

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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**Dedicated in memory of Gertrude Spiegel a"h**  
**by Patti and Michael Steinmetz and Family.**  
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**Shiur #27: Chapter 22-23**  
**Yoshiyahu Part 2 – The Tragedy of Yoshiyahu**

**YOSHIYAHU'S TRAGIC DEATH**

In his days, Pharaoh Nekho, king of Egypt, marched against the King of Assyria to the River Euphrates; King Yoshiyahu went to meet him, but he [Pharaoh Nekho] killed him at Megiddo when he saw him. His servants conveyed his body by chariot from Megiddo to Jerusalem and they buried him in his tomb. (23:29-30)

A single verse records Yoshiyahu's premature and tragic death in battle. This military skirmish raises many questions. What did King Yoshiyahu look for in his encounter with Pharaoh Nekho? Why did the confrontation take place at Megiddo? Why did Nekho kill Yoshiyahu at the moment he saw him?

Historical sources inform us that the Egyptian army was headed to battle against the Babylonian army at Karkemish, by the Euphrates.<sup>1</sup> The Assyrian city of Nineveh had just fallen to Babylonian forces. This defeat signaled the crumbling of Assyrian hegemony and the rise of a new regional force – Babylon. With these tectonic shifts in the regional power balance, Egypt, allied with Assyria, could not sit by and merely observe. Nekho sought to destroy Babylon's power before it gained full traction, thereby impeding the rise of the nascent Babylonian empire and army.

They most direct route for Nekho's troops was through the Land of Israel. Megiddo is a fortress at the gateway to the Jezreel valley, a natural bottleneck and an obvious strategic point from which to attack an advancing force. However, it appears that the Judean forces were no match for the Egyptian army. *Divrei Ha-yamim* records Pharaoh Nekho's initial reluctance to enter into hostilities against Yoshiyahu: “What is between me and you, O King of Judah? I do not march against you this day, but against the kingdom that wars with me... refrain from interfering with me...” (35:21). Despite this,

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<sup>1</sup> See the full account in *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 35.

Yoshiyahu refused to desist and the archers sought him out. Once the king was killed, the battle was over.

What was Yoshiyahu's motivation in obstructing Pharaoh? Presumably, with the collapse of Assyrian power, Yoshiyahu had experienced a new era of independence from a superpower. This had allowed the kingdom to grow and thrive, and Judea began to exert control over new territories, including the defunct northern kingdom. Witnessing Egypt's attempts to dominate the regional space, Yoshiyahu was concerned that he would become subject to Egyptian control. This motivated him to confront Pharaoh and obstruct his advance.<sup>2</sup> Tragically, this was a gamble that failed.

## A RIGHTEOUS GENERATION?

The Talmud debates Yoshiyahu's motivation in his opposition to Pharaoh Nekho. After all, Nekho explicitly expresses his non-violent intent. The Talmudic discussion takes us to the section of *Sefer Vayikra* that discusses covenantal blessings and curses:

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav: "...Yoshiyahu said [to himself]: 'Since he [Pharaoh Nekho] puts his trust in his idols, I will prevail over him'... On what did Yoshiyahu rely? – On the divine promise contained in the words, 'And no sword shall pass through your land' (*Vayikra* 26:6). What sword? Is it the warring sword? It is already stated [in the same verse], 'And I will give peace in the land' – it must then refer to the peaceful sword. Yoshiyahu, however, did not know that his generation found but little favor [in the eyes of God]. (*Ta'anit* 22b)

This Talmudic passage overlays two themes. Firstly, Yoshiyahu perceived his reign, his era, as the realization of the divine blessings which ensue "If you follow My laws." In other words, Yoshiyahu understood the good fortune and prosperity that characterized his period as God's bounty, a reward for his return to monotheism. But this complacency caused Yoshiyahu to make mistakes. Despite Nekho's non-aggressive intent, Yoshiyahu believed that he had heavenly backing in preventing the heathen Nekho from passing through the Land of Israel. From the Talmud one senses that Yoshiyahu overestimated God's direct and immediate protection.

