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Haftarat Mikeitz: Wisdom and Insight in the Leadership and Law of Shlomo Ha-Melekh

Introduction

Our *haftarah*¹⁸¹ is not commonly studied. Since *Parashat Mikeitz* is nearly always the week of *Shabbat Chanukah*, the specific *Chanukah haftarah* is read and the assigned *haftarah* for *Mikeitz* is rarely read.¹⁸² Only when the calendar has a late *Parashat Bereishit* (29 *Tishrei*) and a late *Chanukah* (when *Cheshvan* and *Kislev* are both only 29 days) do we have the opportunity to read *Mikeitz* after *Chanukah* and thus include the assigned *haftarah* in our study. Delving into the tightly woven narrative of *Melakhim Aleph* 3:14–4:1 which serves as the regular *haftarah*, allows us to consider the unique role of a *Melekh Yisrael* in leading his people with wisdom and Torah.

While *prima facie* the connection between *Parashat Mikeitz* and the wisdom of *Shlomo Ha-Melekh* in *Melakhim* is one that contrasts the dreams, the dreamers, and presumably the levels of insight revealed in the two narratives, the majority of the *haftarah* deals more with explicating what Divinely inspired wisdom is, and how it is used in leading the people, rather than dealing with the specific meaning of the dream, as in *Parashat Mikeitz*. Therefore, in learning this *haftarah*, we approach *Shlomo Ha-Melekh's* unique wisdom as manifested in his judgment of the case of the two harlots, and consider what it tells us about Divinely inspired wisdom. How does this wisdom help a *Shlomo Ha-Melekh* lead his nation?

Background

Given, the tumultuous onset of David's reign and the difficult relationships of David's sons to the *melukhah*, it is important to note that the *haftarah* comes after the *Shlomo Ha-Melekh* has clearly been identified as the rightful political designee and continuance of his father's reign.¹⁸³ Additionally, his rule has been recognized as Divinely inspired, confirmed and directed towards the ultimate achievement of completing the reign of David.¹⁸⁴ It is significant that Shlomo's sense of self, and purpose, are clearly defined by this goal.¹⁸⁵ This image of Shlomo, committed to building a *Beit Hashem* as a personal fulfillment of his role as the continuance of his father's mission, is a recurring theme in the descriptions of Shlomo's efforts regarding the *Mikdash*. However, from the perspective of *Chazal*, it is also an obstacle and a part of his limited ability to see the realities of his nation's fraying faith.¹⁸⁶ In light of this, we read our *haftarah* with an appreciation that the special wisdom granted to Shlomo was a quality that secured his leadership and endeared him to his people and to *Hashem*, but it did not inoculate him from error, nor did it ensure that his policies were to be ultimately successful.¹⁸⁷

As such, our question becomes, what is so special about the wisdom of Shlomo? How does our *haftarah* reflect this unique gift of *Hashem*, and how does it inspire Shlomo's leadership?

The setting of our *haftarah* is after Shlomo has firmly established his throne and in thanksgiving goes to *Givon* to bring offerings to *Hashem*. There he is visited by *Hashem* in a dream, with an offer to fulfill whatever request he

¹⁸¹. *Melakhim Aleph* 3:15–4:1.

¹⁸². The *haftarah* of *Shabbat Chanukah* is *Zechariah* 2:14–4:7.

¹⁸³. Even Adoniyahu, the last contender to the throne, acknowledges Shlomo's reign is from *Hashem*. See *Melakhim Aleph* 2:15.

¹⁸⁴. As David asserts in his deathbed blessing to Shlomo, See *Melakhim Aleph* 2:1–5.

¹⁸⁵. See Shlomo's prayer upon completing the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, which is suffused with this notion. See *Melakhim Aleph* 8:12–22.

¹⁸⁶. Adin Steinsaltz; *Biblical Images*, Solomon, pp. 182–184.

¹⁸⁷. See *Melakhim Aleph* 11:1–10.

makes of *Hashem*. Shlomo requests “*lev shomea*” – “a discerning heart,” to be able to judge His people better. While *Hashem* approves the request and grants Shlomo the wisdom, in addition to all the material wealth he did not ask for, the language of the grant is decidedly different. Shlomo requests a discerning heart for judging a difficult people, and *Hashem* grants him a heart that is wise and probing, combining both knowledge and insight for the potential of unparalleled understanding and wisdom.¹⁸⁸

The *haftarah* begins with Shlomo awakening from his prophetic dream having been blessed with this unique wisdom. The narrative then tells us about the infamous case of the two harlots seeking Shlomo’s judgment regarding their competing claims over two babies, one dead and one alive. Claims are put forth, and in short order Shlomo has contrived a useful trick to discern the birth mother from the posing mother and the case of the truthful mother is solved. The *haftarah* concludes with a dramatic assertion that Shlomo was “*melekh al kol Yisrael*” – “king over all of Israel,” thereby indicating that this case was sufficient to inspire unanimous loyalty and thus represented the sagacity of Shlomo’s justice and leadership.¹⁸⁹

For a quick recap of the above, in *Melakhim Aleph* 3:15–4:1 we read:

And Shlomo awoke; and, behold, it was a dream. And he came to *Yerushalayim*, and stood before the ark of the covenant of *Hashem*, and offered up burnt offerings, and offered peace offerings, and made a feast for all his servants.

