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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)  
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**SEFER MELAKHIM BET: THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS**  
**By Rav Alex Israel**

**Shiur #04:**  
**Chapter 3 – The War Against Moav**

This week we return to the battlefield, as the king of Yisrael leads a military campaign against Moav. Under Ach'av's rule, Yisrael had dominated Moav. However, after Ach'av's death and during Achazyahu's hapless reign, Moav breaks Yisrael's control by refusing to pay its annual tax<sup>1</sup>. Now Ach'av's son, King Yehoram, decides to reaffirm his sovereignty over Moav.

Yehoram joins with King Yehoshafat of Yehuda, who has a record of enthusiastic collaboration with the Northern kingdom. Yehoshafat declares: "I will do what you do, my troops shall be your troops, my horses shall be your horses" (3:7).<sup>2</sup> Yehoshafat has already fought alongside Ach'av<sup>3</sup> and built a navy with his son, King Achazyahu.<sup>4</sup> However we should acknowledge that this alliance is not problem-free. Yehoshafat was loyal to God, whereas the Northern kingdom had adopted Ba'al as its official deity. Hence, when the military forces hit a snag and Achazyahu appeals to Elisha, the prophet initially refuses to engage with the king of Yisrael:

Elisha said to the king of Yisrael: "What have you to do with me? Go to your father's prophets, or your mother's prophets."  
But the king of Yisrael said: "Don't! For God (YKVK) has brought these three kings together only to deliver them into the hands of Moav."  
Elisha answered: "As the Lord of Hosts lives, whom I serve, were it not that I respect King Yehoshafat of Yehuda, I wouldn't look at you ..."  
(3:13-14)

Elisha's disparagement of Yehoram might seem excessive given that the opening lines of our chapter introduce Yehoram as a king who had curbed the influence of Ba'al in the North:

He [Yehoram] did what was evil to the Lord, yet not like his father and mother, for he removed the pillars of Ba'al that his father had made. However, he clung to the sins which Yerav'am ben Nevat caused Yisrael to commit... (3:2-3)

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<sup>1</sup> *II Melakhim* 1:1, and 3:4-5. The incredibly high numbers of livestock that make up the annual tribute may be a way of illustrating Moav's complete vassalage to Yisrael, and the obvious desire to break free of that arrangement.

<sup>2</sup> Echoing *I Melakhim* ch.22

<sup>3</sup> *I Melakhim* ch.22

<sup>4</sup> *II Divrei Ha-yamim* 20:35-37

Moreover, when Yehoram expresses his distress, he references God, not Ba'al. Furthermore, the Targum beautifully amplifies Yehoram's expression, "Don't!" in a dramatic appeal to Elisha:

Please! Do not mention our sins at this moment. Appeal for mercy on our behalf. (3:13)

Elisha expresses a strongly negative attitude towards Yehoram, clearly indicating that Yehoram's religious changes have been insufficient. Yehoshafat, however, overlooks any religious dissonance between them. He is deeply committed to national unity, persistently associating with three successive Northern kings, even though he was repeatedly criticized by the prophet (*II Divrei Ha-yamim* 19:2, 20:37). Moreover, Yehoshafat forged family ties with the line of Ach'av; his son married Ach'av's daughter (*II Melakhim* 8:18).

## **THE ATTACK**

In order to boost the size of the attack force, Edom joins the war as a third ally. The kings lead their armies through Edomite territory, a long, tortuous route that skirts the southern tip of the Dead Sea, to attack Moav from the south.

However the advancing forces encounter a serious setback: they run out of water. Now, they are traveling through a desert; how could they commit such a basic logistical error? I imagine that their planned route had been to pass by a particular wadi or a spring and they unexpectedly found it dry, or the access blocked. Maybe they had to alter their route for some reason (for example, sometimes after a flash flood, a wadi becomes impassable due to fallen rocks), and they failed to reach the water that they had anticipated. Walking for seven days in the desert without water is a severe problem.

The kings consult Elisha, who prophesizes a swift resolution to the crisis: "You shall see no wind, you shall see no rain, and yet the wadi shall be filled with water" (3:17). Most likely we are dealing with a flash flood that brought rainwater from the Jordanian hills down towards the Dead Sea. This phenomenon is familiar to us from the Israel side of the Dead Sea. When it rains in Hebron and Jerusalem, the drainage through the wadis of the Judean desert generates fierce flash floods; there may be a flood near the Dead Sea despite the fact that the sky is absolutely clear.

