THE BOOK OF II *SHMUEL*

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LECTURE 81: CHAPTER 12

THE POOR MAN'S LAMB (PART I)

I. THE PARABLE

Following the detailed account of the sin in chapter 11, chapter 12 chronicles the punishment. Natan the prophet is sent to David, but to our surprise, he does not open by casting the sin into David's face, but with a story â€“ the famous parable about the poor man's lamb:

> (**1**) And the Lord sent1[1] Natan unto David. And he came unto him, and said unto him, â€œThere were two men in one city: the one rich, and the other poor. (**2**) The rich man had exceedingly many flocks and herds; (**3**) but the poor man had nothing save one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and reared; and it grew up together with him, and with his children; it did eat of his own morsel, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter. (**4**) And there came a traveler unto the rich man, and he spared to take of his own flock and of his own herd, to dress for the wayfaring man that was come unto him, but took the poor man's lamb, and dressed it for the man that was come to him.â€•

David was quick to respond:

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1 [1] In previous *shiurim*, we saw that the root *sh-l-ch* is a guide word in chapter 11, and that the excessive use of agents â€“ which gave David an exaggerated sense of power, on the one hand, and led him to a lack of caution regarding what other people knew, on the other â€“ was the root of his fall. Now, measure for measure, the reproach and punishment opens with the words: "And the Lord sent Natan unto David."

(**5**) And David's anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Natan, â€œAs the Lord lives, the man that has done this deserves to die; (**6**) and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.â€• 2[2]

The connection between the parable and the incident described in the previous chapter is clear: the rich man is David, the poor man is Uriya, and the lamb is Bat-Sheva. As for the traveler, *Chazal* (*Sukka* 52b) explain that the reference is to the *yetzer ha-ra*; in other words, the traveler represents the practical motive for the sin.3[3] There are, of course, details in the parable that do not have parallels in the actual story. David did not slaughter "the lamb," but rather sent her husband to death; the traveler is an added external character that is not mentioned in the story; there is also no clear parallel to "And it grew up together with him, **and with his children."**4[4] Already the *Metzudat Tziyyon* noted: **"**Although he added elements that have no connection to the story involving David, his intention was to conceal the matter, so that David should not understand, and refrain from issuing a ruling**."**

II. THE JUDICIAL PARABLE

Why did Natan need this parable? It stands to reason that there is a certain advantage in having "David himself issue a verdict about himself" (*Metzudat David*), for after issuing a harsh verdict about the rich man, it would

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2 [2] These verses contain an interesting play on words, revolving around the two senses of the verb "*ch-m-l*": In verse 4, it says that the rich man *chamal* â€“ "and he spared (*va-yachmol*) to take of his own flock and of his own herd"; whereas in verse 6 it says that he did not *chamal â€“ "*because he did this thing, and because he had no pity (*lo chamal*).â€• In verse 4, the meaning is that the rich man was concerned about his property (see I *Shemuel* 15:9), whereas in verse 6, the word is used in its more common sense â€“ pity.

3 [3] There may be an allusion here to the circumstances of David's sin, which started with: "And he walked (*va-yithalekh*) upon the roof of the king's house" (11:2). *Chazal* (in *Sukka* 52b) learn an important moral principle from this parable regarding the workings of the evil *yetzer*: "First he is called a passer-by, then he is called a guest, and finally he is called a man."

4 [4] The Radak writes: "That which it says: 'And it grew up together with him, and with his children,' teaches that he had children from another wife who had died."

be difficult for David to argue in his own favor, after it became clear that the parable was referring to himself. Nevertheless, there is room to ask: Surely Natan is about to level in most unequivocal terms severe accusations regarding the killing of Uriya and taking of Bat-Sheva; would these accusations not suffice? Does not the parable of the poor man's lamb reduce the severity of David's actions?