Then came there two women, who were harlots, to the king, and stood before him. And one woman said, O my lord, I and this woman live in one house; and I gave birth to a child with her in the house. And it came to pass the third day after I had given birth, that this woman also gave birth; and we were together; there was no stranger with us in the house, only the two of us in the house. And this woman’s child died in the night; because she lay on it. And she arose at midnight, and took my son from my side, while your maidservant slept, and laid it in her bosom, and laid her dead child in my bosom. And when I rose in the morning to nurse my child, behold, it was dead; but when I had looked at it closely in the morning, behold, it was not my son that I had borne. And the other woman said, No; but the living child is my son, and the dead is your son. And this said, No; but the dead is your son, and the living is my son, and they spoke before the king.

Then said the king, One says, This is my son who lives, and your son is the dead; and the other says, No; but your son is the dead, and my son is the living.

And the king said, Bring me a sword. And they brought a sword before the king. And the king said, Divide the living child in two, and give half to one, and half to the other. Then the woman, whose son was the living child, spoke to the king, for her love was enkindled towards her son, and she said, O my lord, give her the living child, but do not slay it. But the other said, Let it be neither mine nor yours, but divide it.

Then the king answered and said, Give her the living child, and do not slay it; she is its mother. And all *Yisrael* heard of the judgment which the king had judged; and they feared the king; for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him, to do judgment.¹⁹⁰

Apparently, the placement of this specific story here indicates that this story can be understood as the case that exemplifies the fulfillment of *Hashem*’s promise to Shlomo. After he requested “a sympathetic heart in order to judge your people” (3:9), and God promised him, “I have done as you requested” (3:12), the trial confirms Shlomo’s new insight and wisdom.

What are the features of Shlomo’s wisdom and leadership that are reflected in this narrative?

The Case

Of all the types of deliberations and judgments a king must engage in, what was worthy about this one that gives it such primacy in our text? To start with, we have an unusual set of clients. *Ishot zonot* (harlots) in the king’s court certainly are not the typical royal clientele. Next, the actual case is striking in that the claim deals with widows, a bereaved mother, and the possible theft of an infant child. In addition to these dramatic figures, Shlomo’s solution is also dramatic in its simple logic, and in his confidence that the rightful mother would emerge to protect her child’s life.

¹⁸⁸. *Melakhim Aleph* 3:6–12. See Radak there, with regards to the appreciation that this balance of information and the pursuit of its application is what sets Shlomo’s wisdom apart.

¹⁸⁹. *Melakhim Aleph* 4:1. Radak contrasts this unanimous acceptance of Shlomo with the confusion and contested nature of David’s initial reign which continued in the revolts and insurrections of his later reign as well.

¹⁹⁰. *Melakhim Aleph* 3:15–28.

What does this trial reveal about Shlomo's *chokmah*? One suggestion places the *halakhot* of *yibbum* at the center of the case.¹⁹¹ The *Midrash* in *Kohelet* explains that the reason both of these women were so desperate to have the living child declared their own was that they were both potential *yevamot*. Neither of the two had any other offspring. Whoever would be judged to be the childless woman would not only lose the infant, but would also be trapped in the unpleasant status of a *yevamah*, being dependent upon her brother-in-law's good will.¹⁹² Complicating things further, according to the *Midrash*, these women were mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.

The Meiri suggests that these clarifications regarding the women's identities need to be understood together.¹⁹³ That is, as recently bereaved women, each with the possibility of becoming a *yevamah*, the claim to a living baby becomes more urgent. Additionally, according to the explanation offered by R. Kornfeld,¹⁹⁴ Shlomo's wisdom was such that he understood that the *halakhot* of *yibbum* would allow the mother-in-law to be released from *yibbum* by virtue of her grandson, and thus only the daughter-in-law would be desperate enough to either claim the child as her own (which would release her from *yibbum* since it would indicate that her dead husband had not been childless when he died), or consent to the death of the baby (in which case she would be released from *yibbum* if her husband's brother was no longer alive).¹⁹⁵

This interpretation of the events asserts that Shlomo's wisdom here was both indicative of his detailed grasp of the relevant *halakhot*, as well as his being conscious of the frailties of human nature.¹⁹⁶ In those moments of desperation, Shlomo could see the driving need for self-preservation superseding the ethics of preserving the life of an innocent child. By tricking the daughter-in-law to disclose her desperation, Shlomo also exposes her cruel logic. Anyone who could agree to the death of a child in that manner was certainly guilty.

Thus, it was not only the judgment of Shlomo that was wise and righteous, but also the way in which he conducted the trial in which the guilty party gave self-incriminating testimony. This mechanism achieved more than justice, it validated the legitimacy and clarity of the ruling, wherein no doubt remained as to who the guilty party was, and how that individual had to face her own guilt and corruption. This self-realization was ultimately the form of justice that Shlomo promoted.

