

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

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LECTURE 80: CHAPTER 11

DAVID AND BAT-SHEVA (PART II)

I. THE DEATH OF URIYA

At the end of the previous lecture, we saw that Uriya stubbornly refused to go home, and David was therefore left with only one way to cover up his deed – to send Uriya to his death:

(14) And it came to pass in the morning, that David wrote a letter to Yoav, and sent it by the hand of Uriya. (15) And he wrote in the letter, saying, “ Set you Uriya in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retire you from him, that he may be smitten and die.” (16) And it came to pass, when Yoav kept watch upon the city, that he assigned Uriya unto the place where he knew that valiant men were. (17) And the men of the city went out and fought with Yoav; and there fell some of the people, even of the servants of David; and Uriya the Chitite died also.

This is an exceedingly tragic account: Uriya, the loyal soldier, delivers his death sentence to Yoav with his very own hands. But the full severity of the deed only becomes manifest when we consider the difference between David's command and its execution. David ordered that Yoav's soldiers should abandon Uriya in the field, so that he should die alone. In practice, Yoav did not issue this command, but rather stationed Uriya in a dangerous place with other soldiers, and other people alongside him. Why did Yoav deviate from David's command?

The answer to this question seems to be clear: David's order was impractical – no commander can order his soldiers to flee and abandon their brother in arms to death. This understanding further exacerbates the severity of David's order. It was convenient for David to ignore the fact that his order was impractical and thus to feel responsible "only" for the death of Uriya. But since in actual practice there was no way for such an order to be carried out,

what David actually commanded was to bring about the deaths of other people as well. In the previous lecture, we noted the important role played in this story by David's authority to **send** messengers to do various tasks on his behalf. Now we see that David's authority to **send** people to their deaths through the agency of others lightened the moral burden that he had to bear.

II. YOAV

Following Uriya's death, Yoav sent David an account of what happened:

(18) Then Yoav sent and told David all the things concerning the war; (19) and he charged the messenger, saying, " When you have made an end of telling all the things concerning the war unto the king, (20) it shall be that, if the king's wrath arise, and he say unto you: ' Wherefore went you so near unto the city to fight? Knew you not that they would shoot from the wall? (21) Who smote Avimelech the son of Yerubeshet? ¹[1] Did not a woman cast an upper millstone upon him from the wall, that he died at Tevetz? Why went you so near the wall?' Then shall you say, ' Your servant Uriya the Chitite is dead also.' "

Why did Yoav tell the messenger to tell David about Uriya's death only in response to a question that David might ask, and not outright?

It seems that Yoav acted here with special cunning. On the one hand, Yoav fulfilled the order and brought about Uriya's death; on the other hand, Yoav wanted to say via the messenger that Uriya's death stemmed from a special request on the part of David. Had Yoav wanted to keep David's secret, he would have integrated Uriya's death into the account of "all the things concerning the war." But Yoav adopted a different approach. He foresaw the question that David would ask: Why did the soldiers draw so near to the wall? Surely this is a classic mistake that proved to be a faulty step already in the days of Avimelekh! So he instructed the messenger that when David asked him about the matter, he should answer him: "Your servant Uriya the Chitite is dead also."

1 [1] Yerubeshet=Yeruba'al. Concerning the substitution of *ba'al/beshet* in the book of *Shemuel*, see Lecture no. 60, note 7. Yoav's words refer here to the story in [Shoftim 9:50-54](#).

What would the messenger understand from this? What kind of an answer was this? How can Uriya's death explain the tactical mistake that was made in the conduct of the battle?

It stands to reason that the messenger would understand from here exactly what Yoav wanted him to understand: that the military blunder was especially arranged in order to fulfill David's desire that Uriya the Chitite should die.²[2] In this way, Yoav succeeded in preserving his loyalty to David and fulfilling his orders, and also in sending his soldiers the message that the tactical mistake was not his personal failure, but rather the fulfillment of an order, the objective of which was to bring about the death of Uriya.

It seems to me that in this way we can understand the following *midrash*:

"Moreover you know also what Yoav the son of Tzeruya did **unto me**, even what he did to the two captains of the hosts of Israel, unto Avner the son of Ner and unto Amasa the son of Yeter, whom he slew" ([I Melakhim 2:5](#)). What did he do **to him**? You find that when David wrote to Yoav: "Set you Uriya in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retire you from him, that he may be smitten and die," he did so, and he was killed. All the chiefs of the soldiers assembled against Yoav to kill him, he being the chief warrior, as it is written about him: "Uriya the Chitite over thirty seven" ([II Shmuel 23:39](#)).³[3] He showed them the letter. It is therefore written: "What Yoav the son of Tzeruya did unto me." ([Bamidbar Rabba 23:13](#))

According to the *midrash*, after Uriya was killed, Yoav showed his soldiers David's order to bring about his death, and this is the personal offense ("what Yoav did **unto me**") that David mentioned in his testament to Shlomo.