In order to answer this question, we must understand the phenomenon of the judicial parable. In two other places in Scripture, we find someone turning to a king in the guise of a legal discussion, which in the end â€“ after the king issues his ruling â€“ turns out to be a parable for the actions of the king himself. One such case is brought below in chapter 14. After Avshalom kills Amnon and flees to Geshur, Yoav knows that "the king's heart was toward Avshalom," and therefore asks the woman of Tekoa to turn to David with a story that is a parable about his situation:

> And she answered, â€œOf a truth I am a widow, my husband being dead. And your handmaid had two sons, and they two strove together in the field, and there was none to part them, but the one smote the other, and killed him. And, behold, the whole family is risen against your handmaid, and they said, â€˜ Deliver him that smote his brother, that we may kill him for the life of his brother whom he slew,â€™and so destroy the heir also. Thus will they quench my coal which is left, and will leave to my husband neither name nor remainder upon the face of the earth.â€• (14:5-7)

After succeeding in extracting from David a promise that her son would not be harmed, the woman of Tekoa explains to him5[5] that the reference is to David himself. Just as he promised not to cause harm to the son who had killed his brother, so must he practice regarding himself: to restore Avshalom, and not to execute him.6[6]

The third judicial parable in Scripture is found in the story of Achav and Ben-Hadad. Achav should have understood that his miraculous victory over Aram necessitates the killing of Ben-Hadad, but instead he spares his life and

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5 [5] Although in a slightly unclear manner. See *shiur* no. 21 on I *Shemuel*, end of section III.

6 [6] Was the woman right in this parallel? This issue will be discussed when we get to chap. 14.

even calls him, "my brother" (I *Melakhim* 20:32). Afterwards, he enters into a dubious peace agreement with him. In order to make it clear to him that he had erred, a prophet is sent to him with a judicial parable:

> So the prophet departed, and waited for the king by the way, and disguised himself with his headband over his eyes. And as the king passed by, he cried unto the king, and he said, â€œYour servant went out into the midst of the battle; and, behold, a man turned aside, and brought a man unto me, and said, â€˜ Keep this man; if by any means he be missing, then shall your life be for his life, or else you shall pay a talent of silver.â€™And as your servant was busy here and there, he was gone.â€• And the king of Israel said unto him, â€œSo shall your judgment be; you yourself have decided it.â€• (ibid. 38-40)

After Achav decides the matter, the prophet explains to him that it was merely a parable:

> And he hastened and took the headband away from his eyes; and the king of Israel discerned him that he was of the prophets. And he said unto him, â€œThus says the Lord: Because you have let go out of your hand the man whom I had devoted to destruction, therefore your life shall go for his life, and your people for his people.â€• (ibid. vv. 41-42)

What is the meaning of a judicial parable? The answer lies in the striking common denominator found in all three parables: In each of the three cases, the turning to the king, rather than to an ordinary judge, stems from the assumption that in the case in question, it is fitting to rule not in accordance with the strict law, but according to the special circumstances of the case. Therefore, the matter should be brought before the king, who has the authority to issue exceptional rulings.7[7]

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7 [7] The Ran expands at length in his *Derashot* (no. 11) on the need for a twofold legal system, comprised of judges and the king, and on the distinction between the different roles. According to him, the judge restricts himself to the case before him, whereas the king must take a wider perspective and consider the welfare of the nation and factors that go beyond the strict law in the particular case.

In the parable of the poor man's lamb, the expectation is for a ruling that is more severe than the Torah's verdict of "four sheep for a sheep" (*Shemot* 21:37), owing to the aggravating circumstances: Instead of taking from his own flock, the rich man took the poor man's only lamb. David fulfills this expectation, and issues a most severe ruling: "The man that has done this deserves to die;8[8] and he shall restore the lamb fourfold."9[9]

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8 [8] Did David actually have the death penalty in mind? The Radak understands that this was not his intention: "When he said that the man deserves to die, he was speaking in hyperbole, for a man is not liable to the death penalty for the act of stealing. But since he did something despicable, he said that he deserved to die." But even the Radak agrees that David's ruling deviated from strict law, for he understands the words "and he shall restore the lamb fourfold," as: "Double the usual law, for another thief would pay fourfold, but this one, who is rich and stole the poor man's lamb deserves to be penalized and to pay **double**." That is to say, the rich man must pay eightfold: four for the oridinary circumstances and four for the aggravated circumstances (see also *Sifrei Devarim* 26, which brings the view of R. Chanina that "fourfold" means sixteen times).

