

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

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Sponsored by Aaron and Tzipora Ross and family in memory of our  
grandparents Shmuel Nachamu ben Shlomo Moshe HaKohen, Chaya bat  
Yitzchak Dovid, Shimon ben Moshe, and Rivka bat Aharon.  
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**Shiur #26: Chapter 22-23**  
**Yoshiyahu and the Return to God. Part 1**

Of all the kings of *Sefer Melakhim*, Yoshiyahu is unsurpassed as a champion of God worship, cleansing the kingdom of its idolatry and returning the nation to God. No accolade is spared in *Melakhim's* enthusiastic assessment of the ardently religious king, as reflected in the opening and closing lines of Chapter 22-23:

He did what was correct in God's eyes... he did not deviate to the right or to the left... (22:2)  
There was no king like him who turned to God with all his heart and soul and might, in full accord with the teachings of Moshe, nor did any rise like him.<sup>1</sup> (23:25)

Previous chapters have charted the dramatic twists and turns that characterize the kingdom of Yehuda in the latter First Temple period: Achaz's capitulation to Assyrian idolatry is reversed by Chizkiyahu's return to God. Menashe and Amon dramatically overturn Chizkiyahu's religious accomplishments, steeping the country in idolatry yet again. And now with the Yoshiyahu, the pendulum swings back towards monotheism.

**RELIGIOUS ORIENTATION**

Yoshiyahu rises to the throne at age eight, after his father's assassination. Little is documented of his early life. *Sefer Melakhim* records his religious actions as concentrated in the eighteenth year, when the king

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<sup>1</sup> Note how this verse echoes the *Shema*. The phrases in these verses are unique within the royal *Sefer Melakhim*, applied exclusively to Yoshiyahu. Moreover, Yoshiyahu is the only king whose name is predicted, centuries before his birth. See *Melakhim* I 13:2 and *Melakhim* II 23:16.

was twenty-six years old. *Divrei Ha-yamim*, however, details a more gradual timeline:<sup>2</sup>

In the eighth year of his reign, while still young, [Yoshiyahu] began to seek the God of his father David, and in his twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the *bamot*, the sacred posts, the idols and the molten images. (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 34:3)

We don't know what spurred Yoshiyahu's devotion to God in contrast to his idolatrous father and grandfather. Did he have a natural personal aversion to idolatry and an attraction to monotheism, or was his religion a discovery made at age sixteen,<sup>3</sup> an initial interest that developed into a passion as he grew up?

Who influenced Yoshiyahu? When a child king is sovereign, he is not independently managing the kingdom; a group of advisors are effectively in charge. Who are these figures? Are they from the group known as "*Am Ha-aretz*"<sup>4</sup> (21:24) – the political faction that executed Amon's assassins, possibly an aristocratic association that supported the monarchy in times of instability? Whatever the precise identity of Yoshiyahu's guardians, it seems reasonable to suggest that he was nurtured in a God-fearing environment.<sup>5</sup>

One aspect of his guardians' priorities certainly influences his adult decisions. Yoshiyahu marries, at age fourteen,<sup>6</sup> to Zevuda from the northern town of Ruma (23:36). Presumably this wife was selected for the young king and thus the choice of a queen from a northern province reflects a policy of national reunification, reflecting the intentions of the administration to return

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<sup>2</sup> *Divrei Ha-yamim* differs in its order of events. Whereas *Melakhim* opens with Yoshiyahu's Temple renovation, it is the discovery of the "*Sefer Ha-Torah*" that stimulates the purge of idolatry. In *Divrei Ha-yamim*, however, the cull of idolatry predates the finding of the scroll and is merely a product of Yoshiyahu's independent commitment to God.

<sup>3</sup> See *Shabbat* 56b, where one opinion derives from the word "*shav*" in 23:25 that Yoshiyahu was a penitent who sinned in his early life and then turned to God and even repaired his earlier sins. Ralbag (22:2) is one of the medievalists who maintain that Yoshiyahu was righteous throughout his life.

