

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

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LECTURE 82: CHAPTER 12 (PART 11)

PUNISHMENT AND REPENTANCE

I. FOUR PUNISHMENTS

After David pronounces his verdict concerning the rich man, the time arrives to expose the truth:

(7) And Natan said to David, “ You are the man! Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Shaul; (2) and I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom,¹[1] and gave you the house of Israel and of Yehuda; and if that were too little, then would I add unto you so much more. (9) Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do that which is evil in My sight? Uriya the Chitite you have smitten with the sword, and his wife you have taken to be your wife, and him you have slain with the sword of the children of Amon.” ²[2]

1 [1] To whom is this referring? According to Rashi, the reference is to Mikhal, the daughter of Shaul, but this explanation is a difficult reading of the words, "your master's wives." The *Metzudat David* explains, based on the midrash, that the reference is to Ritzpa bat Aya, Shaul's concubine, whom David took as a wife. The practice of a king taking his predecessor's concubines in marriage is noted in the story of Avshalom, which will be mentioned below, as well as the story of Adoniya and Avishag the Shunamite woman (see [Melakhim 2:13-22](#)).

2 [2] The redundancy in this verse regarding the killing of Uriya is puzzling. The Radak explains that the intention is that not only did David cause the death of Uriya, but his death was executed in a humiliating way, through his falling into the hands of Amon. Some argue that the closing words, "and him you have slain with the sword of Amon," which follow the words, "and his wife you have taken **to be your wife**," are more appropriate at the end of the next verse – "now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house;

In the previous *shiur*, we saw that the parable of the poor man's lamb was meant to demonstrate the severity of David's conduct, over and beyond the "ordinary" severity of taking a married woman and sending her husband to his death. This parable prepared the groundwork for four punishments that are now cast upon David:

1) "Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house" (v. 10). This punishment seems to be measure for measure for the killing of Uriya the Chitite "by the sword." It was fulfilled, among other ways, in the deaths of three of David's sons: Amnon (13:28-29), Avshalom (18:15), and Adoniya ([Melakhim 2:25](#)).

2) "Thus says the Lord: Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house, and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them unto your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun" (vv. 11-12). This punishment, measure for measure for taking Bat-Sheva, was fulfilled through Avshalom's rebellion (below, chapter 17).^{3[3]}

because you have despised Me, and have taken the wife of Uriya the Chitite **to be your wife**" – for in that way both verses mention both sins; if this is correct, we must explain why the words are ordered in a different manner. The matter requires further study.

3 [3] In *shiur* no. 80, we argued that Scripture does not have a negative view of David's marriage to Bat-Sheva, and that it was, in fact, a positive act of accepting responsibility. Against this argument, an objection might be raised from Natan's words: "Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do that which is evil in My sight? Uriya the Chitite you have smitten with the sword, **and his wife you have taken to be your wife**...because you have despised Me, **and have taken the wife of Uriya the Chitite to be your wife**" – verses that seem to imply that David's taking of Bat-Sheva as a wife was a negative act. It seems, however, that the punishment for taking Bat-Sheva – someone from the house of David sleeping with his wives – proves that the sin was his sleeping with her, not their marriage, although this is what eventually led him to marry her. If his marriage to Bat-Sheva was also a sin, the fitting punishment would have been that someone else would **marry** David's wives. Furthermore, in the punishment for taking Bat-Sheva, Natan emphasizes: "For you did it secretly." This too proves that the problem was in an act that was done in secret, and not in his marriage to Bat-Sheva, which, of course, was performed in public.

3) Following David's repentance, "And David said unto Natan, ' I have sinned against the Lord' " (v. 13), Scripture says: "And Natan said unto David, ' The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die' " – implying that had David not repented, a sentence of death would have been decreed against him. This is self-evident, for this is the "simple" punishment for taking a married woman and sending her husband to his death. Furthermore, as we saw in the previous *shiur*, the whole purpose of the parable of the poor man's lamb was to demonstrate the particularly aggravating circumstances of the incident.

4) In the end, the prophet adds: "Howbeit, because by this deed you have greatly blasphemed the enemies of the Lord,^{4[4]} the child also that is born unto you shall surely die" (v. 14). The child to be born from this sin falls into the category of "the crooked that cannot be made straight" ([Kohelet 1:15](#)),^{5[5]} a permanent reminder of the desecration of God's name, and therefore his death was inevitable.

II THE REPENTANCE

When David hears Natan's rebuke, he has only two words to say: "*Chatati la-Hashem*" – I have sinned against the Lord." Without a doubt, these words reflect enormous strength. Other kings who were the objects of a prophet's rebuke responded in altogether different ways. Some kings seethed with rage and ordered that harm should be brought to the prophet; this was the response, for example, of Yerov'am ben Nevat (see [I Melakhim 13:4](#)) and Achazya (see [II Melakhim 1](#)). Others tried to evade responsibility – this was highly characteristic of King Shaul, who time and time again tried to justify his actions (see [I Shmuel 13, 15](#), and 28, and our *shiurim* there). David, in contrast, recognizes his sin, is not angry with the prophet, and does not try to excuse his actions. This response was appreciated on high, and accordingly

4 [4] Rashi understands that this is a euphemism for God. But the Radak explains (based on Targum Yonatan) the term in its plain sense: "That is to say, you gave the enemies of Israel an opportunity to say that something as evil as this was done in Israel."

