

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
YISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

SEFER MELAKHIM BET: THE SECOND BOOK OF KINGS
By Rav Alex Israel

Dedicated by the Wise and Etshalom families
in memory of Rabbi Aaron M. Wise, whose yahrzeit is 21 Tammuz.
Y'hi Zikhro Barukh.

In loving memory of Fred Stone, Ya'acov Ben Yitzchak, A”H
beloved father and grandfather, by Ellen and Stanley Stone and their children
Jake and Chaya, Zack and Yael, Ezra, Yoni, Eliana and Gabi.

Shiur #20: Chapter 17: 1-23

The Fall and Exile of Shomron

This painful chapter recounts the catastrophic fall of Shomron and its exile. And yet, Yisrael's defeat and dispersion at the hands of Ashur is narrated in a concise, factual manner; the chapter's two expansive sections address the origins and the aftermath of this calamity. The first section explains Shomron's fall as divine punishment and details the religious sins that lead to its demise. The second section narrates the story of foreigners brought to Yisrael by Ashur to replace the exiles, as it critiques their syncretic religious practices. The theme which unites these segments is religious deviance from the pure and unadulterated worship of God.

The chapter may be seen as structured in the following way:

1. The reign of Hoshea ben Elah (v.1-2)
2. The fall of Shomron
 - a. Report of the exile of Shomron (v.3-6)
 - b. The religious causes of Exile (v.7-23)
3. The aftermath
 - a. Resettlement of Shomron and syncretic religion (v.24-33)
 - b. Persistence of syncretism (v.34-41)

1. THE REIGN OF HOSHEA BEN ELAH (v.1-2)

In the twelfth year of Achaz king of Yehuda, Hoshea ben Elah became king over Yisrael in Shomron, and reigned nine years.¹ He did evil in the sight of God only not as the kings of Yisrael who were before him.

King Hoshea's offenses are assessed as lighter than all his royal predecessors. Why is that? Prof. Gershon Galil offers an interesting proposal:

The author of *Sefer Melakhim* wanted, it seems, to stress that the kingdom didn't fall due to the sins of Hoshea or his generation, but rather as a result of the cumulative sin[s] which began in the days of Yerav'am ben Nevat. (*Olam Ha-Tanakh*)

Seder Olam offers a different perspective. If the primal sin of the northern kingdom is the golden calves and the cultic shrines instituted by Yerav'am at Beit-El and Dan, *Seder Olam* suggests that at this point in history, during the period of Hoshea, the offensive icons had already been seized by Ashur:

In the twentieth year of Pekach, King Tiglat-Pil' eser of Ashur came and conquered Iyun² and Dan and took the golden calf which was in Dan ... In Achaz's twelfth year, the spirit of God awakened King Pul of Ashur³ and he took the golden calf in Beit-El ... in fulfillment of the verse "this too [the calf] will be carted away to Ashur as tribute for the king." (*Hoshea* 10:6)

Once Hoshea ben Elah saw that the golden calves had been exiled, he removed the guards that Yerav'am ben Nevat had positioned on the highways to restrict pilgrimage of Yisrael [the northern tribes] to Yerushalayim, and hence for all other northern kings it is written "he walked in the path of Yerav'am ben Nevat," and with Hoshea, "He was not like the kings of Yisrael who were before him." (*Seder Olam* ch.22)

So Hoshea's era has two advantages. The first is the absence of the noxious calves of Yerav'am. The second is Hoshea's decision, now that his worship

¹ Rashi quotes *Seder Olam* (ch.22) which suggests that in fact Hoshea reigned longer than nine years, but that it was his revolt against Ashur that endured nine years. However, *Seder Olam* is responding to a misalignment between the chronologies of Yisrael and Yehuda caused by the reign of Yotam. The better resolution is to see Yotam as reigning during his father Uzzia's reign as regent, and to read the *pesukim* here in chapter 17 and 18 according to their standard reading (*peshat*).

² *II Melakhim* 15:29. The Assyrian invasion is not dated to Pekach's twentieth year, nor is Dan explicitly mentioned. However it is possible that the attack of Tiglat-Pil' eser was in response to Achaz's call for help. See *II Melakhim* 16:7-9, which relates the attack on Damascus, but Shomron appears to escape the Assyrian attack. *Seder Olam* assumes that Tiglat-Pil' eser's advance is a response to Achaz and is the same military campaign that removed Retzin from Damascus. It is highly reasonable to assume that these events happened in Pekach's twentieth year. Similarly, Iyun (near today's Metulla) is close to Dan, and although one might have anticipated an explicit reference to the site, it is highly reasonable to presume that Dan was captured and looted at the same time.

