

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

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LECTURE 87: CHAPTER 13 (III)

THE MURDER OF AMNON

I. "TAKE NOT THIS THING TO HEART"

Avshalom's reaction upon hearing what had happened to Tamar is quite surprising:

(20) And Avshalom her brother said to her, " Has Amnon¹[1] your brother been with you? But now hold your peace, my sister: he is your brother; take not this thing to heart."

From this verse alone, we might have understood that Avshalom thought that Tamar should not "air the dirty laundry in public," for the matter involved her brother, and it would be fitting for her to forget the whole thing. But as we all know, later in the narrative Avshalom kills Amnon, and so it is clear that he did not think that it would be appropriate to pass in silence over the rape of Tamar. Why, then, did he tell Tamar to act in that manner?

It seems that Scripture is presenting us here with Avshalom's cunning, which stands in total contrast to Amnon's aggressiveness and stupidity. Avshalom is trying to lower Amnon's guard by creating the impression that it was not his intention to " make a mountain out of a molehill." Avshalom tries to convey this message even to his sister Tamar, and indeed, she is left miserable in Avshalom's house:

So Tamar remained desolate²[2] in her brother Avshalom's house.

1 [1] The text reads "Aminon." Avshalom refers to Amnon using this diminutive as a show of scorn.

Scripture, however, emphasizes that in truth Avshalom did not forget the matter:

(22) And Avshalom spoke unto Amnon neither good nor bad; for Avshalom hated Amnon, because he had forced his sister Tamar.

As opposed to Amnon, Avshalom was graced with patience, and he waits for the opportune time to take his revenge from Amnon.

First, however, we must go back to the verse that we had skipped, which describes David's reaction to the entire affair:

(21) But when King David heard of all these things, he was very angry.

This verse expresses the depth of David's tragedy. He hears about the incident, and the matter infuriates him, but he cannot say a word to Amnon for two reasons. First of all, he cannot level charges against Amnon, for were he to say to him, "Remove the chip from between your teeth," he would lash back and say, "Remove the beam from between your eyes" – that is to say, Amnon would remind him of his part in the Bat-Sheva affair. Second, this is an expression of a broader phenomenon. From the end of the Bat-Sheva affair and on, David no longer functioned as a king who enjoyed authority, and from here until the end of the book, he conducts himself with extreme passivity.^{3[3]}

2 [2] The letter *vav* in the word "*ve-shomema*" is superfluous; see Radak. It stands to reason that the word "*shomema*" (desolate) denotes that Tamar did not have family of her own (see *Yeshaya* 54:1: "Sing, O barren one, you that did not bear; break forth into singing, and cry aloud, you that did not travail with child; for more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife, says the Lord.")

3 [3] The juxtaposition of this verse to the next verse, "And Avshalom spoke unto Amnon neither good nor bad," apparently comes to allude that David as well did not speak to Amnon neither good nor bad on this matter, and even if he did speak to him, his talk had no effect (as in the case of Eli and his sons). It should be noted that the Septuagint adds a clause here: "He did not sadden the spirit of his son Amnon, for he loved him since he was his firstborn." It

II. THE PLAN

The story continues with Avshalom's cunning plan:

(23) And it came to pass after two full years, that Avshalom had sheep-shearers in Ba'al-Hatzor, which is beside Efrayim; and Avshalom invited all the king's sons. (24) And Avshalom came to the king, and said, " Behold now, your servant has sheep-shearers; let the king, I pray you, and his servants go with your servant." (25) And the king said to Avshalom, " No, my son, let us not all go, lest we be burdensome unto you." And he pressed him;^{4[4]} but he would not go, but blessed him. (26) Then said Avshalom, " If not,^{5[5]} I pray you, let my brother Amnon go with us." And the king said unto him, " Why should he go with you?" (27) But Avshalom pressed him, and he sent Amnon and all the king's sons with him. (28) And Avshalom commanded his servants, saying, " Mark you now, when Amnon's heart is merry with wine; and when I say unto you, ' Smite Amnon,' then kill him, fear not; have not I commanded you? Be courageous, and be valiant."

Avshalom's plan is based on several stages:

1) First of all, Avshalom waits two full years, until it would be possible to think that he had already gotten over what had happened.

seems, however, that this reading is based on the parallel to David's relationship with Adoniyahu (see [1 Melakhim 1:6](#)), and that it does not fit in with David's attitude toward Amnon as it is portrayed in the continuation of the chapter (see below).

4 [4] The word "*va-yifratz*" (and he pressed him) is used here in the sense of "*va-yaftzir*" (and he pleaded with him). This is an instance of transmutation of letters, a common phenomenon in Biblical Hebrew (e.g., *keves/kesev*, *salma/simla*, and others).

