

The Royal Prophet **Sharing the Blame** Who Destroyed Nov¹

“And Nov, the city of priests, he (Doag) smote with the sword, men and women, infants and sucklings; and oxen and donkeys and lambs (were slaughtered) by the sword.” I Shmuel 22; 19

Thus does the Tanach record one of our history’s most unspeakable tragedies. A Jewish scholar/soldier, under the direct orders of our first king (Saul) destroys the tabernacle, killing, in the process, hundreds of defenseless priests and their families.

What happened?

David, suspected of using his rising popularity to both control and corrupt the nation, escapes his father-in-law Saul.² Starving and bedraggled, he runs to the tabernacle town of Nov and, under the pretence of a secret royal mission, requests food and weapons. The high priest Achimelech grants the request and, secretly observed by Doag, David continues on his way.

Saul later demands that his advisors tell him who might be aiding the “traitor.” Under pressure, Doag reveals the role played by the priests of Nov and Saul orders the city destroyed.

But the story didn’t end there. Years later a severe famine rocked the nation. David sought to know the cause (by way of the urim v’tumim) and was told it was “because of Saul and because of the house of blood that he had killed the Gibbonites.” (II Shmuel, 21; 1) This “killing of the Gibbonites,” according to our sages, refers to the destruction of Nov (see below). The famine, therefore, was one consequence of the violence.

...But not the only one. The echoes of Nov continued to reverberate: In a battle against the Philistines near the end of his life, David nearly fell and was saved by his officer, Avishai ben Tzuriya: “And Yishbi (found David) in Nov...and he (wanted to) smite David.” relates the Tanach (II Shmuel 21; 16). Why mention Nov here? Because, according to the Talmud,³ it was the sin of Nov that brought about this close brush with death.

But it was more than *three centuries* before the account would finally be closed. The Talmud⁴ tells us that the near-disastrous siege of Jerusalem at the hands of Sancheriv and his Assyrian armies could also be traced to Nov.

Terrible events. Terrible consequences.

Who’s To Blame?

To understand the Oral Torah’s approach to an event in Tanach, one must examine *everything* available on the subject; one or two passages might not be enough. It’s very common for one Talmudic statement to appear to be absolute only to be qualified by other statements. Here’s a good example.

Ask a younger Torah student what caused the destruction of the second temple and you’ll likely

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

² See chapter 20 of I Shmuel and “David - Through Critical Eyes”

³ TB Sanhedrin 95a

⁴ *ibid.* According to the Talmud, “closing of the account” is hinted to from a verse in Isaiah (ch. 10) ““The day is still to come in Nov...’ **that** day is left over from the sin of Nov.”

get the “absolute” answer “needless hatred among Jews.”⁵ But further examination of the sources reveals many other equally “absolute” answers:

*“Abaya said: Jerusalem was only destroyed because of desecration of the Shabbos...Rabbi Avohu said: Jerusalem was only destroyed because they failed to say the “shema” morning and evening...Rav Hamenuna said: Jerusalem was only destroyed because they interrupted (the Torah study) of school children...Ula said: Jerusalem was only destroyed because they had no shame from each other...R’ Yitzchak said: Jerusalem was only destroyed because they equalized the great and small...R’ Chanina said: Jerusalem was only destroyed because they didn’t rebuke each other...R’ Yehuda said: Jerusalem was only destroyed because they insulted Torah scholars...”*⁶

I believe that the expression “...לא חרבה ירושלים אלא...” shouldn’t be translated “...Jerusalem was only destroyed...” (as I did in order to make my point), but should instead read: “Jerusalem was *certainly* destroyed...” Which implies that needless hatred (for example) did indeed cause the destruction, but only in concert with other factors.

Having seen only one source, therefore, left us with a narrow and incomplete understanding of the issue.

Now let’s see what the sages have to say about Nov.

Doag:

His king ordered him to provide information necessary to stop a potential rebellion...he provided that information, saying nothing but the truth...he carried out the express command of his king. So what, exactly, did Doag do wrong?

Rashi⁷ comments that “he spoke lashon harah (slander) about David of whom Saul was jealous...” But how can what he said be considered slander? Lashon harah is certainly permitted if one intends thereby to avoid falling victim to some perceived threat.