³ *I Divrei Ha-yamim* 5:26. There is no direct evidence to attribute this attack to Achaz's twelfth year, nor can we verify that in this attack Ashur penetrated Yisrael as far as Beit-El.

sites had been emptied, to permit Yisrael access to Yerushalayim to celebrate and sacrifice at the Temple.

UNITED IN YERUSHALAYIM

Indeed, there seems to be some direct biblical support for this latter assertion. King Chizkiyahu, who ascends the throne in Hoshea's third year, stages a huge celebration of Pesach at the Temple in Yerushalayim; it is an opportunity to renew the national commitment to God after the idolatrous regime of his father Achaz. We read that Chizkiyahu invites the northern tribes to the festive national rededication:

King Chizkiya sent word to all Yisrael and Yehuda, and he wrote letters of invitation to the people of Efrayim and Menasheh. He asked everyone to come to the Temple of God at Yerushalayim to celebrate the *Pesach* of the Lord, the God of Yisrael... So they sent a proclamation throughout all Yisrael, from Be'er Sheva in the south to Dan in the north ... The runners went from town to town throughout Efrayim and Menasheh and as far as the territory of Zevulun. But most of the people just laughed at the runners and made fun of them. However, some people from Asher, Menasheh, and Zevulun humbled themselves and went to Yerushalayim... The entire assembly of Yehuda rejoiced, including ... all who came from the land of Yisrael ... There was great joy in the city, for Yerushalayim had not seen a celebration like this one since the days of Shlomo, King David's son. (*// Divrei Ha-yamim* 30:1, 5, 10-11, 25-6)

Yerushalayim had not experienced a celebration of this magnitude since the days of Shlomo because that was the last time that the nation had been united. After centuries of separation, suddenly, in the opening year of Chizkiya's reign – which coincides with the fourth or fifth year of Hoshea ben Elah – Israelites from the northern tribes of Efrayim, Menashe, Zevulun, and Asher attend the *Korban Pesach* at the Temple en masse! This could only happen under northern royal sanction. *Seder Olam* argues that Hoshea ben Elah had removed the legal restrictions of passage to Yerushalayim allowing northerners to visit the Temple, and for this reason, he is "unlike" his predecessors.

But this religious turnabout is too little too late. Ashur's pressure weighs heavily upon the region, and Yisrael is doomed.

THE CONQUEST OF SHOMRON (v.3-6)

Shalman'esar king of Ashur came up against him, and Hoshea became his servant and paid him tribute. But the king of Ashur found conspiracy in Hoshea, who had sent messengers to So king of Egypt and had offered no tribute to the king of Ashur, as he had done year by year; so the king of Ashur shut him up and bound him in prison. Then the king of Ashur invaded the whole land and went up to Shomron and besieged it three years. In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Ashur captured

Shomron and carried Yisrael away into exile to Ashur, and settled them in Chlach and Chavor, on the river of Gozan, and in the cities of Maday.

The text here raises many questions. Did Shalman'esar make two trips to the region? Why did Hoshea suddenly reverse his original allegiance and appeal to the king of Egypt? Did he not anticipate the Assyrian reprisal? Fortunately, the evidence provided by *Tanakh*, along with a wealth of Assyrian records that has survived, enables us to reconstruct the events.

Hoshea had come to the throne by deposing Pekach. Assyrian records show that Tiglat-Pil'esar III appointed him. It is likely that Hoshea's rise to power, a pro-Assyrian king, saves Yisrael from a fate similar to that which befell Aram, in which the king was killed and the capital city (Damascus) overrun. Hoshea comes to power in 730 BCE as an Assyrian vassal. However, in his fourth year, Tiglat-Pil'esar dies and is replaced by Shalman'esar V (727-722 BCE). Tiglat-Pil'esar had a reputation as a fearless warmonger and it seems that the new king Shalman'esar had failed to establish power immediately.⁴ The perception of Assyrian weakness had stimulated attempts at forming a regional coalition to overthrow Assyrian control, with Egypt⁵ serving as the fulcrum. This is the "conspiracy" referred to in the pesukim quoted above. However, Shalman'esar returns to the region to restore control. It seems that Hoshea attempts to meet Shalman'esar and appease him, but the king is uninterested in pardoning this renegade king. Hoshea is incarcerated and taken to Ashur,⁶ and Shomron is besieged, with the city elders administrating the city under siege in the absence of their sovereign.

