

**The Royal Prophet
David:
Through Critical Eyes¹**

*“I became peculiar (in the eyes of) my brothers; a stranger to my mother’s sons”
(Psalms 69; 9)*

*“The stone despised by the builders has become the cornerstone”
(Psalms 118; 22)*

Throughout his life - and even after his death - King David was misunderstood by those around him. The David many people saw was a man singularly unsuited to rule the holy Jewish nation; perhaps even incapable of ruling himself. His origins, early life and even his physical appearance all stood as obstacles between the author of Psalms and his destiny. Obstacles that would require Divine intervention to overcome.

Curiously, it is from the words and thoughts of others - many of them David’s critics and even enemies - that we can form the clearest picture of this great man. This chapter will examine David through the eyes of his contemporaries, as observed and recorded by our sages and later commentators.

While King David is discussed at length throughout many of the books of the Tanach, one might want to read chapters sixteen and seventeen from I Shmuel.

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There are two things about the critical relationship between the prophet Shmuel and his protégé David that beg deeper thought: David wasn’t at all what Shmuel had expected and they actually met only twice.

Shmuel, when meeting David for the first time, seemed shocked and unprepared for what he found.

Having been informed that the next king of Israel would come from the family of Yishai, Shmuel asked that distinguished elder to bring forward each of his sons. On seeing the oldest, Eliyav, the prophet was sure that his search had ended. However:

“...G-d said to Shmuel, ‘do not gaze at his appearance nor at this stature, for I have rejected him; for (it is) not according to the vision of man, for a man sees with his eyes and G-d sees to the heart.’” (I Shmuel 16; 7)

After each of the sons was brought before Shmuel - and rejected by G-d - the youngest was reluctantly² called back from tending the sheep.

¹ From the book “The Royal Prophet and other thoughtful essays on the book of Shmuel” by Boruch Clinton. www.marbitz.com.

² It is worth mentioning that David is here referred to as “the young one.” This probably means more than simply “the youngest of the brothers.” Elsewhere (I Shmuel 16; 28), we find the oldest brother, Eliyav, treating David like an irresponsible teenager and in (I Shmuel 17; 42) the Philistine soldier, Goliath, thinking of David as a “boy.” This, despite the fact that David was, at the time of this

“And he sent (for David) and they brought him; and he was reddish with beautiful eyes and good appearance. And G-d said: ‘arise, anoint him for this is him.’” (ibid, verses 12 - 13)

The midrash³ tells us that G-d, with the word “arise,” was in effect saying: “the (one to be) anointed is standing and you are sitting? Arise! Anoint him!” What was G-d’s “complaint” with His prophet and why was Shmuel specifically told to “stand up?” The Da’as Sofrim suggests the possibility that, upon first seeing David, Shmuel actually sat down in shock and it was from that position that he was told to rise.

But what was it that so badly shocked Shmuel?

There’s another midrash,⁴ this time concerning the birth of Eisav, that might provide the answer: “And the first (son) came out all red...” (Genesis 25; 25). On the words “all red” the midrash comments “as though he were a murderer.” The Midrash continues: “(Shmuel) was afraid (upon seeing David) and he said ‘even this one will murder like Esav.’ G-d said to (Shmuel: ‘David has) beautiful eyes (i.e.) Esav killed on his own; but this one will kill only with the consent of Sanhedrin.”“ The phrase “beautiful eyes” is taken here as a subtle reference to the Jewish high court - the “eyes of the flock.”

David’s reddish appearance⁵ seems to have helped shape the impression he left in the minds of many people - particularly those unaware of G-d’s assurance to Shmuel. The thought that this young man might be as violent and treacherous as Eisav led many to believe that it was far too risky to allow him to become and/or remain king.

Despite the fact that Shmuel and David, in many ways, shared the historical mission to build the Jewish national monarchy, they seem to have met only twice.

It is significant, notes the Da’as Sofrim, that Saul, when he was chosen to be king, enjoyed a great deal of Shmuel’s attention and time in preparation for his public role. There is the clear suggestion that, as great as Saul was when he was anointed, he was not yet quite ready for the monarchy and needed further “schooling.” Indeed, as subsequent events suggest, he might never have made the grade.

David’s initiation was a study in contrast. The Tanach doesn’t even directly mention a single conversation between David and the prophet! Our sages do say that they spend one long night in discussion - but that discussion seemed to have had very little to do with preparing David for government.⁶

We are left, according to the Da’as Sofrim, with the distinct impression that by the time Shmuel found him, David was already near-complete. His years tending his father’s sheep, composing Psalms, intensely studying Torah and growing in ways we can’t imagine seem to have left the young man amply prepared for his life’s task.