And so the water comes in the morning. The Moabites see the liquid in the morning light; it looks red and they think it is blood. Why would the water appear red? It could be that the rainwater drew mud along with it. Alternatively, the reflection of the reddish mountains of Moav in the morning light gave the water a reddish hue. The Moabites draw a radical conclusion. They presume that infighting within the coalition of Yisrael-Yehuda-Edom had generated a bloodbath, and that they are witnessing a huge stream of blood! Their reaction is to advance and to plunder the camp of Yisrael. However,

things are not what they seem. As Moav arrives, they are met by the army of Yisrael, which advances and decimates Moav:

Yisrael rose up and fought them until they fled, and they invaded the land and slaughtered Moav. They destroyed the towns ... Only the wall of Kir Hareseth was left and the catapults surrounded it, to destroy it. (3:24-5)

However, as the forces of Yisrael are about to capture the last stronghold, King Mesha makes a desperate move, which undermines Yisrael's imminent victory:

When the king of Moav saw that the battle had gone against him, he took with him seven hundred swordsmen to break through to the king of Edom, but they failed. Then he took his firstborn son, who was to succeed him as king, and offered him as a sacrifice on the city wall. The fury against Yisrael was great; they withdrew and returned to their own land. (3:26-7)

Two actions are reported here. The first is a desperate military operation which fails. The second is a human sacrifice which, as abhorrent as it may seem, brings the dramatic surge to a halt, and the coalition retreats.

## **GOD'S FURY**

At this point, many questions arise: why did this pagan act lead to Yisrael's retreat? What frustrated their attack? And what is the meaning of the phrase describing the great "fury against Yisrael?" Whose fury was it? God's? The Moabites? How was it manifest? Why should a pagan act of child sacrifice affect the nation of Yisrael?

The Talmud<sup>5</sup> offers two possibilities: either Mesha offered his son to God, or his sacrifice was idolatrous. According to both readings, the "fury against Yisrael" is God's fury; obviously, *Tanakh* does not attribute any power to other deities.<sup>6</sup> We shall read these two options as they appear in the Radak's commentary, drawing upon the *Pesikta*:

In the midrash (*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana*): "[Mesha] asked his advisors, 'What is the secret of this nation that they are subject to these miracles?' They answered, 'Their father Avraham offered his son as a sacrifice.' He [Mesha] said: 'I will do the same.' The Rabbis debate whether his intent was to serve God ... or an idolatrous deity."

In a surprising interpretation, the midrash suggests that Mesha's sacrifice was an imitation of Abraham's religious passion in the story of the binding of Isaac.

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<sup>5</sup> *Sanhedrin* 39b

<sup>6</sup> This reading is particularly attractive in the light of the Mesha Stele (see later in this *shiur*) which attributes Mesha's victory over Yisrael to Kemosh, god of Moav. Needless to say the mere suggestion that *Tanakh* would acknowledge such a pagan perspective is entirely inconsistent with a book that views idolatry not only as evil but as worthless and powerless.

The Radak explains the two rabbinic approaches regarding Mesha's gesture. The first suggests that Mesha dedicated his human sacrifice to God. In that case, God's anger is aroused by the fact that "the king of Moav spared no mercy on his son in order to perform God's will, but Yisrael angers Him every day." The alternative reading is that he sacrificed his son to Kemosh, god of Moav. And yet, God is furious with Yisrael "for this was a reminder of Yisrael's sins – that they too offered their sons to idols" and were therefore unworthy of being saved.

Both of these approaches are difficult, in a number of respects. In the first reading, Mesha is seen as imitating Avraham. But can we even begin to view his sacrifice as comparable to Avraham's binding of Isaac? Is Mesha's desperate self-preservation akin to Avraham's religious dedication? Doesn't God's sparing of Isaac suggest that He repudiates human sacrifice?<sup>7</sup> And would we say that Mesha is thoroughly committed to God, such that his devotion would put Yisrael to shame?

The second interpretation is that Mesha sacrificed to an idolatrous deity. Why does a contemptible pagan sacrifice induce a positive result? Is it indeed possible that this act suddenly "reminded" God of Yisrael's sins? Is God so fickle?