After three years, the city falls. Assyrian cuneiform documents attribute the conquest of Shomron to two kings; some texts list Shalman'esar and others list his successor, Sargon II. It is likely that Shalman'esar is king for most of the siege, and the city capitulated in the reign of Sargon who rises to power in 722 BCE. How many people are exiled? Sargon records the campaign on the walls of the royal palace at Dur-Sharrukin (Khorsabad):

In my first year of reign ... [I fought] the people of Samaria ... to the number of 27,290 ... I carried away. Fifty chariots for my royal equipment I selected. The city I rebuilt. I made it greater than it was before. People of the lands I had conquered I settled therein. My official (Tartan) I placed over them as governor.⁷

⁴ His three year siege against Shomron possibly testifies to his military weakness. See A. Malamet, "The wars of Ashur and Israel," in J. Liver (ed.), *The Military History Land of Israel In Biblical Times* (Jerusalem: Israel Defence Force publishing 1964) [Hebrew].

⁵ The Egyptian king mentioned here by the name of So is unknown to historians. The prophet Hoshea critiques this political zigzagging and the general heady atmosphere in Shomron; see *Hoshea* ch.7 and *Isaiah*, Y. Bin-Nun and B. Lau, (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot and Hemed books, 2013) pp. 178-184 [Hebrew].

⁶ Josephus

⁷ Luckenbill, Daniel David. *Ancient Records of Ashur and Babylon*, L.ii.4.

27,290 may not seem like a huge number, but if we recall that in the first wave of exiles from Yerushalayim to Bavel⁸ 10,000 of Yerushalayim's leadership were exiled, we can appreciate that this deportation wipes the nation clean of its leadership, effecting a mortal blow to Israelite continuity in the north. Moreover, the widespread killing and mutilation inflicted by the kings of Assyria "who were cruel destroyers and who pursued world domination with a ruthlessness they never tire of describing in their inscriptions"⁹ could have meant that the death toll in Yisrael was frighteningly high.

LOST TRIBES, LOST IDENTITIES

The Assyrian policy of population transfer is aimed at crushing hostile populations. By dispersing the exiles to far-flung locations – “Chlach and Chavor, on the river of Gozan, and in the cities of Maday” – Ashur succeeds in destabilizing and disorienting the defeated. This technique absolutely destroys the internal cohesion of the exiled community and strangles its political opposition. For Yisrael this policy is a death knell. Domestically, as alien populations are transferred to Shomron, along with a foreign governor, it essentially becomes impossible for Yisrael to reinstate itself as an independent entity. Archeology shows a huge population influx into Yehuda in this period, presumably migrants from the northern tribes, indicative of a desire to remain under Israelite governance.¹⁰

This Assyrian policy was responsible for the disappearance of the ten tribes. Scattered and dispersed, leaderless and severed from the heartland of the Jewish people, the exiles simply disappeared as a coherent Jewish unit. The effect of the deportations and mass population transfers that transpired in this period finds its effect in a fascinating halakha:

When Sancherev, king of Ashur came [i.e. conquered the region] he transferred all the populations and mixed them, exiling them from their original lands. And so, the Egyptians in Egypt are other people [than the original biblical Egyptians] and similarly the Edomites who reside in Edom. And since these four forbidden nations [Ammon, Moav, Edom, and Egypt] have all become mixed amongst the nations of the world who are permitted [to convert and marry into the Jewish people,] ... all nations are permitted, because we assess a potential convert as emerging from the majority group. (Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, “Laws of Forbidden Intercourse” 12:19)

The Torah restricts four nations from conversion and marriage into Judaism; Egypt, Moav, Edom, and Ammon.¹¹ Are today's Egyptians the same nation as the ancient Egyptians? The halakha asserts that Sancherev jumbled

⁸ *II Melakhim* 24:14

⁹ Y. Kaufman, *The Religion of Israel*, transl. Moshe Greenberg, (New York, Schocken, 1972), pp383.

¹⁰ Archaeologists identify a fourfold expansion of Yerushalayim in this period. See M. Broshi, “The Expansion of Jerusalem in the Reigns of Hezekiah and Manasseh,” *Israel Exploration Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 1, (1974) pp. 21-26.

