

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

**Shiur #21: Chapter 17 part II**  
**The *Shomronim***

INTRODUCTION

In our last *shiur*, we discussed the devastating Assyrian siege of Shomron (Samaria), the fall of the city, and the terrible exile of its inhabitants to far-flung locations: “Chalach and Chavor, on the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes” (17:6). This is the moment that precipitated the demise of the ten northern tribes. Was the entire population exiled in one fell swoop? How did these tribes get “lost”? Assyrian records speak of only 27,290 deportees from Samaria, certainly a mere fragment of the population. Even if we factor in a high casualty toll from military engagement with the Assyrians, the bulk of the civilian population is still intact at this point; prophets continue to wish for the return of “Ephraim”<sup>1</sup> even a century after this event – proof that these tribes are still identifiable.

But the return of the tribes failed to transpire, and in the course of time, the ten tribes disappeared as a distinct unit in *Am Yisrael*. What happened to the remaining Israelites?<sup>2</sup> Abroad, the Israelites assimilated. In Eretz Yisrael, many migrated southwards to the province of Yehuda and absorbed themselves into that society, while many others remained in their farms and villages in the north. Those who moved south, despite their prior tribal affiliations, merged with the majority culture, losing their independent tribal identity. In time they became known as “*Yehudim*” – Judeans – or as we now refer to ourselves, Jews! Those who stayed in the north saw their distinct Israelite identity and faith gradually erode in the absence of a central Israelite government. One of the factors in the religious confusion of the north was the influx of foreigners who became known as the “*Shomronim*,”<sup>3</sup> or Samaritans (residents of Samaria), or by their mishnaic title “*kutim*” (Cutheans – arrivals from Cutha).

THE *SHOMRONIM*

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<sup>1</sup> See Isaiah 11:13, Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 37.

<sup>2</sup> See *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 30:1-12 and 34:9 where we note that a considerable Israelite population remained in the northern lands in the period of Chizkiyahu and some sixty years hence, in the era of Yoshiyahu.

<sup>3</sup> The sole instance of this appellation in *Tanakh* is here in verse 29, but it could well refer to the Israelite inhabitants of Shomron. It is reasonable to suggest that there was a merging of certain Israelites with the Samaritans by the fact that the Samaritans believe themselves to be the descendants of Ephraim and Menashe. See the end of this *shiur*.

The latter half of the chapter is structured in a composite manner<sup>4</sup>:

17:24-33 – A historical account of the *Shomronim*

17:34-41 – A religious-philosophical assessment of the post-exilic situation<sup>5</sup>

The historical account is as follows:

The king of Assyria brought people from Bavel, Kuta, Avva, Chamat and Sefarvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the people of Israel. And they took possession of Samaria and lived in its cities. At the beginning of their dwelling there, they did not fear God. Therefore God sent lions among them, which killed some of them. So the king of Assyria was told, “The nations that you have carried away and placed in the cities of Samaria do not know the law of the God of the land. Therefore He has sent lions among them, and behold, they are killing them, because they do not know the law of the God of the land.” Then the king of Assyria commanded, “Send there one of the priests whom you carried away from there, and let him go and dwell there and teach them the law of the God of the land.” So one of the priests whom they had carried away from Samaria came and lived in Beit El and taught them how they should fear God. (17:24-28)

The Assyrian policy of population transfer, which was enacted against Shomron, was unleashed indiscriminately against all the kingdoms vanquished by the Assyrians. Then new people arrive in Shomron, foreigners from “Bavel, Kuta, Avva, Chamat and Sefarvaim.” *Melakhim* describes an epidemic in which lions attack and strike fear into this new populace, a phenomenon interpreted as an expression of rage on the part of the “God of

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<sup>4</sup> This mirrors the structure of the first half of the chapter which offers: 1. 17:1-6 - A historical description of the exile from Shomron; 2. 17:7-23 - A religious-philosophical analysis of the sins that led up to that exile. Both religious-philosophical segments end with the language “until this day.”

<sup>5</sup> This passage (17:34-41) is certainly a retrospective assessment, written from the vantage point of the composition of *Sefer Melakhim* (after the *Churban*) as a survey of the last 150 years “to this very day” (verses 34, 41). Shemaryahu Talmon assesses this passage as a late addition from the early Second Temple period. See S. Talmon, *Biblical Traditions in Samaritan History* [Hebrew] in E. Stern and H. Eshel (eds.), *Sefer Ha-Shomronim*, Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, (2002) pg. 25-27 [Hebrew].

