

The Royal Prophet David and Bas Sheva¹

This narrative raises enormous questions. Scholar and school child; religious and non-religious - any mature person who encounters this story must struggle with his image of King David and, indeed, of the entire moral vision of the Torah. There are people “out there” in the world at large who actually use these events to justify terrible behavior: “After all,” they say, “if King David could do it...”

Let’s quickly review the events: David is attracted to Bas Sheva who turns out to be the wife of Uriah, one of his officers. The king has her brought to him and engages in what seems to be an adulterous relationship. Bas Sheva becomes pregnant and David, apparently to cover up the crime and attribute the pregnancy to her husband, orders Uriah back from the battlefield, instructing him to return home to his wife. When Uriah refuses to go home, David orders his general (Yoav) to send this valuable soldier to his death in the most dangerous area of the battle.

Coveting his neighbor’s wife, committing adultery, ordering the indirect execution of the wronged husband. How could the charges against David be more serious? G-d Himself reacts: “...and this thing that David had done was evil in the eyes of G-d.” (II Shmuel, 11; 27)

But here’s the real problem: Some sixty years later, G-d, through his prophet, introduces Yeravum ben Nevat to his new role. Yeravum has been given permission to break away from the Jewish kingdom of David’s grandson, Rechavum, and to take ten of the Jewish nation’s twelve tribes along with him.

*“And you I have taken and appointed king over all that your soul should desire; and you will be king over Israel. And it will be if you will listen to all that I command you and (if you) go in My ways and do what is straight in My eyes to keep My statutes and My commandments **as did David My servant**, then I will be with you and I will build for you a permanent house as I built for David and I will give to you Israel. (I Kings, 11; 37 - 38)*

With these words we are asked to think of King David as a man who listened to *all* that G-d commanded him, who went in His ways, who was straight in His eyes. These are huge and rare praises from a source that simply does not deviate from truth. Could a man thus described have performed such immoral acts?²

Just who was this model of human greatness; of perfect loyalty to G-d’s Torah? What did he really do in that fateful time and how are we to understand it?

Adultery. A married woman involved in a sexual relationship with another man.³ Adultery is an act with serious legal, moral and social consequences. It lies at the lowest level of human conduct and carries with it the highest level of Torah-punishment. King David, you might argue, has hit moral bedrock.

But what if Bas Sheva weren’t married?

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

² Some might say that these praises of David don’t necessarily mean he lived an entirely exemplary life, but only that he recovered from a terrible sin and devoted himself to full repentance. One should, however, examine how the Tanach describes the lives another two of our greatest kings: In II Kings 18; 5, King Chizkiya is described: “In G-d, the Lord of the Jews he trusted and after him there was none like him among all the kings of Judah and that were before him.” Again in II Kings 23; 25 about King Yoshiyahu (who overcame the most morally impoverished of upbringings): “And like him there wasn’t before him a king who returned to G-d with all his heart and all his soul and with all his strength like all the Torah of Moshe, and after him arose none like him.” Had the Tanach meant to praise David specifically for his repentance (or any other single trait), we now see that it would have done so explicitly. Leaving the praise so full and so general surely prompts us to see David as an outstanding man in the general sense.

³ See Rashi to Exodus 20; 13. Relationships involving married (or single) men are also expressly forbidden, but they do not fall within the halachic category of adultery.

The Oral Torah⁴ says that she wasn't. Not surprisingly, there's even evidence in the written text itself:

"And Yishai said to David his son, please take for your brothers this measure of flour and these ten loaves of bread; and run to the camp to your brothers. And bring these ten cheeses to the Officer of the Thousand; and (you should) greet your brothers and (you should) take ערבתם." (I Shmuel, 17; 17 - 18)

The youthful David's brothers, as part of the Jewish army, are preparing for war against the Philistines. Yishai sent his son with provisions, greetings and instructions to take "that which binds them (ערבתם)" The Talmud⁵ teaches us that this word hints to the "binding" nature of marriage and that it was Yishai's family practice for its war-bound sons to write a "get" (bill of divorce) for their wives in case they were lost in battle. Should the men return safely from the war, the couples would quietly re-marry. In later years, the Talmud continues, all who went out to war in David's armies would provide similar security for their wives.