¹¹ *Devarim* 23:4-9

all the ethnic groups of the region, such that Egyptians, Edomites and Moabites are unlikely to be genetic descendants of those original biblical nations. This simple legal rule opens the door to accepting converts without fear of contravening a biblical law. But for our purpose, it is evidence of the absolute chaos and confusion effected by Sancherev, such that all ethnic lines are considered to be disrupted. Upon this backdrop, we begin to understand how the historical identity of the ten tribes eroded absolutely.

THE RELIGIOUS CAUSES OF EXILE (V.7-23)

Our chapter has, thus far, offered a political explanation for Shomron's demise: Hoshea's political vacillation. However at this point, *Sefer Melakhim* shifts from politics to historiosophy, as it presents the exile's causes as spiritual in nature rather than political. The *pesukim* present a detailed reckoning of the nation's degenerate actions, listing crimes incurred over centuries from the time that God "freed them from the land of Egypt from the hand of Pharaoh" (v.7) until the northern exile.¹² This is an uncharacteristic departure for *Sefer Melakhim*. Generally *Melakhim* is a book that has focused almost exclusively on royal sin and responsibility, and yet here, when reflecting upon the demise of the northern kingdom, the lens is widened to a collective national guilt¹³:

When the Children of Yisrael sinned ... and followed the practices of the nations ... they built for themselves shrines (*bamot*) in every settlement ... and set up pillars and *asheirim* on every lofty hill and under every leafy tree The Lord warned Yisrael and Yehuda by every prophet and every seer ... but they did not obey ... they spurned His laws and the covenant ... they rejected all the commandments of the Lord their God, they made molten idols for themselves – two calves ... bowed down to all the host of the heaven, worshipped Ba'al. They consigned their sons and daughters to the fire; they practiced augury and divination ..." (17:7-17)

WARNINGS

The text emphasizes that God warned Yisrael, by means of prophets, to repent and abandon their evil ways, but these were ignored. And yet, we should appreciate that this message is inherent to the very construction of this painful spiritual condemnation. Much of its phraseology is reflective of

¹² In an interesting symmetry, both the political and the historiosophical readings of the lead-up to Shomron's fall end with a similar phrase: "And Yisrael was exiled to Ashur..." Cf. v.6 with v.23.

¹³ See *Yalkut Shimoni* para. 234, which suggests that once Hoshea had opened access to appropriate worship at the Temple in Yerushalayim, the "noose was removed from his neck [Hoshea] and placed on the neck of the nation." Whereas this *midrash* fails to articulate the scope and depth of the national guilt for their idolatry – which the *Tanakh* text here views as a persistent and pervasive culture that persisted for many centuries – it nonetheless accurately reflects the attribution of responsibility to the nation at large, rather than to the leadership.

terminology from the Torah: passages that warned Yisrael, from the outset, of the tragic consequences of idolatry. We will bring but a few examples.¹⁴

- **The practices of the nations (17:8)** ("*chukot hagoy*")¹⁵ - This expression appears in *Vayikra* in a warning of exile:

You shall faithfully observe all My statutes and all My regulations, and fulfill them, lest the land, to which I am bringing you to settle in, vomit you out. You shall not follow **the practices of the nation ("*chukot hagoy*")** that I am driving out before you, for they committed all these [sins], and I was disgusted with them. And I said to you: "You shall possess their land." (*Vayikra* 20:22-24)¹⁶

- **"They feared other gods" (17:7)** is reminiscent of verses in *Devarim*, both in the Ten Commandments – "Thou shalt not serve other gods," but also in its linguistic corollary and antithesis: "*yirat Elokim* – Fear of God"¹⁷:

Fear the Lord your God, worship Him alone, and swear by his name. Do not follow **other gods**, any gods of the peoples about you Lest the anger of the Lord your God blaze forth against you and He wipe you off the face of the earth. (*Devarim* 6:15-17)

- **"They spurned His laws" (17:15)** evokes the key word of the *Tokhacha*, – the "Rebuke" in *Vayikra* – that portends national ruin and exile:

If you spurn My laws... – (*Im be-chukotai tim'asu...*) (*Vayikra* 26:15)

Interestingly, our chapter offers a lamentable symmetry by affirming that Yisrael's "spurning" of God generates a reciprocal gesture: "The Lord spurned (*vayim'as*) all the seed of Yisrael" (17:20).

The lengthy list of crimes – the Asheira,¹⁸ pillars,¹⁹ worship of molten images, particularly calves,²⁰ the heavenly host,²¹ passing children through fire, augury and divination,²² – all resonate inter-textually as they reflect the Torah's warnings regarding the pernicious culture of Canaan.²³

¹⁴ See Y. Kiel's commentary in *Da'at Mikra*, where he explores each and every phrase for its biblical antecedent.