But Yoshiyahu missed the mark in a further area. He misappraised the religious revolution that he had wrought. In a deeply insightful observation, the Talmud contends that the fault lay not with Yoshiyahu personally, but rather with the wider population, who angered God. If so, what was the situation in society at large?

Yoshiyahu did not know that his entire generation worshipped idols. What did the scoffers of his generation do? They would put half of the [idolatrous] form on one door, and half on the other door. [Yoshiyahu] would send two wise men to purge their homes from idols. They would

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<sup>2</sup> See *Olam Ha-Tanakh* p. 203-204.

enter, but find nothing. As they left, [the scoffers] would have them close the door, so that, on the inside, the idols would be reattached. (*Eikha Rabba* 1:18)

*Chazal* are suggesting a deep disconnect between the king and the nation. From Yoshiyahu's vantage point, the country had become overwhelmingly committed to God and his Torah. But the *Midrash* argues that this religious revolution had failed to penetrate society. Indeed, the monotheistic commitment, while adopted by public institutions, had not seeped deeper into the minds and hearts, into the living-rooms of the average citizen of Yehuda. This is hardly surprising. Yoshiyahu's religious revolution is dated to his 18<sup>th</sup> year and he is killed in his 31<sup>st</sup> year. We have only thirteen years of positive influence. It is hard to imagine that thirteen years can uproot norms that have been entrenched for seventy years. Thus, while Yoshiyahu imagined that his kingdom was thoroughly devoted to God and made certain strategic decisions on that basis, he was quite out of touch with the facts on the ground; the nation was still dabbling in idolatry.

### THE LOOMING SPECTER OF *CHURBAN*

This last point should explain a certain ambivalence, or even dissonance, that characterizes the depiction of Yoshiyahu's period in our texts. On the one hand, no king is acclaimed quite like Yoshiyahu. But at the same time, this is a period in which we repeatedly witness predictions of *Churban*.<sup>3</sup>

Before him there was no king like him, who turned to God with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moshe, nor did any like him arise after him. Still, God did not turn from the burning of his great fury, by which his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations of Menashe. God said, "I will remove Judah from My sight, as I have removed Israel, and I will spurn this city that I have chosen, Jerusalem, and the house of which I said 'My name shall be there.'" (23:25-27)

God's decree strikes us as terribly unfair. Here, Yehuda has reached a point at which the nation is led by a pious king, possibly the most religious of all the kings of Yehuda. Yoshiyahu has expunged idolatry and even the *bamot*; he has expended every effort to correct past wrongs. In this highly positive

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<sup>3</sup> The prophecy of Chulda (22:16-19) expresses a similar duality: Prediction of *Churban* alongside personal approval of Yoshiyahu. *Chazal* emphasize Yoshiyahu's keen awareness of the imminent demise of the Temple when they assert that he hid away the Ark of the Covenant to ensure that it would not be seized by the enemy (*Yoma* 52b). They draw this conclusion on the basis of the verse in *Divrei Ha-yamim* 2 35:3 in which Yoshiyahu instructs the priests: "Put the holy Ark in the Temple ... You no longer need to carry it back and forth on your shoulders. Now spend your time serving the Lord your God and his people Israel" and also Jer 3:16-17: "In those days ... people will no longer say, 'The Ark of the covenant of God.' It will never enter their minds or be remembered; it will not be missed, nor will another one be made. At that time they will call Jerusalem the throne of God..." The implication in both sources is that the Ark is being taken out of use. See also Rambam, *Hilkhot Beit Ha-bechira* 4:1.

environment, should the sins of Menashe really obscure the virtues of Yoshiyahu? What about the value of repentance? Why is God so unwilling to forget the sins of Menashe? How could God ignore Yoshiyahu's radical religious reforms?

