

Class #4: The Sages' Solomon: Lore and Legend 2 Sivan 5783 | May 22, 2023

Solomon and the Queen of Sheba

Midrash Mishlei (Midrash on Proverbs), Chapter One (trans. Burton L. Visotzky)

מלכת שבא, ששמעה את חכמתו, אמרה 'אלך ואראה אם חכם הוא אם לאו', ומניין ששמעה חכמתו? שנאמר (מלכים א י א): "ומלכת שבא שומעת את שמע שלמה לשם ה' ותבוא לנסותו בחידות", מהו בחידות?

אמר רבי ירמיה בר שלום: אמרה לו 'אתה הוא שלמה, ששמעתי עליך ועל מלכותך ועל חכמתך?', אמר לה 'הן', אמרה לו 'חכם גדול אתה, אלא אם אני שואלת ממך דבר אחד, אתה משיב לי?', אמר לה (משלי ב ו): "כי ה' יתן חכמה, מפיו דעת ותבונה". אמרה לו 'מה הן שבעה יוצאין, ותשעה נכנסין, ושניים מוזגים, ואחד שותה?' אמר לה 'בוודאי, שבעה ימי נידה יוצאין, ותשעה ירחי לידה נכנסין, שני דדיים מוזגים, והוולד שותה'.

אמרה לו 'חכם גדול אתה, אלא אם אני שואלת ממך דבר אחר אתה משיבני?' אמר לה 'כי ה' יתן חכמה', אמרה לו 'מה הוא, אשה אמרה לבנה: אביך - אבי, זקנך - בעלי, ואת - ברי, ואנא - אחותך?' אמר לה 'בוודאי, שתי בנותיו של לוט הן'.

ועוד דוגמה אחרת עשתה: הביאה לפניו תינוקות בקומה אחת ובכסות אחד, אמרה לו 'הפרש לי מאלו זכרים ונקבות'. רמז לסריסו, והביאו לו אגוזים וקליות, התחיל מפזרם לפניהם; זכרים, שלא היו מתביישים, היו נוטלים בבגדיהם, ונקבות, שהיו מתביישות, היו נוטלות בסודריהן. אמר לה 'אלו זכרים ואלו נקבות'. אמרה לו 'בני, חכם גדול אתה!'.

ועוד דוגמה אחרת עשתה: הביאה ערלים ומהולים, אמרה לו 'הפרש לי המהולים מן הערלים'; מייד רמז לכהן גדול ופתח ארון הברית, מהולין שבהן כרעו בחצי קומתן, ולא עוד אלא שנתמלא פניהם מזיו השכינה, וערלים שבהן נופלים על פניהם, מייד אמר לה 'אלו ערלים ואלו מהולים'. אמרה לו 'מהיכן לך?' אמר לה 'מבלעם, דכתיב (במדבר כד ד): "אשר מחזה שדי יחזה נופל וגלוי עיניים", אילו לא היה נופל - לא היה רואה כלום. ואם אין אתה רוצה ללמוד מבלעם, בוא ולמד מאיוב: בשעה שבאו שלושת רעי איוב לנחמו, אמר להם (איוב יב ג): "גם לי לבב כמוכם, לא נופל אנוכי מכם", לא נופל אנוכי ממותכם'.

באותה שעה אמרה לו (מלכים א י ז): "לא האמנתי לדברים עד אשר באתי ותראינה עיניי, והנה לא הוגד לי החצי, הוספת חכמה וטוב אל השמועה אשר שמעתי

The Queen of Sheba heard of Solomon's wisdom. She said, "I'll go see whether or not he is wise."
Whence [do we learn] that she had heard of Solomon's wisdom? From the verse, *The queen of Sheba heard of Solomon's fame, through the name of YHVH, and she came to test him with hard questions* [Heb. *chidot*, "riddles"] (1 Kings 10:1). What are these riddles?

She asked him, "Are you Solomon, of whom and whose reign and wisdom I have heard so much about?"

He answered, "Yes."

She said, "Since you are so wise, if I ask you something, will you answer me?"

He answered, "For YHVH grants wisdom; Knowledge and discernment are by G-d's decree (Prov. 2:6)."

She said, "Seven leave and nine enter; two pour and one drinks."