## **EDOM'S FURY**

The Radak himself finds these readings problematic, terming these approaches "midrashic." Instead he offers a third approach, linking Mesha's sacrifice with the previous verse:

When the king of Moav saw that the battle had gone against him, he took with him seven hundred swordsmen to break through to the king of Edom, but they failed. Then he took **his firstborn son**, who was to succeed him as king, and offered him as a sacrifice on the city wall.  
(3:26-7)

The Radak<sup>8</sup> explains that the king of Moav did not kill his own son; instead, it was the son of the king of Edom that he killed. Mesha had tried to fend off the attack with a surge of seven-hundred swordsmen towards the Edomite army. The surprise attack was, in itself, unsuccessful; however, in the course of their attack, the Moabites managed to seize the king of Edom's son. Mesha took him, and burnt him on the wall. This explains why he killed the boy upon the wall rather than upon the local altar. Mesha's "sacrifice" is not religiously motivated, but rather a publicity stunt, an act of psychological warfare designed to intimidate the enemy. As Edom looked on and watched their crown prince being burned, Edom unraveled. The "great fury" that was directed against Yisrael was Edom's bitter accusation: Yisrael had not

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<sup>7</sup> Yet the Talmud (*Ta'anit* 4b) insists that God rejected human sacrifice, both in this episode, and in the story of Yiftach.

<sup>8</sup> In a moving, personal touch, the Radak's interpretations are presented in the name of his father and also "my teacher, my brother, R. Moshe."

sufficiently supported Edom.<sup>9</sup> It was not God's fury but Mesha's brilliant, if nefarious, tactic that dismantled the allied coalition, and brought an end to the battle.

## SCORCHED EARTH POLICY

A second troubling aspect of this chapter is Elisha's call, part prediction and part instruction, to utterly destroy the Moabite territory:

You will overthrow every fortified city and every major town. You will cut down every good tree, stop up all the springs, and ruin every good field with stones. (3:20)

These words are fulfilled to the letter:

They destroyed the towns, and each man threw a stone on every good field until it was covered. They stopped up all the springs and cut down every good tree. (3:25)

The problem is that this prophetic injunction would seem to contravene an explicit Torah law that guides the ethics of war:

When you lay siege to a city for a long time, fighting against it to capture it, do not destroy its trees by putting an axe to them, because you can eat their fruit. Do not cut them down. Are the trees of the field people, that you should besiege them? (*Devarim* 20:19)

This is the mitzva of "*bal tashchit*" (do not destroy), which requires an advancing army to have respect for the countryside and specifically to take care not to destroy fruit bearing trees. Here in *II Melakhim*, Elisha issues a policy of total devastation: leave the Moabite landscape in an uninhabitable manner. Why does Elisha give a directive that contradicts Torah law?

Even though the Torah says, 'Do not destroy its trees' this was a direct divine instruction of a provisional nature. (Ralbag)

This is only a law for a siege camp. (Radak)

In this situation [God] permitted [destroying trees] because they were contending with a disgraceful and lowly nation, as it states, "Do not seek their welfare or goodness" (*Devarim* 23:7) - this refers to their trees. (Rashi)

These commentaries all deal with this problem from the relatively narrow perspective of this particular chapter, suggesting that God specified a different mode of engagement in this instance. Possibly, this change resulted from the unusually degenerate acts of Moav. Alternatively, the Torah's law applies only

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<sup>9</sup> This approach is shared by the Malbim.

during a situation of a protracted siege. However, we might suggest an approach that is wider in scope.

First, this episode has much in common with *II Melakhim* chapter 20. There too Yisrael seemed stuck against a bitter adversary, in that case, Aram. God gave Yisrael assurances that it would be victorious: "and you shall know that I am the Lord" (*I Melakhim* 20:28). Indeed, Yisrael wins the battle, and defeats the enemy. Nevertheless, at the critical moment, Ach'av releases the king of Aram, squandering a decisive victory, and obscuring God's supremacy over Aram.

The insistence on a scorched earth policy might be an attempt to gain a victory that leaves no spectator in any doubt regarding the indisputable defeat of the enemy, and by deduction, that God has fought for His nation. We may lend further credence to this hypothesis with some fascinating historical evidence.

