reign of the kings Amatzia and Uzzia of Yehuda in Melakhim II ch.14-15. In one place (14:17) it appears that King Uzzia, reigned in the 15th year of Yerovam. But in another (15:8) it appears that Uzzia rose to the throne in the 3rd year of Yerovam.¹⁰ This is a 12 year disparity! What is the solution? The answer lies in the events that preceded Uzzia. There we read that his father, Amatzia, engaged in a disastrous war against the Northern kingdom in which he was seized by the enemy (14:13). We don't know when he was returned, but this resulted in an assassination attempt which took place away from Jerusalem, in Lachish (14:19-21). How long was Amatzia absent? When did his son, Uzzia take over? Commentaries suggest that the likelihood is that the years of the kings are counted twice, and that father, Amatzia was still alive, while his son, Uzzia, actually ruled the country. So, we are dealing with two concurrent kings of Yehuda. Both of their years were included in their separate accounts. Hence the 12 extra years!

SEFER MELAKHIM AND DIVREI HA-YAMIM

The final topic of this interim introduction is *Sefer Divrei Ha-Yamim*. Thus far, we have referred to *Divrei Ha-Yamim* intermittently, but we will see that from King Rechavam onwards, that *Divrei Ha-Yamim* becomes a critical parallel source.

What are the differences between *Divrei Ha-Yamim* and *Sefer Melakhim*? Whereas *Sefer Melakhim* is written with a consciousness of *churban*, sin and destruction, *Chazal* suggest that the author of *Divrei Ha-*

¹⁰ A third problematic date is in 15:1 where it appears that Uzzia ascended the throne in the 27th year of Yerovam. This brief description does not allow us to tackle this problem thoroughly.

Yamim was none other than Ezra. This book was written during the period of *Shivat Tzion*, the return to Zion and the early years of the Second Temple. Ezra battled many issues during that period. He had to lead a nation that did not believe that they could restore themselves and the Temple to its glory days and rise to the heights of the stature of the First Temple. He had to struggle with religious problems, such as intermarriage and widespread disregard for observance of Shabbat. He had to deal with disappointment in a Temple that did not meet the grandeur of its predecessor. How did this influence his perspective of history?

First, we must mention that since Ezra was dealing with rehabilitating Yehuda and Jerusalem, he deals exclusively with the Southern Kingdom, referring to the Northern Kingdom of Yisrael or Efrayim only when it is relevant to Yehuda.

Divrei Ha-Yamim revels in *teshuva*, celebrating any king who engages in religious repair and describing it in great detail. It frequently paints the "good kings," such as David and Shlomo, as stable and free of rebellion and sin, as if to boost their stature. Of course, this is a very different orientation from *Sefer Melakhim*. Ezra was interested in a more upbeat tone, allowing the nation to believe that they could succeed.

Furthermore, *Divrei Ha-Yamim* has a different tone to *Sefer Melakhim*. In the theological realm, *Divrei Ha-yamim* is far more personal and explicit than *Sefer Melakhim* about reward and punishment. If a sin is mentioned in *Sefer Melakhim*, *Divrei Ha-Yamim* will always provide a punishment. If a worthy act is narrated in *Melakhim*, *Divrei Ha-Yamim* will suggest its reward. The causal links of reward and punishment, the theological lessons of history, are far more explicit in *Divrei Ha-Yamim*. And yet *Sefer Melakhim* frequently punishes later generations for the sins of their forebears. Many at the time of Ezra felt that they were condemned to fail: "Our fathers sinned and are no more; and we must bear their guilt." (*Eikha* 5:7) But Ezra challenges the idolatry-based focus of *Sefer Melakhim*, suggesting that *teshuva* is possible and that a brighter future is ahead. Whereas a king's actions condemn the future many generations hence in *Sefer Melakhim*, that aspect is played down in *Divrei Ha-Yamim*. To that end, one of the most telling aspects of *Divrei Ha-Yamim*, is that it opens with nine chapters of genealogies. (This fits in with the style of *Ezra* and *Nechemia*, which revel in genealogy.) The aim is to connect history to its roots in the era of the *avot*. Ezra is telling people that they are legitimate and that they can start anew. ¹¹

The *Beit Ha-Mikdash* described in *Divrei Ha-Yamim* is a place of celebration and *teshuva* that is frequently depicted in most positive terms. Whenever *Divrei Ha-Yamim* detects a gathering of worship of God at the *Mikdash*, it describes it extensively, as if to show the people that they can follow in the character's footsteps.

¹¹ For more on this theory, see the articles of Rabbi Hayyim J. Angel in his book, *Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings* (Ktav 2009) in ch.19 and 20.

Thus, the orientations of each book are very different. We shall refer to both *sefarim* in the upcoming weeks as we continue with our discussion of the succession of *Melakhim*. After this interim introduction, we shall move ahead next week, to examine the reign of King Rechavam.