

# THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

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## LECTURE 79: CHAPTER 11

### DAVID AND BAT-SHEVA (PART I)

#### I. INTRODUCTION

The story involving David and Bat-Sheva is one of the most complex stories in Scripture, over which much ink has been spilled. On the one hand, it deals with King David, the sweet singer of Israel, whose great spiritual strength we have already seen. Even though Scripture has consistently shown us David's weaknesses and errors, the overall picture that it has painted is one of an extraordinary man who trusts in God, and who therefore time and time again merits His deliverance. On the other hand, the story speaks of horrendous sins, beginning with sleeping with a married woman and ending with sending her husband off to certain death in order to cover up his crime. How can we reconcile the matter? Is it possible to read this story in its plain sense? Is it possible to read it not in its plain sense?

From the earliest times, the Sages of Israel have disagreed about this issue. Some advocated understanding the biblical text in its plain sense, while others rejected such an understanding. *Chazal* disagreed about this, the *Rishonim* differed, and even the latest *Acharonim* dispute the matter. At the end of our study of this episode, we shall present a short summary of the disagreement surrounding this topic in *Chazal* and in the *Rishonim*. First, however, we will attempt to understand the plain sense of Scripture as we have done from the very beginning of the book of *Shemuel*, based on a firm belief in the value of the first of the seventy faces of the Torah: the plain sense. Unwavering in our belief in the sanctity of the prophetic books, we shall try to understand the words of the prophet in these chapters in the same manner; we must not study chapters 11 and 12 of II *Shemuel* in a different way than we learn any other chapter in Scripture. We will humbly listen to what Scripture is saying, we will seek to understand what it is trying to teach us, and we will not force it to tell us what we, perhaps, would like to hear. Faithful is our God and faithful are His words, and blessed is God who has chosen good prophets and has been pleased with their words, which were truthfully spoken.

#### II. “ DAVID SENT”

In the previous *shiur*, we noted the problematic nature of the fact that David himself did not go out to battle against Amon, but rather sent Yoav to do so. This stands out all through this episode:

(1) And it came to pass, at the return of the year, at the time when kings go out to battle, that **David sent** Yoav, and his servants with him, and all Israel; and they destroyed the children of Amon, and besieged Rabba. But David tarried at Jerusalem. (2) And it came to pass at eventide, that David arose from off his bed and walked upon the roof of the king's house; and from the roof he saw a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon. (3) And **David sent** and inquired after the woman. And one said, " Is not this Bat-Sheva, the daughter of Eli'am,<sup>1</sup>[1] the wife of Uriya the Chitite?<sup>2</sup>[2]" (4) And **David sent** messengers, and took her; and she came in unto him, and he lay with her; for she was purified from her uncleanness; and she returned unto her house. (5) And the woman conceived; and she sent and told David, and said, " I am with child." (6) And **David sent** to Yoav, saying, " Send me Uriya the Chitite." And Yoav sent Uriya to David.

A difficult picture emerges from these verses. While Yoav and his men find themselves in the heat of the second campaign against Amon, David lives in an entirely different atmosphere. He takes an afternoon nap until late in the day; when he gets up he goes for a walk on the roof of the king's house, and from there he sees a beautiful woman bathing and inquires as to who she is. The nature of this inquiry is slightly surprising, for even the knowledge that she is a married woman does not stop David from taking her.

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1 [1] *Chazal* (see [Sanhedrin 69b](#)) identified Eli'am, the father of Bat-Sheva, with Eli'am the son of Achitofel, one of David's warriors (see 23:34). According to this, some explain that Achitofel joined Avshalom's rebellion because of his anger over David's deed. This explanation, however, is surprising, for David loved Bat-Sheva and her son Shlomo; Achitofel had no reason to prefer Avshalom over Shlomo, if indeed Shlomo was his great-grandson. It should be noted that in *Divrei Ha-yamim* (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 3:5), Bat-Sheva's father is called Amiel, perhaps referring to Amiel from Lo-Davar, David's friend who helped him during Avshalom's rebellion (see 17:27).

2 [2] It is difficult to determine whether or not Uriya was an Israelite. The Radak raised two possibilities: "It is possible that he was a proselyte, or else he was an Israelite, and he was called the Chitite because he lived among the people of Chet."

The phrase, "And David sent," appears five times in our chapter (four times in the aforementioned citation and once again in verse 27), and altogether the root *sh-l-ch* ("send") appears twelve times. It seems, then, that the idea of "sending" is essential for understanding the story. The king's ability to send people to do various tasks on his behalf is liable to give him a feeling of exaggerated power. However, it is precisely here – measure for measure – that the root of the fiasco lies: when a person engages in problematic activity by way of messengers, his actions are known to others. As we shall see later, David fell because he had failed to conceal his actions, and the other people who had been involved revealed his secrets in public.