David’s job now would be to convince the rest of the nation that he was ready.

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Although not actually mentioned until later in the book⁷, Doag Ho’adomi (a prominent figure in

narrative, nearly thirty years old!

³ Tanchuma, Parshas Vayera #6

⁴ Beraishis Rabba parsha 63 #11

⁵ I don’t think that all people of red complexion are here branded violent (although I may be biased: I have some red hair myself). Rashi himself writes that Esav’s coloring was a “sign that he would spill blood.” Therefore, one might say that the color red is used as a working metaphor of a particular person’s potential for violent behavior. In some cases, a red complexion might be considered a sign of things to come...and for which to watch out.

⁶ See I Shmuel 19; 18. The Talmud (Zevachim 54b) states that the goal of that night’s study was to discover the intended site of the Temple. The midrash, “Yalkut Shimoni” (#129) writes that “the night that David escaped from Saul, he learned more from the prophet Shmuel than could have been absorbed by an outstanding student over a hundred year period.”

⁷ See I Shmuel 21; 8. Note that, according to the Radak (and others), Doag’s name does not imply that he was actually an Edomite (Ho’Adomi), but that he was a Jew who had lived in Edomite territory.

Saul's administration) was an important player from the time David first appeared on the public stage. The Talmud identifies Doag as the "boy" who introduces David as the talented person whose music would relieve the king's depression.

"And one of the lads answered and said: 'behold I have seen a son of Yishai from Bethlehem who knows music, is a powerful soldier, a man of war, who understands things, a man of (impressive) appearance and G-d is with him.'" (Shmuel I 16; 18)

Warm words. In fact, according to our sages, these were actually effusive praises of David's considerable abilities and diligence in Torah scholarship. But the Talmud⁸ contends that these words were also

"slandorous (loshon harah): 'he knows music' implied that he knew to ask (intelligent halachic questions);⁹ 'powerful' implied that he could also answer the questions of others; 'a man of war,' that he could participate fully in the 'battle' of Torah;¹⁰ 'who understands things,' that he can deduce halacha from prototypical cases; 'a man of appearance,' that he can present halacha coherently and correctly 'and G-d is with him' that the halacha always rests with his opinion."

So where was the slander? The Talmud continues...

"...to all of these (praises, Saul) answered 'my son Jonathan is just like him.' However, when (Doag) said 'G-d is with him' - something that Jonathan did not share - Saul weakened and envied (David)."

The purpose of all of Doag's praises, it seems, was only to arouse Saul's jealousy (sometimes, we are taught, even praising someone can be dangerous slander just as much as vicious and gratuitous criticism). Nevertheless, each and every element of Doag's tribute was true: David really was a scholar of significance and any attempt to understand David and the many remarkable things he did, requires great sensitivity to this point. David's profound Torah knowledge and Torah personality colored his entire life.

The Talmud¹¹ portrays David as a beleaguered public servant who sacrificed much of the considerable comfort of his position to make himself available to answer the average Jew's halachic queries. And yet, despite his stature and popularity, he sought the truth above all and made it his practice to consult colleagues to confirm the accuracy of his decisions.

Elsewhere,¹² David is described as one who "uncovers" his knowledge. Meaning either that he was eager to teach his Torah to others (through which he achieved notable success), or that he expended great effort to fully and precisely understand the Torah that he learned.¹³

According to the Talmud,¹⁴ Doag was also the most active force in the attempt to discredit David's lineage - his very Jewishness! David, as is well known, descended from Ruth, a Moabite convert and ideal model of a successful Jew (see the Book of Ruth, 4; 22). However, it was no secret that the Torah clearly prohibits marrying a Moabite convert (see Deuteronomy 23; 4). Doag - and others - therefore felt that David, while perhaps great and deserving as an individual, was legally¹⁵ unfit to hold high office in the Jewish nation and that his quick rise should therefore be stopped.

⁸ TB Sanhedrin 93b

⁹ The Talmud isn't saying that this passage can *only* be interpreted in terms of Torah ability - without question, David was also a great musician and a mighty warrior - but that David's scholarly achievements were *also* herein implied and that these traits were *also* noticed by an astute Doag.

¹⁰ Torah study is often compared to battle (see TB Kiddushin 30b among others) as fierce dialectic struggle is the best and often only way to achieve full clarity of the complex issues.

¹¹ TB Brachos 4a. David asked G-d: "Am I not pious? All the kings of the east and west sit in groups (sharing) great honor, and I, my hands are dirtied with blood and fetuses and ambiotic sacks (in order to determine a woman's halachic status) to permit a woman to her husband..."

