

Lesson 6: The Decline of Solomon's Kingdom

Lesson Goals:

1. Students will develop skills in “rapid reading” of Biblical Hebrew narrative, and in “reading for information” in considering narrative.
2. In examining the story of Solomon, students will consider how being admired (for wisdom or any other personal accomplishment) can lead to an inflated sense of self. Students will consider how this sort of arrogance can lead to serious deficiencies in relationships both *בין אדם למקום* and *בין אדם לחברו*.
3. Students will further consider correlations between Sefer Devarim and Sefer Melakhim. By examining how the narrative of Solomon's misdeeds is similar to the limits on the king in Devarim 17, more advanced students will consider how narrative is an interpretation of events, rather than a record of events.
4. Students will consider how Solomon's misdeeds result in some ways from his successes, and what steps he could have taken to avoid these misdeeds. Students will internalize these steps and think about internalizing concepts that are often talked about such as *יראת שמים*, *ענוה*, *צניעות*, applying them in their own personal lives as character traits, and not only in external actions.

Part 1: The Queen of Sheba (Melakhim Alef 10:1-13)

The teacher should begin by reading 10:1 out loud, and ask a student to summarize the verse in English without looking at a Tanakh. The student will likely leave out the words “*לשם ה'*” in his/her translation, and the teacher will ask the students what these words mean and why they're important. The whole verse appears in slide 2, along with Radak's commentary, which indicates that Solomon was somehow “different” than other wise men. For a couple of minutes, the teacher should ask students to suggest how that difference might be apparent in Solomon's behaviour. The purpose of this question is to explore a point which will be important further on in the chapter, rather than to achieve a specific answer. Record some of the best answers on slide 3, to which the teacher can refer later in the lesson. (I do not have a fully satisfactory answer to this point, but it is clear from the continuation of the chapter that Solomon is expected to acknowledge the supremacy of God. Students should consider how this acknowledgement translates into actual practice.)

The teacher should then ask students to read independently 10:2-9, and ask students to answer the two questions in slide 4, after reading these verses. (Ideally, the task of preparing vv 1-9 can be assigned for homework the night before, using worksheet 1 as a guide.) The questions are interpretive, rather than informational:

אלו דברים ראתה מלכת שבא בגללם אמרה את פסוקים וז'?

אלו דברים ראתה מלכת שבא בגללם אמרה את פסוק ט'?

In answering question 1, the teacher can refer to the *ג' רלב* here:

זה מורה כי הבית אשר בנה היה בנוי בחכמה נפלאה, וכן מאכל שלחנו ומושב עבדיו ומעמד משרתי ומלבושיהם ומשקיו – שהיה שותה על דרך המזון ועל דרך הרפואה, הכל היה מסודר בחכמה, וכן העליה אשר יעלה בה בית ה' מבינו, היתה גם כן נעשית בחכמה.

The teacher should be aware that the Queen of Sheba episode marks the apogee of the Solomon narrative. It is the last key “highpoint” of the narrative, with no negative undertones. It has led to many legends, but we lack any clear historical information about Sheba or its queen.

Before concluding the Queen of Sheba episode, the teacher should ask students who gives gifts to whom, looking at 10:2, 10:10, 10:13. Illustrate using slide 5. What do the gifts express? Explain that power dynamics among rulers in the ancient world are often expressed by gift-giving. Rulers who are on an equal level exchange gifts mutually. But in a relationship where one ruler is more powerful than the other, the weaker party is obligated to give gifts as a sign of loyalty, and the stronger party gives no gifts, but only provides “protection” to the weaker party. Students should realize that Solomon and the Queen of Sheba are described as equal in power, because they exchange gifts.

This leads to

Part 2: Solomon’s Wealth and Horses (Melakhim Alef 10:14-29) and the Commandment of the King (Devarim 17:14-20)

The teacher should read 10:14-15, and ask students what these verses indicate about Solomon’s status. Students should realize that Solomon was seen as the overlord or more powerful party, and students should be asked how this might make them feel if they were Solomon. Don’t elicit answers yet, just ask the question.

Students should then read vv. 18-21 on their own, and also vv. 23-25 (Vocabulary for these verses is on handout 2). After each group of verses, students should again ask themselves the same question: “How might this make you feel if you were Solomon?” Students should record their answers in a notebook, and can answer in the words of a song, in pictures, or in some other form (without spending too long on these creative pursuits).

The teacher should elicit answers after students have read till v. 25. The teacher should try to direct a discussion on the relationship between feeling “great” and feeling “on top of the world,” and one’s relationship to others. Is it really a good feeling to feel more powerful than others? Does one have friends, or only underlings and servants? Students may not be attuned to the nuances of why feeling at “the top of the world” may be injurious to relationships with other people. The goal of this discussion is to ensure that students develop this sensitivity. Issues of how this influences one’s relationship with God will be addressed later.

After the topic has been thoroughly addressed, the teacher should ask students what objects they might have that make them feel “on top of the world.” Students will no doubt mention the latest technological gizmos, or great bodies, or designer clothes. Ask students (especially male students) to focus on objects, especially transportation – and try to elicit the idea that sportscars

or other fancy cars feed ego. Then mention that just like there is a difference between a Chevrolet sedan and a sportscar (slide 6), there was a difference in the ancient world between chariots and wagons. Chariots provide not only transportation, but power in war and political strength and therefore feed the ego. Quality horses to drive such chariots could best be obtained in Egypt and in the Hittite kingdom, two empires that had long bred such horses. (Note the locations of Egypt and Que in the map on slide 7; Que is in the Cilician plain in the south of Anatolia, the most accessible part of what was once the Hittite empire.) The teacher should read vv. 26-28, focusing on vv. 26 and 28, and ask students again “How would you feel if you had all these horses and chariots?”

