

## THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

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### LECTURE 89: CHAPTER 14 (II)

#### AVSHALOM IN JERUSALEM

##### I. AVSHALOM'S BEAUTY

In the previous *shiur*, we saw how Yoav and the Tekoan woman convinced David, by way of a judicial parable, to bring Avshalom back to Jerusalem without punishing him for the murder of Amnon, even though this lacked all justification. It seems that David himself was uncomfortable with this development, and that deep in his heart he too understood the difference between the parable and the actual situation. For this reason, he adopts a problematic approach:

(24) And the king said, “ Let him turn to his own house, but let him not see my face.” So Avshalom turned to his own house, and saw not the king's face.

In this way, David in great measure loses out at both ends. On the one hand, his soul does not find rest from its yearnings for Avshalom, as he still does not see him. On the other hand, he causes Avshalom frustration, as we will see below.

Before we get to that, however, we encounter a surprising literary phenomenon. Scripture once again notes that David did not see Avshalom:

(28) And Avshalom dwelt two full years in Jerusalem; and he saw not the king's face.

Between these two verses, we find a separate section that seems to blatantly interrupt the continuity of the narrative:

(25) Now in all Israel there was none to be so much praised as Avshalom for his beauty; from the sole of his foot even to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him. (26) And when he cut his hair – now it was at every year's end that he cut it; because the hair was heavy on him, therefore he cut it – he weighed the hair of his head at two hundred shekels,<sup>1[1]</sup> after the king's weight. (27) And to Avshalom there were born three sons,<sup>2[2]</sup> and one daughter, whose name was Tamar;<sup>3[3]</sup> she was a woman of fair countenance.

Clearly, the main theme of this section is Avshalom's rare beauty. No other Biblical character – man or woman – is described in this manner, and it

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1 [1] This is estimated at being equivalent to two or three kilograms.

2 [2] This verse is difficult, for it seems to contradict what is stated below in 18:18: "Now Avshalom in his lifetime had taken and reared up for himself the pillar, which is in the king's dale; for he said, ' I have no son to keep my name in remembrance;' and he called the pillar after his own name; and it is called Avshalom's monument to this day." The commentators (ad loc.) propose two ways to understand the matter. Rashi writes in the wake of *Chazal* (*Sota* 11a) that Avshalom had a son, but he was not fit for kingship. This, however, is difficult according to the plain sense of the text, for the rationale, "to keep my name in remembrance" implies that he had no son at all (see, for example, the passage dealing with levirate marriage, the objective of which is "to raise up to his brother a name in Israel" [[Devarim 25:6](#)]). The Radak, in contrast, explains that Avshalom had sons, but they died. Based on what he says, it may be suggested that just as David was punished for the episode involving Bat-Sheva with the death of three sons (the first son of Bat-Sheva, Amnon, and Avshalom), so too Avshalom was punished, as he committed similar sins, only much much severe – both forbidden sexual relations (when he slept with his father's concubines, as we shall see in the next chapter) and murder – with the death of three sons.

3 [3] Giving Avshalom's daughter the name of his sister is touching. Avshalom spread his protection over his sister Tamar, as it is stated: "So Tamar remained desolate in her brother Avshalom's house" (13:20). It stands to reason that after Amnon bluntly rejected her request that he take her as his wife after having raped her, Tamar remained in her solitude until the end of her days. It seems that Avshalom, who took care to perpetuate his own name, owing to the fact that he had no surviving sons (see previous note), also took care to perpetuate the name of Tamar, his wretched sister, and called his daughter by her name.

may be argued that Avshalom is the handsomest person in Scripture.<sup>4</sup>[4] Why did Scripture interrupt the narrative with this exceptional account?

The Radak writes: "Prior to the account of his rebellion against his father, [Scripture] relates what brought it about – because he was beautiful, there being nobody like him in all of Israel, and he was proud of his beauty and his hair, and he thought that none of the sons of David were as fit for the throne as he was, and so he rebelled." According to the Radak, Avshalom's beauty explains why he saw himself fit for the throne and why he rebelled.<sup>5</sup>[5] In other words, this section serves as an exposition for the next chapter, which deals with Avshalom's rebellion. Following this approach, it may be argued that the section explains not only Avshalom's thinking, but also his great success in deceiving the people and in beginning the rebellion, for his beauty certainly had a considerable influence on the people.