Now let's turn our attention to David's own actions:

"And David sent (his servant) and sought after the woman; and he (the servant) said 'isn't that Bas Sheva the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah Hachiti?'"

"And David sent messengers and they took her and brought her to him..." (II Shmuel, 11; 3 - 4)

What was David's intention with this first mission ("seeking after" the woman)? If her identity and status didn't matter to him, why not immediately send the messengers to take her? And if David truly wanted to know whether she was married (resolving, if that was the case, to leave her alone) then, why, when it turned out that she was indeed married, did he go to the next stage?

Here the Da'as Sofrim points out how subtle and precise are the words of our prophets. David *did* wish to know (among other things) if this woman was married. And that was the answer that he received: "Isn't that...the wife of Uriah Hachiti..." as if to say: "...the famous Uriah Hachiti; your trusted officer?"⁶ David therefore knew that, being an officer in the army in a time of war, this Uriah would now be at the battlefield and would surely have given his wife a bill of divorce! Then, and only then, did David feel confident sending messengers to take Bas Sheva.

But still, is it proper take advantage of a couple's forced separation to "grab" a wife? Let's examine further:

"And David said to Uriah (upon his return): 'go down to your house and wash your feet' and Uruah went out from the king's house...and Uriah slept at the entrance of the king's house...and he did not go down to his house..." (verses 8 - 9)

Why did Uriah - a married soldier on leave and just minutes from his own home - decide to sleep in a public place (most likely a barrack for common soldiers)? What reason did he give?

"And Uriah said to David: 'the holy ark and Israel and Judah are dwelling (at the battlefield) in huts...and I should go to my house to eat and drink...?'" (verse 12)

Perhaps.⁷ But then again, Uriah should have felt some emotional ties to his wife (even if she wasn't technically his wife due to his previous bill of divorce). Should his alleged feelings of camaraderie with

⁴ TB Kesubos 9b. We will follow the opinion of Rebbainu Tam (שם דה"ם כל) that Bas Sheva and Uriah were divorced completely and unconditionally (see below). There are, however, a number of alternate approaches. Rashi (שם דה"ם גט), for instance, is of the opinion that a "soldier's divorce" would have been conditional and would only come into affect retroactively once the husband had failed to return after a set time following the end of the war. For a more complete discussion of the dynamic of multiple interpretations of events in Tanach, see the appendix at the end of this book.

⁵ ibid.

⁶ see the very end of II Shmuel ch. 23

⁷ Indeed, one could not be faulted for reading this passage according to its simple meaning. But we will suggest a different, eminently credible, approach.

the other soldiers stand before these obligations? Has anyone in history - just returned from a dangerous and uncertain adventure - gone to such lengths to avoid his wife and home?

The possibility strongly suggests itself, according to the Da'as Sofrim, that Uriah had no intention of re-marrying Bas Sheva; that they might have previously agreed between themselves not to continue their marriage. Uriah, if such was the case, would have had no business returning to the home where this woman now lived. Further, it is likely that Bas Sheva would have told David about all of this at their first meeting.

So it seems that Bas Sheva was neither married to, nor even wanted by Uriah. David, therefore, was no adulterer and took advantage of no one.⁸

But even if Bas Sheva were no longer married and had no intention of continuing her relationship with Uriah, couldn't David have waited until the divorce was public knowledge and then marry in a normal way? Isn't this haste evidence of the king allowing his personal desires to go unchecked?

