

Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings
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Shiur #17: Chapter 15: Aviya, Assa, and Ba'sha – Civil War

INTRODUCTION

This week, we will examine the reign of two kings of Yehuda, Aviya and Assa. We will begin by charting the broad contours of the events that transpired after Shlomo Ha-melekh's rule.

Our starting point is a kingdom split and weakened by Yerovam's revolt. Furthermore, the South was devastated only five years later by Pharaoh Shishak, who seized several of the prize national treasures of Shlomo's era, while sparing Jerusalem itself.

Spiritually, we can chart an interesting journey:

- **Rechavam** rules for 17 years. In his reign, a culture of idolatry and pagan practices prevail and accelerate. *Ashera, kadesh, and kedasha* are among the illicit practices in Yehuda.
- **Aviya(m)** follows Rechavam with a 3 year reign. *Avoda zara* continues unabated.
- **Assa** reigns for 42 years. He follows God loyally, actively fighting idolatry and removing it and its accoutrements from the kingdom. The driving force behind the culture of *avoda zara* is the king's grandmother – Ma'acha from Ammon – who clearly brought her Ammonite religious practices with her from Ammon. She is removed from the high position of *Gevira*. Assa turns his attention to funding the Temple and boosting the service of God.

In other words, we see a decline both in terms of national security and in religious loyalty after Shlomo. King Assa represents a return to the correct orientation.

But there is a second story that flows through these chapters, namely the internecine tension, or civil war, between the South and the North.

There was continual war between **Rechavam** and Yerovam. (14:30)

There was war between **Aviyam** and Yerovam all the days of his life. (15:6)

There was war between **Assa** and King Baasha of Israel all their days. (15:16)

If we continue to read through chapter 15, we read that Assa is confronted with a siege on his northern border. Ba'asha had built a physical barrier to obstruct passage between the North and the South. Assa manages to suspend the conflict and bring it to a close by "hiring," or signing a military pact with, the Aramean king Ben Hadad. As a result, Ben Hadad attacks the Northern Kingdom and the siege is broken. Interestingly, the next king of Yehuda – Yehoshafat - is on exceptionally friendly terms with the royal family of Yisrael, and their children marry one another. Clearly, the tension between the two kingdoms dissipated.

So there are two stories to follow. The first is the spiritual slump in Yehuda and the recovery from it; the second story is the civil war that reaches its climax and conclusion during the reign of King Assa.

AVIYA¹ KING OF YEHUDA

(See sources *Melakhim* I 15:1-8, *Divrei Ha-yamim* II ch.13)

In *Sefer Melakhim*, the reign of Aviya(m) could not be more straightforward:

He reigned three years in Jerusalem; his mother was Maachah daughter of Avishalom. He continued in all the sins of his father before him... yet for the sake of David, the Lord his God gave him a lamp in Jerusalem, by raising up a descendent after him and by preserving Jerusalem... There was war between Aviyam and Yerovam all the days of his life. (15:2-6)

Quite uneventful! Although Aviya facilitates *avoda zara* and we might anticipate his demise as a result, we are informed that God preserves the royal line of David despite Aviya's guilt.

Divrei Ha-yamim presents an entirely different image. There, we don't hear a word about Aviya's idolatry. Instead we read of a colossal war between Yehuda and Yisrael, with 400,000 soldiers under Aviya and 800,000 under Yerovam! The war begins with a rousing speech by Aviya:

Listen to me, Yerovam and all Israel: Do you not know that the Lord God of Israel gave the rule over Israel forever to David and his sons by a covenant of salt?² Yet Yerovam ben Nevat, the servant of Shlomo the son of David, rose up and rebelled against his master, and worthless men gathered about him, scoundrels, who proved too strong for Rechavam, the son of Shlomo, when he was young and timid and could not hold his own against them. So now you intend to resist the kingdom

¹ *Sefer Melakhim* refers to him as Aviyam, whereas he is Aviya in *Divrei Ha-yamim* (without the final *mem*).