¹² TB Eruvin 53a

¹³ See Rashi (Ibid) "דגלו מסכתא"

¹⁴ TB Yevamos 76b - 77a

¹⁵ And perhaps spiritually unfit as well: Since the Torah actually tells us *why* Moabites are prohibited from fully joining the nation ("Because they didn't provide you with bread and water...and because they hired Balaam against you" Deut. 23; 5), Doag might have attributed any of David's seemingly strange behavior to what he perceived as imperfect lineage. Just like some athletic or intellectual abilities seem to "run in families," so too might character traits; both good and bad.

The court of Shmuel (i.e., the Torah academy headed by Shmuel), however, maintained that only male members of the nation of Moav were prohibited in marriage (by inference from the above-mentioned verse: “מואבי ולא מואבית”), but that properly converted *females* (like Ruth) could indeed be considered completely Jewish and their descendants could fully participate in Jewish communal life. It was the opinion of Shmuel and his disciples that eventually held sway.

The source for this whole debate is essentially found in the oral Torah...but the Da’as Sofrim finds a compelling hint in the text itself and his close reading of the passage reveals yet another defining element of David’s difficult relationship with many of those around him.

After David’s surprising victory over the Philistine warrior, Goliath, the text relates a curious series of events:

“And David took the head of the Philistine and he brought it to Jerusalem...and [before the battle] when Saul saw David heading out to meet the Philistine he said to his general Avner: ‘Avner; who’s son is this boy?’ and Avner said ‘I swear by your life...that I don’t know’...and when David returned from killing the Philistine and Avner brought him before Saul, and the head of the Philistine was in his hand...” (I Shmuel, 17; 55 - 57)

This passage presents us with problems: First: how could Saul and Avner not know the identity of a man who only recently had become inseparably attached to the king?¹⁶ Second: why is the fact that David was carrying the head of his defeated foe repeated? And while we’re on the subject: what possessed David to carry around a bloodied and severed head in the first place?

According to the Da’as Sofrim, Saul and his advisors might not have been asking for David’s name and birthplace...such details they already knew. But consider this: they saw a “reddish” man (reminiscent of the violent Esav) who had previously boasted of confronting a lion and a bear (see I Shmuel, 17; 35) to save some sheep(!) and was now wandering back to town in blood-spattered clothes while swinging a dead man’s head. Wouldn’t *you* think that was a bit strange?

So now it doesn’t seem so out of place for these men to ask about David’s family background. “Oh...” they might have said, “he’s Yishai’s son? The one descended from the Moabite woman, Ruth? Perhaps we can see a bit of his ancestors’ character in all of this.” Now add the fact that David had quickly become a national celebrity (I Shmuel, 18; 6) and it suddenly makes sense for Saul and his advisors to assess the potential danger posed by this new hero.

David, for his part, might well have thought of Goliath’s head as a symbol of G-d’s love and concern for His people. The “simple” shepherd from Bethlehem had just witnessed an open miracle and wanted to share his intense feelings of gratitude, awe and maybe even pride in the nation for whose good G-d was willing to interfere with the natural workings of the world.

But who could have guessed all that?

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Saul’s relationship with David is perhaps the most complex of all. The king loved him deeply (I Shmuel, 17; 21) and actually chose him as his son-in-law. There were times in the troubled months that followed, that Saul expressed great warmth for the man he’d tried to kill and regret for the pain he’d caused (I Shmuel, 24; 17 - 18; I Shmuel, 26; 21).

And yet Saul *did* try to kill David and he *did* cause him pain. Why? What made him so threatening? Was Saul so jealous of David’s talents that he would actually want him dead?

The human mind being a complex thing, I suppose we can’t completely rule out the possibility that Saul succumbed to jealousy. But it nevertheless seems unlikely.¹⁷

The Da’as Sofrim, on the other hand, suggests that Saul was primarily motivated by his concern

¹⁶ “And David came before Saul and stood before him and he loved him very much and became his weapons’ bearer” - I Shmuel, 17; 21

¹⁷ See the chapter on Saul for evidence of the pre-eminent greatness of character of our nation’s first king.

for the stability of his nation: He might have been aware of David's pretensions to the throne - and of his great popularity with the people. He might also have known that Shmuel had secretly anointed David. But was David fit to rule? Would Israel be safe under his leadership?

What specific reservations might Saul have had about David? As we mentioned above, there were doubts about his lineage and, connected to those, doubts about his character; he had inspired women to publicly sing secular songs in praise of his courage and skill;¹⁸ and he had been accused of threatening to kill his wife.¹⁹

The common thread that might have suggested itself to Saul was that David, despite his many talents and strengths, was a deeply physical man; both in his own conduct and in the behavior he inspired in others. This physical nature, Saul might have reasoned, didn't lend itself to Jewish leadership - a singularly spiritual activity.