David, we learn from the words of our rabbis, felt enormous pressure from two sources: His insatiable desire to come ever closer to G-d, and his age (David would have been in his mid-fifty's at the time).⁹

Rav Yehuda taught in the name of Rav: a person should never bring himself to a test because David, the king of Israel, brought himself to a test and tripped (i.e. failed). He said before (G-d) "Master of the Universe! why do they say 'The G-d of Abraham, the G-d of Isaac and the G-d of Jacob' but they don't say 'the G-d of David?'"¹⁰ (G-d) said: "They were tested before me and you have never been tested before me." (David) said before (G-d) "Master of the Universe! Test me!" ... (G-d) said: "I will test you and I will do something for you that I didn't do for the others. The others weren't told which area would be tested, but you I will tell: I will test you in the area of sexual morality."¹¹

What was the test?

"...And David got up from his bed and walked on the roof of the king's house and he saw, from the roof, a woman washing..." (Verse 2)

G-d arranged, seemingly by accident, that the wall protecting Bas Sheva from public view while she washed herself should be unexpectedly knocked down (see Sanhedrin 107a). David, according to G-d's plan, "just happened" to be looking in that direction. In his passion for perfection, David had brought this test upon himself. How *should* he have reacted? Most likely, he was expected to immediately look the other way, forget what he saw and go on with his life.

But he didn't. Instead he saw Bas Sheva. And he saw her well. He correctly determined that this woman was eminently suited to be the mother of the next king of Israel. Indeed, according to the Talmud (ibid), Bas Sheva was "meant for David from the six days of creation...."

And this is where David's age played a role. David had many sons, some of them outstanding Torah scholars and men of refined character, but none had everything it would take to properly build upon the foundation of the Jewish monarchy. Perhaps the missing ingredient was the all-important influence of

⁸ In contrast to our approach, the commentator Rebbainu Yeshaya (Ch. 12; 4) writes that David's main sin was "stealing" Bas Sheva from her husband, because, even though she was not technically married, nevertheless, "each wife would wait anxiously for her husband's return" and would fully expect to re-marry. Uriah, too, was expecting to find a loyal "wife" in Bas Sheva. Obviously, Rebbainu Yeshaya felt no need to assume that the marriage of Uriah and Bas Sheva was permanently over.

⁹ We know this because David and Bas Sheva's son Shlomo was only twelve years old when David died...and his father died at the age of seventy. Bas Sheva lost her first child from David in infancy meaning their relationship probably began around fifteen years before David's death.

¹⁰ Perhaps what is meant here is that our forefathers were universally identified with G-d - to the point where they are the models of G-dly behavior. David also wanted to grow to the level where he, too, could "teach" the world how to live a proper life. G-d, it seems, allowed for the possibility.

¹¹ Sanhedrin 107a. The gemara continues:

ויקם דוד מעל משכבו - אמר רב יהודה שהפך משכבו של לילה למשכבו של יום מיד "יהי לעת הערב" ונתעלמה ממנו הלכה: אבר קטן יש באדם משביעו רעב ומרעותו שבע - עיין רש"י

an outstanding mother.¹²

David was no longer a young man. Even if he would father the future king right away, it would be many years before the child would be old enough to rule. Who could be sure that David would remain alive long enough to guide him? The very future of the monarchy - and of the Jewish nation - depended upon a smooth transition of power. David desperately wanted to get things going as quickly as possible.

Against this background, perhaps we can understand what inspired David to “push the envelope” and bypass what would (under normal circumstances) have been the proper way of handling the matter. Ultimately, we can’t deny that David made an error of judgment, but he wasn’t so far off the mark.

How do we explain David’s treatment of Uriah? Here, we face two difficult and related questions:

Why was Uriah brought back from the war and encouraged to return home?

Why, when he refused to return to his wife, was he sent back to be killed?

Upon reading this passage, most people would probably assume that Uriah was ordered home to prevent David’s affair with Bas Sheva from becoming public knowledge.¹³ If the pregnancy could be attributed to Uriah, David might escape the terrible embarrassment that would follow. When the plan didn’t work and Uriah refused to co-operate, he was killed; conveniently moving him “out of the way.” Following this path, however, would make it very difficult to understand David as the Tanach seems to want him understood.