5 [5] The term "*ve-lo*" means here that if David cannot go, then at least Amnon should go (Rashi).

2) Avshalom invites all of the king's sons to participate in his sheep-shearing feast – a most natural invitation. He then turns to David and asks him to honor the occasion with his presence. But despite his pleading, David refuses the request. Why? It stands to reason that David was still immersed in his sackcloth and fasts, and that his heart was not open to celebration. Avshalom apparently foresaw David's refusal, and thus he laid the groundwork for the next step.

3) Following David's refusal, Avshalom makes a new request: "If not, I pray you, let my brother Amnon go with us." This request seems reasonable: If the king is unable to participate, he should at least send his son in his place. Avshalom even adds the words, "my brother," in order to express closeness and to minimize the suspicion – just as Amnon did, on the advice of Yonadav, when he requested of David: "Let my sister Tamar come, I pray you."

4) David is slow to agree to the request: "And the king said unto him, ' Why should he go with you?' " It stands to reason that he was not comfortable with the request, and that he suspected Avshalom of malicious intentions. It is here that Avshalom's cunning reaches its climax: Since David had already once refused Avshalom's pleadings, he cannot refuse him a second time: "But Avshalom pressed him, and he let Amnon and all the king's sons go with him."

The difference between Amnon and Avshalom is now fully evident. Amnon wanted to meet Tamar on his "home court," and Avshalom likewise sought to reach a similar situation with Amnon. Amnon was incapable of imagining what he should do, and he fell into a deep depression, until Yonadav advised him what to do; and even after he received the Yonadav's wise counsel, he ruined it with his haste. Avshalom, on the other hand, did not need advisors; he drew up his plan with meticulousness and patience, until he executed it. Both of David's sons did things that are forbidden, but the difference between them is very evident.

The tragedy in the story is David's part in the serious misdeeds. In both cases, the sons involve their father, and he actively participates in the realization of a situation that leads to a terrible act. In both cases, David sends the victim to his persecutor:

(7) Then David **sent** home to Tamar, saying, " Go now to your brother Amnon's house, and dress him food."

(27) But Avshalom pressed him, and he **sent** Amnon and all the king's sons with him.

It is difficult to ignore the fact that we are dealing here with an instance of measure for measure. In chapter 11, we saw that the root of David's sin was his sense of power, the clearest expression of which was his authority to send agents wherever he wanted, and among other things, to send agents to bring Bat-Sheva to him, to send agents to bring Uriya to him, and to send Uriya to his death. We saw that the guide word in that chapter is in fact the root *sh-l-ch* (send), and that it was his bringing agents into the picture that complicated things for David.^{6[6]} It is very symbolic then that David's punishment arrives in similar fashion: David himself sends his children off to their bitter destiny.

III. “ AND [DAVID] MOURNED FOR HIS SON EVERY DAY”

After Avshalom succeeds in bringing Amnon to him, he does not hesitate even for a moment:

(28) And Avshalom commanded his servants, saying, “ Mark you now, when Amnon's heart is merry with wine; and when I say unto you, ‘ Smite Amnon,’ then kill him, fear not; have not I commanded you? be courageous, and be valiant. (29) And the servants of Avshalom did to Amnon as Avshalom had commanded.^{7[7]} Then all the king's sons arose, and every man got him up upon his mule,^{8[8]} and fled.

6 [6] Among other things we concluded that Uriya appears to have first heard about Bat-Sheva's presence in David's house from David's men with whom he slept on the night of his return from the battlefield, and with that began Uriya's opposition to David's repeated attempts to send him home.

7 [7] From this description it may be concluded that Amnon did in fact "make his heart merry with wine" as had been planned from the outset, thus once again demonstrating his stupidity.

8 [8] The king's sons got around on mules; see below 18:9 and [I Melakhim 2:33](#).

Assassinating the crown prince is not a simple matter for Avshalom's servants, and he strengthens them and emphasizes his responsibility for the order. Avshalom's servants accede to his request, and as soon as the rest of the king's sons see what is happening, they quickly flee. Presumably, they feared that Avshalom did not mean only to strike out at Amnon, but rather to destroy the royal seed, in order to ensure his ascendancy to the throne, as others had done before him.⁹[9]

At this stage, the king's sons were wrong in their understanding of Avshalom's motives, but the news about it quickly spread:

(30) And it came to pass while they were in the way, that the tidings came to David, saying, “ Avshalom has slain all the king's sons, and there is not one of them left.” ¹⁰[10]

This is followed by a slightly ironic situation:

(31) Then the king arose, and rent his garments, and lay on the earth; and all his servants stood by with their clothes rent. **(32)** And Yonadav, the son of Shim'a David's brother, answered and said, “ Let not my lord suppose that they have killed all the young men the king's sons; for Amnon only is dead; for by the appointment of Avshalom this has been determined¹¹[11] from the day that he forced his sister Tamar. **(33)** Now therefore let not my lord the king take the thing to his heart, to think that all the king's sons are dead; for Amnon only is dead.”

