

## Lesson 18: Melakhim Alef chapter 21

### Lesson Goals:

1. To consider how recognition of God as supreme can be expressed by means of behavior towards property
2. To consider how recognition of God as supreme requires a reduced sense of one's own importance
3. To reflect on the nature of Israelite kingship
4. To know the narrative, and ensure memory of one of the central stories of Israelite Kingship.
5. To become familiar with the characters in this central story

### Part 1: Naboth, Jezebel, and Ahab – verses 1-16

To ensure that students recall the key names in this chapter, use the board extensively to illustrate each of the names. I think that the board will be more useful in this respect than a powerpoint.

Begin by frontally teaching verses 1-3. Illustrate verse 1 on the board by showing Ahab's "heichal" and Naboth's vineyard. Mention that grape vines require much more work than other trees – unlike olives and pomegranates, they won't survive in rocky soil, and they need continuous care. So someone who has a vineyard really works hard, and develops a real relationship of love with his vines.

Then present verse 2. Ask if Ahab is being fair. Insist that students argue both sides of the issue. Students should realize that from a strict financial point of view, he is being fair. But the key question is: Does Ahab have the power to force his point of view onto Naboth? A secondary question is: How does Naboth view the vineyard?

Ask students to read and act out verse 4. They should realize that Ahab is here behaving like a spoiled baby and sulking.

Then, introduce verses 5-7. Allow two students to act out Ahab and Jezebel in these verses. When the acting is done, highlight the phrase in v. 7: אתה עתה תעשה מלוכה בישראל. Jezebel argues that until now, Ahab has not been an effective king.

Ask students: What does kingship mean, in Jezebel's view?

Students should realize that kingship means, to her, supremacy in a hierarchy.

Show slide 2, which illustrates the contrast between Jezebel's view of kingship in Israel, and the prophet's view. What difference does it make if you recognize God as supreme over the

king? How does that limit the king's property rights? This is a key question, one which students really should understand fully.

This idea, that God's supremacy matters, is what is lacking in Jezebel's handling of the matter.

Read and explain verses 8-10 out loud, noting that בָּרַךְ here means קָלַל, and then ask students: Is Jezebel being fair? Students should understand that she is procedurally doing all that is required: there are witnesses, and the king has the right to execute people. But slide 2 illustrates what is wrong.

Ask students to internalize this by thinking of themselves as one of the זִקְנִים וְהַחֲרִים to whom Jezebel directs her missive. (חֲרִים is a very difficult-to-define term, but indicates some type of leader.) Would they obey her? Why or why not?

Perhaps for this reason, the narrative emphasizes not only Jezebel's instructions (verses 9-10) but also their carrying out (verses 11-13). Did the זִקְנִים וְהַחֲרִים have to obey? Could they have saved Naboth? What would they have to sacrifice to do so? Students should understand that accepting God as sovereign means avoiding killing an innocent person, even if commanded to do so "כִּי אִם בְּסִפְרֵי" v.11. This may involve major loss of personal property, but it is nevertheless required of a person.

In verses 14-16, return to the drama of Ahab and Jezebel, each of them in turn. Read the verses out loud, and ask students to act out these roles.

The key question to open for debate after reading verse 16 is: Is Ahab guilty? Does he know what Jezebel did? Should he know? Should he suspect? And should he take the vineyard?

The key question should not be answered simply by procedural answers, but by addressing the more substantive question: Does Ahab recognize God as supreme?

## Part 2: Eliyahu and Ahab verses 17-27

In introducing this second part of the chapter, students should be told in advance that Jezebel disappears from the drama here. Because the story is primarily about Ahab, and how he deals with his conscience, and how Eliyahu represents that conscience.

Read verses 17 and 18. Emphasize the location where the encounter takes place. How many times have we seen Ahab in this vineyard? (Recall verses 1-3). Ask students what they think Ahab is now thinking. As they are answering, cut in with a dramatic reading of the first half of v. 19:

Put slide 3 on the board, which shows the words הֲרַחֲצֵת וְגַם יִרְשֵׁת. Students should understand the meaning of the question, and then ask students: What's wrong with the accusation?

Students should understand that Ahab is here being accused of a crime he did not technically commit – he didn't kill Naboth – but that doesn't matter to God, who nevertheless holds him responsible.

Read the rest of verse 19. Students should understand that of all the crimes Ahab committed, this crime is the one for which he will be punished. No other crime he did carries a similar punishment.

Read verse 20, ask students why they think Ahab asks the question he does. Ahab recognizes in Eliyahu someone who holds a mirror to his actions and shows Ahab what he himself has done.

Ask students to read through verses 21-24 and list all of the punishments that are to be meted out to the house of Ahab. Students should understand:

1. Ahab's death in the field of Naboth
2. The end of Ahab's house
3. The gruesome death of Jezebel in the moat.

Then ask students to read (perhaps for homework) verses 27-29 and extract a message from that narrative. Hold a brief discussion of these verses, emphasizing that teshuva is always possible, but does not always eliminate punishment. The teacher may wish to present the end of the first chapter of Hilkhhot Teshuva in Rambam, and emphasize that without teshuva, there is no way to eliminate punishment, but that given the severity of the sin, other elements may also be required.

## Conclusion

Given the attention focused here on recognizing God's sovereignty, ask students to devote some time to an essay with the following structure:

- a. What does "recognizing God as sovereign" mean in real life?
- b. What experiences of Ahab gave him the opportunity to recognize God as sovereign? In what ways did he recognize God as sovereign, and in what ways did he not?
- c. What experiences in your own life give you the opportunities that Ahab had? What choices can you make in light of learning from Ahab?