² This phrase appears twice in the Torah (*Vayikra* 2:13 and *Bamidbar* 18:19). It seems to indicate an everlasting promise (as salt preserves things); see Rashbam. For more on this phrase, see:

<http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/Korach/bar.html>

of the Lord through the sons of David, being a great multitude and having with you the golden calves which Yerovam made as gods for you. Have you not driven out the priests of the Lord, the sons of Aharon, and the Levites, and made for yourselves priests like the peoples of other lands?... But as for us, the Lord is our God and we have not forsaken Him; and the sons of Aharon are ministering to the Lord as priests, and the Levites attend to their work... Now behold, God is with us at *our* head and His priests with the signal trumpets to sound the alarm against you. O sons of Israel, do not fight against the Lord, God of your fathers, for you will not succeed. (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 13:4-12)

As the story continues, Yerovam's troops surround and entrap Aviya's army until:

When Yehuda turned around and saw the fighting was before and behind them, they cried out to God and the priests blew the trumpets... God routed Yerovam and all Yisrael before Aviya and Yehuda. Yisrael fled before Yehuda and God delivered them into their hands... 500,000 men of Yisrael were slain... Aviya pursued Yerovam and captured some of his cities – Beit-El... (ibid., 13:14-18)

Here our questions begin. In this story, not a word is spoken of Aviya's idolatry. Furthermore, the perspective of these *pesukim* sees Aviya's victory as evidence of God's support and backing. Based on the account in *Divrei Ha-yamim*, I would come to the conclusion that Aviya was a *tzaddik*, a flawless, God-fearing king! Why does *Divrei Ha-yamim* depict Aviya in this manner? Indeed, why does God assist him if he is, in fact, a corrupt and iniquitous king? Where does the truth lie between *Divrei Ha-yamim* and *Sefer Melakhim*?

Let us first summarize the differences between the accounts:

- *Divrei Ha-yamim* completely omits the sins of this king.
- *Sefer Melakhim* ignores the details of the battle.
- Aviya's mother is identified differently in each account. In *Melakhim*, his mother is Maacha bat Avishalom; in *Divrei Ha-yamim*, she is Michayahu bat Uriel.
- The spiritual evaluation of Aviya seems to be diametrically opposed in each source.

Yet again, we return to the topic of the differential perspectives of these two *sefarim*. As we have mentioned in previous *shiurim*, *Divrei Ha-yamim*, was composed in the historical context of the early Second Temple period. Its agenda is to boost the fledgling community and *Mikdash* in Judea, and it therefore focuses on Yehuda, to the exclusion of Yisrael, the Northern Kingdom. (In Ezra's time, there was only Yehuda, as the Ten Tribes had not returned.) Ezra is interested in encouraging the nation to value the *Mikdash*, to appreciate their impressive historical mission and legacy, and to believe once again in their country. To this end, *Divrei Ha-yamim* tells the story of the correctness of the religious institutions of Yehuda – the Temple, *kohanim*, and Jerusalem – as opposed to the reprehensible religious order of the Northern

Kingdom. *Divrei Ha-yamim* is interested in bolstering religious commitment to those institutions, and it insists that these are sureties for God's protection. Furthermore, the *sefer* aims to reinforce that Jerusalem upholds a long history of correct religious orientation and it is the historic seat of royal dynasty embraced by God. (And *Divrei Ha-yamim* stylistically loves emotive speeches!) In the light of all this, we understand the way it tells the Aviya story. Aviya's idolatry fails to further these goals in any way.

The story as told in *Sefer Melakhim*, on the other hand, is an expression of a very different theme. *Melakhim* is written with the images of *churban* fresh in Yermiyahu's mind, and with the prophetic understanding that idolatry specifically constituted the cause of that catastrophe. Yirmiyahu set out to write a book that would identify any trace of Aviya's contribution to the tragic descent on the path of idol worship.

With this agenda in mind, Aviya, whose biological mother was most probably Michayahu, as mentioned in *Divrei Ha-yamim*, is depicted as born to the king's most dominant wife, Ma'acha.³ This Ma'acha is later depicted (15:13) as the mastermind behind the national practice of idolatry. We read how Aviya's son, Assa, removes her "*mifletzet*" – a statue of sorts or an object of worship – and removes her from her position as "*Gevira*," apparently an influential court position with considerable influence.⁴ *Sefer Melakhim*'s claim that Aviya is her son reinforces our perception of the role of pagan influences in his early life. *Sefer Melakhim* is unforgiving of any strains related to idolatry. Even though it appears that Aviya served *Hashem* while concurrently tolerating other religious phenomena, this syncretism is anathema to the worldview of *Sefer Melakhim*. There is zero tolerance for idolatry and hence absolute condemnation of Aviya for not preventing these public pagan expressions.