<sup>4</sup> See 23:30, 11:17-19 and 15:5. In each of these instances, the "*Am Ha-aretz*" functions when there is a disruption in the royal line. Talmon describes them as "not an institution at all but a fairly loosely constituted power group in the kingdom of Judah... which does not function continuously but always goes into action ad hoc when extraordinary political conditions make action imperative." See S. Talmon, "*The Judean 'am ha'ares in Historical Perspective*," in *Proceedings of the Fourth World Jewish Congress of Jewish Studies I* (1967) pg. 71-78.

<sup>5</sup> Yoshiyahu's story resembles that of Yoash another Judean child king – their names are even similar – who also sets to repairing the Temple. Compare the language of 11:13 and 16, for example, with the identical phrases in 22:6-7. Both stories narrate the downfall of an evil, idolatrous regime, to be replaced by a loyal, monotheistic king. One image common to both stories is the king standing on an "*amud*," see *Melakhim* II 11:14 and 23:3. Yoash was raised by the High Priest. On the basis of the parallel stories, it may be possible that Yoshiyahu's courtiers, Chilkiyahu the High Priest and Shafan ben Atzalyahu, were God-fearing men who raised the child king. See Yigal Ariel, *Mikdash Melekh* (Midreshet Hagolan, Hispin 1994) pg. 395 no. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Yehoyakim is their son. He rises to the throne at age 25, following Yoshiyahu's death. Since Yoshiyahu is killed in his 31<sup>st</sup> year, Yehoyakim would have been born in Yoshiyahu's 6<sup>th</sup> year, when the king was just fourteen years old.

the northern Israelites to the jurisdiction of Yehuda, a policy that Yoshiyahu later pursues.

Yoshiyahu's religious turnabout is aided by yet another factor. In this period, the Assyrian empire begins to wane,<sup>7</sup> and with the shrinkage of its influence, Yehuda is released from its hefty cultural impact. Yoshiyahu now gains the freedom to manage his kingdom's affairs without interference.

## **YOSHIYAHU FINDS A SEFER TORAH**

Yoshiyahu's first act is the renovation of the *Mikdash*. After a long period<sup>8</sup> in which God has been abandoned, the building needed restoration. Some point to the interior decoration needed to repair the scars left on the Temple structure by the removal of idolatrous icons. In the course of the repairs, Chilkiyahu discovers a *Sefer Torah*. He hands it to Shafan, the “*sofer*” or secretary, a senior government minister:

Shafan read it in the presence of the king. When the king heard the words of the *Sefer Torah*, he tore his clothes. Then the king commanded Chilkia the priest, Achikam the son of Shafan, Akhbor the son of Mikhaya, Shafan the secretary, and Asaya the king's servant saying: “Go, inquire of God for me and the people and all Judah concerning the words of this book that has been found, for great is the wrath of God that burns against us, because our fathers have not listened to the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us.” (22:10-13)

What is the *Sefer Torah* that they found? Why did it elicit such alarm among all those who encountered it? And how did this book or scroll communicate the message that God was furious with Israel?

### **I. Lost Torah, Lost Religion.**

Radak suggests that the Torah had been lost to Israel during the period of Menashe and Amon:

Menashe was a king for an extended period, fifty-five years, and he “did evil in God's eyes, as the abominations of the nations” (21:2)... and he caused Torah to be forgotten from Israel; no one was interested in it, for they all turned to other gods and practices of the nations. In those fifty-five years, the Torah was forgotten.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Yoshiyahu rises to power in 640 BCE. The Assyrian king Asurbanipal died in 627 BCE, a date that marks the decline of Assyrian power. Nineveh falls into Babylonian hands in 612 BCE.