² [2] The *Metzudat David* understands this in the opposite manner: "His intention was to inform him that he had done as commanded regarding Uriya, and in order to conceal the matter from the messenger, he didn't command him to tell him immediately." But as stated above, it seems that in this manner he did not conceal the matter, but rather emphasized it.

³ [3] The Masoretic text of that verse reads: "Uriya the Chitite. Thirty and seven in all." The *midrash* is based on a different reading of the verse.

According to what we said above, the meaning of the *midrash* is clear. The *midrash* wishes to emphasize that Yoav's action involved an offense that he initiated and directed against David.

This does not necessarily mean that the *midrash* is laying blame on Yoav, who wished to clear himself of the responsibility for the failure. But it is also certainly not to his credit that he takes a roundabout path in order to come out clean in everyone's eyes.

In any event, it would appear that the messenger well understood the hidden message, and that when he arrived before David, he did not wait for David's scolding about the failure:

(22) So the messenger went and came and told David all that Yoav had sent him for. **(23)** And the messenger said unto David, " The men prevailed against us, and came out unto us into the field, and we were upon them even unto the entrance of the gate. **(24)** And the shooters shot at your servants from off the wall; and some of the king's servants are dead,⁴**[4]** and your servant Uriya the Chitite is dead also." **5**^[5]

It is reasonable to assume that the messenger was not surprised by the success of the "scheme," as may be understood from David's calm response:

4 [4] From this account it appears that Yoav's action was even more sophisticated than what one might have understood from what was stated thus far. Yoav brought it about that the soldiers of Amon left the city to the open field, and that the Israelite soldiers chased after them until the entrance of the city, and only then did the archers shoot from the wall at the Israelite soldiers. In this way, there was even less room to suspect that the military failure was inevitable.

5 [5] The Septuagint adds (based on vv. 19-21) the following words between v. 22 and v. 23: "And David became angry with Yoav, and said to the messenger, Why did you draw near to the city to fight; surely you knew they would shoot from the wall..." But it seems that the Septuagint missed an important element in understanding the chain of events.

(25) Then David said unto the messenger, “ Thus shall you say unto Yoav, ‘ Let not this thing displease you, for the sword devours in one manner or another; make your battle more strong against the city, and overthrow it; and encourage you him.” 6[6]

Thus the messenger understood that it was David who stood behind the entire episode, without David realizing that the information had already leaked out.

III. THE MEASURE OF RESPONSIBILITY

The chapter ends with Bat-Sheva being brought to David's house:

(26) And when the wife of Uriya heard that Uriya her husband was dead, she made lamentation for her husband. (27) And when the mourning was past, David sent and took her home to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord.

From the chapter's conclusion it would appear that David's conduct was negative from beginning to end – from the moment that he wanted to take Bat-Sheva to the time that she was brought to his house. It is possible, however, that the matter is more complex. In order to understand this, let us look at the interesting parallelism between the story of David and Bat-Sheva and the story of Yehuda and Tamar ([Bereishit 38](#)).^{7[7]} There are many parallels between the two stories:

6 [6] According to the plain sense, the two final verbs in the verse should be separated: the first one, "and overthrow it," is a continuation of the command to Yoav, whereas the second, "and encourage you him," is a command to the messenger that he should encourage Yoav. See, however, Abravanel.

7 [7] For this parallelism, see in greater detail my book, *Makbilot Nifgashot – Makbilot Sifrutiyot Be-Sefer Shemuel* (Alon Shevut, 5767), pp. 144-148.

1) In both cases, we are told about illicit sexual relations outside of marriage.⁸[8] Yehuda is intimate with his daughter-in-law Tamar, thinking that she is a prostitute, and David sleeps with Bat-Sheva while she is a married woman.

2) Both women conceive from these illicit relations.

3) In both cases, the man issues a death sentence against someone who was not deserving of death. When Yehuda hears of Tamar's pregnancy, he orders: "Take her out that she may be burned" ([Bereishit 38:24](#)),⁹[9] and David sends Uriya to his death.