The Da’as Sofrim proposes another motive: Uriah and Bas Sheva were divorced (according to the custom of Jewish soldiers, as described above) and unwilling to re-marry - a fact that was probably not widely known. If Bas Sheva were to become David’s wife and the mother of the next king, the public perception (if left unchanged) wouldn’t be positive. David, therefore, felt that it was in everyone’s interest for the termination of Uriah’s marriage to be officially acknowledged.

So David ordered Uriah to return to his house - knowing that he neither would nor could comply. What should have followed was Uriah’s simple confession that his marriage was over and that he no longer had any interest in Bas Sheva. With that, Uriah would have returned to the battlefield to continue his brilliant career and David and Bas Sheva would have immediately set about building the monarchy.

Once again, however, things didn’t go according to plan: the succession of the Davidic dynasty was not destined to be smooth and peaceful. Uriah refused to co-operate, employing a rather far-fetched excuse (verse 12). Whether or not he was aware of David’s interest in his former wife is debatable, but the net result was very unpleasant.

And Uriah ended up dead.

This is quite strange: How could David order a man’s murder based, seemingly, on personal frustration? Remember: David was beyond doubt G-d’s faithful servant!

Let’s take a bit of a tangent:

“When you shall come to the land that the Lord your G-d will give to you, and you will take possession of it and dwell there; and you will say, ‘place upon me a king like all the nations that surround me.’ You shall surely appoint upon yourself a king that the Lord your G-d shall choose. From the midst of your brothers appoint a king...” (Devarim 17; 14 - 15)

“Rabbi Yehuda taught: these words were only written to terrify (the Jews) as it says ‘you shall surely appoint [the doubling of the Hebrew משיח intensifies the verse’s tone] on yourself a king’ -

¹² See TB Sanhedrin 70b where we see a description of the enormous effort expended by Bas Sheva to ensure that her son Solomon should grow to righteous adulthood.

¹³ Indeed, Rashi to verse 6 says as much. Even though the Da’as Sofrim feels that such a cover-up is too bizarre to attribute to a great man like David, those commentators who follow Rashi will point out that as bad as the original act might have been, so much greater must David have been for rising above it and repenting so completely and sincerely.

so that his fear should be upon you.”¹⁴

Why should the Torah desire and require a nation to *fear* its king?

“...Rabbi Akiva came and deduced: ‘the Lord your G-d you shall fear’ (Devarim 10; 20) (the word) אַתָּ (comes) to include (fear of) Torah scholars”¹⁵

David was more than just a military leader or politician, and he certainly wasn’t a self-centered, hedonistic despot eager to enrich himself at the expense of his subjects. David was first and foremost a Torah scholar and teacher.¹⁶ If the Jewish people lacked the proper awe and respect for their leader, then he would be incapable of leading them in the Torah path. The nation’s primary mission - learning to live G-dly Torah lives - would be unreachable. Perhaps for this reason, the Torah gives a Jewish king unusual powers¹⁷ and sometimes forces him to use them.¹⁸

Therefore, when a king is faced with a subject who acts in a way that can be considered even slightly rebellious, the security of the government and of the Torah-future of the nation is at risk. The rebellion must be put down.

The Talmud¹⁹ tells us that Uriah was revealed as such a rebel when he said “and my lord Yoav and the servants of my lord are camping in the field...” (Ch. 11, verse 11) What did he say wrong? He stood before the king and he referred to the king’s general, Yoav, as “my lord” - implying that David is somehow not in charge.²⁰

This is a high crime²¹ - treason. The penalty is death.

So why was David criticized? This we have still to discuss.

There’s no denying that David erred during the course of these events. Much of the rest of the book of Shmuel deals with the consequences. David himself, immediately upon being informed of G-d’s displeasure, accepts the full blame: “And David said to Nathan: ‘I have sinned to G-d’”²² (Ch. 12; 13)

Our job, after having shown how David was neither an adulterer (Bas Sheva wasn’t married) nor a murderer (Uriah deserved to die), is to understand exactly what it was that David did wrong. Uncovering David’s sins as related by the sages of the Talmud will allow us a glimpse of just how great this man really was and just how demanding G-d is of those close to Him.