But there is a deep confusion as to which group this passage is describing. Rashi, Rav Avraham ben Ha-Rambam and the second opinion in the Radak assume that it addresses the *Shomronim*. Rav Yosef Kara and Radak explain that the passage describes the religious corruption of Israel in the lands of their dispersion. Ralbag and Rav Yosef Kaspi suggest that it refers to the Israelites who remained in the northern kingdom. There is certainly reason to see this passage as addressed to Israel, in that it mentions “God who brought you up from the land of Egypt... the Torah which He wrote for you... the covenant He made with you.” On the other hand, the passage opens and ends with lines which seem to refer to the gentile émigrés.

The target group addressed in this passage is similarly debated by academics. M. Cogan suggests that it addresses Israel in exile, whereas H. Eshel sees it as aimed at the remaining Israelites in the Land of Israel. M. Cogan, “Israel in Exile: The View of a Josianic Historian,” *JBL* 97 (1978), pp. 40-44. H. Eshel, “The Samaritans in the Persian and Hellenistic Periods” (Ph.D. diss., The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1994) pg., 6-56 [Hebrew].

the land.” In response, a priest from Beit El is returned from exile. He educates the newcomers about the religion of the land and the lion attacks cease.

Two questions arise from this story: First, why would God send lions to attack a group of non-Jewish émigrés? Is there some anticipation that gentiles will adhere to the religion of Israel? Second, the priest who is imported to teach these newcomers is one of the priests of Beit El. But as we have seen, the religion of Beit El is the worship of the golden calves, denoted as a cause of Israel's exile (17:22-23), and it is led by priests who are not from the tribe of Levi.<sup>6</sup> Apparently, the teachings of this priest sufficed to remove the plague of lions! Why should the errant religion of an illegitimate priest resolve the problem?

## THE LIONS

The idea of lions functioning in a punitive divine role is familiar to the reader of *Sefer Melakhim*. Earlier in *Melakhim*, we read the story of a prophet of God who contravenes an explicit divine instruction and pays with his life: He is killed by a lion (13:24-28). Similarly, in the Ahab stories, defiance of the prophet incurs a swift death by means of a lion (20:26).<sup>7</sup>

But this animal punishment is not limited to the sinful individual. The Torah features several instances in which wild beasts implement divine providence on the national stage:

If you walk in My statutes and observe My laws, I will send you the seasonal rains. The land will then yield its crops, and the trees of the field will produce their fruit.... I will give you peace in the land, and you will be able to sleep with no cause for fear. **I will rid the land of wild beasts** and keep your enemies out of your land. (*Vayikra* 26:3-6)

Conversely, if Israel does not observe the laws of Torah:

**I will unleash wild beasts against you**, and they shall bereave you of your children and wipe out your cattle. They shall decimate you, and your roads shall be deserted. (*Vayikra* 26:22)

Another example may be the divine assistance in conquering the land of Canaan:

And I will send **hornets** before you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites and the Hittites from before you.<sup>8</sup> (*Shemot* 23:28)

The power of the animal kingdom is harnessed to enforce God's regime.

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<sup>6</sup> See *Melakhim* I 12:31. This is echoed in our chapter as well, in verse 32.

<sup>7</sup> See also 2:24, where Elisha bellows at some children and they are killed by two bears.

<sup>8</sup> See also the concept of wild beasts in *Shemot* 23:29. See my article on the topic at <http://www.alexisrael.org/#lekev---gradual-conquest/ckx0>. It is also possible that Hoshea is referencing this in 2:20.

## THE LAND

But of course, the verses quoted above refer to the people of Israel. Why then were a group of foreigners suddenly plagued by wild animals upon their arrival in Samaria? The Radak (17:28) answers:

The punishment was inflicted upon these nations who came to Samaria, although they were not afflicted in their original land. This is because the Land of Israel is sanctified above other lands and will not tolerate abominations of this sort.

