

Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings
By Rav Alex Israel

Shiur #26 – A Perfect Murder: Navot's Vineyard - Chapter 21

At first blush, this story could not be more straightforward. It is a case of a simple man who gets in the way of people who are powerful and ruthless. Navot has something which the king and queen want and he is standing in their way. They have him "disposed of," executing Navot in a political set-up, and they then seize the prize piece of real-estate that they seek. A simple case of greed and murder. The *navi* - in this case, Eliyahu - is sent to criticize and condemn Achav for his abuse of power.

This is certainly the storyline, and yet, I believe that with a close reading of the story, we will find it a fascinating landscape in which to examine the intriguing pathology of sin and the revolutionary power-structure of Israelite society.

KING VS. THE PEOPLE: WHO HAS THE POWER?

And it came to pass after these things, that Navot the Yizraelite had a vineyard, which was in Yizrael, next to the palace of Achav, king of Shomron. Achav spoke to Navot, saying, "Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden because it is near to my house, and I will give you a better vineyard instead; or if it is good to you, I will give you its worth in money." Navot said to Achav, "God forbid to me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers to you." And Achav came into his house sullen and displeased.

How are the characters depicted in these opening lines? "Navot the Yizraeli who has a field in Yizrael" - his location is not there merely by dint of his field. Rather, his place defines him. He is a Yizraelite; it is the cornerstone of his identity. He is contrasted with Achav, King of Shomron, far from Yizrael, but nonetheless, the king. At the outset, this depiction transmits two contrasting thoughts. The first is that Navot is way out of his depth; after all he, the commoner, is meddling with the King! But conversely, this king is a king in Shomron; he does not belong here, his jurisdiction is elsewhere, and it is Navot who is the permanent local fixture. Achav's control is rooted in another location.

THE POWER OF INHERITANCE

Navot issues a refusal that is a reflection of an ideology:

God forbid it to me that I should give the inheritance of my fathers to you.

In other words, I cannot sell you my vineyard even if I wish, because God has mandated me to preserve this tract of land in my family. This is not a lack of respect for Achav or disregard for the high office of the king. Navot sees this as a matter of principle.

But is Navot correct? Is a Jew forbidden to sell land? In *Parashat Behar*, the selling of land is permitted only in a situation of dire financial duress. Moreover, once sold, the family of the land's original ancestral owner is instructed to "redeem" that land, restoring it to the family (see *Vayikra* 25:25). The record of practice, of which we read in *Megillat Rut* as well, is preceded by the following *pesukim*:

The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is Mine, and you are sojourners and residents with Me. And throughout the land of your possession, you shall give redemption to the land. (*Vayikra* 25:23-24)

Moreover, we read in *Sefer Bamidbar*:

An inheritance shall not be transferred from one tribe to another, for each person of *Bnei Yisrael* shall cleave to the **inheritance of the tribe of his fathers**, in order that *Bnei Yisrael* may inherit, each individual the **inheritance of his fathers**. (*Bamidbar* 36:7-8)

Here, we see the origin of the phrase spoken by Navot: "inheritance of his (my) fathers." The idea is that the land is not ours to sell. Rather, God has entrusted our land to us, returning it to the ancestral unit each Jubilee year if we have been financially unsuccessful. But if there is a choice, we remain with our inheritance!

ROYAL POWER AND PEOPLE POWER

Has the king no rights to requisition land from his citizens? On the one hand, the *pesukim* in *Shmuel I* that constitute the "*Mishpat Ha-Melukha*" seem to legislate that a king may take any vineyard that he desires:

This shall be the custom of the king who will rule over you. He will take your sons and commandeer them for his chariot, and as his horsemen, and they shall run before his chariot... He shall take your daughters as perfumers and cooks and bakers. And **he shall take the best of your fields and your vineyards** and your olive yards, and give them to his servants... (*Shmuel I* 8:11-14)

However, the legal status of this passage is under dispute in the Talmud:

R. Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel: All that is mentioned in the "*Mishpat Ha-Melekh*" [in *Sefer Shmuel*] is permitted to the king. Rav

said: This was only told to them in order to threaten them. (*Sanhedrin* 20b)

According to R. Yehuda, the king may expropriate Navot's vineyard, but Rav disagrees. In his view, the regal powers listed in *Sefer Shmuel* were mere propaganda in order to discourage the nation from a system of monarchy. For Rav, the appropriation of property is beyond the king's legal jurisdiction.

