

Shiur #1: Struggle for the Throne - Chapter 1

- Rav Alex Israel

Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings
By Rav Alex Israel

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Shiur #1: Struggle for the Throne (Chapter 1)

Introduction

Sefer Melakhim opens with a dramatic chapter of political intrigue and rivalry. King David is frail and elderly and has given no clear instructions as to a designated heir. Two contenders, two sons of David, vie for the throne: the dashing Adonia and his half-brother Shlomo. What results is a frantic scramble between the coalitions of each candidate. Natan the prophet and Batsheva, the wife of King David and mother of Shlomo, mobilize to thwart Adonia's coronation. They confront King David and insist that he honor an earlier promise to have Shlomo crowned. The king accedes to their request; Shlomo is led to the Gichon Spring in a royal procession and is anointed as the monarch. Celebration erupts in the capital, surprising the participants in Adonia's rival celebratory gathering and throwing his faction into confusion and disarray. The chapter ends with Adonia fearful for his life; he seeks sanctuary at the sacrificial altar in Jerusalem. Shlomo agrees to spare Adonia as long as he expresses loyalty to the new king.

The Problem of Avishag

We will begin our study of the chapter with a discussion of the opening story, which will open a window to wider understandings in this chapter.[1]

The problem that is presented at the outset of our story is the aged and ailing King David suffering from an inability to become warm (1:1). The resolution is found in the appointment of Avishag as a "sochenet," translated as a "companion." Avishag's role is to warm the king by sleeping in his bed. One wonders as to this bizarre resolution. Is this the simplest way to solve David's medical needs? Moreover, why are the precise details regarding Avishag at all relevant to the story? And furthermore, why was a search made of the entire country in order to find this young lady? Of course, a king needs a beautiful woman in accordance with his dignity, but could a suitable candidate not be found in a more limited locale - the province of Yehudah, for instance?

APPROACH 1 – LEADERSHIP STRUGGLE

Many of our problems can be resolved by simply understanding the entire chapter on the political level. Let us view this chapter as charting a classic leadership struggle.

We can begin with the story of Avishag (1:1-4). It is a rather strange story, reminiscent of the search for a wife for Achashverosh in *Megillat Esther*. In that context, however, we are dealing with a king who invites a new virgin into his bed each night for over a year. King David seems to be the antithesis of this, as we read (1:4), "And the King did not know her." We wonder whether the king was even involved in this decision at all. And was it really necessary to comb the entire country "through all the borders of Israel" (1:3) in order to locate a suitable candidate?

A resolution may be found in the verse, "And **his servants** said, 'Let a virgin girl be sought for the king'" (1:2). The suggestion for the national beauty contest emerges from a group of unnamed "servants" or

palace officials. A key to identifying this group is the reappearance of this phrase in verse 9, when "all the men of Yehudah, **the king's servants**" were invited by Adonia to his coronation party. One wonders if there is possibly a connection here - are the servants who appear in verse 2 in cahoots with Adonia?

We can possibly suggest a simple but novel understanding of this episode.[2] This search for a woman to warm the sick King David is part of the campaign to elect or appoint Adonia. The first stage is to send a message to the entire country that the king is sick. The people will certainly become quite concerned when the monarch's death appears imminent and a suitable heir has as yet not been designated. The national search for a beautiful assistant to the king announces loud and clear that the king cannot maintain his body temperature. The servants are broadcasting a simple message: the King is dying. They do this surreptitiously in order to obscure their motives and avoid accusations that they are usurping the throne.

Thus, the Avishag story is directly related to Adonia's self-election. It generates a sense of anxiety and urgency. In Jerusalem, the talk is all about the pressing need to appoint a successor before the king dies.

Adonia and His Coalition

The story continues with Adonia's self-appointment (1:6-8). What can we say about Adonia? The text here compares him both explicitly and by allusion to his elder brother Avshalom:

- They are both described by their impressive good looks (cf. *Melakhim I* 1:6 and *Shmuel II* 14:25)
- Both Avshalom and Adoniah make for themselves "a carriage and cavalry, with fifty men running before them" (cf. *Melakhim I* 1:5 and *Shmuel II* 15:1). Rashi views this practice as indicating foreign influence, as it is alien to the Jewish ethic of the king.
- Most significantly, they both instigate an attempt to crown themselves as king during their father's lifetime.