A RABBINIC VIEW

These portrayals of Aviya still appear to be radically inconsistent. The Sages in the Yerushalmi (*Yevamot* 16:3, also quoted in *Bereshit Rabba* 65:20) are unprepared to tolerate the whitewashed image of Aviya as presented by *Divrei Ha-yamim*. They question aspects of his self-congratulatory speech:

"Yerovam could not muster strength again during the days of Aviya; God struck him down and he died." R. Shmuel said: Do you think it was Yerovam [who died]? No - It was Aviya! And why was he struck down?

³ See the solutions of the Radak and Ralbag in *Sefer Melakhim*.

⁴ Despite a severe paucity of sources on this topic, it would appear that the "*Gevira*" is the main wife of the king. Certainly as regards Ma'acha, she appears to have wielded significant influence concerning the nation's religious orientation. See also *Melakhim* I 11:19, referring to the *Gevira* in Egypt, and *Melakhim* II 10:13 and *Yermiyahu* 13:18, 29:2 where the *Gevira* seems to have a particularly high societal and royal standing.

R. Yochanan said: Because he shamed Yerovam publically, as it states: "... a great multitude and having with you the golden calves which Yerovam made as gods for you" (13:8).

Resh Lakish said: He ridiculed Achiya Ha-Shiloni, as its states: "... Worthless men gathered about him, scoundrels..." (13:7). Is he calling Achiya a scoundrel?

The Rabbis said: Because idols came into his control but he failed to destroy them. As it states: "Aviya pursued Yerovam and captured some of his cities – Beit-El" (13:18), and it states, "He placed one in Beit El and the other in Dan" (12:29).

This midrashic discussion critiques Aviya's impassioned declaration in *Divrei Ha-Yamim* and raises deep questions. Can Aviya legitimately depict Yerovam's rise to power as a power-grab by an unlawful rabble when it was ordained by a prophet? Can Aviya claim the moral high-ground when he himself failed to remove idolatry from Beit-El? By extension, is it possible that Aviya, who exhibits tolerant tendencies towards public manifestations of idolatry, is in any position to admonish Yerovam? Even this public harangue, shaming King Yerovam, is condemned; after all, if Aviya was serious about his criticism, he could have found private channels through which to raise these matters for discussion with Yerovam.⁵

This *midrash* closes the gap somewhat between the perfect image of Aviya in *Divrei Ha-yamim* and the harsh judgement of *Sefer Melakhim*. *Divrei Ha-yamim* informs us (13:22) that more information on the subject can be found in the "*midrash* of the prophet Ido." One can only wonder what such a book might add to our understanding of this king and his relationship with the prophet Ido.

ASSA

Assa represents a welcome change in Yehuda. *Sefer Melakhim* describes the removal of idolatrous icons and the institution of the "*kadesh*" (15:12). Assa does not personally participate in the *bamot*, although the nation still engages in their use (15:14). These are good times religiously for Yehuda. *Divrei Ha-yamim* is more detailed regarding Assa's biography than *Melakhim*, detailing a spectacular military victory against the army of Zerakh Ha-Kushi from Ethiopia.⁶ Furthermore, *Divrei Ha-yamim* seems to chart various stages of Assa's religious strengthening, culminating in a covenantal "*Brit*" ceremony in Assa's fifteenth year, which gives the nation an opportunity

⁵ *Bereshit Rabba* goes even further, accusing Aviya of actively or passively demonstrating disregard for human dignity by his attitude to the corpses of casualties of war. This is an accusation of cruelty, of an inability to stop the war. The enormous casualty figure of a half a million soldiers seems to indicate an overzealous desire to inflict death and destruction on Yerovam and Yisrael, who are, after all Yehuda's brethren.

⁶ Once again, this military campaign is replete with charismatic religious speeches - see *Divrei Ha-yamim* 14:10 – and God's immediate response. (The use of the verb NGF is common to the Aviya and Assa accounts, as well as many other leading words and phrases.)

to restate their allegiance to God after a protracted period in which there had been "no true God, no guiding priest, and no Torah" (*Divrei Ha-yamim* 15:3).

THE WAR WITH BA'ASHA⁷

In *Sefer Melakhim*, the tense standoff between Assa and Ba'sha is described rather telegraphically. We are left to wonder what instigated the conflict. Was Assa's policy of avoiding civil war a correct one? What exactly was the "Rama" that Ba'asha built and why was it such a threat to Yehuda?

