

***Sefer Melakhim: The Book of Kings***  
**By Rav Alex Israel**

***Shiur #29 – Chapter 22 – Yehoshafat, King of Yehuda***

King Yehoshafat of Yehuda is a strong leader with impressive achievements, and his agenda of national reconciliation raises challenging contemporary dilemmas. Tucked away at the end of *Melakhim I* in a sparse telegraphic summary, he hardly makes an impression, but his reign was a high point for the kingdom of Yehuda. In *Divrei Ha-yamim*, it is described in luxurious detail, spanning four extensive chapters.<sup>1</sup>

Who is Yehoshafat and what legacy did he leave? What should we remember him for?

**ASSA**

Yehoshafat's achievements build upon the firm base built by his father, Assa. If you recall (*Melakhim I* ch.15), Assa reigned for 41 years. His prime accomplishment according to *Melakhim* was his anti-idolatry policy, as he dismantled pagan sites of worship and their associated cultural influence. This included the destruction of an image instituted by his own grandmother. In addition, Assa boosted the prestige of the Temple. On the military front, he ended the protracted internecine tensions with the Northern Kingdom. Rather than engaging Israel in war, he paid the Arameans to attack the Northern state, thus alleviating tension and avoiding civil war on his northern border.

**CLOSE READING IN MELAKHIM**

Yehoshafat follows King Assa. *Sefer Melakhim* depicts him with its hallmark formulaic language and we therefore fail to gain a significant impression of the man. However, we will engage in an exercise of close reading to demonstrate the manner in which much of the significant information may be extracted from the clues and indicators embedded in the text of *Sefer Melakhim*.

**RELIGION:**

He walked in all the way of Assa his father; he did not turn aside from it, doing right in the sight of God... The remnant of the Kadesh who remained in the days of his father Assa, he expelled from the land. (vv. 44, 47)

The first important detail, other than his age at his ascension to the throne and his 25 year reign, is the fact that he "did that which was right (straight) in the sight of God;" in other words, he did not succumb to *avoda zara*. In this regard, the text of *Sefer Melakhim* informs us that he engaged in a comprehensive campaign

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<sup>1</sup> *Divrei Ha-yamim* II ch.17-20

to rid the country of the Kadesh (v. 47), continuing the war against idolatry waged by his father and predecessor. Clearly, Yehoshafat made extraordinary efforts to eradicate any traces and trappings of idolatrous culture.

### **NATIONAL UNITY:**

Yehoshafat also made peace with the king of Israel. (v. 44)

The next detail is the manner in which Yehoshafat extends his hand in peace towards with the Northern Kingdom. This would appear to pass without comment or evaluation; however, we will see that this is more problematic than one would know at first glance. *Pasuk* 50 makes an enigmatic reference to a situation in which Yehoshafat rejects an offer to team up with Achav's successor, Achazyahu:

Then Achazyahu, son of Achav, proposed to Yehoshafat, "Let my servants sail with your servants by sea," but Yehoshafat would not agree. (v. 50)

Why does Yehoshafat rebuff Achazyahu? What was problematic in his offer? We will see the complementary account in *Divrei Ha-yamim*, which will supply the missing information.

### **PROSPERITY AND POWER:**

Now there was no king in Edom; a deputy was king. Yehoshaphat made ships of Tarshish to go to Ophir for gold, but they did not go, for the ships were broken at Ezion-Gaver. (vv. 47-48)

We can tell that this was a period of enormous prosperity and extensive political hegemony over the region. There are a number of clues here: Yehoshafat's control of Etzion Gaver<sup>2</sup> (v. 48) means that he has the wherewithal to build and maintain a sea port a great distance away from the national capital and the major population concentration of Yehuda. Additionally, protection of the port and its supply lines mean that Yehoshafat has full and uncontested control of the route to Eilat. Only kings who had regional control could mount such a project. In support of this theory of Yehoshafat's regional power, we should note how v.48 tells us that Israel had installed an Israelite governor as king in Edom (the desert leading to Eilat). In other words, Yehuda was the local regional power, wielding serious power over neighbouring states.<sup>3</sup> The resources and resourcefulness of the kingdom, including its technological know-how is portrayed elegantly by the ability to raise a fleet of "*Oniot Tarshish*," sea faring craft, ships strong enough to withstand a lengthy sea voyage. Again, this is a sign of wealth and power.

So we gain quite a good picture of the events of Yehoshafat's life from a careful reading of the few details listed here in *Melakhim*. We might question why we need to hear about the breaking of Yehoshafat's fleet at Etzion-Gaver. One feels that there is more to this story than is being communicated. And this is true.

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<sup>2</sup> On the coast of the Red Sea; see *Devarim* 2:8. Some scholars identify it as today's Aqaba, others as Tel El-Halifa, or the Jezirat Farun Island near Eilat.