- If our previous discussion is correct, Adonia uses David's ailment and the search for Avishag to discredit the king's health and to make him seem infirm. In a similar manner, Avshalom paves the way to his self-coronation and raises public support by discrediting David's sense of justice (cf. *Shmuel II* 15:2-6).

Avshalom is an exceptionally negative figure in *Tanakh*. He killed his own brother, Amnon, in an act of vengeance, and worse still, he sought to depose and kill his father, David.^[3] He is the man who, in a bid to demonstrate that he had taken his father's place, pitched a tent on the palace roof and slept with David's concubines (*Shmuel II* 16:22).^[4] By highlighting the comparisons to Avshalom, the "narrator" here clearly intends to portray Adonia in a negative light.

Given his negative traits, we must wonder how Adonia managed to gain such a well-connected coalition. How did he attract David's army general, Yoav, the princes (*bnei ha-melekh*), and David's close advisors (*avdei ha-melekh*) (1:7, 9)? We can surmise that the national leadership was deeply concerned about the issue of succession. Let us recall the order of David's children as recorded in *Sefer Shmuel*:

Sons were born to David in Chevron: His firstborn was Amnon, to Achinoam of Jezreel. His second, Kilav, to Avigail... the third was Avshalom son of Maacha ... the fourth, Adonia son of Chaggit... (*Shmuel II* 3:2-4)

At this point in the family history, Amnon and Avshalom are both dead. Kilav is not a character that we hear about.^[5] The next in the order of succession is Adonia. One imagines that Yoav, who has been involved in stabilizing of the kingdom in the past, deems Adoniah as a worthy successor, just as he had originally supported Avshalom's candidacy.^[6] Both brothers seem to possess charisma and the drive to occupy the limelight. But if we line up the two sides, we quickly see that there is a representative missing in Adonia's coalition.

	Adoniah (1:7, 9)	Shlomo (1:8)
Army	Yoav	Benaya

Kohen	Evyatar	Tzadok
Coalition	Royal family Servants of the king	Shimi and Rei and the Warriors of David
Prophet	-	Natan

Adonia does not have a prophet in his "team." He is uninterested in being receptive to the messages of God. Alternatively, no *navi* would associate with him.

In both the comparison to Avshalom and the lack of prophetic support, there is little doubt that the text sends a clear message that Adonia is a deeply problematic candidate for the monarchy.

Palace Intrigue

What follows is a brilliant plan on the part of Nathan the Prophet and Batsheva, who masterfully choreograph their approaches to the king in order to alert or possibly alarm him to events happening just a few hundred yards from his bedside, at the spring of Ein Rogel, just outside the City of David (1:11-27)[7] and Shlomo's subsequent coronation (1:38-40). The manner in which Batsheva enters the king's chamber in the role of "the king's wife," as well as "mother of Shlomo," only to be interrupted by Natan, who brings the "news" of the impending coronation, works perfectly in bringing King David to a point of absolute lucidity.

Many have raised questions as to the validity of the oath that Batsheva recalls here:[8]"You promised in the name of *Hashem* your God to your maidservant that Shlomo your son will rule in your stead" (1:17). This promise has never been mentioned previously. Is Batsheva somehow taking advantage of David's senile state of mind? This clearly could not be further from the truth; when David reaffirms the oath to Batsheva (1:30) and provides detailed instructions as to the anointing and procession of Shlomo (1:32-37), he clearly reveals a lucid, quick-thinking, detail-oriented King David who is in full control of all his mental faculties.

To visualize this chapter and its drama appropriately, I would recommend a visit to the archeological site of *Ir David*, the City of David. This allows one to almost picture the image as Shlomo maneuvers the King's mule (a stark and modest contrast to Adonia's chariot, horses, and runners) down the sharp slopes of the city to the Gichon spring. Shlomo is anointed there[9] and then accompanied in a ceremonial and joyous procession to ascend David's throne.

In the last section, I noted the presence of Natan the prophet on Shlomo's side, but what strikes us here is **the absence of prophecy**. Nathan DOES anoint Shlomo, but particularly in this atmosphere of confusion and disarray, we might have anticipated a divine pronouncement or a prophetic verification as to the designated identity of the monarch. What should we make of Natan's surprisingly non-prophetic role? Moreover, all the palace intrigue and machinations make one wonder what this story is telling us. Is Shlomo crowned as king because the people around David knew how to manipulate him?

I cannot help but conclude that this story is written as a very secular, political story. And yet, this is possibly exactly the point. The critical decisions are made in David's palace. Once the king, however frail, has decided, and once Shlomo has ridden the King's mule and ascended on the king's throne, he is the king, undisputedly and without question.