Here is how our sages see it:

1. David sought to be tested (to reach the level of our forefathers - as mentioned above). In his overwhelming zeal to perfect himself, he asked for a challenge that he apparently wasn’t yet ready to overcome. Either way, we should apparently be satisfied with the tests that naturally come our way and not ask for more.
2. David killed Uriah without having gone through the proper legal process of Sanhedrin.²³ He probably felt that speed and confidentiality were essential to the success of his plan. The prophet,

¹⁴ TB Sanhedrin 20b

¹⁵ TB Pesachim 22b

¹⁶ See TB Brochos 4a “לא חסיד אני?”

¹⁷ See TB Sanhedrin 20b “פורץ לעשות לו דרך ואין ממחה בידו”

¹⁸ See TB Kiddushin 32b where it states that a king may not “forgive” or ignore his honor

¹⁹ TB Shabbos 56a

²⁰ Rashi, ibid. Tosafos argues and says that the rebellion is visible from Uriah’s refusal to fill David’s explicit command to return to his house. Either way, Uriah’s words seem to serve as a window to the rebellious feelings he harboured.

²¹ It should be borne in mind that rebellions against David’s rule were not uncommon (see II Shmuel 15 and II Shmuel 20 for examples). This was a real concern. The king had his enemies - even long after his death.

²² Note, however, that it was only to G-d that David admitting having sinned; had he actually murdered or committed adultery he could hardly have said these words. This is even more explicit in Tehillim (Ch. 51) where David says: “To you *alone* I have sinned.” It is worthwhile to read this entire chapter as it represents David’s own response to these events.

²³ TB Shabbos 56a “שהיה לך לדונו בסנהדרין ולא דנת”

however, informed him that due process of law in this particular case was the greater good.

3. According to some commentators,²⁴ David came between Uriah and his wife, thereby betraying the trust of his soldiers who were risking their lives in battle and, in a sense, “stealing” the woman Uriah intended to remarry. In the eyes of others,²⁵ he also briefly showed weakness of character in his attempt to cover up his error.
4. Nathan the prophet, in his rebuke to David, uses harsh words: “Why have you disgraced the word of G-d to do evil in His eyes...?” (Ch. 12; 9) This would seem to be a most serious accusation and, according to the Da’as Sofrim, suggests that there have been consequences that are still felt even today.

From David’s generation²⁶ until our own, there have been people who haven’t understood these events in their true light. That there has been this misreading of David and his life has reflected badly upon our whole nation and on the Torah itself. How many people have sinned or mocked the Torah and its followers based on these false conclusions? How much has the house of David (and, by extension, the G-d who chose that house) been brought to disrepute?²⁷

Certainly David was innocent of the charges laid against him by the “world out there,” but he was, it seems, nevertheless guilty of having acted in a way that allowed such charges to be brought. This is the tremendous burden carried by all public figures. Their actions have an impact far beyond their own circles of family and friends. Few, if any, have lived up to the demands more perfectly than King David. But few, if any, have had so much at stake and have suffered so much for what were - in an absolute sense - very small errors in judgment.²⁸

From the rebuke of the prophet Nathan, we can see how G-d saw these sins of David, but we have to look carefully.²⁹ Think about the parable chosen by Nathan to transmit the message: There was a rich man and a poor man...the poor man’s lamb was stolen.... Why didn’t Nathan choose what would seem to be a more appropriate example? Instead of a rich man, why not an evil man or a killer? Why didn’t Nathan have the rich man actually kill the poor man³⁰ (that would seem to be a fit parable to the execution of Uriah)? Perhaps this itself hints to the relative mildness of the crime; David is not to be compared to a criminal or evil man and Uriah’s death had nothing to do with David’s sin.

