

Book Review

Kings III

by Yochi Brandes

(Kinneret Zmora-Bitan Dvir, 2008), 447 pp. (in Hebrew)

Israeli author Yochi Brandes treats us to a biblically inspired novel that is a dazzling midrash relying upon Rabbinic lore, along with her own captivating creative skills. Looking at unfolding biblical events from the vantage point of particularly the tribe of Ephraim, she challengingly and convincingly rewrites the official history that is written from the tribe of Judah's perspective. In the process, we are given reason to pause and reassess what we have taken for granted as the authentic version of a revered text tending to conceal more than reveal, with a rabbinic license to explore and exploit its treasures.

In this literary makeover of radical dimensions, King David receives a bad rap as a conniving though charismatic personality who, contrary to his claim, did not even kill Goliath and whose unrestrained ambition controlled his actions. He is accused of betraying his people to the Philistines who protected him from Saul's justified wrath. Exonerated King Saul never threw a spear at plotting David who sought to inherit him while taking advantage of his special bond with Jonathan. David's boundless cruelty almost succeeded to eliminate the House of Saul's male remnant. A sole survivor, Saul's great-grandson, grows up unknowingly with a new identity only to become none other than King Jeroboam. Brandes's Jeroboam is a beloved and God-fearing figure, radically different from the harsh biblical treatment.

With Jeroboam's enlightened leadership the author sympathetically envisions the restoration of the colorful religious life of Israel's pre-centralized worship, which was ruthlessly banished when King Solomon embarked on the grandiose building of Jerusalem's Temple. Along with other wasteful construction projects, contends Brandes, the impossible burden of taxes and labor placed upon the Israelites further alienated them from Solomon and the tribe of

Judah. It earned Solomon the denigrating title of "New Pharaoh," whereas Jeroboam became known as "Second Moses," taking Israel out of Solomon's House of Bondage. Following Solomon's death, Rehoboam's expected coronation is narrowly averted as Jeroboam becomes king of a united Israel.

Just prior to his coronation, Jeroboam's message to the assembled masses reaches out beyond them with a call for much-needed unity to all of Israel. "My call is for Mt. Gerizim's top to Judah's mountains,' I say with a broken voice, 'my brethren, beloved ones, children of Judah, do not split from us. Return to us and we'll all be one people and one kingdom according to God's promise to our fathers. Let us renew together the Torah covenant that Moses in the desert and Joshua in Shechem provided for us. Let us establish anew the united kingdom of Israel established by King Saul'" (p. 444).

Before this stirring call for Israel's unity, there is also a plea for returning to a pluralistic practice of religion and even reformation. "God loves all the tribes and seeks to dwell in all of our portions, not only in one tribe's portion. Build temples to our God, children of Israel, God desires our temples. Build them according to your hearts' generosity, but remember: God does not want to reside in gold-gilded cedar houses, but in simple and modest ones like the tabernacle established by the children of Israel in the desert. God also likes His priests to be modest. Not every first-born son deserves to be a priest" (p. 443).

The place of women in the author's drama is highlighted to compensate for its lackluster in the biblical script, with Saul's younger daughter, Michal, playing the primary role. She is featured as no other than Jeroboam's grandmother. Driven mother Bathsheba, who concocted Solomon's alleged wisdom, manipulated her son's ascension to the throne with the unholy cooperation of Prophet Nathan, who is far from the hero who allegedly spoke truth to power. What infinite imagination can do!

Indeed, the book's intricate plots resonate with contemporary themes. A surprise Philistines' attack reminds me of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, which caught Israel unprepared. What is beyond dispute is Brandes's following observation: "Stories are more effective weapons than swords. Swords can kill only those who face them, while the stories determine who shall live and who shall die in future generations as well" (p. 21). Amen. This fully absorbing

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and challenging book moves us to return to our *Tanach* with both greater interest and suspicion!

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