5 [5] See [Chagiga 9b](#): "R. Shimon ben Menasya said: Who is it 'that is crooked' who 'cannot be made straight'? He that has a connection with a forbidden relation and begets by her bastard children."

Natan informs David that his repentance was effective for the short term and saved him from death: "The Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die."⁶[6]

What remains is a question that *Chazal* formulated in concise fashion: "Shaul sinned once⁷[7] and it brought [calamity] upon him; David sinned twice⁸[8] and it did not bring evil upon him" ([Yoma 23b](#)). Why did Shaul lose his kingdom for one sin, while David did not lose his kingdom for an offense that seems far more serious by any standard?

It would seem that the difference lies in their respective reactions to the rebuke of the prophet: Shaul was very hesitant and tried to free himself from responsibility before he finally admitted his sin (in particular in the episode involving Amalek; [I Shmuel 15](#)), whereas David, as mentioned above, immediately confessed. But the problem remains, for even prior to David's repentance, there is no mention of the fact that he was supposed to lose his kingdom. Scripture explicitly states that David's repentance only canceled the death sentence that awaited him; it says nothing about the continuation of the kingdom. Thus, we come back to the question: Why didn't David lose his kingdom, just as Shaul lost his?

On the simple level, we may suggest that this was no longer possible, as God had already made a promise to David in Natan's vision: "But My mercy shall not depart from him, as I took it from Shaul, whom I put away

6 [6] David's repentance here is expanded upon in psalm 51 in *Tehilim*, the heading of which is: "When Natan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bat-Sheva." This psalm deals with a request for pardon and with regret over the sin. It ends with two verses that seem to have been written much later than the period of David (see *shiur* no. 3 on [I Shmuel](#)).

7 [7] The *gemara* explains that the reference is to Shaul's sin in the war against Amalek, for the story of Nov took place after he had already lost his kingdom. The question may, however, be raised: Why does the *gemara* ignore Shaul's sin of offering the sacrifice before Shmuel's arrival, which Scripture explicitly states is a reason that Shaul lost the kingdom (see [I Shmuel 13:13-14](#)). The *Tosafot Yeshanim* (ad loc., s.v. *Shaul be-achat*) answer: "For at that time he did not lose the kingdom entirely, for then it was only God's intention to remove it from him, but not from his sons, but following the episode of Agag, He regretted even with respect to his sons." See also Maharsha ad loc.

8 [8] The *gemara* explains that the reference is to the sins of Uriya the Chitite and the census (below, chapter 24).

before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before you; your throne shall be established forever" (7:15-16). But this answer is only possible if we assume that our chapter took place later chronologically than chapter 7. In our study of chapter 8 (*shiur* no. 74), we argued that it is reasonable to assume that the events of chapter 7, which opens with the words, "and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies round about," took place after the chapters describing the wars of David (8 and 10), and presumably after the Bat-Sheva episode, which occurred at the height of the war fought against Amon.

We are left then with only one possibility: The Bat-Sheva episode was indeed a serious one-time fall of David, but it did not reflect his person as a whole. It is possible that this evaluation is supported by what we emphasized in *shiur* no. 80, that David's entanglement resulted from his sense of responsibility for Bat-Sheva. Against this fall stands the greatness of David's person as it was expressed on various occasions in the past, and it may be concluded that David learned his lesson, and that the serious episode reflects the exception, rather than the rule – unlike Shaul, whose fall reflected an essential flaw in his leadership, and therefore led to his losing the kingdom.

III. " I SHALL GO TO HIM, BUT HE WILL NOT RETURN TO ME"

The fourth and final punishment begins immediately:

(15) And Natan departed unto his house. And the Lord struck the child that Uriya's wife bore unto David, and it was very sick.

However, the main point of the story of the child is not the unsurprising fulfillment of the prophecy, but rather David's surprising reactions at various stages of the events:

(16) David therefore besought God for the child; and David fasted, and as often as he went in, he lay all night upon the earth. (17) And the elders of his house arose, and stood beside him to raise him up from the earth; but he would not, neither did he eat bread with them. (18) And it came to pass on the seventh day that the child died. And the servants of David feared to tell him that the child was dead; for they said, " Behold, while the child was yet alive, we spoke unto him, and he

hearkened not unto our voice; how then shall we tell him that the child is dead, so that he do himself some harm?" (19) But when David saw that his servants whispered together, David perceived that the child was dead; and David said unto his servants, "Is the child dead?" And they said, "He is dead." (20) Then David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed himself, and changed his apparel; and he came into the house of the Lord, and bowed; then he came to his own house; and when he required, they set bread before him, and he did eat. (21) Then said his servants unto him, "What thing is this that you have done? You did fast and weep for the child while it was alive; but when the child was dead, you did rise and eat bread." (22) And he said, "While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, Who knows whether the Lord will not be gracious to me, that the child may live?" (23) But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me."