In any event, it seems that according to the plain sense of the text, David had in mind to sentence him to the death penalty (see Rashi). Indeed, we find in several places in the Torah that theft in aggravated circumstances is punishable by death. The Torah rules: "And he that steals a man and sells him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death" (*Shemot* 21:16); when Lavan complains to Yaakov about the theft of his *terafim*, Yaakov answers: "With whomsoever you find your gods, he shall not live" (*Bereishit* 31:32); and Yosef's brothers conferred the same penalty on the one who stole the goblet: "With whomsoever of your servants it be found, let him die" (*Bereishit* 44:9). In the Code of Hamurabi, a thief is liable to the death penalty. And similarly in *Chazal* we find statements according to which robbery and theft are included among those sins the severity of which require in certain situations death. In *Ketubot* 19a, an opinion is brought according to which theft is one of the transgressions subject to the law that one must allow oneself to be killed rather than commit the sin; in *Bava Metzia* 83b it is stated that R. Eliezer the son of R. Shimon had thieves executed through the non-Jewish authorities, and the Ritva there explains that "it is the law of the king to execute without witnesses or a warning, as we see that David killed the Amaleki, and the agent of the king is like the king himself."

9 [9] *Chazal* (*Yoma* 22b) understood that the ruling, "and he shall restore the lamb fourfold," was indeed fulfilled in David, who paid for his offense with the death of four of his children: the first son of Bat-Sheva, Tamar, Amnon, and Avshalom. The Ralbag replaces Tamar, who was not killed, with Adoniya. (Apparently, the *midrash* in *Yoma* did not count Adoniya because he died in the book of *Melakhim*, following David's death). See also *shiur* no. 69, section II, where we brought another explanation of the word "fourfold" and rejected it.

David justifies his ruling with the argument: "Because he did this thing, and because he had no pity," and the commentators have already noted (see Radak and *Metzudot*) that this doubling gives expression to two aspects of the sin. The words, "because he did this thing," refer to the very stealing of the lamb, whereas the words, "and because he had no pity," express the special severity of the act, which justifies special punishment in accordance with the law of the king.

The woman of Tekoa also asks for a ruling not in accordance with the strict law, but in her case, the request was to rule leniently in light of the extenuating circumstances. By strict law, the murderous son must be executed, but the woman pleads with David that he pardon her son, for were he to die, she would turn into a childless widow, bereft of family. David accepts her request and pardons her son.

So too in the parable regarding the captive, the person turning to the king seeks leniency vis-Ã -vis the strict law, but in this case, he achieves the very opposite result. According to the strict law, the "guard" must fulfill his obligation - become himself a slave, or else pay a talent of silver (which was a huge sum) - but he asks for consideration in wake of the circumstances â€“ "and as your servant was busy here and there, he was gone." But unlike David, Achav does not respond favorably to the request, because the circumstances do not justify an exceptional ruling on the part of the king, and therefore the ordinary law must be applied: "So shall your judgment be; you yourself have decided it."

The parable is, of course, used to clarify some aspect of the real life situation. The main message that Natan wishes to convey to David through the parable of the poor man's lamb is that he is not "merely" guilty of sending someone to his death and then taking his wife. Rather, we are dealing here with particularly aggravating circumstances: David had received so much from God, and nevertheless he was not content with what he had, but rather took Bat-Sheva, Uriya the Chitite's only wife. For this reason, his punishment must be much more severe than the "usual" punishment in such a case, as we shall see in the continuation.

In conclusion, there is room to consider another question: How did David not understand that the parable was about him? Even though, as stated above, there are several differences between the two stories, the essence of the matter is clear. Furthermore, the story was told by a prophet, as opposed to the other parables, which were reported by ordinary people, and therefore

would have appeared more credible! Is it so difficult to understand that Natan is alluding to David himself?

This seems to indicate the extent to which David had repressed his sin prior to Natan's arrival. It may be presumed that David justified his actions to himself in various ways, especially his killing of Uriya the Chitite; when the episode came to a close, he gave it no further thought and removed if from his mind. This deep repression testifies that, in fact, David understood the severity of his sin. And it stands to reason that David was worthy of Divine help, which did not allow him to run away from his sin, but rather forced him to deal with it face to face and undergo a process of full repentance.

(Translated by David Strauss)