

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

Rav Amnon Bazak

LECTURE 88: CHAPTER 14 (I)

THE WOMAN FROM TEKOA

I. A WISE WOMAN

At the end of the previous chapter, we saw that David has already been comforted concerning the death of Amnon, and now he longs for his son Avshalom. David finds himself in a state of emotional distress. On the one hand, he longs exceedingly for Avshalom. On the other hand, he cannot restore Avshalom, Amnon's cold-blooded killer, as if nothing had happened. Avshalom did indeed have good reason to be angry with Amnon, who had raped his sister and failed to take responsibility for her, but this does not legitimize murder. Yet it should be remembered that Avshalom did not kill Amnon with his own hands, but rather he commanded his men to do the deed.¹[1]

David's general, Yoav, is aware of the situation, and he manifests here particular loyalty to David:

(1) Now Yoav the son of Tzeruya perceived that the king's heart was toward Avshalom.

1 [1] There is a certain similarity here to David's own action in the incident involving Uriya the Chitite. In both cases, the principal character issues a command to give the intended victim to drink and intoxicate him. Regarding the murder of Uriya: "And when David had called him, he did eat and drink before him; and he made him drunk" ([Shmuel II 11:13](#)); regarding the murder of Amnon: "And Avshalom commanded his servants, saying, ' Mark you now, when Amnon's heart is merry with wine; and when I say to you: ' Smite Amnon,' then kill him' " (14:28).

Yoav decides to take an unusual step – to present David with a "judicial parable"²[2] that will show him what he must do:

(2) And Yoav sent to Tekoa and fetched from there a wise woman, and said to her, “ I pray you, feign yourself to be a mourner, and put on mourning apparel, I pray you, and anoint not yourself with oil, but be as a woman that had a long time mourned for the dead; (3) and go in to the king, and speak in this manner to him.” So Yoav put the words in her mouth.

Even though Yoav puts the words in the woman's mouth, he nevertheless troubles himself to bring "a wise woman." It stands to reason that Yoav does not tell her word for word what to say, but rather explains to her the general idea; she, in her wisdom, formulates what she actually says, in what turns out to be a most successful manner.³[3]

The woman appears before David and reports a difficult story:

(4) And when the woman of Tekoa spoke to the king, she fell on her face to the ground and prostrated herself, and said, “ Help, O king.”
(5) And the king said unto her, “ What ails you?” And she answered, “ Of a truth I am a widow, my husband being dead. (6) And your handmaid had two sons, and they two strove together in the field, and there was none to part them, but the one smote the other, and killed him. (7) And, behold, the whole family is risen against your handmaid, and they said, ‘ Deliver him that smote his brother, that we may kill him for the life of his brother whom he slew, and so destroy the heir also.’ Thus will they quench my coal which is left, and will leave to my husband neither name nor remainder upon the face of the earth.”

2 [2] The use of "a judicial parable" and the need for it here and in two other places was discussed at length in our *shiur* on the parable of the poor man's lamb.

3 [3] It was not by chance that Yoav sent a woman. In addition to the empathy that a woman arouses owing to her dependent state, women are more capable of manipulating feelings than men. In the book of *Shmuel*, we find two other women who succeed in preventing bloodshed owing to their wisdom and their sensitivity: Avigayil and the wise woman from Evel Ma'akha (in chap. 20).

The Tekoan woman's words do, in fact, reflect her wisdom:

1) She does not describe a case of premeditated murder, but of manslaughter: "And they two strove together in the field, and there was none to part them, but the one smote the other, and killed him." Thus, there is room to suggest that there were extenuating circumstances.

2) The woman cites the demand advanced by her relatives: "Deliver him that smote his brother, that we may kill him for the life of his brother whom he slew, and so destroy the **heir** also." Mention of the issue of an heir arouses the suspicion that this unfortunate woman is surrounded by greedy relatives, who wish to execute the brother who had committed manslaughter not in pursuit of justice, but in order to allow them to inherit the estate of their deceased relative after his second son has also been put to death.

3) The woman says that her request stems also from her concern about the name of her deceased husband: "Thus will they quench my coal which is left, and will leave to my husband neither name⁴[4] nor remainder upon the face of the earth." In this way, she arouses empathy in anyone who hears her, for she presents herself as someone who is concerned not about herself, but only about her late husband's name.

4) The woman's formulation is especially interesting in the way it creates a connection to the story of Kayin and Hevel:

a. Both stories focus on a murder committed by the victim's only brother.