But these suggestions meet with a clear difficulty. If indeed this passage is connected to Avshalom's rebellion, why does it appear here, in the middle of the story of his return to Jerusalem, and not in its natural spot according to this explanation – at the beginning of chapter 15, at the beginning of the story of the rebellion? The location of the passage in the middle of our story intimates, according to the plain sense of the text, that it is connected in some way to the story of Avshalom's return.

It seems, therefore, that the passage has an entirely different objective. A question begins to arise in our chapter that will grow stronger over the course of the chapters dealing with Avshalom: How are we to understand the unique relationship between David and Avshalom? Why were David's yearnings for Avshalom – Amnon's murderer – stronger than the feelings of grief over Amnon's death? How were these feelings not dulled by all of Avshalom's severe actions during his rebellion, including sleeping with David's concubines in the plain sight of all of Israel? How is it that before going out to battle against Avshalom, David did not fear to say anything except for his instructions to have mercy upon Avshalom, even though he already understood that were he to remain with his men in Jerusalem, none of them would be spared (15:14)? What is the meaning of David's great mourning over his cruel and wicked son, mourning that has no parallel anywhere else in

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4 [4] Other members of his family were also graced with exceptional beauty; so it is reported about his daughter Tamar (v. 27) as well as his sister Tamar (13:1).

5 [5] He adds that Avshalom did not wait for David to die, for "perhaps he heard that the king intended to designate Shlomo as his heir."

Scripture: "O my son Avshalom, my son, my son Avshalom! would I had died for you, O Avshalom, my son, my son" (19:1)?

The short passage under discussion seems to intend to answer these questions. Avshalom's rare beauty attracted the attention of David, whose sensitivity to beauty was the root of the entire Bat-Sheva affair (see 11:2). This beauty is Scripture's explanation of David's special relationship with his son and the answer to all the questions raised above. In days to come, David would have a similar attitude towards another one of his sons:

Now Adoniya the son of Chagit exalted himself, saying, " I will be king;" and he prepared him chariots and horsemen, and fifty men to run before him. And his father had not grieved him all his life in saying, " Why have you done so?" **And he was also a very handsome man;** and he was born after Avshalom. (*Melakhim I* 1:5-6)

This was indeed an exceptional, complicated, and tragic relationship, and in its wake, David was visited with many troubles. It is reasonable to assume that Scripture does not intend to withhold its meaning from us.

## II. THE MISTAKE

It is perhaps to be expected that bringing Avshalom back to Jerusalem without letting him see David will not end peacefully. Over time, Avshalom's patience does indeed expire:

(28) And Avshalom dwelt two full years<sup>6[6]</sup> in Jerusalem; and he saw not the king's face. (29) Then Avshalom sent for Yoav, to send him to the king; but he would not come to him; and he sent again a second time, but he would not come. (30) Therefore, he said to his servants, " See, Yoav's field is near mine, and he has barley there; go and set it on fire." And Avshalom's servants set the field on fire. (32) Then Yoav arose and came to Avshalom to his house, and said to him, " Why

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6 [6] It is symbolic that Avshalom waits two years, just as he had waited two years before killing Avshalom (see 13:23). It seems that Avshalom has a certain degree of patience, but it expires after two years.

have your servants set my field on fire?" (32) And Avshalom answered Yoav, " Behold, I sent to you, saying, ' Come here, that I may send you to the king, to say: Why am I come from Geshur? It were better for me to be there still.' Now therefore let me see the king's face; and if there be iniquity in me, let him kill me."

The burning of Yoav's field brings to mind another action performed in an entirely different context: "And Shimshon went and caught three hundred foxes, and took torches, and turned tail to tail, and put a torch in the midst between every two tails. And when he had set the torches on fire, he let them go into the standing corn of the Pelishtim, and burnt up both the shocks and the standing corn, and also the olive yards" ([Shoftim 15:4-5](#)). There is another similarity between these two characters as well – their long and special hair. It stands to reason that Scripture wishes to emphasize the contrast between these two figures: Shimshon used his special powers to strike a blow at Israel's enemies, whereas Avshalom uses his powers to strike a blow at the commander of the army of Israel in order to advance his own personal interests.<sup>7</sup>[7]

In any event, it seems that Avshalom makes a serious mistake here. It would appear that until now, Yoav ben Tzeruya stood on Avshalom's side, for he was the main cause of his return to Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup>[8] Now, Avshalom insults

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7 [7] For more about the contrasting parallel between Shimshon and Avshalom, see below chapter 18.