The "action" in this story takes place at two parallel locations - two springs. But the difference between them is stark. Ein Rogel is outside the city; the Gichon spring is THE water source of Jerusalem. Shlomo isn't crowned in a bootleg ceremony; his has the stamp of officialdom. There are two zones here - the official zone of the city and the outskirts, which eventually become a zone of illegitimacy.

The minute that Adonia's faction – which incidentally wielded greater political clout than Shlomo's – realized that Shlomo was sitting on the King's throne, their coronation party immediately dissolved (1:49). It became clear to Adonia that his life was in peril and he rushed to the altar to protect his life. The chapter ends not only with the Shlomo granting

clemency to Adonia, but with Adonia bowing to King Shlomo and accepting his new status. It is final, and Adonia has to concede. Interestingly, Shlomo does not feel vulnerable or threatened by this rival contender to the throne. He allows Adoniah to live. Shlomo comes across as absolutely secure in his position.

How does a situation that seems so contested, so unresolved, so inconclusive and undetermined become instantaneously resolved? What comes across through this story, ironically, is the stability of the monarchy and the power and force of central government. This is in contrast to earlier periods: The first king, Shaul, was first anointed in private, secretly. King David was also anointed in secrecy, and his rule was accepted only after years of flight and civil war. Yet now, Shlomo ascends the throne without question, in public. There are certainly questions about David's successor, but the moment the king has designated his heir, the second that the official declaration is issued, even if other powerful candidates exist, there is an absolute transfer of power.

I have always wondered why the persona of Shlomo is totally absent from this drama. In fact, we know nothing about him. Is he not, after all, the subject of the story? We are intrigued as to why Shlomo is the most suited to become king. It would appear that this is NOT the topic of the story. What IS critical is the notion that Shlomo is the uncontested successor to David *Ha-Melekh*. The transmission of power is absolute. This represents a significant step forward in the development of Israelite rule, a certain maturation and coming of age.

For Shlomo, who is to be the subject of the first eleven chapters of *Sefer Melakhim*, this opening is critical. Shlomo is given the monarchy by David. The smooth transmission of power puts Shlomo on a secure platform from the very beginning. This steady beginning gives Shlomo an immediate mandate to take the nation to new heights. As Shlomo is saluted (in the presence of his father), "May Shomo's rule be GREATER than David's rule" (1:37, 47).

APPROACH 2 – SPIRITUAL ECHOES

There is another dimension of this story as well. I would like to relate to a comment of *Chazal* and a literary observation that both reframe this chapter somewhat.

The first point is raised by Rashi in his comment on the first verse of the *sefer*. The text tells us that: "King David was old... and though they covered him with bedclothes, he never felt warm" (1:1) Rashi comments (based on *Berakhot* 62b):

Our Rabbis taught: Anyone who ridicules clothes will eventually not benefit from them. This, because David tore the corner of Shaul's cloak.[10]

In other words, David's intolerable coldness and the inability of blankets to warm him is a punishment for the disrespect that he demonstrated to clothing when he used the tearing of clothing to demonstrate his loyalty to Shaul.

This Talmudic lesson seems extremely harsh. One wonders why we need to trudge up David's sins of yesteryear in the opening lines of a book that focuses beyond David.

The Sin of David and Batsheva

The second and more extensive point relates to echoes of the David and Batsheva story in our chapter.

- There are only two stories in which the three characters of David, Batsheva, and Natan feature - our present story and in the episode of David's sin with Batsheva and Uriah.
- The verse describes that Avishag will "lie in your bosom – *ve-shakhva be-chekeikha*" (1:3), a direct parallel to the phrase in the Batsheva episode regarding the little ewe lamb which "nestled in the bosom" of the poor man (*Shmuel II* 12:3), which relates directly to Batsheva.
- "Batsheva went to the king to his chamber. The king was very old, and Avishag the Shunamite was serving the king" (1:15). One cannot read this verse without being startled by the very scene of

Batsheva entering the room and seeing David *Ha-Melekh* with Avishag. But the text tells us that "the king was very old," which automatically raises the stark contrast between the young, virile David, who could not resist the temptation of Batsheva, and the now feeble and impotent David. The coalescence of the images gives the sense of David broken and wasted, his strength having left him.