¹⁵ Similarly, see 17:19, "the practices of Yisrael."

¹⁶ See also *Vayikra* 18:1-5, 24-30.

¹⁷ This phrase appears as a refrain later in our chapter. See 17:24, 28, 33, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 41.

¹⁸ *Devarim* 16:21

¹⁹ *Devarim* 16:22 and Rashi there

²⁰ *Shemot* 32:4, 8; 34:17, *Devarim* 9:12. The echoes of the golden calf may also be felt here in the vocabulary used in the depictions of that episode in *Shemot* and *Devarim*: the depiction of Yisrael as "stiff-necked" (*Il Melakhim* 17:14 and *Shemot* 32:9, 33:3, 5; 34:9 and *Devarim* 9:6, 13) and the unusual verb for God's anger, "*hit'anaf*" – see *Il Melakhim* 17:18 and *Devarim* 9:8: "And God was furious with you [wanting] to obliterate you."

²¹ *Devarim* 4:19

²² See *Vayikra* 19:26, 20:1-6; *Devarim* 18:9-15.

²³ One may also find a wealth of parallel phrases in the book of *Yirmiyahu*, to whom *Chazal* attribute the authorship of *Sefer Melakhim*. One such phrase appears in *Il Melakhim* 17:15:

LAND, EXILE, AND GOD

We shall comment on two final points. First is the phrase of rejection, unique to our chapter, that God "removed Yisrael from before His face" (17:18, 20, 23). This harsh phrase needs to be understood. What is it saying? Is the imagery similar to God's hidden face,²⁴ indicative of punishment and withdrawal of protection? In contrast to that metaphor, the impression here is not of God's withdrawal but rather of Yisrael's distancing. Is this merely a figure of speech or might the removal of Yisrael "from before His face" be more concrete?

We shall suggest that the land of Yisrael *is* God's presence. Ejection from the land is tantamount to banishment from before God. We may recall the description of God's attention being constantly focused upon the land of Yisrael:

But the land into which you go to possess it, is ...a land which the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. (*Devarim* 11:10-12)

The land is a place which is synonymous with God's presence. This is reflected in the writings of the Rambam:

A person should always dwell in the Land of Yisrael, even in a city where most of the residents are gentiles, rather than live outside of the Land in a city where most of the residents are Jewish. For anyone who leaves the Land is considered as if he worships idols, as it says, "for they have driven me out this day that I should not cleave to the inheritance of the Lord, saying, 'go serve other gods' (*I Shmuel* 26:19)." (Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, "Laws of Kings," 5:15)

The verse from *Shmuel* cites King David as he is chased from Yisrael's borders by King Sha'ul. In this verse, he sees Yisrael as the "inheritance of the Lord," and his banishment as tantamount to service of a foreign God.

If we may return to the implication for our chapter, exile is not merely a geographical displacement. Yisrael has betrayed God's covenant, and in response, their exile is not merely from their land and from self-governance, but from God's presence and His watchful eye.

YEHUDA

"They went after delusion and were deluded." The identical language is used in *Yirmiyahu* 2:5.

²⁴ *Devarim* 31:17-18; 32:20

The subject of our chapter is most certainly Yisrael, the northern kingdom, and yet, the focus on Yisrael's exile precipitates a textual interruption, a "preview" of the fate of Yehuda, the southern kingdom:

Nor did Yehuda keep the commandments of the Lord their God; they followed the practices of Yisrael. The Lord spurned all the seed of Yisrael and He afflicted them and delivered them into the hands of plunderers and finally, He cast them out from His presence [lit. face]. (17:19-20)

Sefer Melakhim is written in retrospect;²⁵ it looks back at the history of the kings, seeing before its eyes a destroyed Yerushalayim, the ruins of the Temple, and the Babylonian exiles. As it reflects upon Yisrael's deportation to Ashur and the sins that led to it – some 140 years before the destruction of Yerushalayim - the book cannot remain silent. It reminds us that Yehuda was guilty of the same errant practices as its northern neighbor – with the exception of the sins of Yerav'am (v.21-23) – and in this way it foreshadows an exile still to come.

²⁵ *Chazal* (*Bava Batra* 14b-15a) identify Yirmiyahu as the author of *Melakhim*. Academic opinion points to a post-exilic (and pre-return) authorship of this book.