A *perceived* threat. This might be a key point. We can safely assume that Saul thought of David as a threat,⁸ but was that the way that Doag himself saw it? I think it likely that Doag, with the information available to him, knew better. To him, David’s innocence must have appeared probable - at least. But by relating only the bare facts Doag, knowing how the king would react, was playing to Saul’s insecurity. Perhaps Doag was thereby manipulating Saul; feeding his fear of David. Testimony of that nature, then, is clearly in the realm of “rechilus” - tale bearing meant to create hatred and dissension between Jews.⁹

Furthermore, writes the Abarbanel, Doag left some important details out of his testimony: whereas he faithfully reported how David had presented himself to Achimelech and how Achimelech had done everything requested of him, Doag omitted some of David’s words:

“And David said to Achimelech the priest, ‘the king has commanded me something and he said to me ‘let no man know of this mission on which I am sending you and that which I have command you’ ‘ (I Shmuel, 21; 3)

Had Saul known that Achimelech assumed that David was following secret royal orders, could he have held the priest blameworthy for helping fulfill these orders?

This changes everything: As long as Doag truly shared the king’s fears, was only following orders and was faithfully relating everything he’d seen, then he was well within his rights in carrying out any of the king’s commands.¹⁰ But once he adds something of his own to the mix then the responsibility for

⁵ TB Yoma 9b

⁶ TB Shabbos 119b

⁷ TB Sanhedrin 95a “נטרד דואג”

⁸ after all, Saul was somewhat destabilized by his rapid rise to prophecy (see the chapter on prophecy for details) and had good reason to fear for his monarchy.

⁹ See Sefer Chofetz Chaim, halachos of rechilus, chapter one, halacha one.

¹⁰ In truth, “following orders” might not be quite so simple. The “runners” (who included Avner ben Ner, of whom we’ll speak more soon, see I Shmuel, 22; 17) refused the order to kill the priests - seemingly without consequence. They obviously employed their own judgment and concluded that the king’s orders were unwarranted. So, say Chazal, should have Doag.

every subsequent act - including the murders of hundreds of innocent human beings - falls directly on his shoulders.

Saul:

There is no question that Saul saw David as a threat not only to his monarchy, but to the stability and morality of the entire nation as well. From within this mindset, Saul was completely justified in trying to stop David...even if that meant killing him. Indeed, which legitimate government wouldn't use force in the face of open revolt?

Perhaps Saul could have done no better. But, since hindsight shows his understanding of events to be incorrect (David really had no interest in rebellion), does the king nevertheless bear some blame for the tragedy?

"...and (G-d showed Moshe a prophetic vision of) Saul and his sons falling by the sword. (Moshe) spoke: 'the first king who will stand over your children (i.e., the Jews) will be impaled by a sword?' G-d answered 'To Me you speak thus? Say it to the priests whom he killed, they are accusing him!'"¹¹

"When Saul said to Doag 'you should circle and attack the priests' a heavenly voice came out and said to him 'don't act with such evil' (Ecclesiastes 7; 17). Rav Huna said: How worry-free and secure is a man whose Master (i.e. G-d) helps him! Saul (sinned) only once, (and yet) he faced (retribution) while David (sinned) twice and didn't face (retribution - i.e., the "Master" was there to help only David)."¹²

Yet, we may well share the Talmud's surprise as it continues to relate that this single sin of Saul - for which he suffered death and the loss of his throne - wasn't the destruction of Nov, but the temporary reprieve of Agag, the Amaleki king! It's as though Nov was no sin at all!

It is strange, observes the Radak,¹³ that the accusations against Saul in this matter are so muted. Even the Tanach seems restrained: we are later told that the famine during David's reign was caused "by Saul and the house of blood that he had killed the Gibeonites." (II Shmuel, 21; 1) Not for killing the priests and their families, but for the "collateral damage" caused the Gibeonites!

What, then, was "right" about Saul's mass murders? The Radak suggests (while not completely exonerating Saul) that the priests and their families might have sinned in some other area¹⁴ and therefore deserved death. Saul might, therefore, have seen himself acting as an instrument of divine justice in addition to his efforts to defend his monarchy.

The Abarbanel further suggests that Saul feared he was facing a full revolt. To stop the unrest from spreading, Saul chose to deal most harshly with Nov, sending a message to other communities and individuals who might consider helping David. This also goes some distance to explain why the king wanted even women and children killed.

