

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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

Shiur #09: Chapter 6:24- 7:20
Siege and Salvation in Shomron

Previous chapters have revealed a belligerent Aram engaging in regular border attacks against Israelite villages and towns. In this episode, the Aramean threat escalates further, as Aram besieges the capital Shomron, subjecting the city to terrible starvation. However, events unexpectedly turn in the depths of the siege and hunger, as God induces the enemy to flee and the city is saved! It is a group of four lepers, societal outcasts, who discover that the Arameans have deserted their positions. They return to the city and announce the good news.

THE SIEGE

And so it was, after this, Ben-Haddad King of Aram mustered his entire army and marched upon Shomron and besieged it. There was a great famine in Shomron, and the siege continued until a donkey's head sold for eighty [shekels] of silver, and a quarter of a *kav* of pigeons' dung for five shekels. Once, when the king of Israel was walking on the city wall, a woman cried out to him: "Help me, your majesty!" "Don't [ask me]," he replied. "Let the Lord help you! Where could I get help for you, from the threshing floor or from the winepress?" "But what troubles you?" the king asked her. The woman answered, "That woman said to me, 'Give me your son and we shall eat him today; and tomorrow we'll eat my son.' So we cooked my son and we ate him. The next day I said to her, 'Give up your son and let's eat him'; but she hid her son." When the king heard what the woman had said, he tore his clothes; and as he walked along the wall, the people could see that he was wearing sackcloth underneath. He said: "Thus and more may God do to me if the head of Elisha ben Shafat remains on his shoulders today." (6:24-31)

The verses use a variety of images to depict the severity of the devastation inflicted by the siege. First, the portrayal of the available food – a donkey's head and pigeons' droppings – sold at exorbitant prices illustrates the dire situation. The donkey meat is for food purposes, but what of the bird droppings? The Radak suggests that it was used for heating and fuel, but the Ralbag suggests a more creative option:

Due to the attack of the enemy, the countryside was filled with grain (because the people couldn't leave the city to harvest it). The doves

would feast upon the grains, and they ate so much, they could not digest it, and so much of the grain remained in their droppings.

The thought of eating the head of a donkey or picking through bird droppings for food remains gives ample insight into the dire straits of the people of Shomron.

ON THE WALL

A second image of the desperate hunger is the woman's appeal to the king while he tours the city walls, most likely supervising his fortifications and military positions upon the city perimeter, ensuring that the city is resistant to attack. The woman's approach appears to reflect a classic court scene; her initial cry, "Help me, your majesty!" is used elsewhere as the initiation of a royal judicial hearing (*II Shmuel* 14:4). The case she presents is a squabble between another woman and her. This woman that has approached the king demands, in the name of justice, that she has rights to the other's child. The direct appeal to the king, the two women, the lack of evidence, and the wrangling over a dead child evoke the judgment of King Shlomo in *I Melakhim* ch.3. And yet the comparison merely underscores the vast difference between the cases: the justice this woman seeks is grotesquely perverted, as she demands that her counterpart honor her word and give over her son so that they may devour him. This horrific scene echoes the worst predictions of the *tokhacha*, the rebuke: "You shall eat the fruit of your own body, the flesh of your sons and of your daughters ... in the siege."¹ This scene is also depicted in the vivid ordeals of the destruction of the Temple.² The depiction of women, who naturally bear, nurse, and nurture their children, cannibalizing their sons, a most fundamental violation of human nature, is a direct sign that the people have been forced to compromise the most fundamental aspects of their humanity. In this case, the woman seems oblivious to her self-incrimination, as she professes to the king that she consumed her own son. The siege has brought the city to its knees.

THE KING

Possibly, the extreme situation, so desperate and hopeless, furnishes an explanation for the vacillating response of the king. At first, he reacts with frustrated despair: " 'Don't [ask me],' he replied. 'Let the Lord help you! Where could I get help for you, from the threshing floor or from the winepress?'" But he quickly regains his composure, understanding that the woman is not requesting that he procure food, but merely that he resolve a dispute. " 'But what troubles you?'" he responds. After listening carefully to the woman's twisted predicament, he immediately rips his royal robes, a sign of mourning, shock, and horror. With his robes torn, he reveals that he is wearing sackcloth underneath, a clear sign that the king is engaged in penitence and prayer.³ And yet, he immediately accuses Elisha, insinuating that Elisha is to blame for the national ruin, and he threatens the prophet's

¹ *Devarim* 28:53

² *Eikha* 2:20, 4:10

³ *I Melakhim* 21:27, *II Melakhim* 19:1-2, *Yona* 3:5.

life.⁴ The king's threats, however, strike us as hyperbolic,⁵ for in the very next scene, the messenger arrives from the king saying, " 'this calamity is from the Lord; what more can I hope for from the Lord?'" (6:33)