Typically, the court of the king is not the forum for regular daily deliberations between citizens regarding ownership and civil matters. Even the cases brought to Shlomo in the prior chapters reflected significant concerns of political stability and the capital execution of individuals attempting to thwart the king's reign. In our *haftarah*, however, the claim of two harlots was considered significant enough to be brought before the king. It was their case that exemplified Shlomo's gift from *Hashem*, and how Shlomo's wisdom and judgment were displayed before the people.

¹⁹¹. This explanation is cogently made in an article by R. Mordechai Kornfeld of Yeshivat Ohr Yerushalayim (<http://www.shemayisrael.co.il/parsha/kornfeld/archives/miketz.htm>).

¹⁹². *Kohelet Rabbah* 10:16.

¹⁹³. *Yalkut Shimoni* 2:175, Meiri on *Yevamot* 17a.

¹⁹⁴. See fn. 11.

¹⁹⁵. In the article cited above, R. Kornfeld offers this brief review of the relevant *halakhot* of *yibbum*:

If there are brothers, and one of them dies without children, the wife of the deceased man may not marry "out," to another man. Her brother-in-law (that is, her levir, or husband's brother) must marry her and thus perform "Yibum" [=levirate marriage] on her.... If the man does not want to marry her, she shall approach the elders and declare, "My brother-in-law refuses to establish his brother's name in Israel; he does not consent to perform "Yibum" on me" Then she shall approach him in the presence of the elders and remove his shoe from his foot, and spit in front of him, and proclaim, "Such should be done to a man who would not build up his brother's house!" (Devarim 25:5, 7, 9). (1) "Yibum," as mentioned above, is only applicable when a man dies childless. "Dying childless" includes cases where a man once had children, but those children were already dead at the time of his own death (*Yevamot* 87b). (2) If the deceased man has no living children but he does have living grandchildren, he is not considered to be "childless." Therefore, there is no "Yibum" (*ibid.* 70a). (3) The widow is only bound to marry her husband's *brother.* If the deceased husband does not leave behind a living brother, his wife is free to marry whoever she pleases (*ibid.* 17b). (4) If the deceased left behind any offspring at all, there is no "Yibum" – even if the offspring is only one day old. Not only that, but even if the offspring is still a fetus at the time of the husband's death, its mother is exempted from being bound to the living brother. This is only true, however, when the offspring is viable. If the fetus is aborted or stillborn, or even if it is born alive but dies or is killed before it has lived for thirty days, it is not considered to have ever been a viable offspring. "Yibum" is therefore required (*ibid.* 111b; *Shabbat* 136a). (5) If the brother of the deceased is a minor, the widow is still bound to him. In this case, however, she does not have the option of freeing herself through the "Chalitzah" ceremony, since a minor is not able to perform a "Chalitzah." Instead, she must wait 13 years, until the brother is thirteen years old, in order for him to be able to perform a "Chalitzah." Only then may she remarry (*Yevamot* 105b).

¹⁹⁶. Another angle in understanding the precise nature of the crime and the claim of these women is explored by R. Yitzchak Etshalom, in his article "Mishpat Shlomo," in which the trial is explored based on an analysis of some of the precise wording of the cryptic case. See his <http://www.torah.org/advanced/mikra/br/MishpatShlomo.pdf>.

Shlomo's reign was characterized by peace, stability, diplomacy, and world-wide recognition of his leadership and wisdom. Motivated by a mission to build an international empire that secured the legacy of his father David, he also reached new heights domestically, refashioning the political and legislative structure of Israel's government. Most importantly, in building the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, he highlighted for the people that all the successes they aspired to are rooted in their service and worship of *Hashem*.

Shlomo's insight into the human condition, and his leadership, are both exemplified in the story of this *haftarah*, in which Shlomo not only resolves a curious case of identity and law but also in which his expectation that all members of the Jewish polity must face their failings serves as a central theme, as well. As discussed above, in rendering his initial verdict, Shlomo treats the disputed baby as a property to be divided. In this manner, Shlomo exposed the cruel logic of the purported mother. When Shlomo was able to expose the corrupt logic of the guilty party, by inducing the woman into hearing her own depravity as she assented to a cruel and inhumane verdict, the people could see the depth of his commitment to truth and justice. This moment and revelation was as significant as his ultimate verdict, since it demonstrated Shlomo's insight to all segments of society, and the fact that he was not above bringing *Hashem's* justice to each and every member of the nation.

This account in our *haftarah* ends with a dramatic closing statement describing how all the people saw that "God's wisdom was within him, to perform justice" (3:28). "*Va-yehi ha-melekh Shlomo melek al kol Yisrael*" – "and Shlomo was king over all of Israel" (4:1). The implication is clear – that the wisdom God granted, and which Shlomo displayed in the resolution of this case, were indicative of, and the reason for, Shlomo's peaceful reign over all of Israel.