He said, "Surely [this means] seven days of menstruation [the period of ritual impurity] leave, then nine months of pregnancy enter; two breasts pour [forth milk] and the infant drinks."

She said, “You are a great sage, but if I ask you another question, will you answer me?”

He replied, “*For YHVH grants wisdom.*”

She said, “Who is the woman who says to her son, ‘Your father is my father, your grandfather is my husband, you are my son and I am your sister?’”

He replied, “Surely [these are the] daughters of Lot, who say to their sons, ‘Your father is my father, your grandfather is my husband, you are my son and I am your sister.’”

She gave him yet another test. She brought in boys and girls, all of the same appearance, all of the same height, all clothed the same. Then she said to him, “Distinguish the boys from the girls.”

He immediately motioned to his eunuch to fetch some parched grain and nuts, and began passing them out. The boys unashamedly stuffed their tunic full, but the girls, being modest, [only] filled their kerchiefs. He then told the queen, “These are the boys and those are the girls.” She said, “My son, you are a great sage!”

Then she gave him one more test. She brought circumcised and uncircumcised men before him, all of the same appearance, all of the same height, all clothed the same. Then she said to him, “Distinguish between the circumcised and the uncircumcised.”

He motioned at once to the High Priest to open the Ark of the Covenant. The circumcised among them bowed from the waist, and their faces were filled with the radiance of the Shekhinah, while the uncircumcised among them fell on their faces. Solomon said to her, “These are the circumcised and those the uncircumcised.”

“How did you know?” she asked.

He explained, “From [the case of] Balaam, for is it not written, *Who beholds visions from the Almighty [prostrate, but with eyes unveiled]* (Numbers 24:4)? Had he not fallen, he would not have seen anything.”

If you do not want to learn it from Balaam, come and learn it from [the case of] Job. When his three friends came to comfort him, he said to them, *But I, like you, have a mind. I fall not beneath you* (Job 12:3)—[what he meant is] “I do not fall down like you do.”

At that moment, the Queen of Sheba said to Solomon, *But I did not believe the reports until I came and saw with my own eyes that not even the half had been told me; your wisdom and wealth surpass the reports I heard...* (1 Kings 10:7-9).

Yalkut Melachim #182 (trans. Seymour Rossel)

עֲשָׂרָה דְּבָרִים נִבְרָאוּ בְּעֶרְבַּ שְׁבֻת בֵּין הַשְּׁמֵשׁוֹת, וְאֵלוּ הֵן... וְהַשְּׁמִיר...
Ten things were created on the eve of the Sabbath at twilight:
... [7] *the shamir*... [Pirkei Avot 5:6]

It is said that the wise King Solomon knew all the secrets of nature and could speak the languages of animals and birds.

Once, as the curtain of evening drew across the sky, an eagle landed beside the king and said, “You seem troubled, O King. What bothers you?”

The king answered, “I am trying to solve a mystery. G-d commanded that I build a Temple to be G-d’s house on earth. But G-d also commanded that, since metal is used to make weapons, no metal should strike the stones of the Temple, a house dedicated to peace. How can the stones be cut from the hills without iron axes? How can the stones be shaped without hammer and chisel? Still, there must be a way, for G-d would not command me to do the impossible.”

“Indeed,” the eagle said, “G-d has created a way to cut and shape stone without metal. But the secret is in the Garden of Eden.”

“Then the secret is useless,” Solomon sighed, “for G-d has commanded that no man or woman may ever return to the Garden of Eden.”

The eagle flapped its wings. “Yet, G-d allows me to fly in and out of the Garden of Eden whenever I please. I will go and bring you the secret.”

Days passed. Then, at last, the eagle appeared with a nest in its talons. “Here is the secret,” said the eagle, gently placing the nest on the ground at Solomon’s feet.

Solomon looked into the nest. It was filled with tiny worms, each the size of a grain of barley. He had never seen the likes of them. As he watched, they wriggled and slithered. “What creature is this?” he asked.

“This is the *shamir*,” said the eagle. “The shamir eats rock. These little creatures were created by G-d to help you build the Temple. They can cut and trim the stones so that you do not have to use any metal.”