We already (*shiu* 85) explained that Yonadav's words here reflect his anger with Amnon, who distorted his advice and thus made himself liable for

⁹ [9] Like Avimelekh, who killed his brothers (see *Shofetim* 9:5); later, this was done by Atalya, who killed all of the royal seed ([II Melakhim 11:1](#)).

¹⁰ [10] It is reasonable to assume that the report spread very quickly, so that it reached David's ears even before the king's son had returned, as some of those present rode on horses, thus arriving more quickly than those on mules.

¹¹ [11] The commentators suggested various ways to understand this word ("*shuma*"), but its meaning seems to be clear: Avshalom had already decided to kill Amnon on the day of Tamar's rape.

his life. But this ironic situation also expresses scorn for Amnon – the information about his death was received as a relief after the initial, erroneous announcement about the death of the king's sons. This is also expressed in the continuation:

(34) But Avshalom fled. And the young man that kept the watch lifted up his eyes, and looked, and, behold, there came much people in a roundabout way by the hill-side. **(35)** And Yonadav said to the king, “ Behold, the king's sons are come; as your servant said, so it is.” **(36)** And it came to pass, as soon as he had made an end of speaking, that, behold, the king's sons came, and lifted up their voice, and wept; and the king also and all his servants wept very sore. **(37) But Avshalom fled,** and went to Talmai the son of Amihud, king of Geshur.^{12[12]} And [David] mourned for his son every day. **(38) So Avshalom fled,** and went to Geshur, and was there three years.

The central theme in these verses seems to be the mourning over Amnon's death. It is not by chance, however, that three times and in a most astonishing manner, Scripture "plants" the information about Avshalom's flight. It seems that in this way, Scripture wishes to say that what was especially difficult for David was not the murder of the crown prince at the hand of Avshalom, but rather the latter's flight from *Eretz Yisrael* in its wake.

This is especially emphasized in the words, "And [David] mourned for his son every day." Regarding whom were these words stated? Surely at first glance, the reference is to Amnon, for mourning is for the dead. The problem is that in the beginning of that very verse, the subject is Avshalom! In this way, Scripture creates an intentional double entendre,^{13[13]} which comes to teach us that David's feelings with respect to the killer and his victim were divided. There is no doubt that this reaction to the death of his firstborn son also stems from a certain measure of understanding for Avshalom's deed.

In any event, with the passage of time, the gap between David's feelings about Amnon and those about Avshalom grow, and the chapter concludes with the following words:

12 [12] This was his grandfather, the father of his mother Ma'akha (see above 3:3).

13 [13] We already noted this common phenomenon. See our discussion of [I Shmuel 15:27](#).

(39) And the soul of king David failed with longing for Avshalom; for he was comforted concerning Amnon, seeing he was dead.

And so, by the end of the chapter, David was already comforted concerning the death of his firstborn, and his thoughts continued to be troubled by the pain connected to the forced departure of Avshalom.

The difficult structure of this verse is striking: What is the meaning of "*Va-tekhal David*"? Most of the commentators explain that the verse is defective, and that it means: "And the soul of David failed with longing."¹⁴[14] But why was the verse written in this defective manner?

It may be that we must make use of a rule that was discussed already in the past, that the striking omission of a word comes to tell us something.¹⁵[15] It seems to me that in our case, Scripture comes to tell us that David's conduct here was inappropriate. Later in the book, we will discuss at length the meaning of David's surprising attitude towards Avshalom, his cruel and wily son, until the battle in which the latter found his death. For now, let us suffice with Scripture's allusion here; its slight hint, not yet especially striking, to David's exceptional attitude toward his son Avshalom.

(Translated by David Strauss)

14 [14] The Radak suggested an original explanation in the name of the Ibn Ezra. According to his explanation, the verb, "*va-tekhal*" – a feminine form – is a transitive verb, referring to Ma'akha, David's wife, who pressed on David to restore Avshalom: "His wife, Avshalom's mother, greatly petitioned David until he desired Avshalom and sent one of his lads after him." This explanation, however, is difficult both linguistically and substantively: Was David's love for Avshalom in need of strengthening on the part of Avshalom's mother? Moreover, nowhere is Ma'akha mentioned in our story (or in other stories in this book) as an active character.

15 [15] In our *shiurim* on chapters 4-6, we noted the intentional omission of the name Ish-Boshet the son of Shmuel, which was meant as an expression of scorn for him.