## THE MESHA STELE

In 1868, twenty miles east of the Dead Sea in Dibhan, Jordan, a Prussian missionary named Fredrik Klein discovered a remarkable historical artifact. He found a basalt monument, four feet in height, inscribed with 33 lines of text. When it was deciphered, archeologists found that this was a victory tablet in which King Mesha narrates his victory and that of his god Kemosh in the Moabite revolt against the dynasty of Ach'av, king of Yisrael. It is a remarkable document, if only because it corroborates the *Tanakh* so strongly – mentioning Mesha and Ach'av, and also the Tetragrammaton - but more so due to the line, stated so smugly by Mesha: "Yisrael has been defeated; has been defeated forever" (line 7). The stele depicts a furious revolution in which Moav attacks towns and villages of Yisrael throughout the Transjordan, killing the inhabitants and specifically humiliating Yisrael's God:

I fought against the city [Atarot] and captured it. And I killed all the people of the city as a sacrifice for Kemosh and for Moab ... And Kemosh said to me, Go take Nebo against Yisrael, and I went in the night and I fought against it from the break of day till noon, and I took it: and I killed in all seven thousand men, but I did not kill the women and maidens, for I devoted them to Ashtar-Kemosh; and I took from it the vessels of YKVK, and offered them before Kemosh.

We do not know how to accurately date this Moabite revolt, but we may propose the following timeline. After Ach'av's death and during Achazyahu's reign, Mesha stages his bloody revolt against Yisrael. This revolution is filled with widespread slaughter and insult to the God of Yisrael. Yehoram launches a war to regain control. However, for the prophet, and for God, this is not merely about regaining lost territory or recouping tax monies. God issues a writ of devastation to Moav due to the fact that they deliberately targeted God Himself. In response, God instructs Yisrael to unleash its rage upon Moav. Viewing the chapter in historical context thus helps explain the unusual directive to destroy fields, trees, and water sources.

## AMBIVALENCE IN THIS CHAPTER

Apervading ambivalence pervades this chapter. At first, Yisrael receives the prophecy that it will deal a crushing blow to Moav; ultimately Yisrael withdraws, resulting in an inconclusive end to the battle. To what degree were they victorious? On the one hand, the forces of Yisrael find themselves in the desert without water, an error interpreted as a sign of God's disfavor (3:10,13). On the other hand, water is provided miraculously. Is God with Yisrael or is He not? Initially, Elisha will not even countenance Yehoram, but then he capitulates, possibly for the sake of the righteous king, Yehoshafat. Are the leaders considered righteous or wicked? Finally, was this a war fought in God's honor, or for the sake of the king? Was Yisrael worthy or not? We thus leave this chapter with many questions remaining.

## ON THE FRINGES OF CHAPTER 3: PROPHECY AND MUSIC

When Elisha is asked by the kings to communicate with God, he requests musical accompaniment:<sup>10</sup> "Now, get me a musician" (3:15). Elisha needs music to receive prophecy. This is a well-documented phenomenon. We witness this with the band of prophets that Sha'ul meets prior to his coronation:

... a band of prophets coming down ... and before them will be lyres, timbrels, flutes and harps and they will be prophesizing." (*I Shmuel* 10:5)<sup>11</sup>

Apparently, music generates the environment in which prophecy can transpire. Maimonides comments:

Prophecy does not come to those who are miserable or lethargic, but only to those who are happy. Therefore, the sons of prophets would have before them harps, drums and flutes, and would seek prophecy. (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 7:4)

We are familiar with the relationship of music to mood and temperament. Music is fundamental to the book of *Tehillim*; countless chapters speak of song, musical instruments, and so forth. Possibly, it is for this reason that music was central to the Temple service.<sup>12</sup> In more recent centuries, music has been elevated to a sacred status by the *niggunim* (tunes)

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<sup>10</sup> The commentaries explain that he had become angry in his encounter with Yehoram. The Talmud explains that "a person who gets angry ... if he is a prophet, his prophecy will elude him" (*Pesachim* 66b).

<sup>11</sup> See also *I Shmuel* I 16:16,23 and 18:10 in which David's playing of the harp alleviates Sha'ul's "evil spirit." We also see the ecstatic bringing of the Ark to Jerusalem accompanied by music in *II Shmuel* ch.6.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, the Mishna's descriptions: of *hallel* during the *korban Pesach* (*Pesachim* 5:7); of music with *bikkurim* (*Bikkurim* 3:4), of the daily song (*Tamid* 6:6-7) and of the water drawing ceremony (*Sukka* 5:1,4).

of Hassidic courts. However, it is here that the *Tanakh* establishes the particularly unique relationship between music and our connection to God.