Returning to the matter at hand, the objective of David's mission – "And David sent and inquired after the woman" – is not clear. Why was it important to David to know who the woman was? And what impact did the answer that he received – "Is not this Bat-Sheva, the daughter of Eli'am, the wife of Uriya the Chitite" – have on what he did later? David may have wished to check where her husband was; when he heard that it was Uriya the Chitite, who was one of his warriors (see 23:39), it was clear to him that he was out at battle, and therefore David could have her brought to him.<sup>3[3]</sup> This step aggravates David's offense: David knowingly exploits the fact that he is in Jerusalem, while Bat-Sheva's husband is out at war.

The story could have ended here, with Bat-Sheva's return to her house. But the situation becomes more tangled when Bat-Sheva realizes that she is pregnant, and in ironic fashion she informs David:

(5) And the woman conceived; and **she sent** and told David, and said, " I am with child."

It stands to reason that the message was delivered orally ("and told... and said"), and so the information that Bat-Sheva was pregnant (with David's child) also became known to too many people.

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3 [3] If *Chazal* are right (see note 1) that Eli'am, Bat-Sheva's father, was also among David's warriors, then the answer that David received meant that both Bat-Sheva's father and her husband were at the battlefield, and she was left alone in Jerusalem.

### III. BAT-SHEVA

The words, "I am with child," are the only words expressed by Bat-Sheva in the entire episode. The question must be asked: What was Bat-Sheva's part in the story? To what extent was she a willing partner? There is a well-known view in *Chazal* ([Ketuvot 9a](#)) that Bat-Sheva was permitted to marry David, even though a married woman who engages in adultery is forbidden to both her husband and her lover, because she had been under duress. It stands to reason that this does not mean that David actually raped Bat-Sheva, but rather that David's very standing made it impossible for her to refuse him, out of fear that her refusal would seal her fate.

On the plain level, however, the picture seems to be altogether different. Scripture gives no hint whatsoever that Bat-Sheva felt coerced. On the contrary, there seem to be hints that in a certain sense she even initiated the whole affair. It is worthwhile to consider several points. First, we must carefully read the verse:

And he walked upon the roof of the king's house; **and from the roof he saw a woman bathing**; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon.

What do these words mean? Did Bat-Sheva bathe on the roof? The Radak rejects such an explanation, saying: "He saw from upon the roof that she was bathing in her house." This understanding is reasonable, both because the roof was already mentioned at the beginning of the verse, and because if the words "from the roof" relate to Bat-Sheva's bathing, it should have read "*al ha-gag*," and not "*mei-al ha-gag*." It stands to reason, then, that David saw Bat-Sheva bathing from atop his house, which in any case was higher than any other house in the city.<sup>4[4]</sup>

There is still room to ask: Why did Scripture choose to formulate the verse in this manner, and not write simply, "He saw from the roof a woman

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<sup>4 [4]</sup> Uriya's house was below David's house, as the verse states: "And David said to Uriya, 'Go down to your house,' " and so too several times later in the chapter. According to the accepted view today, David's house was at the top of the ridge of the city of David and looked out over the entire city, which descended southward from the royal house.

bathing" ("va-yar me'al ha-gag isha rochetzet"), rather than "va-yar isha rochetzet me'al ha-gag"? It may be argued that this is Scripture's way of saying that the blame falls on Bat-Sheva as well. Even if, in fact, Bat-Sheva bathed in her house, she was nevertheless seen by David. Scripture does not say, of course, that Bat-Sheva was acting deliberately, but there is a lack of caution here; had Bat-Sheva been more careful, nobody would have seen her bathe.

This may also explain the expression: "And David sent messengers, and took her; **and she came in** unto him." What do the words "and she came in" teach us? What would have been missing without them? These words seem to intimate that Bat-Sheva was not entirely passive in the story, and therefore there is room to describe her part with active verbs as well.

This seems to be the way that we should understand another puzzling verse: "And he lay with her; for she was purified from her uncleanness." What does this come to emphasize? The commentators offer several suggestions. The Radak explains that the verse emphasizes that Bat-Sheva was not a *nidda*, and that the bathing mentioned in verse 2 is immersion from her menstrual uncleanness. Therefore, David "did not violate the prohibition of sleeping with a *nidda*, but only of sleeping with a married woman." This is difficult; why would Scripture emphasize that David "only" violated the prohibition of a married woman? Ri Kara writes that the verse comes to explain why David was forced to call Uriya from the battlefield: Since David had relations with Bat-Sheva after she had had her period, it is clear that the child was not Uriya's. R. Yaakov Medan<sup>5</sup>[5] suggests that this was written to David's disgrace – for he took Bat-Sheva when she had purified herself for her husband.