Radak draws upon several places in which the Torah indicates that the land itself is susceptible to defilement due to forbidden sexual acts or murder performed on its soil. These pernicious behaviors may engender ejection from this special territory:

The land became defiled, and I visited its sin upon it, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. (*Vayikra* 18:25)

And you shall not corrupt the land in which you live, for the blood corrupts the land. (*Bamidbar* 35:33)

Eretz Yisrael is sensitive and responsive to spiritual wrongdoing on its soil, and it doesn't discriminate in this regard between Jew and non-Jew. In the view of the Ramban, the Garden of Eden serves as the paradigm for this dynamic:<sup>9</sup>

The Torah began with the story of Creation until the creation of man, whom God invested with dominance over the world and control of it. The Garden of Eden – the choicest of places in the world – was his dwelling place. But his sin prompted his banishment. The generation of the great flood was banished from the face of the earth and only the righteous amongst them [Noah] was rescued.... **It is the way of God, then, from time immemorial, that when a nation continues to sin, it will lose its place and home and another nation will replace it...** (Ramban, *Bereishit* 1:1)

The Ramban explains that what was true for Eden becomes the reality in the Land of Israel, the “choicest of all places”:

He expelled those who rebelled against Him from the Land of Israel and placed His loyal servants there. Israel must know that they merit the land only through their loyal service to God. If they sin the land will vomit them out.”

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<sup>9</sup> See also *Vayikra* 26:34-35.

In the Ramban's view, the Land of Israel demands higher standards of conduct than other global locations.<sup>10</sup>

## DOUBLE STANDARD

Why would a priest from Beit El be successful in teaching the new inhabitants of Samaria how to serve God? And why would the selfsame syncretic worship of which Israel were found guilty be sufficient for the Samaritans? The Malbim (17:28) offers one solution:

One of the priests: He was a priest of the images worshipped by Israel, however Israel believed in the existence of God and beheld Him as a supreme deity; [Israel] perceived the calves as intermediaries. For Israel, this was a transgression of the law, as they were commanded to practice unadulterated and exclusive monotheism, as they are under God's direct control, and not that of the stars. But as regards the Cutheans, it was sufficient that they acknowledge that they feared God... that they called him the "God of Gods"; in this regard he [the priest from Beit El] "taught them how they should fear God."<sup>11</sup>

The Malbim is suggesting that there is a dual standard for belief in God between Jews and non-Jews.<sup>12</sup> The strict monotheism mandated for Jews is different from the level of belief required of other nations. For Israel, icons are absolutely forbidden, even when they serve as intermediaries to God. This is the primary sin for which the inhabitants of Shomron were exiled. However, for other peoples, idolatry and other gods are tolerable as long as God is recognized as the supreme deity, even while other gods are worshipped alongside Him.

So they feared God but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away. (17:33)

## GENUINE CONVERTS?

How should these émigrés be assessed? Should they be viewed as Jews who practice idolatry, or as gentiles who share some Jewish observance? Eventually the Samaritans emerged as a distinct group with independent beliefs and practices, but for a considerable period their identity was indeterminate and subject to fluctuation as reflected in their closeness to or distance from the Jews and their religious observance. As such, there were Tannaim who considered them Jews in many respects and others who saw them as gentiles. In a discussion regarding *teruma* (tithes), we read:

Rebbi said: "A Cuthean is like a gentile." Rabbi Shimon Ben Gamliel said: "A Cuthean is considered a Jew." (*Tosefta Terumot* 4:10, 4:12)

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<sup>10</sup> This chapter in *Melakhim* equates residence in the Land of Israel with living in God's presence – see verses 18 and 20.

<sup>11</sup> See Abarbanel and *Da'at Mikra* who share this approach.

<sup>12</sup> See Rabbeinu Tam in *Sanhedrin* 63b, Tosafot s.v. *assur*.

Similarly, the Talmudic debate regarding the authenticity of the Samaritans returns frequently to their arrival here in *Melakhim*. Were these émigrés sincere converts (*gerei emet*), or ones who converted merely out of fear (*gerei arayot*, literally “converts [due to the fear] of the lions”)?<sup>13</sup> Were they authentic Jews?

*Melakhim* fails to include all the information on the origins and development of the Samaritans.<sup>14</sup> In the book of Ezra, the Samaritans testify that they arrived in the land in the days of “Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here” (Ezra 4:2). Esarhaddon was the son of Sancheriv, and his reign is dated to 680-669 BCE, some forty years after the exile of Shomron (722 BCE). Evidently, successive waves of emigration influenced a long evolution of the Samaritan identity.