- We have mentioned the oath that David swore to Batsheva that Shlomo would be his successor. As noted, it is not mentioned explicitly in the Tanakh. The Radak makes the following interesting comment:

And why did he [David] make an oath to her? After their child died, Batsheva said: "The child died because of [our] sin. Even if we have a son who lives, he will be ridiculed by his brothers as an object of sin." And she refused to be intimate with David until he vowed that her firstborn son would succeed him as king.

Thus, according to the Radak, the oath to Batsheva was also a direct outgrowth of the overwhelming sense of guilt engendered by the dreadful sin of David with Batsheva and Uriah. But once again, this oath is mentioned only now. How is it that the specter of that sin resurfaces particularly in our chapter?

To digest the observations that we have made, we are suggesting that behind the overt political story are several subtexts that seek to place David's sins as a background to this chapter. Why? What is this teaching us? Why is the *Navi* here deliberately hinting to David's sordid past?

The Controversy of Shlomo

Based on the comment of the Radak noted above, it is clear that the choice of Shlomo is a controversial one. Of all of David's wives, Batsheva is entangled in scandal, and her son, Shlomo, would at first glance be an unlikely candidate for rule, tainted as he is by his parents' sin. This is not a problem that the text wants to ignore. Can Shlomo move beyond the past?

The conclusion would be a resounding "Yes." This chapter tells us that despite being fully aware of the background, without any cover-up, Shlomo is the suitable successor.

The Withdrawal of David

But David can also move beyond his past. A reading of *Shmuel II* clearly demonstrates that David has been plagued by death and ruin ever since the sin of Batsheva. In that episode, David was told: "The sword will never leave your house ... a calamity will rise up against you from within your house, I will take your wives and give them to another man before your very eyes..." (*Shmuel II* 12:7-12). From that moment forth, disaster has struck David *Ha-Melekh*. Beginning with the death of Batsheva's baby, the family has been afflicted by treason and rebellion and other tragic occurrences.[11]

A further point needs to be made here. We suggested earlier that this chapter gives weight to the power of the king and the stability of central government. But one wonders why it has to be so last-minute, so haphazard and disorganized. Could the heir not have been named before David's old age set in? Why did everything have to be decided in a mad scramble of backroom diplomacy?

Here, I feel we are witnessing a symptom of David's response to his sin. Ever since the episode of Batsheva, at least in the book of *Shmuel II*, David exhibits a distinct non-involvement in public life. Unless his very survival is on the line, he exists in a mode of inactivity,[12] almost resigned to the events that befall him. One senses that he feels paralyzed, weighed down by his past sins. This withdrawal, this standing back from taking initiative in public life, is the backdrop to our chapter in *Melakhim*. The text specifically points out, regarding Adonia, that "his father never scolded him: 'Why do you do that'" (1:6).

The King has left a vacuum; he has not designated a successor.[13] He has allowed this confusion to evolve through his indecision, his withdrawal and shriveling from public life. All this is a direct effect of his sense of guilt, his ongoing personal fall-out from the

episode of Batsheva. This chapter thus continues this process, with David's avoidance of active decision making and the clear signs that David has paid the heavy price of his actions.

Where does this leave David spiritually? It explains the political morass of the chapter, but is this the way that we wish to view David *Ha-Melekh*? Is this our final view of this great man? Should David pay so greatly for a crime committed years earlier?

Perhaps we can suggest that David has suffered for his sins; he has accepted responsibility for his pernicious actions and has suffered greatly. In the words of the Abarabanel:

David sinned greatly, admitted his sin valiantly, repented fully, and received his punishment, and through this his sins were atoned.

Conclusion

These messages provide an important spiritual introduction to *Sefer Melakhim*:

- Despite his problematic background, Shlomo is not "born in sin." David has paid for his various sins. Shlomo ascends the throne clear of past complications; there is no residual stain on his monarchy.
- No king is immune to the effects of his actions. Even the greatest king will pay for his misdemeanors. This is going to be a critical message of *Sefer Melakhim*, in which kings perpetrate serious crimes.

This composite image of the political dimension along with the spiritual leads us to chapter 2, in which David gives his final instructions to Shlomo before his death.

FOR NEXT WEEK, please read chapter 2.

What messages does David choose to impart to the young Shlomo?

Examine the history of each personality that David talks about. What is their history with David? Explain the manner in which David treats each one:

Yoav: *Shmuel* II 3:20-32, 18:3,16, 19:9-10

Barzilai: *Shmuel* II 14:9, 19:30-38

Shimi: *Shmuel* II 16:5-12; 19:17-24

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[1] I will attempt to understand the chapter on its own literary merits. I want to examine what is and what is not in the story. An awareness of what is in the story – a great deal of politics – and what is NOT in the story - any characterization of Shlomo, for example – will help us understand this chapter.