Interestingly, the Rambam, who seems to rule like R. Yehuda, takes the legal middle ground:

He [the king] can take fields and olive orchards and vineyards for his subjects WHEN THEY GO TO WAR ... IF THEY HAVE NOTHING TO EAT, and he must RECOMPENSE [the owner of the field]. (Laws of Kings 4:6)

For Rambam, the king HAS the right to requisition a field or vineyard, BUT only under very specific conditions: It must be a war situation, in a case of urgent military food needs, and he must compensate the field's owner for his financial shortfall.

Having stated this, one does get the impression that this legal discussion is somewhat immaterial. If one reads our chapter, it is completely clear from the storyline that Achav is powerless to commandeer this vineyard. His hands are tied. Everyone concerned understood clearly that taking Navot's field was beyond the rights of the king. Even Izevel needs to devise an intricate scheme of courtroom intrigue and fabricated evidence to indict Navot. If it were so easy for the king to requisition land, Achav would have done so. Izevel certainly would not have hesitated. It is absolutely clear here that in the Jewish State, the king's power was severely constrained. When it came to land rights, the average citizen had rights even over his king.

One cannot overstate what a significant statement this makes as to the autonomy of the common citizen in ancient Israel. Israel was a revolutionary culture that empowered its rank and file, who could not be trampled or bullied by the ruling class. This democratic land culture is the opposite of all that we know about other ancient societies and is an accolade to the values of Torah and the culture of Israel.¹

THE TRANSFORMATION OF NAVOT'S REFUSAL

We have understood Navot's refusal as based upon his deep commitment to his ancestral connection to the Land of Israel. However, it would appear that in Achav's mind, Navot's principled and polite refusal undergoes a radical transformation over time. Let us look closely at the

¹ See the Chief Rabbi <http://www.chiefrabbi.org/ReadArtical.aspx?id=48>

manner in which Navot's refusal is recorded. Our chapter records his refusal four times, and a comparison between them is most instructive:²

Navot says (v.3): "God forbid that I should give the inheritance of my fathers to you."

Achav hears (v.4): "I shall not give you the inheritance of my fathers."

To Izevel (v.6): "I shall not give you my vineyard."

Izevel's version (v.15): "Who refused to give you the vineyard of Navot the Yizraeli for money."

The first record of the refusal, as voiced by Navot, is phrased in religious terminology, "God forbid," with his reason - it is an ancestral inheritance.

When Achav returns home, frustrated and irritated, as he mulls this over in his own mind, the refusal takes on a personal tone. Note how the "God forbid" is dropped, and the "you" moves into the foreground of the sentence. The way that he recalls Navot's response is devoid of the high principles, and sounds at best family nostalgia and at worst a personal snub to the king.

By the time Achav retells the story to his wife Izevel in verse 6, it has already become an act of defiance to the king without rhyme or reason: "I will not give you my vineyard." The vineyard is not ancestral in nature, and the only interpretation of Navot's behavior is a desire to insult and disgrace the king, to flex his muscles towards the monarch.

In the final stage, Izevel reads Navot's refusal as emanating from a point of greed. Navot the ingrate refused to give you the field even though you made a most generous offer.

This is a classic example of how our mind can play tricks on us and refashion events in a manner that justifies our emotions and frustrations. Rather than being objective and accepting Navot's refusal as a demonstration of Jewish heritage, backed by Torah law, Achav succeeds in taking Navot's ethical stand and grotesquely twisting it into an egotistical gesture of greed.

BETWEEN IZEVEL AND ACHAV

His wife Izevel came to him and asked him, "Why are you so dispirited that you won't eat?" So he told her... His wife Izevel said to him, "Now is the time to show yourself king over Israel. Rise and eat something and be cheerful; I will get you the vineyard of Navot the Yizraelite for you." (vv.5-7)

² The literary structures and comparisons used in these chapters may be seen in the work of Prof Meir Weiss, "The Bible and Modern Literary Theory – *Ha-Mikra Ki-Demuto*," pp. 354-377. The chapter was edited by Yair Zakovitch.

Achav "lay down on his bed and turned his face away, and would not eat," but he doesn't even have a thought to use illicit means of obtaining Navot's property. Izevel, however, comes from a different royal culture, in which the limits placed on the king are absurd. She views the Israelite norms with disdain. At first she advises, "Now is the time to show yourself king over Israel," meaning that Achav should simply execute Navot. But when she understands that that option is simply inconceivable, she tells her husband that she will take care of things.