The Punishment

*(King) Saul (sinned) once and it happened to him [i.e. he lost his kingdom], (King) David (sinned) twice and it didn’t happen to him.... David (sinned) twice: what were (the sins)? That of Uriah and that of the census [see II Shmuel ch. 24]. But wasn’t there also the sin of Bas Sheva? For that (David) was paid back as it says (Ch. 12; 6) ‘for the lamb he should repay four times’ - [which, when applied to David himself found expression through the troubles connected with] the child [of Bas Sheva who died in infancy], Amnon, Tamar [for both, see Ch. 13] and Avshalom [his rebellion - see Ch. 15].... That [the sin of Bas Sheva] was (even) paid back (to David) as physical punishment...Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav, ‘for six months David was afflicted with tzoras, the Sanhedrin separated from him and the divine presence left him’...*³¹

²⁴ See Rabbainu Yeshaya to Ch. 12; 4

²⁵ See Rashi to Ch. 11; 6 and others.

²⁶ “...ואומרים לי: דוד הבא על אשת איש מיתתו במה...” See TB Sanhedrin 107a

²⁷ See Rashi to Ch. 12; 14. Roughly translated, it reads “you have given ammunition to the enemies of the nation of G-d.” - it doesn’t say “You have angered G-d,” but caused others to act improperly.

²⁸ עיין ספר מכתב מאלו חלק א' עמוד 161

²⁹ See Da’as Sofrim

³⁰ Abarbanel. Although I hope the Abarbanel will forgive me; he used this observation in a very different way.

³¹ TB Yoma 22b

The method of punishment that G-d saw fit to exact against David was actually spelled out by David himself when he told the prophet Nathan “for the lamb he [i.e. the rich man who had stolen and killed the lamb of the poor man] should repay four times.” Four tragic and painful events followed one upon the other.

The Talmud tells us³² that great people are sometimes made to suffer so that their few sins should be “cleansed” - leaving them free in the next world to enjoy complete, unpolluted and infinite reward for their many good deeds. The converse is true of evil people. While seeing the inherent good in suffering is often difficult (in the words of our sages: “we’d rather not have the suffering, nor its reward”), ultimately, it is for the best. This would seem to be the nature of David’s four punishments.

But in addition to his being “cleansed” for entry into the next world, he also merited to retain his kingdom - for himself and for his future descendants. Saul, on the other hand, didn’t fare so well. What was the difference? According to the Da’as Sofrim, David immediately responded to Nathan’s rebuke with the words “I have sinned to G-d!” He didn’t attempt to justify his behavior (although, as we have seen, his behavior was fairly justifiable), nor did he plead for mercy. He simply said “I am guilty. Now, where do I go from here?”

It took some time for Saul to reach that understanding: In II Shmuel 15; 15 and again in verse 20 we find Saul reacting to the prophet Shmuel’s criticism with self-justification and only later (verse 24) does Saul finally admit “I have sinned, for I have transgressed the mouth [i.e. word] of G-d.”

The Talmud³³ tells us that the sin with Bas Sheva was something David would never have done under normal, natural circumstances³⁴ but that David was forced into it to show the world the power of repentance. “If even a great man like King David could bring himself to repent, and if G-d could forgive even such a huge sin, then there’s hope for me too.”

According to this, David deserved punishment not for the act itself (which seems to have been beyond his control) but for his *desire* to perform that act.

Either way, we see that David was indeed forgiven by G-d. However, it took many years of shame and suffering before the world saw it. We are told³⁵ that it was not until the inauguration of Solomon’s temple that the righteousness of Kind David was finally and absolutely confirmed in the eyes of all Jews faithful to the G-d of Israel.

³² TB Brachos 5b

³³ TB Avodah Zarah 4b. See also Maharsha

³⁴ Or perhaps, according to the Rebbeinu Tam mentioned earlier, was no sin at all, but simply looked to the world like a sin.

³⁵ TB Shabbos 30a