But this would be a misreading of the situation. Although the king was impassioned towards God, the rank and file of the nation were disconnected. In the midrashic imagery, when the government inspectors came around, they discovered homes cleansed of idolatry, but “the inside of the door” was decorated with idolatrous symbols. Outside, public life had changed; but inside, people's private beliefs and their personal religious commitments remained unaltered.

Wander the streets of Jerusalem, look around and inquire, and seek her squares whether there is but one man who does justice, who seeks truthfulness, and I will forgive her. Though they say, “as the Lord lives,” they are surely swearing falsely. (*Yirmiyahu* 5:1-2)

As Yirmiyahu testifies, people used religious language, but it was empty of meaning. In this sense, Menashe's evil period overwhelmed and eclipsed Yoshiyahu's revolution. Yoshiyahu's reforms were insufficient to eradicate the idolatry and the corruption from the minds and hearts of the people.

## **IS THERE A POINT OF NO RETURN? YIRMIYAHU'S PERSPECTIVE**

A further point must be made here. *Sefer Melakhim* conveys the impression that the cultural fallout from the spiritually ruinous period of Menashe had left the country incurable, and, as such, the Temple's destruction and the national exile were inevitable and inescapable.

I believe the situation is more complex. The prophet Yirmiyahu begins his mission in the thirteenth year of Yoshiyahu's reign, and he continues as a national prophet for forty years, until after the *Churban*. Most of his prophecy reflects the foreboding of the impending national calamity.

"From the north shall disaster break loose upon all the inhabitants of the land"(Jer 1:14).

The prophecy with which he is charged is a violent one: “To uproot and to smash, to destroy and overthrow,” but also, “to build and to plant.” (*Yirmiyahu* 1:10) In this regard, it is important to note that even after Menashe, even after the death of Yoshiyahu, Yirmiyahu never abandons the possibility that *Churban* may be averted; he calls for repentance until the eleventh hour.<sup>4</sup> Here he speaks in God's name:

At one moment I may decree that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed. **But if that nation against which I made the decree turns back from its wickedness, then I will**

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<sup>4</sup> See *Yirmiyahu* 22:1-4, 25:5, 26:2,13 and 36:3.

**relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned...** Now therefore say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem... I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. **Turn back from your evil ways**, each one of you, and mend your ways and your actions. (*Yirmiyahu* 18:7-11)

*Melakhim* is written from a post-*Churban* perspective. In hindsight, *Melakhim* suggests that the collateral damage of Menashe's reign signaled the death knell for Yehuda. However, in real time, as events unfolded, Yirmiyahu insists that no moment was too late for the kingdom to change course and save itself.

## YOSHIYAHU'S LEGACY

In conclusion, let us return to the most important aspect of Yoshiyahu's narrative: His fervent campaign against idolatry and his enthusiastic covenantal ceremony in which he gathers the nation at the Temple and has them pledge allegiance to Torah and the covenant. *Melakhim* avows that Yoshiyahu was superior to all previous kings. Radak articulates why this is the case:

[Yoshiyahu] was deeply concerned for the instructions of the Torah and he performed all that was written in it. He removed the *bamot*; not a single one remained such that in his days, sacrifices were exclusively brought in the Temple. The kings who preceded him, even those who were righteous, never removed the *bamot*... (Commentary on 23:25)

We may add to the list of Yoshiyahu's achievements the social justice that prevailed in his age;<sup>5</sup> this was yet another aspect of the Torah that he instilled in the nation. It is for this reason that we see an outpouring of national mourning<sup>6</sup> for this king that is also unprecedented in its intensity:

Yirmiyahu composed laments for Yoshiyahu, and all the singing men and the singing women spoke of Yoshiyahu in their laments as is done to this day. They were customary in Israel, and behold, they are written in the lamentations.<sup>7</sup> (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 35:25)

## APPENDIX: YOSHIYAHU AND THE "DEUTERONOMIST"

We would be remiss in discussing Yoshiyahu's Torah scroll without at least a mention of one modern reading of that story that has changed the landscape of Bible studies for over two hundred years. In a dissertation written in 1805, W. M. L. de Wette identified the "Book of the Law" discovered by Chilkiyahu as *Sefer Devarim*. This theory was later adopted by German

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<sup>5</sup> See *Yirmiyahu* 32:15-16.