Some burden of guilt, however, Saul surely bears:

"Rabba bar Chin'na Sabba said in the name of Rav: anyone who sins and is embarrassed by it, is forgiven for all his sins¹⁵ as it says: ...'and Shmuel said to Saul: 'why have you bothered me to

¹¹ Vayikra Rabba 16; 7 (at the end of the section)

¹² TB Yoma 22b

¹³ I Shmuel 22; 18

¹⁴ Radak suggests a connection to the sins of Eli and his sons. See the chapter that specifically deals with them.

¹⁵ From this statement, one might get the impression that it's relatively easy to achieve full forgiveness for our sins. I believe, however, that this gemara makes a seemingly absolute statement that, by force of common sense, must be qualified. There are similar examples that I think are worth examining:

bring me up (from the dead)?' and Saul said 'it is very difficult for me and the Philistines are warring with me and G-d has turned from me and doesn't answer me (directly), nor through prophets, nor through dreams...' (I Shmuel 28; 15). [the Talmud continues] But (Saul) didn't mention the urim v'tumim [a garment of the high priest through which prophecy could be received] because he had killed the priests of Nov [and was therefore ashamed to draw attention to his relationship with the priests]. And how do we know that in heaven he was forgiven? As [Shmuel said to Saul]: 'Tomorrow you and your sons will be with me' (ibid, v. 19) and Rabbi Yochanan interpreted: 'with me' (meaning) in my presence (in the next world, i.e., an honorable place).¹⁶

So Saul's role in the events at Nov required forgiveness and through his personal shame he earned it. What, however, are we to make of these words of Rashi: "and for this sin (i.e. Nov) Saul and his three sons were killed in the war with the Philistines."¹⁷ If Saul was forgiven for Nov through the shame he felt, what was left on his account to warrant his death?

To understand this, we must distinguish between forgiveness (מחילה) and atonement (כפרה). It is possible that Saul had been forgiven by G-d (meaning that G-d had no more complaint with Saul's behavior as it had been corrected) but there yet remained a stain on his soul that would block Saul from enjoying his ultimate reward in the next world. That stain could only be removed by the pain of such a difficult death.¹⁸ Perhaps the stain could be seen as a consequence of the sin, but not part of its punishment.

Yehonason:

How was Saul's son involved with the killing of the priests? The sages tell us that, while not direct, Yehonason's role was critical.

"An error can be considered (by G-d) punishable as though it was intentional. Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav: if Yehonason had only loaned David two loaves of bread, the city of Nov would never have been destroyed, Doag would never have been lost and Saul and his three sons would never have been killed."¹⁹

For all the good will and kindness that marked the relationship between these two friends, Yehonason seemed not to realize that David, having hidden in a field for three days and now having to escape for his life, might be hungry²⁰ (see I Shmuel, chapter 20). It was hunger that drove David to Nov in a search for help. The rest of the tragedy we now know.

David:

"Anyone who recites "Tehila l'David" (Psalm 145, i.e. "Ashrei") three times a day is guaranteed a place in the next world." (BT Brochos 4b) It's impossible to imagine that Judaism is so simplistic as to attribute success even to one who does nothing more than regularly and mechanically mumble a Psalm. Rather, we are forced to say that one who says Psalm 145 three times a day with the proper understanding and with his emotions engaged will be driven by the tremendous power of David's words to live a perfect life...and of course he'll gain the next world!

"Charity rescues from death." (Proverbs 10) Can this mean that putting eighteen cents in the pushkah guarantees eternal life? I think it's obvious that we're being told that one who throughout his life distributes charity according to halacha to the best of his ability and applying all his sensitivity and intelligence, will be protected from an untimely death (see BT Shabbos 156b).

Similarly in our case: The shame needed to evoke full forgiveness is probably equivalent to the regret felt by a person involved in full and sincere repentance...why shouldn't such a person be forgiven everything?

¹⁶ TB Brochos 12b

¹⁷ see TB Sanhedrin 95a, Rashi "נטרד דואג האדומי"

¹⁸ See TB Yoma 85b et. seq. "repentance atones for light sins...(but heavier sins require a combination of repentance and one or all of) Yom Kippur, troubles and death.