Was Saul correct? Was David too "physical"? He must indeed have seemed strange and unconventional in the eyes of his contemporaries, but unknown to many, this unusual quality was not a contradiction to David's elevated Torah-personality, but rather, very likely a necessary ingredient.

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While many of the more spiritually-inclined Jews who knew David saw him as too violent and too intensely physical to be taken seriously in the Torah world, Goliath, a man famous for his violence, saw things quite differently:

The prophet records the Philistine hero's reaction to his first sight of David coming to meet him in battle:

"And the Philistine gazed and he saw David and he mocked him for he was a boy and reddish with beautiful eyes." (I Shmuel, 17; 42)

"He mocked him..." To this seasoned veteran, David didn't appear much like a soldier and a worthy opponent. *"He was a boy..."* Goliath, like Saul, thought of David as a boy (even though David was close to thirty years old and quite powerful in a physical sense). That David was given so little credit is remarkable. But it's the next words that provide the real surprise: *"...and reddish with beautiful eyes."* For these are the exact words used by Shmuel upon seeing this same David for the first time!

It's possible, writes the Da'as Sofrim, that those "beautiful eyes" spoke more of singing Psalms, of struggling to understand the Torah and of passionately defending the honor of G-d and His people than of waging war. Goliath surely knew what it took to become a great fighter and he knew how a real soldier's eyes should look. When gazing at the lone opponent standing before him, the Philistine saw nothing but a scholar and ecstatic servant of G-d.²⁰

Finally, we might gain a better understanding of the difficulties David faced in gaining general acceptance by considering the following points:

- While escaping from Saul, David (joined by his large militia force) appeared to live among and ally himself with the Philistines, the Jews' greatest enemy (see I Shmuel, chapters 27 and 28). David even attempted to join the battle *against* the Jews (ibid, chapter 29)!²¹

¹⁸ See I Shmuel 18; 7 and note that the women's song made no mention of G-d's role in the victory. Even if David was again misunderstood, and his own pious comments during the battle went unheard, in Saul's eyes, he had nevertheless inspired and amplified a gross and physical side of the Jewish nation.

¹⁹ Michal, in order to hide the fact that she had protected her husband from her father's soldiers, made the story up - see I Shmuel 19; 11 - 17.

²⁰ Of course, Goliath's assessment was correct: David's surprise victory had nothing to do with his personal military prowess. As David himself said, "And all of this congregation will know that not with the sword and the spear comes the salvation of G-d; but war belongs to G-d and He will give you into our hands" (I Shmuel 17; 47)

²¹ According to the Da'as Sofrim (I Shmuel, 29; 2), David attempted to build a relationship with the Philistines that would allow

- David *appeared* to think himself above the law when he took Bas Sheva - the wife of one of his officers (see the chapter on David and Bas Sheva).
- David's whole claim to the throne (and indeed to personal legitimacy) lay in those two secret meetings with the prophet Shmuel...meetings probably attended by no one else and whose contents remained a virtual mystery! Over and over again (until long after his death) David's right to rule was challenged by his countrymen (see II Shmuel, 20; 1 and I Kings, 12; 16).²²

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To sum up: the Torah teaches us that David was a pre-eminent Torah scholar and a tireless teacher; we know (from Shmuel's light hand in preparing him for the monarchy) that somehow, and while still a young man, David prepared himself brilliantly for his future public role and that he was filled with zeal and passion for G-d's honor. We have seen David as a man possessed of potentially dangerous attributes – but that he manipulated them for use in the service of his G-d and nation.

Perhaps most of all, we see a man who was misunderstood, marginalized and accused of unspeakable crimes; (of which he was innocent), who nevertheless emerged without any apparent bitterness or complaint.

We'll never know what David might have been able to accomplish had his life been simpler and smoother. But which life in history has been trouble-free? Can one ever know what it is that will prod him to growth and upward struggle? Are tranquility and comfort always true blessings?

What we do know is that David, through his entire life, had all the excuses to give up and let go. But he didn't. And that, perhaps, is the greatest lesson we can learn from this remarkable human being.

him to better protect his fellow Jews in the coming war. His original choice to live among the Philistines, too, was only necessary to avoid Saul's soldiers and death sentence (see I Shmuel, 27; 1). Even while living among the Philistines, David fought secret battles to protect his fellow Jews - without their ever realizing it (see Da'as Sofrim to I Shmuel 27; 8)

²² The Da'as Sofrim notes that in both of these cases, it was David's right to the perpetual rulership of Israel that the people rejected. It would take many years and great tragedies before G-d's choice (through His prophet Shmuel) would be fully accepted by the nation.