One key question relates to whether this is, in essence, a story about David's death or about Shlomo's coronation. Some have suggested that chapters 1-2 of *Sefer Melakhim* are in a sense a footnote to *Sefer Shmuel*. The first two chapters record the closing of David's life, resolving the fates of many key figures (Yoav, Barzilai Ha-Gila'adi, Shimi Ben Gera) who appear in *Shmuel* II. Moreover, this story continues the theme from *Sefer Shmuel* of children seizing power and brotherly rivalry in the royal family. On the other hand, there are good reasons to read these chapters as an independent story. *Sefer Shmuel* already contains an appendix of sorts in the form of chapters 21-24, which form an organic literary unit that ends the book. It would be strange for there to be two concluding "appendices." Furthermore, the key aspects of this chapter are noticeably absent from *Sefer Shmuel*. There, Shlomo does not feature as a leading candidate for the throne; the oath to Batsheva is never recorded. It would thus make sense that these chapters form not a conclusion to *Shmuel*, but rather an introduction to *Melakhim*.

This certainly influences our thinking about the question with which we began: Is this a story about David or about Shlomo? When we view these chapters as the start of a new book – *Sefer Melakhim* – whose first king is Shlomo, it is clear that these stories are to be viewed from the perspective of Shlomo's life rather than David's. We must ask ourselves how these

initial chapters impact our understanding of Shlomo, his persona, and his reign.

- [2] I heard this from Menachem Leibtag many years ago.
- [3] The story of Avshalom's assassination of Amnon is found in *Shmuel II* 13. The rebellion is described in chapters 15-19
- [4] This episode creates a further point of comparison between Avshalom and Adonia; see the episode in which Adonia requests Avishag as his wife (*Melakhim I* 2:17).
- [5] Kilav is referred to as Daniel in *Divrei Ha-yamim I* 3:1-2; we know nothing about this son. He never appears as a candidate for the monarchy. The *gemara* (*Berakhot* 4a) describes him as a "talmid chakham."
- [6] It was Yoav who organized Avshalom's return to Jerusalem, thus allowing the heir to the throne to begin his attempt to gain popularity. We will discuss Yoav in our second lecture.
- [7] See Robert Alter's fine reading of this story in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 98-100.
- [8] The name Batsheva can be read as "daughter of an oath" – rather suitable for this chapter. For more possibilities regarding this oath, see *Divrei Ha-yamim I* 22:9.
- [9] Archeologists and *Tanakh* enthusiasts were delighted some years ago to discover that there had been a fortress which stood atop the source of the Gichon spring. This explains a difficult phrase in our chapter. The text talks of Shlomo being anointed "*al Gichon*" – on top of the Spring of Gichon. But how does one stand atop a water-producing spring? The answer is that he was anointed in the fortress that guarded the spring, the critical water source for ancient Jerusalem. As it stood OVER the source of the water, it was appropriately referred to as "*al Gichon*."
- [10] The story appears in *Shmuel I* 24.
- [11] See Professor Avraham Grossman's comments in this regard at:
<http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/Tanach/rishonim/grosman1.htm>.
- [12] He fails to react to the rape of Tamar by Amnon (*Shmuel II* 13:22) and does not respond to the assassination of Amnon other than in mourning (*ibid.* 3:31, 37). He never expresses anger towards Avshalom for the murder of his brother and seems to allow himself to manipulated to re-accept him via Yoav (*ibid.* 14). When Avshalom rebels, he does not fight but simply escapes, avoiding confrontation (*ibid.* 15:13). Later,

David allows himself to be attacked and insulted, claiming it as a punishment from God (*ibid.* 16:9-12). Later, he asks Yoav and his generals to "deal gently with my boy, Avshalom, for my sake" (*ibid.* 18:5).

[13] I have suggested here that David's indecision regarding a successor is a sign of being weighed down by sin. I must admit, however, that there may be simple personal and political reasons for it. A look at contemporary royal life may illustrate this. Queen Elizabeth, at age eighty-three, refuses to discuss who will succeed her. I recall how Prince Hussein of Jordanchanged his mind in the final year of his reign, as he was dying, and designated a new heir – his son Abdullah instead of his brother Hassan.