<sup>3</sup> As we can see from archeological evidence – eg. The Mesha tablet, we know that Achav wielded similar influence further north in Moav.

Yehoshafat's story bursts to life in *Divrei Ha-yamim*. I strongly recommend that you read the chapters there.

## **DIVREI HA-YAMIM**

Chapter 17 of *Divrei Ha-yamim* lists several aspects of Yehoshafat's reign:

17:5	Wealth
17:7-9	Spreading Torah study nationally
17:10-11	Regional Power
17:12	Building projects
17:13	Industry and GNP
17:14-19	A huge, organised army

With all the impressive details, one gains an understanding that Yehoshafat's reign is reminiscent of Shlomo's (except that he didn't fall at all into the trap of *avoda zara*). Maybe this also explains his desire to unify the nation with his alliance with Achav and later Achazyahu. He saw the country returning to its heyday, and the natural thing to do in this environment was to unify. Hence his son's marriage to Achav's daughter.<sup>4</sup>

Chapter 19 describes an impressive story of a miraculous and faith-driven war situation in which Yehudah is threatened by neighbouring states, Moav and Edom. God miraculously saves Yehudah without their even needing to engage in battle! The entire depiction is rich with references to God. Yehoshafat quotes Shlomo's prayer at the Temple's inauguration; Levi'im find themselves unexpectedly overwhelmed by prophecy and they lead the nation to thank God with joyous songs of praise and *Hallel*. The depiction here is an idyllic one, with a nation led by their king in absolute harmony with God. God reciprocates by granting the nation surprise victory against our enemies.

## **DILEMMAS OF UNITY**

And yet all is not perfect in the kingdom of Yehoshafat. The *nevi'im* criticize him again and again for associating with the idolatrous Northern kings. *Divrei Ha-yamim* 18 recounts the story told in *Melakhim* I ch.22 of the joint campaign between Yehoshafat and Achav against Aram, a war that resulted in Israelite defeat and the death of Achav. Yehoshafat survived the war, but was greeted back home by the prophet, who reprimands him:

Do you seek to assist the evil, and demonstrate love to those who hate God? (19:2)

Similarly, after Yehoshafat joins with Achazyahu to build a joint navy, the *navi* Elazar ben Dodavahu approaches the king:

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<sup>4</sup> The question of who married whom between Yehoshafat and Achav's family, is a complicated one. See *Melakhim* II 8:18 and 26-7. See also *Divrei Ha-yamim* II 18:1-2. The *pesukim* do not state clearly whether Yehoram married Achav's daughter, or whether Yehoshafat married Omri's daughter. Most commentaries assume that Yehoshafat allowed his son to marry Achav's daughter. But Seder Olam suggests that Yehoshafat married achav's sister; Omri's daughter. See *Daat Mikra* in *Melakhim* II ch.8.

“Because you have joined with Achaziah, the Lord will destroy what you have made.” And the ships were wrecked and were not able to go to Tarshish. (20:37)

We thus see the prophet's criticism of Yehoshafat's national unity project.

We might think that Yehoshafat would recant on his policy, but he persists. In *Melakhim* II ch.3, we find him with yet another king of Yisrael - Yoram. The prophet Elisha expresses quite vocally that the king of Israel is a persona non grata:

Were it not that I respect king Yehoshafat of Yehuda, I wouldn't look at you or notice you. (3:14)

And so we understand that Yehoshafat's policy of national unity is a deliberate one.

With this heavy prophetic criticism, one must confront the question as to whether this unity was mistaken. One essential observation is that each of the joint ventures faltered or failed -:The joint military front of Achav and Yehoshafat resulted in defeat and the death of Achav. The boats of the Yehoshafat-Achazyahu naval alliance never made it out to sea. And the war in which Yehoshafat joins with Yoram (*Melakhim* II ch.3) also ends on a sour note. *Avot De-Rabbi Natan* draws an obvious conclusion based upon the teaching of Nitai HaArbeli that cautions against affiliation with the evil:

Nitai HaArbeli said: Keep far from a bad neighbour, and **do not associate with an evil person...** (*Pirkei Avot* 1:7)

... As we see with Yehoshafat, who joined together with Achav, and they went up [in war] together to Ramot Gilad, rousing God's anger against him. Again he associated with Achazyahu and they made boats together in Etzion-Gaver and God disrupted their actions... (*Avot De-Rabbi Natan* 9:4)

What should we conclude? Here I wonder about Yehoshafat as a model for our fragmented contemporary Jewish world. Is it wrong to forge alliances, thereby generating a sense of national cohesion and *Achdut* (unity), if our partner is acting in contravention of the Torah? Is it not possible that it is correct to heal internal frictions despite the differences in religious orientation? Or perhaps Achav and his sons were so potentially harmful that in THIS case it was inadvisable. As we shall see in *Melakhim* II, the marriage between Yehoshafat and the House of Omri resulted in a disastrous descent into idolatry<sup>5</sup> and violent political opportunism.<sup>6</sup> There is no doubt that the prophets were alerting the king to genuine problems. And yet, at the ideological level, the question remains as to whether this view should be the only model.<sup>7</sup> When do we overlook religious differences and unite, and when do we act discriminately?