<sup>6</sup> See *Megilla* 3a for "the eulogy of Hadadrimon in the valley of Megiddon."

<sup>7</sup> Some suggest that this refers to part of *Megillat Eikha*. See, for example, *Tosefta Ta'anit* 2:10.

biblical scholar Julius Wellhausen, and has become the prime academic explanation of the origins of *Devarim*.<sup>8</sup>

This argument proposes that *Sefer Devarim* was composed in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and its ideas animated Yoshiyahu's revolution. This is manifest in several areas. Firstly, the notion of a central site of worship: Whereas *Shemot* allows worship in any place: "In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you" (20:24), *Devarim*, said De Wette, restricts sacrifice to "the place which God will choose" (12:5, 11, 14). This affected Yoshiyahu, inspiring him to concentrate worship at the Temple, inviting both Judah and the northern tribes to sacrifice in Jerusalem. Second, Yoshiyahu destroys the *bamot*, reflecting *Devarim*'s condemnation of worship outside the Temple (12:13-14). He also destroys the pillars, Ashera and other icons and forms of worship, fulfilling the Deuteronomic injunction: "You shall tear down their altars, smash their monuments, burn their *asherim* with fire, cut down the graven images of their gods and destroy their name from that place" (*Devarim* 12:3). Third, this approach contends that the unprecedented Pesach of Yoshiyahu's period (23:22) reflects the command in *Devarim* (16:5-6) to bring the *Korban Pesach* collectively in Jerusalem, suggesting that prior to Yoshiyahu, the Paschal Lamb was offered on local altars. Based upon these observations, corroborated by the significant linguistic commonalities between *Sefer Devarim* and later prophetic books, this approach contends that the "discovered" scroll was, in fact, the book of *Devarim* or critical sections of it. Furthermore, it proposes that the book had been composed by the priests of that period, in order to stimulate Yoshiyahu's religious reforms. This would explain why the scroll's contents were unknown to the king upon its discovery.

The 7<sup>th</sup> century dating is broadly accepted in the world of academic scholarship. Needless to say, those who hold to a traditional Jewish faith perspective maintain that the entire *Chumash* was written by Moshe during the period of the Wilderness. Do these arguments bring the traditional Mosaic authorship into question?<sup>9</sup> The proposed Josianic context of *Sefer Devarim* has some significant problems, however, as articulated by several Bible scholars:<sup>10</sup>

## 1. Centralized worship or idolatry?

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<sup>8</sup> For a current presentation of these views, see *The Jewish Study Bible*, A. Berlin and M.Z. Brettler, ed., pp. 357-358. In some circles, the theory has been refined somewhat to suggest authorship during the Babylonian exile.

<sup>9</sup> For questions about the difference, in terms of revelation, between *Devarim* and the other four books of the *Chumash*, see <http://www.biu.ac.il/jh/parasha/eng/devarim/reg.html>. For a discussion as to the degree that one may suggest non-Mosaic authorship to segments of the Torah, see Marc Shapiro's discussion of Maimonides' eighth principle in *The Limits of Jewish Theology*, and Amnon Bazak's recent book, *Until this Day: Fundamental Questions in Bible Teaching*, pp. 21-80 [Hebrew].

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Y.M. Grintz, "The Narrative of King Josiah's Reform," in *Studies in the Book of Kings, proceedings of the group for Bible study in the residence of PM David Ben-Gurion*, B.Z. Luria ed. pp. 351-369.