Let us try to fill in the gaps. It appears that under Assa, Yehuda enjoyed a degree of stability. Politically, they were still led by the House of David and a direct succession of kings. Their capital was stable. In contrast, Yisrael, the Northern Kingdom, had experienced constant changes of government – the House of David to that of Yerovam and his son Nadav and, after Nadav's assassination, to Ba'asha from the tribe of Yissachar. This political instability took its toll on the Northern Kingdom, and we read of wide-scale migration southwards to Yehuda:

... and those who had settled from Efrayim, Menashe, and Shimon, for many had defected from Yisrael when they saw that *Hashem* his God was with him. (*Divrei Ha-yamim* 15:9)

This population attrition from the North may be the most suitable explanation available to us to explain the building of the Ramah -

to prevent Assa, King of Yehuda, from going out or coming in. (15:17)

Ramah is today's A-Ram, about 9 kilometers north of Jerusalem, and it represented the border between the kingdoms. It seems that Ba'asha began to build a huge fortification there. We hear of buildings or structures (the text refers to the stones and timber in 15:22) and also a moat or trench that was dug as a physical "separation barrier." We hear about this trench in *Sefer Yirmiyahu* as well in the context of the assassination of Gedalia. There, after Gedalia and his men have been murdered, their bodies are deposited into a pit:

The cistern into which Yishamel threw all the corpses of the men he had killed in the affair of Gedalia was the one that King Assa had constructed on account of King Ba'asha of Israel. (*Yirmiyahu* 41:9)

(It is probable that the details of this pit are recorded in *Yirmiyahu* as a deliberate reference to a different tragic era of internal conflict in which Jews were fighting between themselves.)

Based on this information, it seems that Ba'asha builds a wall and Assa digs a moat of sorts in self-defense. The bottom line is that the classic north-

⁷ The precise date of this war in *Divrei Ha-yamim* is highly problematic. See Radak, who assesses that 3 years are from the split of the kingdom.

south road that provided a connection between Yehuda and Yisrael was now blocked and impassable. This takes the division of the kingdom to yet a deeper degree of separation.

Was this physical barrier a declaration of war? Certainly this blockade restricted entry to the country and provided a severe limitation on movement. Assa certainly perceived this as an act of aggression. (A contemporary comparison might be Egypt's blockade of the Straits of Tiran in 1967.)

BEN HADAD AND ASSA'S SICKNESS

Assa's solution is to make a military alliance with Syria. He essentially pays Ben Hadad to attack Ba'asha's northern border. Ben Hadad does so, capturing the entire "finger of the Galilee," from Iyun (near Metulla) and Dan to the Kinneret. This is a huge act of conquest and must have been a devastating war for Ba'asha. A massive chunk of Yisrael passes hands to the enemy. Distracted by his problems in the north, Ba'asha abandons his southern campaign.

How is this act perceived? Does God approve of this action? The story of Assa concludes with a strange detail:

Only, in his old age, Assa suffered from a foot ailment. (15:23)

The Rabbinic commentaries see this piece of information as a clue to God's disapproval of Assa's actions:

He suffered from a foot ailment: Because he sent to Ben-Hadad as if he himself had no legs to go to war! Hence, God gave him this illness. (Ralbag)

Chazal (*Sota* 10a) suggest a different reason for Assa's ailment. The Talmud suggests that this was God's punishment. What was the sin? Assa drafted Torah scholars and enlisted newlywed bridegrooms in his army. This enigmatic critique seems to suggest that Assa had called a comprehensive military draft, using all the emergency measures at his disposal and mobilizing even civilians who were ordinarily exempt in a standard war, a "*milchemet reshut*." In this regard, he overreacted, misjudging Ba'asha's motives and perceiving a simple power struggle and a situation of muscle-flexing as an existential threat. His assessment was wrong and too extreme. The blow inflicted in the north was so severe that Assa was punished for his excessive zeal and his lack of caution.

But *Divrei Ha-yamim* contains a more explicit critique, in which the prophet Channani berates Assa for relying on human means and not appealing to God for help. In *Divrei Ha-yamim*, this self-reliance rather than appealing to God is reinforced in Assa's sickness:

Assa suffered from an acute foot ailment, but ill as he was, he still did not turn to the Lord, but to physicians. (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 16:13)

It is one thing to rely on doctors in a state of illness, but it is another thing to induce a neighboring country to invade the Northern Kingdom! In that situation, Assa should have sought an alternative.

The innocuous statement in *Sefer Melakhim* concerning Assa's foot illness is a good methodological illustration of the way that curious features of the terse text of *Sefer Melakhim* are perceived as clues to deeper elements of the story.

Next week, we will turn our attention to the Northern Kingdom and chapter 16.