How might we assess this king, who simultaneously expresses earnest penitence and yet threatens the life of the prophet? ⁶ The *Midrash Ha-gadol* articulates the king's ambivalence in a fascinating way:

"I am black but comely" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 5:1): The people of Israel said before God: Even though I am black, I am also comely ... There was no king more evil than Yehoram son (of Ach'av). About him, the verse states: "And the people looked, and behold he had sackcloth beneath upon his flesh." When he witnessed the distress of Israel, he could not contain himself ... **evil on the outside, but integrity within.**" (*Midrash Ha-gadol, Shemot*)

SALVATION

Elisha responds to the king by predicting a swift end to the siege and a return to normality. Just as the hunger is expressed using the pricing and choice of foodstuffs, similarly the relief of the starvation: "Tomorrow at this time, a *se'ah* of fine flour shall be sold for a shekel, and two *se'ah* of barley for a shekel, at the gate of Shomron" (7:1). At this point, the story shifts focus to four lepers. Initially we do not identify any connection between the lepers who sit at the "entrance to the gate"⁷ of Shomron and the terrible siege, but they soon become the vehicle of salvation. Lepers must sit outside the community.⁸ These outcasts are not restricted in their movement by the city walls, and hence they have opportunities that the inhabitants of Shomron cannot entertain. They can approach the Aramean army camp:

"Why should we sit here waiting for death?
If we decide to get into the town, we shall die,
and if we sit here, we shall die.
Come! Let us desert to the Aramean camp;

⁴ Why does the king blame Elisha? Possibly, the king felt that Elisha had not exercised his ability to beseech God (Rashi, Radak), or alternatively, because he had explicitly decreed a seven-year famine in the land (Abarbanel). Possibly, the king blamed him for releasing the forces of Aram (6:22-23), thereby allowing them to regroup and attack a second time (*Olam Ha-Tanakh*).

⁵ The scene is difficult, as initially the king threatens Elisha, with Elisha responding by instructing his men to "shut the door and hold the door fast against him" (6:32). However, then the messenger arrives and merely expresses his despair, rather than assaulting Elisha. Moreover, Elisha announces that the king will follow the messenger (see 6:32 and this is verified in 7:17), and yet the king's arrival is not explicit. The commentaries all attempt to resolve these textual difficulties. See Rav Elchanan Samet's *Pirkei Elisha* pp. 505-510 for a summary of the opinions and a possible reconstruction of the scene.

⁶ The Talmud (*Ta'anit* 14b and Rashi's comments there) rereads 6:33 as suggesting that the king now turns to God in prayer: "This calamity is from the Lord. Now I must implore the Lord?" (6:33) In response, Elisha delivers a prophecy of consolation and relief! (7:1)

⁷ The gate of the city (*sha'ar*) plays a prominent role in the chapter (7:1,3,10, 11, 17, 18, 20). The words "*se'or*" (barley) and the measure of a "*se'ah*" are all alliterations of this word.

⁸ *Vayikra* 13:45-46

If they let us live, we shall live,
and if they put us to death, we shall die." (7:3-4)

The chances look slim, but they seize the only possible opportunity for survival and approach the enemy forces. They discover to their surprise that the siege camp is absolutely deserted. God had intervened supernaturally:

God caused the Aramean army to hear a sound of chariots, a sound of horses⁹, a din of a huge army. They said to one another: "The king of Israel must have hired the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Mitzrayim to attack us!" (7:7-8)

Aram panicked and abandoned their positions. Initially, the lepers eat and drink and bury whatever loot they had managed to take with them.¹⁰ But though they are societal outcasts, their communal conscience irks them: "We do not well: this day is a day of good tidings, and we hold our peace" (*II Melakhim* 7:9). They announce the good news to the city, and the king sends scouts to verify that the troops of Aram have indeed fled; the siege is lifted, and supplies are restored to the city. Elisha's prediction is proven true.

A LEPROUS REDEMPTION

The astounding miracle is told from an oblique angle. Rather than an omniscient narrator objectively reporting the story of the Aramean attack, the hunger in the city, and God's miraculous salvation, the siege is told through the prism of morally obscure individuals. We learn about this story via characters who are ethically compromised: the cruel child-eating mothers and the selfish leprous outcasts. Moreover, God's salvation is discovered almost by accident. One wonders: why is the story told in this arcane manner?

The modern Hebrew poet, Rachel, wrote a poem based upon this chapter. It is a bold statement of refusal to accept a tainted miracle. She writes:

For a long while the dreadful enemy
Brought Shomron to siege;
Our lepers to her brought tidings.
To her brought the tidings of freedom.

