

The Royal Prophet

Yoav: David's Loyal Enemy¹

Hundreds of individuals walk across the pages of Tanach. Some are named and some aren't; some are introduced out of thin air with no hint of a background while others are described in great - almost embarrassing - detail; some show up once or twice and then disappear forever and others remain "visible" even a thousand years after their passing.

Here's the rule: The twenty-four books that make up Tanach included only what would be needed by all future generations. No doubt there were many compelling events and personalities during the course of those "Tanach" years, but our written record contains what we absolutely need. Nothing more.

Yoav ben Tz'ruiyah. He appears over and over again throughout II Shmuel. We see him as a key ally of King David, as a leader in his own right and as an unusually independent thinker. We see him, time after time, taking huge risks in his zeal to protect the Jewish monarchy. The Talmud² describes him as a man of kindness and charity. There is also strong evidence³ that he was a Torah scholar of note.

And then, suddenly, we see him turn around. His end? On the orders of David (the very man he seemed to have served so faithfully), Yoav was executed. What happened? Perhaps more importantly: What are we to learn from his loyalty, his ambiguity and his eventual fall?

In simple terms, Yoav was King David's chief military officer; a man of great authority but clearly subordinate. In a way, though, the two were also partners. The Talmud describes their relationship:

"And David performed justice and charity for his whole nation and Yoav ben Tz'ruiyah (was in charge of) the army" (II Shmuel 8; 15 - 16) - For what reason [i.e., how could] David do justice and charity to his whole nation? Because of Yoav (who was in charge of) the army. And why was Yoav (in charge of) the army? Because of David (who did) justice and charity to his whole nation."⁴

Yoav was even ready to stand **against** his king's will if he thought David would thus be best served:

- When Avner ben Ner - once David's enemy - entered into a treaty with David, Yoav might have suspected his motives and feared for the king's safety. Yoav caught Avner in a trap and killed him (II Shmuel, Chapter 3 and Da'as Sofrim to verse 25).
- When David appointed Amassa as his general - despite Amassa's previous involvement in Avshalom's rebellion - Yoav again saw reason to be suspicious (or perhaps he desired to stand up for what he perceived as the sullied honor of G-d's nation) and again he killed (II Shmuel, Chapter 20 and Da'as Sofrim to verse 8).⁵
- Despite David's request that his soldiers have mercy on his rebellious son Avshalom, Yoav, at the moment of victory, personally ensured the death of the now-helpless Avshalom (II Shmuel 18; 12 - 15). It is likely (according to the Da'as Sofrim) that Yoav feared that leaving Avshalom alive might lengthen the rebellion indefinitely.

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

² Sanhedrin 49a

³ On at least two occasions, the Talmud (ibid) shows us a Yoav deeply involved in halachic debate - in his deadly confrontation with Avner and in his attempt to justify the killing of Amassa before Sanhedrin.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ It is very possible that David drew both Avner and Amassa into his inner circle in an effort to unite and solidify a fractured nation (see Da'as Sofrim). David surely knew the risks involved, but felt himself a good enough judge of character to rely on his choices. Yoav, obviously, disagreed.

- Towards the end of his life, David decided to count his people. Yoav objected, doing his best to avoid (and later delay) the census, fearing the national consequences that indeed eventually came (see II Shmuel, Chapter 24).

On two separate occasions Yoav went to great effort to wean David from behavior he felt wasn't in the king's interests:

- In II Shmuel, Chapter 14, Yoav masterminds an elaborate ruse to convince David to forgive Avshalom.⁶
- In II Shmuel 19 (verses 2 - 7), Yoav interrupts David's wrenching mourning for his dead son, Avshalom, with a strongly-worded warning that if the king's public grief over the death of his rebellious son continues, the confused and offended nation might well abandon him.

If we would choose a brief phrase to describe Yoav ben Tz'ruyah it might be: "*Independently Loyal.*" In his own way, using his own mind and his own resources, Yoav seemed to fight passionately for the stability and survival of David's kingdom.

But there's another side to Yoav (and to nearly every event we've just discussed). This second side demands our serious consideration.