4 [4] The idea that if a person dies without children, his name is regarded as having been blotted out, is found in many places in Scripture. The main expression of this idea is found in the passage dealing with levirate marriage: "That his name be not blotted out of Israel" ([Devarim 25:6](#)). See also: "I have no son to keep my name in remembrance" ([Shmuel II 18:18](#)) and "Even to them will I give in My house and within My walls a monument and a memorial better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting memorial, that shall not be cut off" ([Yeshayahu 56:5](#)), and elsewhere.

b. Both murders are described in similar terms:

And it came to pass, when they were in the **field**, that Kayin rose up against Hevel his brother, and slew him. ([Bereishit 4:8](#))

“ And they two strove together in the **field**...but the one smote the other, and killed him.” ([Shmuel II 14:6](#))

In the Tekoan woman's story, the fact that the incident takes place specifically in a field seems to be insignificant, and so it stands to reason that this is noted in order to create a connection to the story of Kayin and Hevel.

c. In both stories, an identical expression is used in the request for compassion for the killer:

And Kayin said to the Lord, “ My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, you have driven me out this day **from the face of the earth.**” ([Bereishit 4:13-14](#))

“ Thus will they quench my coal which is left, and will leave to my husband neither name nor remainder **upon the face of the earth.**” ([Shmuel II 14:7](#))

Why does the woman create this connection? This too seems to be a rhetorical device that is meant to persuade David to rule in favor of "the widow." After all, in the case of Hevel – the first murder in history – the murderer was not sentenced with the death penalty. Thus, we see that even God Himself does not always sentence a killer to death, apparently in consideration of the circumstances – the end to the continued existence of the family, and in the case of Kayin and Hevel, an end to the continued existence of all of humanity.

Perhaps the allusion to the story of Kayin and Hevel relates also to the moral of the story, which appears in the continuation. Just as Kayin was punished with exile – "a fugitive and a wanderer shall you be in the earth" ([Bereishit 4:12](#)) – so too, the punishment of exile should suffice, a punishment that Avshalom was already satisfying in Geshur for three years (13:38).

II. THE JUDGMENT

David does not provide the woman with a hurried answer:

(8) And the king said to the woman, " Go to your house, and I will give charge concerning you."

But the wise woman is not satisfied with this vague answer, and she therefore adds the following:

(9) And the woman of Tekoa said to the king, " My lord, O king, the iniquity be on me and on my father's house; and the king and his throne be guiltless."

The commentators suggest various ways to understand the woman's words,^{5[5]} but the iniquity that she has in mind seems to be clear: not killing the murderer. The Torah emphasizes on several occasion the responsibility upon the people and upon the land to execute killers, because the land will not absorb the murder victim's blood as long as the murderer is free. This is explicitly stated in *Parashat Mas'ei*:

5 [5] According to Rashi and the Radak, the woman spoke in first person out of respect for the king, but she was really referring to him. In other words, if her son will be put to death and she will remain alone, the iniquity will be upon David. In contrast, the Ralbag understands the verse in accordance with its plain sense – namely, that she accepts upon herself the iniquity if her words are untrue.

Moreover, you shall take no ransom for the life of a murderer, who is guilty of death; but he shall surely be put to death... So you shall not pollute the land wherein you are; for blood, it pollutes the land; and no expiation can be made for the land for the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it. ([Bamidbar 35:31-33](#))

Therefore, the Tekoan woman emphasizes that she accepts upon herself the iniquity of not shedding the killer's blood. This is similar to what Rivka said to Yaakov when he expressed his fear to deceive his father: "Upon me be your curse" ([Bereishit 27:13](#)).

These words bring David to make a slightly more explicit statement:

(10) And the king said, " Whoever says anything to you, bring him to me, and he shall not touch you any more."

This, too, seems to be an attempt on the part of David to avoid the issue. How can this widow woman bring those conspiring against her to David? What should she do if in the meantime they afflict harm upon her son? She therefore continues to pressure David:

(11) Then said she, " I pray you, let the king remember the Lord your God, that the avenger of blood destroy not any more,^{6[6]} lest they destroy my son..."

Only now does David yield and make a clear commitment:

And he said, " As the Lord lives, there shall not one hair of your son fall to the earth." ^{7[7]}

^{6 [6]} The word "*me-harbat*" is very difficult. The commentators understood it in the sense of "*le-harbot*" – that is to say, that the avenger of blood should not destroy more, but it remains a difficulty.

It is interesting that here as well, as in the previous chapter, David yields to repeated pressure, this being another expression of his weakness.

In any event, the wise woman achieves her goal, and it is now time to move from the parable to its moral:

(12) Then the woman said, “ Let your handmaid, I pray you, speak a word to my lord the king.” And he said, “ Say on.”