¹⁹ TB Sanhedrin 104a

²⁰ The Da'as Sofrim suggests that Yehonason might have been aware of the problem but felt that it would have raised people's suspicions to be seen walking out to a regular hunt carrying such a supply of food. Nevertheless, the Tanach considers Yehonason to have erred.

“I know that on that day Doag Ha’adomi was there (in Nov) and it was he who told Saul (about the help they gave me). I am the cause of all the (loss of) life of your father’s house.” (I Shmuel, 22; 22)

How did David cause these deaths? As we mentioned above, the Talmud²¹ relates the danger facing David²² to the killings at Nov. The Talmud further tells us that David chose this as his punishment: *The Holy One, blessed be He, said to David: “until when will this sin be held in your hand? Through you Nov was destroyed, through you Doag was lost and through you Saul and his three sons were killed. Is it your preference to lose all your children or be given into the hands of your enemy?”*

David chose to be given into the hands of his enemy. But what exactly was his sin?

The Maharsha (commenting on Sanhedrin 95a) explains that each of the two choices were perfectly suited as penalties for David’s actions:

“That your children should be destroyed just as those of the priests of Nov were destroyed...since you saved yourself and didn’t give yourself up to Saul your enemy...you will be given into the hands of your enemy (the Philistines).”

The Maharsha is here suggesting that David should perhaps have offered his own freedom and even his life so that innocent Jews should not needlessly die.

The Jerusalem Talmud²³ teaches us another approach:

“Doag was a great Torah scholar. The Jews came to David and asked him: ‘are we allowed to prepare the showbreads (for the temple) on Shabbos?’ David answered: ‘arranging them is permitted but not kneading and baking.’ Doag was present and he said ‘who is this who comes to teach halacha before me (i.e., in the jurisdiction of the generation’s prime halachic authority)?’ They said to him ‘David the son of Yishai.’ Immediately, (Doag) went and advised Saul to destroy Nov...”

Teaching halacha in the presence of one’s own teacher or a communal authority is forbidden.²⁴ But doing so in a way that will likely invoke jealousy and anger is also, from a practical standpoint, ill-advised. David (as was his remarkable custom) soon recognized his mistake and accepted responsibility.

Avner:

“Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav, why was Avner (Saul’s advisor and general) punished (with death - through Heavenly intervention - at the hands of Yoav - see II Shmuel, chapter 3)? Because he should have rebuked Saul (concerning the destruction of Nov - Rashi) but didn’t. R’ Yitzchak said that he did rebuke, but was unsuccessful...so why, then, was he punished? Because (by supporting Saul’s son on the throne) he delayed David’s monarchy for two and a half years.”²⁵

Avner, we mentioned earlier, refused to carry out his king’s command to destroy Nov. That, however, seems not to have been enough. According to Rav, he should have actively sought to prevent *anyone* from doing Saul’s will!²⁶ The Maharsha (commenting on the opinion of Rav in the above talmudic passage) suggests that there were times when Avner should have pointed out David’s innocence, thereby defusing the king’s anger and completely avoiding the bloodshed.

But could the simple failure to dissuade a man from carrying out his mistaken plans reap such heavy reproof?

²¹ TB Sanhedrin 95a

²² “And Yishbi (found David) in Nov...and he (wanted to) smite David” (II Shmuel, 21; 16)

²³ Sanhedrin 38a (chapter 10, halacha 2)

²⁴ See TB Sanhedrin 5a

²⁵ TB Sanhedrin 20a

²⁶ And according to R’ Yitzchak he actually did everything expected of him.

“There were three (men) involved with that plan (i.e. Pharaoh’s plan to remove the threat of a growing Jewish population in his land - see Ex. 1, 10)...Bila’am, who actually offered the (murderous) advice, was killed; Job, who remained silent, was afflicted with suffering and Yisro (the eventual father-in-law of Moshe), who ran away, merited that his descendants should sit (among the sages of the Sanhedrin).”²⁷

The ability to prevent evil - or even to make a futile attempt - is a sacred obligation while silence can indeed be considered a vote for any consequence.

Saul gave the order and Doag “pulled the trigger,” but Nov’s terrible fate hung on so much more. G-d, we learn again, is both true and exacting; no detail, thought or act is left out of His justice.