Is Achav to blame here or Izevel? In our earlier discussions of Achav, we saw the dismal religious state of the nation in chapter 18, during which Izevel's influence held sway. Chapter 20, while not describing a perfect monarch, portrays a more religiously positive Achav. Not coincidentally, Izevel's presence was mysteriously absent from those stories. Now in chapter 21, Izevel returns, and along with Izevel comes a degenerate administrative culture with corrupt norms.

One of the problems here is Achav's inability to face Izevel. Witness the way that he presents his offer to Navot:

To Navot - <i>Pasuk 2</i>	To Izevel – <i>Pasuk 6</i>
Give me your vineyard So that it can be a vegetable garden for me because it is near to my house I will give you in its stead a superior vineyard If you prefer, I will give you its price in money	Give me your vineyard For money If you prefer, I will give you another vineyard in exchange

The difference is striking. In conversation with Navot, Achav is generous and accommodating, even diffident, and certainly humble. When he talks to Izevel, he omits the way that he explained his need for the field, as Izevel would think he was ingratiating himself. Moreover, he reverses the order of his offer to make it sound more like a straightforward hard-nosed business deal. He knows that his wife values the world of money,³ so he talks to her in the language that she understands. But we know that his offer was far more generous, and his tone kinder and more self-effacing. Achav is clearly intimidated by his wife.

The Talmud Yerushalmi picks up on this. The textual cue can be found at the end of the chapter, but in truth, its thrust is a sub-current throughout the chapter:

“Indeed, there never was anyone like Achav, who committed himself to doing what was displeasing to the Lord” (21:25): R. Levi taught this

³ See *pasuk 15*, in which Izevel mentions the money alone, but not the exchange of vineyards.

verse for six months in a negative assessment of Achav. At night, Achav came to R. Levi and asked him, "How have I sinned against you, and what crimes have I committed against you? Why do you read only the beginning of the verse, and not its end, "at the instigation of his wife Izevel"? From that day forth, for the next six months, R. Levi expounded the verse in praise of Achav. (Yerushalmi *Sanhedrin* 10:2, 28b)

In other words, when the *perek* presents Achav as a sinner, it mentions Izevel's influence. Is Achav the sinner here, or is he merely instigated to sin by his wife? How much blame lies at Achav's door? If he was incited and encouraged by Izevel, does that minimize his guilt?

Maybe we should move this question deeper into the chapter. When Navot is killed, can Achav truly be implicated with the crime? After all, he knows nothing about the murder. He is unaware of the charges leveled at Navot or the manner in which he met his death. He is uninvolved, disconnected. Izevel makes all the arrangements and orchestrates the entire project. How can Achav be viewed as an accomplice, let alone as the prime suspect?

THE PERFECT MURDER

It is here, we believe, that the true genius of the style of this chapter comes to the fore. The narrative here may be split into five discreet scenes, which we can chart out in the following manner:⁴

Scene 1	– Achav and Navot	[Navot's vineyard]
Scene 2	- Achav and Izevel	[at the palace]
Scene 3	- Izevel, elders, witnesses, Navot	[Yizre'el]
Scene 4	- Achav and Izevel	[at the palace]
Scene 5	- Achav and Eliyahu	[Navot's vineyard]

This simple chiasmic structure is a wonderful prism through which to view the story. One initial observation due to the symmetry is the manner in which Eliyahu is evidently the surrogate for the deceased Navot!

But for our purposes, we will observe that Achav is present, and even dominant, in each scene - except one. The scene in which Achav is absent is the middle scene - the drama of Navot's fabricated trial and his execution.

This absence, this silence, speaks volumes. On the surface, this is the perfect murder. Achav knows nothing. He has been eliminated from the plot in

⁴ Weiss pg. 356; see note 2.

our middle scene. And yet, his fingerprints are all over this act – even though he is unaware of a single detail!

First, let us recall the words with which Izevel parts from Achav, and those with which she returns to him:

v.8 **Rise** and eat something and be cheerful; I will get you **the vineyard of Navot the Yizre'elite** for you.

v.15 **Rise** and **possess the vineyard of Navot the Yizre'elite** who refused to give it to you for money; for Navot is no longer alive - he is dead.

When Achav heard that Navot was dead, Achav **rose** and went down to Navot the Yizraelite's vineyard to take **possession** of it.