The Other Yoav

"And his words [i.e., Adoniya's plans to forcibly succeed his father David to the throne] were with Yoav ben Tz'ruyah and with Aviasar the Kohen, and they followed and assisted Adoniya." (I Kings 1; 7)

Just before David's death, Yoav openly supported Adoniya's attempt to take the throne. Yoav surely knew that David expected his son Shlomo to succeed him, how could he now - while the king lay sick and dying - stand behind Adoniya, Shlomo's rival? How could it be that the same Yoav who fought so hard to protect David from past rebellions should now so suddenly turn against him? It's difficult to imagine that Yoav was so frivolous that he could so drastically change the course of his life almost overnight.

Perhaps, though, the change was not so sudden. Yoav's break with David might have been developing for years....

"And the news [of David's command to kill Yoav] reached Yoav, for Yoav inclined after Adoniya and after Avshalom he did not incline..." (I Kings 2; 28)

"Why," the Talmud⁷ asks, "does the verse need to point out that 'he did not incline (after Avshalom)?" Rav Yehuda answers: (because) he (really) **wanted to incline** but he didn't." According to the Talmud, Yoav would have joined that earlier rebellion but for his fear of the still-powerful King David. He seems to have felt that opposing the king at that time, while justified, was futile.

Perhaps this knowledge invites us to re-examine some of Yoav's actions. Being human (and being a "loyal rebel"), Yoav might well have had many reasons - some personal and others selfless - for doing the things he did: It is possible that Yoav re-united Avshalom with his father (II Shmuel, Chapter 14) out of genuine concern for David...but he might also have done it to further Avshalom's chances at taking control; Yoav may indeed have killed Avshalom at the end of the rebellion (many months later), intending to stifle further insurrection...but he might also have considered Avshalom (the failed rebel) an obstruction and wanted him dead to make way for future plans; Yoav might well have considered Avner and Amassa threats to national stability...but, then again, perhaps he saw them as potential **stabilizing** factors in David's

⁶ ...for Avshalom's vengeful killing of his half-brother Amnon (see II Shmuel Ch. 13). All this happened long before Avshalom's all-out rebellion. At the time, Avshalom was living in exile, afraid to approach his father, David.

⁷ Sanhedrin 49a

government - a government that Yoav didn't want stabilized.⁸

David Reacts

David was far from naive and held few illusions about Yoav's loyalty. Immediately after the death of Avner - even before becoming king over the whole nation - David publicly and bitterly rebuked Yoav, clearly distancing himself from an act he strongly opposed⁹ (see II Shmuel 3: 28).

Indeed, were circumstances different, David would have confronted Yoav and removed him from his position; perhaps even killed him. However, according to the Da'as Sofrim, David's fragile position did not yet allow such a response (see II Shmuel 3: 39). Public silence, David teaches us, can be painful, but its benefits often make it worthwhile.

Instead, David left Yoav's punishment for much later...

Yoav's Punishment

If Yoav deserved to die, do we know exactly why? Let's take a look at some of the evidence:

David's accusation:

*"And you also know that which Yoav ben Tz'ruya **did to me**; that which **he did to two officers of the army of Israel**; to Avner ben Ner and to Amassa ben Yesser..."* (I Kings 2; 5)

"...that which Yoav...did to me..." The Midrash¹⁰ explains that David is here referring to an event dating back to his marriage to Batsheva. After Yoav fulfilled David's secret order to have Uriah (Batsheva's former husband) sent to the thick of the battle and left to die, his officers questioned their general's action. To defend himself, Yoav showed his men the letter containing the order, effectively putting the blame on the king.

It is possible that David interpreted the revelation of the letter as an attempt to weaken his hold over the army, and by extension, the nation. That might qualify as treason and might warrant the death penalty.

"...that which he did to two officers of the army of Israel..." Shlomo (in I Kings, 2; 32), upon ordering the actual execution of Yoav, expands on David's accusation: "...that he 'met with' two men - who were more righteous and better than he - and killed them..."

In which way were his two victims more righteous and better than Yoav? The Talmud¹¹ explains that they were better because, as superior Torah scholars, they were able to interpret limiting clauses of Biblical verses ("אך ורק")¹² while Yoav couldn't. And they were more righteous insofar as "each of them had received verbal (orders) and didn't fulfill them while he (Yoav) had received (orders that came only by way of a) letter, yet he **did** fulfill them."¹³

The Talmud's accusation:

⁸ You might ask: if Yoav opposed David's monarchy, why did he give him such energetic support for so long? It is possible that, for want of a better alternative and for the sake of the nation he no doubt loved, Yoav was willing to work with a man he considered imperfect.