4) Both women inform the man with whom they had had relations, directly or by allusion, that they are pregnant:

When she was brought forth, she **sent** to her father-in-law, saying, " By the man, whose these are, **am I with child.**" ([Bereishit 38:25](#))

And the woman conceived; and she **sent** and told David, and said, " **I am with child.**" ([II Shmuel 11:5](#))

5) In both stories, the man eventually recognizes his wrongdoing:

And Yehuda acknowledged them, and said, " She is more righteous than I; forasmuch as I gave her not to Shela my son." ([Bereishit 38:26](#))

8 [8] Perhaps a parallel should also be drawn between Tamar's dressing up as a harlot (*kedesha*) ([Bereishit 38:22](#)) and Bat-Sheva's being "purified" (*mitkadeshet*) from her uncleanness" ([II Shemuel 11:4](#)).

9 [9] This sentence is unjust irrespective of the fact that Tamar was pregnant with Yehuda's child. Yehuda himself admitted this in the continuation of the story: "She is more righteous than I; forasmuch as I gave her not to Shela my son" ([Bereishit 38:26](#)), and as Rashi explains there: "For she acted by right, as I did not give her Shela my son."

And David said unto Natan, “ I have sinned against the Lord.” ([II Shmuel 12:13](#))

In addition to the substantive parallels, there are also other allusions that connect the two stories. The name of Yehuda's wife, Bat Shu'a ([Bereishit 38:12](#)), is very reminiscent of the name Bat-Sheva – moreover, Bat-Sheva herself is also called Bat-Shu'a (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 3:5).

6) The expression found at the end of our chapter regarding David's deed is also found in the story of Yehuda and Tamar with respect to Onen:

And the thing which he did displeased the Lord. ([Bereishit 38:10](#))

But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord. ([II Shmuel 11:27](#))

These are the only two places in the Scripture where we find the expression "*Vayera ...be-einei Hashem.*"

7) And, of course, David was a descendant of Peretz, who is mentioned at the end of the story in *Bereishit*.

What does this correspondence mean? It seems that with all the severity of having relations with a married woman and with sending her husband off to be killed, it is impossible to ignore the one merit that David has in this story. When Bat-Sheva informed David that she was pregnant, he could have pushed her off and denied any connection to her. In such a case, Bat-Sheva's situation would have been entirely different from that of Tamar, who held Yehuda's signet, cord, and staff in her hand. Yehuda could not have denied Tamar's claim, but in David's case, the possibility existed. Regarding this, Scripture sees a point in David's favor; he did not send Bat-Sheva off empty-handed, but rather tried to protect her. It is true that this brought him to summon Uriya the Chitite before him and try to cover up what he had done, and when this failed, David sent Uriya off to his death, thus adding further sin

to his transgression. But in any event, David did not hide from his responsibility toward Bat-Sheva and did not force her to bear the responsibility for what had happened.

There is another striking difference between David and Yehuda. After Yehuda was told that Tamar had become pregnant from him and he recognized her righteousness, it says: " And he knew her again no more" ([Bereishit 38:26](#)).

According to the plain sense of the text, Yehuda did not continue to maintain marital relations with Tamar.¹⁰[10] Apart from the birth of the two boys, Tamar gained nothing from the entire story. The reality which she faced before the events – "Remain a widow in your father's house until Shela my son be grown up" (ibid. v. 11) – continued, apparently, afterwards as well, and we do not find that Tamar was now given to Shela or some other man.

David, in contrast, did not leave Bat-Sheva chained in her widowhood: "And when the mourning was past, David sent and took her home to his house, and she became his wife." This step seems not to have stemmed from negative motives. David slept with Bat-Sheva on one occasion, and he had no inclination to marry her. Following the sin, we are told: "And she returned unto her house" (v. 4), and it stands to reason that the story would have ended here, had Bat-Sheva not conceived from David. There is no hint in the story that David sent Uriya to his death in order to take Bat-Sheva as his wife. The phrase, "and he took her home to his house," proves that David brought Bat-Sheva into his house as an act of kindness, and not as a cynical exploitation of the intended death of Uriya.¹¹[11]

10 [10] Rashi there writes: "Some say: He knew her again no more. Whereas others say: He did not cease knowing her." But the words of the Rashbam (ad loc.) are convincing: "He knew her again no more, for if you say he did not cease knowing her, it should have said: He did not cease knowing her (*me-le-da'ata* rather than *le-da'ata*)." And so too writes the Ramban: "After he established seed for his sons, he did not want to be with her anymore, even though he could have desired that, as she was not forbidden to him, but rather she was his wife according to the law of levirate marriage."

11 [11] This is the impression from other instances of this expression in Scripture, e.g.: "For there was no man that took them into his house to lodge" ([Shoftim 19:15](#)).

Of course, there is nothing in these words that lessens the severity of David's conduct in this affair. But we do see from here that even when David sank into sin, he never lost the trait of accepting responsibility for his actions. Thus he took the first step on the track to repentance, which constitutes the heart of this tragic episode.

(Translated by David Strauss)