III. THE MORAL OF THE STORY

But at this point, there comes a surprise. Thus far, the woman has formulated her words wisely and coherently. Now, however, when she moves on to the moral of the story, her words suddenly became vague and confused:

(13) And the woman said, “ Why then have you devised such a thing against the people of God? For in speaking this word, the king is as one that is guilty, in that the king does not fetch home again his banished one. (14) For we must needs die, and are as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again; neither does God respect any person; but let him devise means, that he that is banished be not an outcast from him. (15) Now therefore seeing that I am come to speak this word to my lord the king, it is because the people have made me afraid; and your handmaid said, I will now speak to the king; it may be that the king will perform the request of his servant. (16) For the king will hear, to deliver his servant out of the hand of the man that would destroy me and my son together out of the inheritance of God. (17) Then your handmaid said, Let, I pray you, the word of my lord the king be for my comfort; for as an angel of God, so is my lord the king to discern good and bad; and the Lord your God be with you.”

7 [7] It is possible David subconsciously already understood the similarity between the Tekoan woman's story and what happened in his house. Accordingly, his promise, "there shall not one hair of your son fall to the earth," alludes to the moral of the story – Avshalom and his hair (see below, vv. 25-26).

The main problem in this passage is whether the woman has already moved on to the moral or whether she is still in the parable. The first verse (v. 13) gives the impression that she has already moved on to the moral and that she is explicitly saying to David that the ruling that he had just issued stands in opposition to David's own conduct, for he has failed to restore his banished son. But the woman then continues with certain puzzling philosophical statements (v. 14), and in the end seems to return to the parable (v. 16). What then is the nature of this strange oration?

We already noted in the past that unclear wording is a way of expressing the speaker's excitement. Scripture cites the words as they were actually stated, without any editing. This seems to be the way to understand the oration before us. When the Tekoan woman reaches the main part of her mission – which is much harder than the first part, and in which she must effectively say to David, as Natan did in his time, "You are the man" – her strength fails her. Accordingly, she keeps getting caught on her words, and a speech is created which is difficult to understand as a single continuity.^{8[8]}

David notices the great gap between the Tekoan woman's words in the parable and those that follow, and raises the following conjecture:

(19) And the king said, "Is the hand of Yoav with you in all this?"

The woman, however, does not immediately recover from her emotional agitation, and instead of responding with a simple "yes," she answers in a roundabout manner:

^{8 [8]} For this reason, we have not made an attempt to explain these verses. There are many different explanations of each of the woman's difficult statements, but there is no explanation that accounts for all the difficulties. According to our understanding, there is no reason to expect such an explanation.

.. And the woman answered and said, “ As your soul lives, my lord the king, none^{9[9]} can turn to the right hand or to the left from anything that my lord the king has spoken; for your servant Yoav, he bade me, and he put all these words in the mouth of your handmaid. (20) To change the face of the matter has your servant Yoav done this thing; and my lord is wise, according to the wisdom of an angel of God, to know all things that are in the earth.”

At this point, David is persuaded to accept Yoav's counsel, and he issues an order that Avshalom should be restored:

(21) And the king said to Yoav, “ Behold now, I have granted this request; go therefore, bring the young man Avshalom back.” (22) And Yoav fell to the ground on his face, and prostrated himself, and blessed the king; and Yoav said, “ Today your 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.” (23) So Yoav arose and went to Geshur and brought Avshalom to Jerusalem.

Did David make the right decision? Should the Tekoan woman's parable and David's judgment concerning that case lead to a parallel decision regarding the fate of Avshalom? The answer seems to be clear. There are two main differences between the parable (and the story of Kayin and Hevel) and the moral:

1) The situation of the wretched widow, who was left with no one to rely upon following the death of her husband and her son, is in no way similar to that of David, who has extensive family and no financial concerns.

2) The parable speaks of unintended manslaughter: "And they two strove together in the field, and there was none to part them, but the one smote the other, and killed him." Amnon's murder, in contrast, was well planned in advance by Avshalom.

9 [9] "*Ish*" in the sense of "*yesh*;" see [Mikha 6:10](#) and Rashi ad loc. Compare also the substitution of the two names Yishai – Ishai (*Divrei Ha-Yamim I* 2:12-13).

David ignores these differences and decides to restore Avshalom. The Tekoan woman helps him reach a decision concerning the great struggle that was going on within him: the struggle between his personal feelings and his moral obligations. The parable provides David with a ladder with which to climb down from "the moral tree" which he had climbed following Avshalom's flight. This justification, however, has no grounding in concrete reality. As he had done in earlier stories, David once again makes an erroneous decision, one for which he will yet be forced to pay a heavy price.

(Translated by David Strauss)