Students might point out that as a king, Solomon needs war horses: they are essential for his army. The teacher should acknowledge this, but ask students whether all of the items mentioned in 10:14-29 can be construed as necessary for the kingdom.

The teacher should then direct students to Devarim 17:14-20, using worksheet 3. The teacher should explain the context of these verses, noting that Devarim as a whole prepares the Jews for entering the Land of Israel and that from these specific verses derives either the obligation or the permission to have a king. The worksheet does not address the question of whether a king is obligatory (רשות/חובה), but focuses only on the 3 “accumulations” that Solomon commits in Melakhim Alef 10:14-11:10, which are prohibited in Devarim 17:14-20: gold, horses, women, and on the feeling of “being lifted up from among his brothers,” which the Torah seeks to avoid. The worksheet therefore focuses on these points.

In reviewing the worksheet, the teacher should focus on questions 2 and 4, and should refer to question 1. (We will not address question 3 here.) First, ask students to look at question 2 and consider which of the three commandments of לא ירבה Solomon violated in Melakhim Alef 10:14-20. Students should be able to identify the two violations: a) gold/silver; b) horses. Students will look for the third violation and the teacher should direct them to Melakhim Alef 11:1-5, which should be read and explained out loud. Students may (should) be shocked by v. 5, and if not, teacher should ask them “what’s shocking about v. 5?” The students should appreciate that Solomon, who was so wise, worshipped idols. They should ask the question “why”?

The teacher should ask them to hold that question, and look back at the worksheet. What are the overall goals that the commandments about the king in Devarim 17:14-20 seek to prevent? The teacher should focus on the two goals of the commandments here:

- a. To avoid the king seeing himself as above other people;
- b. To avoid the king leaving God.

The teacher should spend time unpacking these two points. First, connect point a) above both to the limit stated in Devarim 17:15 (מקרב אחיך) and mentioned in question 1 on the worksheet, and to the discussion earlier of why feeling at “the top of the world” may be injurious to relationships with other people. The king has to feel that he is “one of the people” (מקרב אחיך),

and not just “top dog.” Then, ask the students how the king’s feeling that he is “top dog” makes it hard for him to fear God. Students should appreciate that a relationship with God requires humility, and that feeling all-powerful can leave no room for recognizing God as superior.

Slide 8 tries to demonstrate the problem of hierarchy --- if the king feels he is superior, then he will become arrogant and lack the sense that he is מקרב אחיך and the sense that God is above him.

Part 3: Conclusion

Ask students: How did Solomon, who was so wise, get to the point stated in Melakhim Alef 11:5, where he worships idols?

The gemara in Sanhedrin 21b suggests that he only allowed the worship of idols, without actually worshipping himself, but the point remains the same.

The teacher should direct students back to the hierarchy illustrated in Slide 8. What is the problem with the conception in which the king emphasizes that he is more powerful and better than other people? How does this prevent him from having normal relationships with other people? How does it prevent him from fearing God?

First, address Solomon’s relationship to other people. What is the key factor that the Torah emphasizes in how the king needs to relate to other people? (Perhaps it’s worth noting that Solomon’s relationship with the Queen of Sheba is described as a relationship between equals - both are royals, both exchange gifts. In contrast, the many women described in 11:1-2 are not equals, and Solomon is obviously their superior in rank.)

Second, address Solomon’s relationship to God.

The teacher should then suggest that the deterioration of this relationship was not a “quick” or “easy” slide for Solomon. The gemara (again in Sanhedrin 21b) states that Solomon knew the prohibitions in Devarim 17:16-17. He knew that what he was doing was forbidden, but said about the prohibitions in these verses that he could violate each prohibition without violating the goal of the prohibition (slide 9). Why did he not succeed in avoiding violating the goal of each prohibition?

Again, the question of how Solomon saw himself (the hierarchy in slide 8) is key. Solomon saw himself as superior to other people, and then saw himself as less subject to God’s commandments than an “average” person.

Part 4: Narrative and Event

Sefer Melakhim clearly organizes the Solomon narrative so as to “front” all the positive events of Solomon’s rule, culminating in the Queen of Sheba story in 10:1-13, and only then begins to tell about how Solomon violates the prohibitions of Devarim 17:16-17, leading to his downfall.

Ask students whether they think that Solomon was perfectly pure until the Queen of Sheba story, and whether his decline only happened afterwards, or whether the attitudes described in 10:14-11:5 take time to build up.

Narrative often simplifies events and creates a logical trajectory out of complex and multifaceted events. So that the actual development of Solomon's personality may not run in a strict "good to bad" line, but involve ups and downs through time. When Sefer Melakhim comes to tell the story, however, it illustrates it in a "good to bad" line.

Part 4: Evaluation

Ask students whether they can identify an experience in which they felt "on top of the world." Then ask them:

- a. How did this make you treat other people around you?
- b. Were you pleased with the way you treated other people? What might you have done differently?
- c. Did you think about God during this experience? Why or why not?