<sup>8</sup> *Seder Olam* 22 asserts that it has been 218 years since the last redecoration in the days of Yoash. Indeed, that is the last explicit citation of Temple renovations, but it is difficult to imagine that a building of this importance did not undergo any repairs for so lengthy a period.

<sup>9</sup> Radak also addresses the repentance of Menashe as described in *Divrei Ha-yamim*. If Menashe had repented, would he not have had Torah scrolls written? His answer is that Menashe only repented late in life, so his religious reforms had little time to influence Judean norms. Furthermore, his repentance was limited to an understanding that idolatry was

Radak suggests that upon the discovery of the *Sefer Torah* in one of the inner chambers of the Temple, “they realized how they had forgotten the Torah which prohibits all the evil practices that Israel was engaged in.” According to Radak, the shock that Yoshiyahu and his officials displayed was a result of their sudden exposure to wide areas of Jewish law of which they were entirely ignorant.

In order to give some credence to this reading, we should appreciate that with Menashe's 55 years, followed by Amon's two-year rule, and the 16 years of Yoshiyahu's reign prior to the Torah's discovery, we have seventy-three years in which foreign religious norms held sway in Israel. If we can put this in a contemporary context, we may want to think about Soviet Jewry, a rich Jewish community, which was starved of Judaism from the time of the Russian revolution until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 – seventy-four years! After that period, how many Jews knew anything substantial about their Judaism? How many practiced *mitzvot* in any significant way? If Israel was swamped by idolatry during the Menashe, Amon and early Yoshiyahu period, we can certainly imagine the shock that the re-discovery of the Torah would make on a young king who seeks to rediscover the religion of his fathers.

## II. Moshe's Torah Scroll.

*Melakhim* talks about discovering “**the Sefer Torah**,” *Divrei Ha-yamim* talks about “the book of the Torah of God, **by the hand of Moshe**” (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 34:14). For this reason, many commentaries<sup>10</sup> explain that the scroll Yoshiyahu found is the Torah scroll that was written by Moshe at the end of his life (*Devarim* 31:26). Abarbanel says:

*Chazal* say (Sanhedrin 102b) that Menashe would erase God's name from the *Sefer Torah* and replace it with idolatrous names. Hence, one of the priests feared that if Moshe's Torah scroll were to come into the king's hands, he would erase the divine names here too and replace them. As such, he hid the scroll away in a chamber between the walls. In Yoshiyahu's period when he returned to God... the priests failed to find the scroll. But when they came to repair the House, Chilkiyahu found it between the walls and it was like finding a treasure; as such he said, “I have found **the Sefer Torah**” ...It would not have generated such terror had it not been the *Sefer Torah* written by Moshe's holy hands, directly from the Almighty.

We have identified the specific identity of the Torah scroll, but we have yet to appreciate why it generated such a panic. Abarbanel supports his interpretation with yet another detail:

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forbidden, and as such, “...he destroyed the idolatry when he repented, but did not set his heart to search for Torah scrolls.”

<sup>10</sup> Mentioned also by Josephus, Radak, and *Da'at Mikra*.

The Rabbis in the *Talmud Yerushalmi*<sup>11</sup> explain that normally, Moshe's scroll was rolled to the beginning, but at that time, they opened it at the verse: "God shall bring you, and your king which you shall set over you, to a nation which neither you nor your fathers have known..." (*Devarim* 28:35). The king was alarmed, as he saw the entire event as a miracle, and a divine sign regarding the future.