What did Achav think had happened to Navot? Did he ask? Did he care? Did he enquire as to whether Navot's relatives had residual rights to the vineyard? What did Achav think when Izevel said, "I will get you the vineyard of Navot" and then a short time later, she declared that Navot "is no longer alive, he is dead," and that Achav was now clear to take control of his beloved vineyard?⁵

The structure of the *perek* suggests that no clues lead to Achav. There are no fingerprints, no secret phone calls, no trace. He is absent from the murder scene. But this absence is chilling. It implicates him all the more.

Moreover, let us examine the manner in which Navot is set up:

She wrote in ACHAV'S NAME, and sealed them with HIS SEAL and sent letters ... testify against him: Navot has reviled God and KING. (vv. 8-13)⁶

The letters are signed in the king's name, sealed with his seal, and the accusation is about reviling the king.

Achav can feign ignorance. Indeed he doesn't know a thing. But the entire episode is pungent with a royal odor. If he would take a lie detector test, Achav would pass with flying colors. And yet, this makes the act all the more evil and twisted, all the more monstrous.

And hence, despite the fact that the active individual is Izevel, it is Achav who is fully implicated in the murder! And so, Eliyahu confronts Achav with the famous line:

So says the Lord: Have you murdered and you also take possession?⁷

⁵ See also the subtle parallel (better in the Hebrew) between vv. 14-15, "Navot has been stoned and HE DIED. And WHEN IZEVEL HEARD..." to vv. 15-16, "Navot is not alive, for he IS DEAD. AND WHEN ACHAV HEARD..." The echoes of Izevel's intimate involvement reverberate in Achav's receipt of the news.

⁶ For parallels between this and the Purim story, see Yonatan Grossman's *shiur*: <http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/ester/10ester.htm>

The short and pithy rhyme, "Have you murdered and you also take possession?" - that is, you have added a terrible crime to a horrific sin, is isolated as an independent statement which expresses the purpose of the story: to teach a chapter in the responsibility of national leaders. The king cannot absolve himself by saying, "I didn't know," "I didn't see," all the more so when he was aware of pointers that were rather obvious.⁸

IN CONCLUSION

Our chapter is linked to the previous chapter with the phrase, "And it was after these things" (21:1). There are certain connections. Chapter 20 ends with Achav returning to his palace in a sour emotional state, "displeased and furious" (20:43), a scene that recurs in our chapter (21:4). But there is also one prominent contrast between the two chapters. We should be struck by the polar disparity between Achav's generosity of spirit to Ben-Hadad, "We have heard that the kings of Israel are merciful rulers... perhaps he will spare your life" (20:31), and Achav's heartless conduct towards Navot. This stark dissonance underscores the helplessness and vulnerability of the simple Jewish farmer as opposed to the immunity of a powerful foreign king. And it demonstrates how a merciful king can become deaf to morality when it serves his purposes.

We have examined the complex psychological background to this act of murder, the internal justifications, the external incitement by Izevel, and the facade of detachment and feigned innocence on Achav's part. However, we may add one further dimension to this analysis.

The Rambam, in his *Mishneh Torah*, suggests that Achav is a prime example of the *mitzvah*, "Thou shall not covet." The Rambam sees Achav as a prime victim of a dangerous and vicious pathology of sin, of a powerful domino effect of desire. Once a person allows ones mind to entertain desire for objects belonging to another person, that illicit desire can become dominating, and the implications can be devastating:

Desire brings a person to coveting, and coveting leads to theft. For if the owner [of the object that one desires] is not willing to sell, even though one offers a hefty sum and pleads with them, then he will come to steal, as it is written, "They have coveted fields and stolen" (*Mikha* 2:2). And if the owner confronts him so as to save his property or to prevent him from stealing, then he will come to shed blood. Go and study the story of Achav and Navot. (Laws Pertaining to Theft and Loss 1:11)

⁷ The use of this verb YR"SH is generally reserved for taking control of the Land of Israel in fulfillment of the divine mandate of conquering the land. The ironic usage here in vv. 15-18 (also in *Shoftim* ch.18) takes a heroic act, a *mitzvah*, and mocks Achav's assertion of his power as cowardly bravado.

⁸ Yair Zakovitch in Weiss (ibid), p. 371

In a future *shiur*, we shall address Achav's punishment and his gestures of *teshuva*.