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<sup>5</sup> *Melakhim* II 8:18

<sup>6</sup> The story of Atalia (Izevel's daughter), who killed the entire royal family of Yehuda (*Melakhim* II 8:26,29 and 11:1-16).

<sup>7</sup> In the past century, confronted by rampant secularisation, scholars from Rav Kook to the Chazon Ish affirmed a readjustment of sanctions against Shabbat desecrators, understanding that

## YEHOSHAFAT – *MISHPAT* / JUSTICE

The feature that may have given Yehoshafat his name<sup>8</sup> is the issue of law and Justice. Yehoshafat began his monarchy with a passion for spreading Torah:

...In the third year of his reign, he sent his officials, Ben-chayil, Ovadiah, Zechariah, Nethanel and Michaya, to teach in the cities of Judah; and with them the *Levi'im*, Shemaya, Netanya, Zevadya, Asahel, Shemiramot, Yehonathan, Adoniya, Toviya and Tov-Adoniya, the *Levi'im*; and with them Elishama and Yehoram, the *Kohanim*. They taught in Judah, having the book of the law of the God (*sefer torat Hashem*) with them; and they went throughout all the cities of Judah and taught among the people. (17:7-9)

However, when he returns from his joint war campaign with Achav, he is greeted by the prophet, calling him to do *teshuva* – to engage in an act of improvement or repair. Yehoshafat decides to rehabilitate the legal system:

Yehoshafat lived in Jerusalem and went out among the people from Beer-sheva to Har Ephraim and brought them back to *Hashem*, the God of their fathers. He appointed judges in the land in all the fortified cities of Yehuda, city by city. He instructed the judges, "Consider what you are doing, for you do not judge for man but for the Lord who is with you when you render judgment. Now then let the fear of the Lord be upon you; be very careful what you do, for the Lord our God will have no part in unrighteousness or partiality or the taking of a bribe." In Jerusalem also Yehoshafat appointed some of the *Levi'im* and *Kohanim*, and some of the heads of the fathers' households of Israel, for the judgment of the Lord and to judge disputes... (19:4-8)

This becomes the basis of an important instruction to judges:

Do not be afraid of any man: You might say – I am scared of that man. Perhaps his son will murder me, or he will set my haystack alight, or cut down my orchard? So the Torah teaches: Do not be afraid of any man, for the law is to God. This is what Yehoshafat said: Consider what you are doing, for you do not judge for man but for the Lord. (*Sifrei, Devarim* #17 and see *Sanhedrin, Tosefta* 1:4)

In other words, here is a king who understands that his mission is to spread God's law. He embarks on a huge undertaking to make the forces of justice and

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these people were far from the traditional heretic or a renegade Jew. Is there a difference between a Jew who engages in direct, self-aware, flagrant rebellion against God and those who are seen as victims of circumstance?

<sup>8</sup> The phenomenon of *midrash shemot* – names whose meaning connects with the text – is widespread in *Tanakh*. Good examples are Yaakov, Naomi, and Naval. In each case, the characters comment about the meanings of their own names, indicating a consistency of name and biography. Notwithstanding the comment of the Ibn Ezra (*Bereishit* 46:8), who suggests that one not analyze meanings of names other than those explicitly derived in the *Tanakh*, Midrash is replete with name wordplay, and modern literary analysis has also made use of the meanings of the names of Biblical characters.

God's law present and accessible to the nation, establishing courts in every locale. He trains and coaches his judges, fully aware of the issues like intimidation, impartiality and bribery, warning them that they are answerable to God Himself. Reading through this chapter, one is impressed of Yehoshafat's God awareness, as he instructs his judiciary, attempting to impart to them that they are imparting God's law, and that God is present amongst His judges.<sup>9</sup>

Yehoshafat reflects Shlomo in many aspects, such as the extensive building, regional power and wealth. But possibly this aspect of "*mishpat*" draws the greatest parallel with the man who requested "a listening heart to judge Your people" (*Melakhim* I 3:9). Whereas Shlomo's opening story is a difficult courtroom battle, Yehoshafat establishes an entire network of courts, spreading God's law beyond the confines of Jerusalem. In conclusion, we might see Yehoshafat as superior even to Shlomo in his positive and responsive interactions with the *navi* and the fact that, despite his association with Achav, he is insusceptible to idolatry. In the landscape of *Sefer Melakhim*, Yehoshafat stands as one of the greatest and most impressive kings of Yehuda.

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<sup>9</sup> See *Tehillim* ch.82:1 and the Ramban on *Shemot* 24:8, who deals with the overlap between the Judges and God in this context.