⁹ According to the Da'as Sofrim, David opposed the killing of Avner, not so much because he considered it outright murder (II Shmuel 3; 30 suggests possible justification) but because defending principles - even vital principles - through explicitly violent means is not a practice he wanted associated with Jewish politics.

¹⁰ Yalkut Shimoni # 170

¹¹ Sanhedrin 49a

¹² The Talmud (ibid) explains that this interpretive skill allowed Amassa to conclude that he should delay raising the army to defend against Sheva ben Bichri. See the debate between Yoav and his accusers quoted below.

¹³ In the Torah-system, it seems, a face-to-face verbal order is harder to ignore than a written one.

Did Yoav indeed deserve death for killing these two men? The Talmud records the following debate between judges (perhaps those of the Sanhedrin¹⁴) and Yoav:

“Why did you kill Avner [the judges asked Yoav]?”

He answered “I was the redeeming relative [גואל הדם] for (my brother) Assa’el [who had been killed in battle by Avner].”

“Assa’el was chasing (and trying to kill) Avner [i.e., Avner had a right to defend himself].”

Yoav answered “He (Avner) could have saved himself (by hitting Assa’el in) one of his limbs [he didn’t have to kill him].”

They answered “He wasn’t able (to aim that carefully).”

“(Really?) didn’t (Avner) aim successfully for the (highly vulnerable) fifth rib...couldn’t he have therefore aimed for one of (Assa’el’s) limbs?”

They said to him “Remove Avner(‘s death from the list of accusations), but why did you kill Amassa?”

“Amassa rebelled against the king (by delaying carrying out David’s orders to raise a force to quell the rebellion of Sheva ben Bichri - see II Shmuel, Ch. 20) and therefore deserved to die.”

The judges replied to Yoav by defending Amassa’s delay (he had discovered that the potential recruits had just begun a session of Torah study and he concluded correctly that he was halachically bound to allow them to continue) and was therefore blameless. Nevertheless, Yoav could not be executed for the killing because his action lacked the absolute clarity of purpose that Jewish law requires before inflicting capital punishment. In other words, since Yoav was operating under a mistaken impression, no Jewish court could convict him.¹⁵

However, the Talmud continues, “...rather: that man (Yoav) rebelled against the king, as it says: “And the news [of David’s command to kill Yoav] reached Yoav, for Yoav had inclined after Adoniya and after Avshalom he did not incline....” (I Kings 2; 28)

As we said before, Yoav wanted to rebel alongside Avshalom, but held back. This passage of Talmud suggests that it was this near-rebellion that warranted death. But could Yoav’s *desire* to “incline” after Avshalom a decade before be considered an *act* of rebellion?¹⁶ On the other hand, he actually did rebel in support of Adoniya, but that, according to the Rif,¹⁷ couldn’t be considered a full rebellion because he wasn’t seeking to remove the aging David from his throne, just to replace him after his death with a rival son.

It was, continues the Rif, a combination of these two “minor” crimes that contributed to Yoav’s guilt. One might say that the relatively mild rebellion expressed by backing Adoniya for the throne confirmed (or even strengthened) the latent feelings of defiance that had existed at least since Avshalom.

An alternate scenario:

¹⁴ See the Radvaz to ט' הלכה ד' פרק ט' מלכים פרק ט' הלכה ד' which suggests that the interrogator was Shlomo himself.

¹⁵ See Tosafos to Sanhedrin 49a. Jews prefer, wherever possible, to leave punishment (at least in capital cases) in G-d’s “capable hands.” For evidence, see TB Brachos 7a where Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, having failed to invoke a curse upon an evil person, deduced that such behavior “is not proper - ‘punishment, even inflicted by a righteous person, is not good.’” In a very few unavoidable scenarios a court is forced to punish - but these are the exceptions rather than the rule.

¹⁶ Actually, to a certain degree, intentions can be held against a person: The author of “Chovos Halevovos - Duties of the Heart” writes that only those plans G-d “adopts” will be allowed to come to fruition. There are many methods G-d will use to prevent the fulfillment of those human plans that don’t fit into His design for the world. If our actions are often pre-determined, though, how is a man judged? From which “database” do the complex accounts of reward and punishment come? Human beings, wrote the Chovos Halevovos, are judged by their intent and free choice decisions - even if they’re unable to translate the plans into action. See Chovos Halevovos, Sha’ar Habitachon (“Gate of Trust”), fifth introduction.