The verse in question is part of the *Tokheicha*, the collection of "rebuke" verses in *Devarim* that predicts the destruction of the land and the exile of the nation as punishment for their sins. This approach certainly fits into the narrative context, as we hear Chulda's terrible prediction:

This is what God says: "I am going to bring disaster on this place and its people, according to everything written in the book the king of Judah has read. Because they have forsaken me and burned incense to other gods and aroused my anger by all the idols their hands have made..." (22:16-17)

### III. The King's Scroll

The Seforno in his commentary to *Sefer Devarim* offers a different interpretation. He suggests that the scroll found was indeed Moshe's scroll, but not the five books of the Torah – a different book:

It seems that the book found by Chilkiyahu was the scroll that Moshe gave to the priests who carried the Ark of the Covenant, mentioned above (*Devarim* 17:19) containing only the "portion of the King" (i.e., *Devarim* 17:14-18). In that scroll, Joshua recorded the covenant that he made with the nation in Shekhem (*Joshua* 24:25) that they should commit themselves to serve God in true devotion, in ideas and action. When Yoshiyahu read this and realized how much they had diverged from [this covenant], he was fearful and sought God...

Seforno's creative suggestion circumvents the issue of the existence of Torah scrolls in ancient Israel. It also furnishes an interesting understanding of the king's shock upon reading the document, as he would have been unlikely to be familiar with a text from Joshua's era. Moreover, the scroll contained the text of a covenant (*Melakhim* II 23:2-3). It might have been the covenant of *Devarim* (*Devarim* 28:69), but Joshua's covenantal speech is directed at the repudiation of idolatry and seems particularly suited to this historical juncture.

### THE AFTERMATH

The revelation of the mysterious scroll followed by Chulda's ominous prophecy stimulates Yoshiyahu into action. The elders of the kingdom and of Yehuda, the inhabitants of Jerusalem along with prophets and priests are

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<sup>11</sup> See *Shekalim* 6:1 and *Yoma* 52b. The full *midrash* can be found in *Midrash Ha-Gadol*, *Devarim* 27:26.

summoned to an emergency assembly. Here, the scroll is publically read and the people affirm their commitment to the covenant.

What follows is the most thorough purge of idolatry seen in *Sefer Melakhim*. The book begins by describing the idolatrous accoutrements removed from the Temple precinct. Following this, we find a comprehensive list of every form of idolatry that had infected the kingdom: *Ba'al*, *Ashera* (23:4), *Kadesh* (v. 7), the sun, moon and all the Hosts of the Heaven (v. 5), *Molech* (v. 10), necromancy and soothsayers (v. 24). Yoshiyahu dismantles idolatry that has endured in Israel for hundreds of years and that no loyal king had dared to expunge. First, he removes the idolatrous shrines of Solomon's wives (v. 13-14), but then he progresses to the Northern kingdom to desecrate Yerovam's altars at Beit-El (v. 15) and Shomron (v. 19). One wonders why these were not removed in previous royal campaigns to cull idolatry, but the thoroughness of Yoshiyahu's cull is impressive and unprecedented. Yoshiyahu does not merely target idolatry; he takes purity of religion a stage further as he dismantles the *bamot* (23:5, 8). *Bamot* are regional sacrificial altars, usually dedicated to God, but illicit due to their location outside the Temple. At no point in *Melakhim* had the *bamot* ceased to function in Yehuda until this point, when Yoshiyahu removes them in yet another unrivaled action.

All of this destruction of idolatry culminates in a highly positive celebration of God worship. Yoshiyahu instigates a mass celebration of Pesach in Jerusalem. Yet again, this festive worship of God is depicted in terms that indicate its historic significance:

There had not been a Passover celebration like that since the time when the Judges ruled in Israel, nor throughout all the years of the kings of Israel and Judah. (23:22)

What made this event so unique? Rashi points to the sheer number of people celebrating God, a gathering of a size unseen since the days of Shemuel (the tail end of the period of Judges). Radak points to the national unity – North and South together – along with the repudiation of idolatry, another feature of the period of Shemuel. As we have seen, Yoshiyahu aspires to sovereignty beyond the borders of Yehuda. His marriage to a northerner and his desire to destroy the idolatry of the North, coupled with this Pesach for all of Israel, express Yoshiyahu's passion for national cohesion.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For more on this, see Binyamin Lau, *Jeremiah* (Maggid, Jerusalem, 2013) pg 17-32.