An objection may, however, be raised against all these explanations: How did David know this? It, therefore, seems that this fact is mentioned in order to present Bat-Sheva's part in the story: she did not refrain from sleeping with David, even though she had just purified herself from her uncleanness, and there was a clear risk of her conceiving from this forbidden intercourse.<sup>6</sup>[6]

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<sup>5</sup> [5] In his book, *David U-Bat-Sheva – Ha-Chet, Ha-Onesh, Ve-Ha-Tikun* (Alon Shevut, 5762).

<sup>6</sup> [6] See *Nidda* 31b: "R. Yitzchak said in the name of R. Ami: A woman conceives only immediately before her menstrual period, as it is stated: 'Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity' ([Tehillim 51:7](#)). But R. Yochanan

#### IV. URIYA

After hearing of Bat-Sheva's pregnancy, David tries to cover up his actions by quickly sending for Uriya the Chitite:

(6) And David sent to Yoav, saying, " Send me Uriya the Chitite." And Yoav sent Uriya to David. (7) And when Uriya was come unto him, David asked of him how Yoav did, and how the people fared, and how the war prospered.<sup>7[7]</sup> (8) And David said to Uriya, " Go down to your house and wash your feet." And Uriya departed out of the king's house, and there followed him a portion of food from the king.<sup>8[8]</sup> (9) But Uriya slept at the door of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and went not down to his house. (10) And when they had told David, saying, " Uriya went not down unto his house," David said unto Uriya, " Are you not come from a journey? Why did you not go down unto your house?" (11) And Uriya said unto David, " The ark, and Israel, and Yehuda abide in booths; and my lord Yoav, and the servants of my lord, are encamped in the open field; shall I then go into my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live and as your soul lives, I will not do this thing."

David's goal is clear: "He intended for him to sleep with his wife and then think that she had conceived from him" (Rashi). But why didn't Uriya go down to his house? Did he really refuse only for the ideological reason that he gave David, that he didn't want to go to his house while his comrades were still out at war? It stands to reason that this was not the case. If this was his only reason, it is hard to imagine that Uriya would have spoken so harshly to David. It seems, then, that the situation was more complicated. At first, Uriya did not know what had happened, and it may be assumed that the reason that he did not go down to his house was in fact his moral-ideological argument. But Uriya did not go to sleep all alone. He "slept at the door of the king's

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stated: A woman conceives only immediately after her ritual immersion, as it is stated: 'And in cleansing did my mother conceive me' (ibid.)."

7 [7] Since these questions were not really asked in order to elicit answers, Scripture sees no need to note Uriya's response.

8 [8] The reference is to a portion of food given by the royal house as a sign of honor and esteem, similar to the presents that Yosef gave his brothers ([Bereishit 43:34](#)).

house with all the servants of his lord"! Without a doubt, among the servants with whom he spent that night there were those who had already heard about David's deed, which, as noted earlier, was not done covertly. Some of them may even have been among the messengers that David had sent during the episode. Even if they did not all have explicit knowledge of the details, it would have been difficult not to see a connection between Bat-Sheva's last visit in David's house and her husband's surprising return to Jerusalem at David's command. In short, David's lack of caution led to publication of the episode, to the point that the information apparently reached the ears of Uriya as well.

In light of this, we can truly understand the sharp words of Uriya: "The ark, and Israel, and Yehuda abide in booths; and my lord Yoav, and the servants of my lord, are encamped in the open field; shall I then go into my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do this thing." It stands to reason that with the sharp and surprising mention of "to lie with my wife," Uriya is alluding specifically to David, as if to say: Is it proper that I should lie with my wife – as you did? Uriya exposes by way of allusion David's most difficult moral problem: that the entire episode took place against the backdrop of the gap between those who went out to battle and those who remained at the home front.<sup>9[9]</sup>

David does not despair, and tries other ways to get Uriya to go home:

(12) And David said to Uriya, "Tarry here today also, and tomorrow I will let you depart." So Uriya abode in Jerusalem that day, and the morrow. (13) And when David had called him, he did eat and drink before him; and he made him drunk; and at evening, he went out to lie on his bed with the servants of his lord, but went not down to his house.

At first, David tried to keep Uriya in Jerusalem for another day, on the assumption that if he remains in the city with nothing to do, he will have no real reason not to go home. When this attempt fails, David tries to undermine Uriya's judgment by getting him drunk. Even in his drunkenness, however, Uriya refuses to cooperate with David; he still retains a measure of clear-

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9 [9] *Chazal* ([Kiddushin 43a](#)) maintained that the very reference to Yoav as "my lord" constituted an act of rebellion. Without a doubt, Uriya speaks here to David in a most provocative manner, and Scripture emphasizes this by referring twice to David as Uriya's lord (vv. 9, 13).

headedness, and it helps him oppose with all his power David's attempt to cover up his affair.

David is left now with only one alternative – the worst of all:

**(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.”

(Translated by David Strauss)

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