A Shomron under siege - the entire land,
The famine is unbearable.
But I do not want to receive news of redemption
From the lips of a leper.

The pure will bring news and the pure will redeem,
And if his hand won't be there to redeem,

⁹ The flight of Aram seems unrelated to Elisha; however, we can't help but wonder regarding the possibility of a connection between this episode and Elisha's horses and chariots in 6:15.

¹⁰ *Chazal* identify the four lepers with Geichazi and his sons (see Rashi 7:3). The connection point might be the taking of the treasures, both here and in *II Kings* 5:23-24.

Then I will choose to die from the suffering of the siege,
On the eve of the day of the great tidings.

Rachel is a perfectionist. She would prefer to choose to die in suffering rather than accept the tidings of redemption from one who is not worthy to deliver them.

Does Rachel's poem express a classic Jewish perspective? Fascinatingly, the Gemara in one aggadic passage depicts the Messiah himself as a leper sitting at the gates of the city:¹¹

R. Joshua b. Levi met Elijah standing by the entrance of R. Simeon b. Yochai's tomb... He then asked him, "When will the Messiah come?" "Go and ask him," was his reply. "Where is he sitting?" "At the entrance to the city." "And by what sign may I recognize him?" "He is sitting among the poor lepers; all of them untie [their bandages] all at once, and reapply them together, whereas he unties and reapplies each [bandage] separately, thinking, 'should I be called, [if it is time for my appearance as the Messiah] I must not be delayed [through having to reapply all the bandages].'" (*Sanhedrin* 98a)

On this basis, we would be forced to say that Judaism does not always present redemption as flawless. For the Talmud, there is redemption even by means of a leper!

But what does our chapter seek to tell us? There is no doubt that this story reflects themes of dissonance between the internal and the external. We witness the king's outer robes and his inner sackcloth. Who is the real king? Is he righteous or evil? Are the lepers who are ejected from the city good or bad? As the story progresses, they undergo a transformation. At first, they are only looking out for themselves; they eat and drink. Suddenly they turn and begin to think about the starving masses in the city, and they recognize their sin. Are the lepers worthy?

The notion of a flawed redemption lies at the heart of this story. At this point in history, Israel is suffering attack and invasion from Aram. This national weakness is a punishment for the sins of the generation of Ach'av. To this end, the entire nation is subjected to a state of prolonged suffering. Elisha's miracles are more of an inspiration than a salvation. Aram might have fled, but they will be back for another round of fighting. However spectacular the miracle, these chapters depict an Israel at the mercy of Aram. And so the moral ambiguity and uncertainty of the chapter is reflective of the infirmity and temporary nature of the victory.

CONTEMPORARY REFLECTIONS: THE STATE OF ISRAEL AND INCOMPLETE REDEMPTION.

¹¹ The Talmud (*Berakhot* 54a-b) relates a story in which lepers, precisely because of their vantage point, outside of society, perceive God's salvation, which would otherwise have been missed by the nation.

Rav Ahron Soloveitchik, Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik's brother, referred to this chapter in an article entitled "Israel's Independence Day: Reflections in Halachah and Hashkafa." Here, he reads our chapter along the same lines that we have presented:

We thus see that the miracle of the deliverance of all the inhabitants of Shomron was carried out through the medium of four lepers: physical lepers, yes, but above all, spiritual lepers. (According to our Sages, these four outcasts were none other than Geichazi and his three sons, who were afflicted with leprosy as a penalty for their spiritual heresy. The Rambam in his *Commentary to the Mishnah* in the last chapter of *Sanhedrin* describes them as cynics and scoffers.)

The first argument, as to how any relief for the Jewish people could be realized through the medium of *apikorsim* (non-believers), can easily be rebutted by the precedent of the deliverance accorded the people of Shomron through the medium of the four lepers. This episode shows that no Jew can be excluded from the grace of God, that "*Yisrael af al pi she-chata, Yisrael hu*" (a Jew, even though he has sinned, remains a Jew), and that there is an innate tendency towards altruism even in the heart of spiritual lepers.

It also shows that God does not exclude any Jew from salvation and He may therefore designate even spiritual outcasts as the messengers of relief and deliverance for the people of Israel. Consequently, we cannot ignore the significance of the establishment of the State of Israel simply because Jews who stand a substantial distance from any form of observance of mitzvos were at the forefront of founding the State. Perhaps the fact that nonobservant Jews are in the forefront today is a penalty for Orthodox Jewry's failure to play the most important part in the formation of the state.

A flawed redemption fits a flawed reality. Rav Yehuda Amital once said that after the Holocaust we are prepared to accept even a redemption that is not a complete redemption, as long as the exile indeed comes to an end! As a Holocaust survivor, he understood the desperation that is described in this chapter, as well as its relief.