How did the Jewish community accept this group? After the destruction of Jerusalem, when Jews returned to their land to rebuild their temple by permission of Cyrus, they are approached by a group called “the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin” who wish to participate in building the Second Temple: “Let us build with you, since we too worship your God” (Ezra 4:2). The Jewish leaders rebuff them. Who is this group? Who would claim a common religion but be viewed by the Jewish returnees as religiously illegitimate? It seems that this group was the Samaritans. The Jewish rejection reveals that in early Second Temple times, Jews saw the Samaritans as distinct from themselves. The Samaritan responded with fierce opposition as the “adversaries” use every means at their disposal to obstruct the construction of the Temple and Jerusalem.<sup>15</sup>

*Chaza!*<sup>16</sup> and extra-biblical sources such as Ben Sira, Josephus and the New Testament all testify to this group. Again, tracing the history is difficult. Ben Sira, a Jewish work, expresses antipathy towards the

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<sup>13</sup> See *Bava Kama* 34a.

<sup>14</sup> There seems little doubt that the Samaritans emerged from Israel, or merged with them at some point. Here we may identify at least four theoretical possibilities as to the origin of the Samaritans: 1) The view of the Samaritans themselves, that they are a perpetuation of the true Israelite faith as it was practiced in the pre-monarchical period at Shekhem (1300-1100 BCE); 2) the traditional Jewish view based on the account in *Melakhim* that Samaritanism is a heresy derived from a corrupt worship of God. It developed after the Assyrian conquest in 722 BCE; 3) an interpretation based on Ezra, Nechemia and Josephus, that the Samaritans broke away from the Jews in the Persian period; and 4) the Samaritan schism occurred in the early Greek period. See *Encyclopedia Mikra'it* (Bialik Institute, Jerusalem, 1982, vol. 8, columns 166-168 [Hebrew]), J. D. Purvis, *The Samaritan Pentateuch and the Origin of the Samaritan Sect* (Cambridge MA, 1968) and E. Stern and H. Eshel (eds.), *Sefer Ha-Shomronim*, Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute (2002) [Hebrew].

<sup>15</sup> See *Ezra* 4-5. See also the character of Sanvalat who seeks to obstruct the building of the walls of Jerusalem (*Nechemia* 4-5), to assassinate Nechemia (6) and to overtake the Temple (13:5-11). Sanvalat is affiliated with the Samaritans in *Nechemia* 3:34 and external sources suggest that he was governor of the province of Samaria. Later in *Nechemia* we discover marital ties between the Jewish priesthood and the Samaritans. Ezra and Nechemia ardently reject these “foreign women.” So even here it may be possible to identify two competing attitudes to this group.

<sup>16</sup> See Y. Elitzur, “The Cutheans in the writings of the Tannaim,” in *Israel and the Bible*, Y. Elitzur and A. Frisch Ed. (Ramat Gan, Bar Ilan University, 1999) pp. 393-414.

Samaritans, whom it describes as “not a people” (50:25-26). Josephus describes them as idol worshippers.<sup>17</sup>

And yet, in *Chazal* the relationship is more complex. In the earlier period, it appears that they were perceived as a quasi-Jewish sect, affiliated with the world of observance, yet in a manner that was incomplete. On the one hand, Rabbi Shimon Ben Gamliel said: “Wherever the Cutheans observe a *mitzva*, they observe it more stringently than the Jews” (*Berakhot* 47b), and the Mishna records their observance of Shabbat (*Nedarim* 3:10). However, other practices were seen as more problematic, and by the end of the mishnaic period there seemed to have been a total rupture between the Jews and the Samaritans. The Samaritans were banned from marrying Jews, either due to their non-Jewish status or their non-observance of marital laws.<sup>18</sup> Their circumcision was suspect,<sup>19</sup> as were their ritual blessings,<sup>20</sup> because these were directed to “Mt. Gerizim.” Eventually under Rabbi Meir, their wine and cheese were banned, like regular non-Jews, and their *shechita* was banned as well, because “an image of a dove was found on Mt. Gerizim that they worshipped” (*Chullin* 6a). The Mishna describes their disruption of the message system that communicated the advent of the new moon (*Rosh Hashana* 2:2), a sure sign of bitter rivalry.

We now see that this people had a rich history living alongside Israel, sharing certain customs and practices, while diverging in several critical areas of observance.

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<sup>17</sup> See Antiquities 12:5.

<sup>18</sup> *Kiddushin* 75b and *Yerushalmi Gittin* 1:5.

<sup>19</sup> *Tosefta Avoda Zara* 3:13

<sup>20</sup> *Berakhot* 7:1