¹⁷ This isn’t R’ Yitzchak Alfassi, but a commentary written much later and printed in “Ain Yakov” - see also Tosafos to Sanhedrin

The little-known Nineteenth Century work, “Niflaos M’Toras HaShem”¹⁸ considers the events from a different perspective: According to the “law of the Torah,” the killing of Amassa provided no grounds for Yoav’s execution (as stated above), but the “law of kings” allows a properly chosen king to use unusual methods to exact justice when the need is clear. David therefore instructed his son to arrange for some excuse (perhaps to avoid public opposition) and to use it to kill Yoav. Yoav’s running from Beniyahu (see I Kings 2; 29) provided that excuse.

The Niflaos M’Toras HaShem further points out an amazing hint to all of this in the Torah itself: “When a man shall purposefully and with deceit kill his fellow, (even) from next to my altar shall you take him to kill him.” (Exodus 21; 14) Haven’t we already been told “A man who hits his fellow and he dies, he will surely die” (verse 12)? There are no wasted words in the Torah: could this not be hinting to Yoav’s killing of Amassa? Yoav killed with deceit (II Shmuel 20; 9 - 10), and was eventually pulled from G-d’s altar to his death (I Kings 2; 29).

Yoav As Jew

What is the halachic relationship between a king and his people? May anyone challenge orders that he finds objectionable? Are royal officers given more room than others?

On the one hand, we read in the Torah:

“*You shall surely appoint upon yourself a king that the Lord your G-d shall choose.*” (Devarim 17; 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 תשימ intensifies the verse’s tone] on yourself a king’ - so that his fear should be upon you.*”¹⁹

To create this fear, the temporal power of a Jewish king must be nearly absolute. At the same time, however, we’re aware of the Talmudic dictum which can be loosely translated as “where the threat of disgrace to the Torah or to G-d exists, the honor usually due leaders is overruled.”²⁰

We have, therefore, three principles:

- A king **isn’t quite** an absolute ruler.
- Fidelity to Torah values **is** an absolute value.
- Every Jew is obligated to take his share of responsibility for his brothers.²¹

From these it would seem obvious that were a Jew to find fault in his king’s actions, he would be required to speak up and raise his concerns.²² If circumstances came to that, he might even be expected to forcefully oppose his king’s rule. The prophet Shmuel did it to King Saul and he was certainly not alone in history. The author of Chovos Halevavos (a famous medieval work of ethics and Jewish philosophy) attaches great significance and value to the ability to rebuke people in authority (when necessary) and to disregard their power and influence.²³

¹⁸ Chapter 45

¹⁹ TB Sanhedrin 20b

²⁰ “כל מקום שיש חילול השם אין חולקין כבוד לרב” TB Brochos 19b

²¹ “כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה” TB Shavuos 39a

²² Yoav himself was accused of failing to oppose an unjust decree when he carried out David’s order to have Uriah killed. The order came by letter (considered somewhat indirect and less binding), and yet Yoav failed to protest or to at least ignore it. See Sanhedrin 49a. The destruction of the priestly city of Nov provides another good example of failure (among some of Saul’s officers) to shoulder this type of responsibility.

²³ See his introduction to Sha’ar Habitachon (Gate of Trust).

At the same time, though, one must be very careful - because if you're wrong (or even if you're right, but criticize in the wrong way) the consequences can be devastating. This is part of the great danger of high office: failure - even seemingly mild failure - can be deadly.

And this concept of responsibility is nearly certain to have been the driving force behind many of Yoav's actions. While plotting against the king, Yoav almost certainly felt that he was acting in the nation's interest (during David's lifetime there were many who felt that Israel was in great danger as long as such a strange person was its leader - see the chapter "David: Through Critical Eyes" for details). And when he openly supported David he probably felt that that, too, was best for G-d's people...at least for the time being.

Our historical perspective of the events shows that Yoav may have been wrong, but how difficult it must have been for him to see that! Useful self-knowledge requires regular investments of enormous time and energy. Even great people filled with Torah and possessed of a passion for serving G-d and His people can be subtly misled by their own calculations.

So Yoav may indeed have been a rebel; a hidden rebel...but hidden so well that even he himself might not have realized it.