Solomon thanked the eagle, adding: “People say I am wise, but truly there is greater wisdom in even the least of G-d’s creatures.”

Solomon's Downfall

Midrash, Kohelet Rabbah 1:12:1

אָנִי קִהַלְתִּי מֶלֶךְ עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל, הָוֵינָא פַּד הָוֵינָא וְכַדוּ לִית אָנָּא מִיָּדִי. רַבִּי חֲנִינְיָא בַּר יִצְחָק אָמַר פַּד הָוֵינָא הָוֵינָא, וְכַדוּ לִית אָנָּא שְׁוֵי מִיָּדִי. שְׁלֹשָׁה עוֹלָמוֹת רָאָה בְּנַפְשׁוֹ וּבְחַיָּיו, רַבִּי יוֹדֵן וְרַבִּי אוֹנְיָה, רַבִּי יוֹדֵן אָמַר מֶלֶךְ וְהַדְּיוֹט וּמֶלֶךְ, חָכָם טַפְשׁ וְחָכָם, עֲשִׂיר עֲנִי וְעֲשִׂיר. מַאי טַעְמָא (קהלת ז, טו): אֵת הַכֹּל רָאִיתִי בְּיָמַי הַבְּלִי, לִית בַּר גִּישׁ מִתְנַיְהוּ אֲנוּקֵי דִידֵיהּ אֲלָא בְּשַׁעַת רוּחַיָּהּ, כְּשִׁיחֹזֵר לְעוֹתְרֵיהּ. וְרַבִּי אוֹנְיָה אָמַר הַדְּיוֹט מֶלֶךְ וְהַדְּיוֹט, טַפְשׁ וְחָכָם וְטַפְשׁ, עֲנִי עֲשִׂיר וְעֲנִי. וּמָה טַעַם אָנִי קִהַלְתִּי מֶלֶךְ עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם.

I, Kohelet, was king over Israel in Jerusalem (Ecclesiastes 1:12).

I was when I was; but now I am nothing!

Rabbi Chanina bar Yitzchak said: When I was I was; but now I am not worth anything.

Solomon saw three worlds during his lifetime. Rabbi Yudan and Rabbi Onya explained this in different ways:

Rabbi Yudan said: King, commoner, king; wise man, fool, wise man; wealthy man, poor man, wealthy man. What is his proof? *In my own brief span of life, I have seen everything* (Ecclesiastes 7:15)— A person relates his anguish only after he has gained some relief, when his wealth has been restored.

Rabbi Onya said: Commoner, king, commoner; fool, wise man, fool; poor man, wealthy man, poor man. What is his proof? [Solomon wrote,] *I, Kohelet, was king over Israel in Jerusalem* (Ecclesiastes 1:12).

Midrash, Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah 1:1:10

שְׁלֹשׁ יְרִידוֹת יָרַד שְׁלֹמֹה, יְרִידָה רִאשׁוֹנָה, מֵאַחַר שֶׁהָיָה מֶלֶךְ גָּדוֹל מְסוּפֵּה הָעוֹלָם וְעַד סוּפּוֹ, נִתְמַעְטָה מְלָכוּתוֹ וְלֹא הָיָה מֶלֶךְ אֲלָא עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל, הֵדָּא הוּא דְכָתִיב (משלי א, א): מִשְׁלֵי שְׁלֹמֹה בֶן דָּוִד מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל. יְרִידָה שְׁנִיָּה, מֵאַחַר שֶׁהָיָה מֶלֶךְ עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל, נִתְמַעְטָה מְלָכוּתוֹ וְלֹא הָיָה מֶלֶךְ אֲלָא עַל יְרוּשָׁלַיִם, הֵדָּא הוּא דְכָתִיב (קהלת א, יב): אֲנִי קִהַלְתִּי מֶלֶךְ עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם. יְרִידָה הַשְּׁלִישִׁית, מֵאַחַר שֶׁהָיָה מֶלֶךְ עַל יְרוּשָׁלַיִם, נִתְמַעְטָה מְלָכוּתוֹ וְלֹא הָיָה מֶלֶךְ אֲלָא עַל בֵּיתוֹ, שְׁנַאֲמַר (שיר השירים ג, ז): הִנֵּה מִטָּתוֹ שְׁלֹשְׁלֹמֹה, (שיר השירים ג, ח): כְּלָם אֲחֻזֵי חֶרֶב, וְאֶפְלוּ עַל מִטָּתוֹ לֹא הָיָה מֶלֶךְ, שֶׁהָיָה מְפַחַד מִן הַרוּחֹת.