Another incident connected to a barley field involved one of David's warriors, Elazar ben Dodo, and it too is connected to war with the Pelishtim: "And after him was Elazar the son of Dodo, the Achochite, who was one of the three mighty men. He was with David at Pas-Dammim, and there the Pelishtim were gathered together to battle, where was a plot of ground full of barley; and the people fled from before the Pelishtim. But they stood in the midst of the plot, and defended it, and slew the Pelishtim; and the Lord saved them by a great victory" (*Divrei Ha-Yamim I* 11:12-14). Elazar's actions in the barley field against his Pelishti enemy also stand in contrast to Avshalom's conduct. The same story is told in [Shmuel II 23:11-12](#) with respect to a field of lentils. It therefore stands to reason that in this case, Scripture did not intend to set up a contrasting parallel, for the barley field is mentioned specifically in the book of *Divrei Ha-Yamim*, which totally ignores Avshalom's rebellion.

8 [8] We learn about Yoav's special role in Avshalom's return from his profuse words of gratitude to David after he granted him permission to bring him back: "And Yoav fell to the ground on his face, and prostrated himself, and blessed the king; and Yoav said: ' Today you servant knows that I have found favor in your sight, my lord, O king, in that the king has performed the request of your servant' " (v. 22). It is possible that Yoav reasoned that if he remains close to

Yoav, and Yoav is not the kind of person to take such an insult lightly. Avshalom thereby turns Yoav into his enemy, who in the end will bring about his death. Avshalom is indeed a strong man, but he does not understand that Yoav is stronger than him. Avshalom's craving for honor make him think unclearly and ultimately brings about the shortening of his life (see [Avot 4:21](#)). We shall return to this point at a later point.

### III. THE KISS

Yoav eventually submits to Avshalom and brings him to David:

(33) So Yoav came to the king, and told him; and when he had called for Avshalom, he came to the king, and bowed himself on his face to the ground before the king; and the king kissed Avshalom.

Once again, David bows to pressure. Just as he bowed to Avshalom's entreaties to send Amnon to him, and just as he bowed to the Tekoan woman's supplication to pardon "her son," and just as he bowed to Yoav's position that he should restore Avshalom, he bows now also to Avshalom, with the meeting and the kiss effectively serving as an official pardon.

A phenomenon that was already noted in a previous *shiur* repeats itself here. Part of David's tragedy is that he brings his troubles upon himself. Here too, as in the earlier chapter, the root *sh-l-ch* repeats itself over and over again (in verses 29-33 it appears six times!), this being the root of David's sin, as we discussed at length in the past.

The meeting itself is not particularly warm. David kisses Avshalom, but the description of this event is very far from the account of another meeting between father and son after many years of separation – namely, the meeting between Yaakov and Yosef: "And he fell on his neck, and wept on his neck a good while" ([Bereishit 46:29](#)). In our story, there is no weeping and no falling on the other's neck, but merely a cold kiss.

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Avshalom, and Avshalom inherits the throne, his position as general will be guaranteed even after David's death. (With Shelomo, his situation would be far more complicated; see *Melakhim I 2*). In any event, with this subsequent action, Avshalom sealed his relationship with Yoav.

It seems that this cold kiss is the "final straw" that breaks Avshalom. Avshalom understands that David does not see him as the heir to his rule,<sup>9[9]</sup> and so Avshalom is left with only one way to rise to the throne – rebellion.

We will deal with the rebellion itself in the next chapter. Here, we wish to note another point that will influence Avshalom's decision to rebel. It is reasonable to assume that David's difficult situation did not go unnoticed by the people. The Bat-Sheva affair, as we have seen, was known, to a certain degree, at least to some of the people who were close to David. David's conduct since that affair, and especially his silence regarding Amnon's actions and the pardon granted to Avshalom, surely did not contribute to David's popularity. Moreover, from the little that Scripture tells us about David's conduct, we may infer what it does not tell us – in other words, that the heaviness that characterized David's steps within his family also characterized the way he conducted the kingdom, and this was also evident to the people. The people were ripe for a new, charismatic, and very handsome leader. It was against this background that Avshalom succeeded in expanding the people's loyalty to him, as we shall see in the next chapter.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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<sup>9 [9]</sup> It is difficult to determine whether Avshalom knew about David's promise to Bat-Sheva that her son Shelomo would rule after him. This promise is mentioned only in *Melakhim I* 1, and it is not clear when it was made. Accordingly, it is reasonable to assume that Avshalom – who, following the death of Amnon, was next in line for the kingship (regarding the absence of Kil'av from the struggle over the throne, see *shur* 62) – saw himself as a fitting candidate for the throne, but the two years that he lived in Jerusalem taught him that David was in no hurry to see him as his heir.