The thrust of Yoshiyahu's religious actions are the eradication of idolatry in its multifarious manifestations. This motive is repeated throughout the account of Yoshiyahu's religious purge. In the proposed theory, *Devarim* is written to stimulate a shift regarding centralized worship. If that were accurate, we would expect more of a focus on this issue in the account of *Melakhim*, and yet the removal of (non-idolatrous) decentralized worship (*bamot*) is barely mentioned in Yoshiyahu's reform, if at all.<sup>11</sup>

We may also point out that the Torah's approach regarding a central shrine is far more stringent in *Vayikra* 17 than in *Devarim* 12, which indicates that this tradition has earlier roots.

## 2. The word “*bamot*”

The word “*bamot*” appears throughout *Sefer Melakhim*, as a constant unresolvable problem. Even the most devoted religious kings are unsuccessful in removing the *bamot* from the national landscape. Despite this, *Sefer Devarim* does not use the term even once! If *Devarim* was written to stimulate Yoshiyahu's aforementioned reform, and if its composition was contemporaneous to *Melakhim*, it would be perplexing for *Devarim* to avoid this phrase.

## 3. Jerusalem

If a late authorship of *Devarim* were true, then why does *Devarim* insist on referencing the Temple as “the place which God will choose?” It seems strange that *Devarim* fails to identify Jerusalem by name even once. Why would a 7<sup>th</sup>-century author obscure the identity of Jerusalem as the chosen place? It would be far stronger to identify God's chosen place as Jerusalem and reinforce the Temple as the exclusive central shrine. Some will respond that since the authors of *Devarim* in the 7<sup>th</sup> century had decided to make out as if Moshe was the author, they knew it would be anachronistic to mention Jerusalem, a city not captured until the days of King David. However, there are many literary techniques that could have been used to allude to Jerusalem. All these are absent.

## 4. Destruction of idolatry

The command to destroy idolatrous shrines and altars is far from exclusive to *Devarim*; it is clearly mandated by *Shemot* (23:24-5; 34:13) and *Bamidbar* (33:52). This is the true focus of Yoshiyahu's religious energy. In that case, there was no need for a new book to ignite the removal of idolatry.

## 5. An altar at Mt. Eval

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<sup>11</sup> Grintz claims that even the *bamot* removed by Yoshiyahu were, in fact, idolatrous – shrines built by Shlomo's wives to their gods, or to the “Ba'al, sun, moon and stars,” as evidenced in 23:5,13. He claims that the only king who did rid the country of *bamot* to God was Chizkiyahu, some 80 years earlier (see 18:4).

*Devarim*, as with other books, is not unequivocal about a single and exclusive site of worship. After all, *Devarim* mandates the building of an altar in Mt. Eval (ch. 27). If *Devarim* was written to bolster the exclusive status of Jerusalem, then this detail could certainly have been omitted.

## **6. Pesach**

First, it must be noted that *Shemot* mentions all the three pilgrimage festivals in the context of “the House of the Lord your God” (*Shemot* 23:17), making it clear that people left their homes to travel to a remote location (*Shemot* 34:24).

Second, we have evidence from as early as Chizkiyahu’s reign, eighty years prior to Yoshiyahu, of the celebration of a mass Pesach, including the *Korban Pesach* (*Divrei Ha-yamim* II 30:1-5). If this account is accurate, then Yoshiyahu's priests would have no need to concoct the notion of pilgrimage to Jerusalem when it has already been celebrated en masse two generations earlier.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

Entire volumes have been written on this topic, and this context is certainly not the right one in which to thrash out all the issues. Still, we have attempted to demonstrate that the arguments are complex, and that one cannot merely connect *Devarim* with Yoshiyahu’s time without serious backing. Much of the so-called “evidence” can be interpreted one way or another in accordance with preconceived notions. It is important to be cognizant that there are arguments and counter-claims and that the traditional view can be amply substantiated.