Solomon “fell” three different times.

The first descent: After he was a great king—whose rule extended from one end of the earth to the other—his kingdom diminished, and he was king only over Israel. That is what is written: *The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel* (Proverbs 1:1).

The second descent: After he was king over Israel, his kingdom diminished, and he was king only over Jerusalem. That is what is written: *I, Kobolet, was king over Israel in Jerusalem* (Ecclesiastes 1:12).

The third descent: After he was king over Jerusalem, his kingdom diminished, and he was king only over his own bed. That is what is written, *There is Solomon's couch, [Encircled by sixty warriors; Of the warriors of Israel, All of them trained in warfare; Skilled in battle,] Each with sword on thigh, Because of terror by night* (Song of Songs 3:7-8).

Actually, he wasn't even king over his own bed, as he lived in fear of evil spirits!

Yalkut Mishlei #953 (trans. Seymour Rossel)

King Solomon ruled for many years. For most of those years, he brought peace and well-being to his people. And his people, the Twelve Tribes of Israel, loved their king. Yet, there came a time of several years when taxes were too heavy, too many young men were taken off to the military, and too many people were conscripted as corvee labor for the king's projects. What had gone wrong?

In those evil days, the rumor grew that the real King Solomon was no longer on the throne. People said that Solomon had been tricked by Asmodeus, king of the demons, who had stolen Solomon's magic signet ring. Asmodeus exhaled a foul wind that lifted the king and sent him far away. Now Asmodeus looked like Solomon, lived in Solomon's palace, and sat on Solomon's throne in Jerusalem. All the evil things happening were the fault of the king of demons, not the real king of Israel—or so people said.

Meanwhile, the real Solomon wandered in some distant land. The evil breath of Asmodeus had shredded his royal robes to rags and tatters. Like an ordinary beggar, he passed from house to house asking for a meal and a place to stay the night. And, like an ordinary beggar, most folk ignored him, shooing him away. When he would say, "I am Solomon, King of Israel," they would laugh and mock him, replying in sarcasm with: "If so, we are all Queens of Sheba!"

Lonely, weary, and hungry, Solomon happened upon the house of a merchant who had visited Jerusalem many times. "I know you," the merchant said. "You are the King of Israel. I have seen your face as you passed through the streets of Jerusalem." So the merchant invited Solomon to come in and dine with him.

“My, my, but it is a terrible shame,” the merchant said to the king as the appetizer was served. “Look, how you have become nothing more than a commoner. What has become of your riches and your gold? Where is your palace and where are all your servants?” So it was with the soup. “My, my.” And with the salad. “It’s a terrible shame.” And with the main course, it was, “What a pity.” With every word and every course, Solomon felt more and more sorry for himself. Tears came to his eyes, rolled down his cheeks, and fell to his plate. Soon, he pushed the food away, unable to take another bite.

The next night Solomon came to the door of a poor woodcutter, one who had certainly never been to Jerusalem. “I have not much to offer,” the woodcutter apologized, “but come and share it with me. There is bread enough for us and a pot of lentils freshly made.” Slowly, as they ate, Solomon told his story, and the woodcutter responded, “I am sure that things will turn out all right,” or, “Tomorrow is yet another day; things may seem brighter then.” Gradually, Solomon’s mood changed. The woodcutter’s words gave him a glimmer of hope that one day he might regain his throne. He felt reassured that he was indeed Solomon, the King of Israel.

One day, the people of Jerusalem noticed a change. A spate of good was overtaking the kingdom. Tax collectors asked for less. The army required less men. The work crew required less workers. The rumor passed among them, “The demon has been defeated. King Solomon has returned to his throne.” As this was true for them, it was true for Solomon, too. Solomon had overcome the demon and banished him. He was now a changed Solomon and all that had happened—even the meal with the merchant who was kind in a cruel way and the meal with the wood cutter who was kind and considerate—seemed as if a dream.