The question raised by David's servants was a logical one that should be raised by the reader himself: How are we to understand David's conduct? Usually, when a person prays for something, and all the more so for the life of his son, and his prayer goes unanswered, he is then in a much more difficult emotional state, for he has already lost all hope and he suffers the pain of bitter reality. The servants' concern that David would "do himself some harm" is then very understandable. Against the difficulty of the question, David's answer stands out in its weakness. Did, in fact, David maintain a philosophical approach, detached from all emotions, that one should not grieve over the deceased because "I shall go to him, but he will not return to me"? Surely he himself did not conduct himself in this manner following the deaths of his other sons, Amnon (13:31, 36) and Avshalom (19:1-5).^{9[9]}

Furthermore, the wording of the verses suggests that we are not dealing merely with a return to routine. The verses emphasize a variety of activities that David undertook: "Then David **arose** from the earth, and **washed**, and **anointed himself**, and **changed** his apparel; and he **came** into the house of the Lord, and **bowed**; then he **came** to his own house; and when he **required**, they set bread before him, and he **did eat**." Nine successive

9 [9] Of course, we cannot compare his attitude to a child who had just been born and his attitude to children who had already grown up. As the Radak writes: "The child is also not fit to be cried over after his death the way people cry over their dead, for a child has no intelligence that a person should cry over his loss, for David cried over Amnon and Avshalom, and his crying was not to restore them, but rather in the way of distress and mourning." In any event, just as David did not react with indifference to the deaths of his other children, he should not have reacted with indifference to the death of the child following a full week of fasting and prayer.

verbs in a single sentence demand explanation, and the general impression that one gets from the verse is that David experienced relief: he washes and changes his clothing, as Yosef had done in his time ([Bereishit 41:14](#)), and then he goes to the house of God and bows there – a clear expression of thanksgiving to God.¹⁰[10] What is the meaning of this behavior?

It seems that from a natural human point of view, David did not really want the child to live. Had he lived, he would have been, as mentioned earlier, a constant reminder of the serious sin that he had committed. When the bastard child died, at the tender age of seven days, a heavy stone was lifted from David's heart, and he thanked God that no trace of his sin would remain. However, it is precisely this that emphasizes David's earlier virtue and the message lying in the account of the child's death: Even though it ran counter to his own personal interests, David nevertheless prayed to God and made every effort to cancel the decree. He thereby proved that his repentance was complete. When David sent Uriya to his death, he ignored the value of human life in order to further his own personal interest. Now he mends his ways: he gives expression to the value of human life and prays for the survival of the child, even though this runs counter to his interests.

If our explanation is correct, we can add another layer to it. If indeed David experienced relief at the death of the child born out of his sin, it is possible that David also had reservations regarding Bat-Sheva, whom he had taken into his house because of a sense of responsibility (see *shiur* no. 80). Indeed, we do not encounter her anymore from here until the end of the book. Moreover, this may be the reason that he had reservations, if only subconscious ones, regarding Bat-Sheva's son, Shlomo, as may be inferred from a careful reading of the following verses:

(24) And David comforted Bat-Sheva his wife, and went in unto her, and lay with her; and she bore a son, [*va-tikra*; and she called (the way the word is read)] [*va-yikra*; and he called (the way the word is written)] his name Shlomo. And the Lord loved him; (25) And He sent by the hand of Natan the prophet, and he called his name Yedidya, for the Lord's sake.

It is Bat-Sheva who calls the child by the name of Shlomo (according to the way the verse is read); God also gives him a name, but David is missing

¹⁰ [10] Thus we find in several places, e.g., by Avraham's servant ([Bereishit 24:26](#), 52), by Elkana and by Eli ([I Shmuel 28](#)); and see *Nechemya* 8:6.

from the picture. Moreover, the verse states: "And the Lord loved him," and it is difficult not to remember another verse with a similar ending: "We have a father, an old man, and a child of his old age, a little one; and his brother is dead, and he alone is left of his mother, **and his father loves him.**" The contrast between the two verses is striking: Scripture makes no mention of David's love for his son Shlomo.¹¹[11] Bat-Sheva and her son, with their very presence, serve as a reminder of the circumstances that brought them into David's house, and it is understandable that David did not feel comfortable around them.

Nevertheless, the end of the story proves that David's repentance was accepted by God, and for this reason it was precisely Shlomo, the son of David and Bat-Sheva, who was chosen to be David's successor, and God loved him. This teaches us the power of repentance.

(Translated by David Strauss)

¹¹ [11] According to this, we can understand why David did not hasten to anoint Shlomo as king when Adoniyahu already saw himself as heir to the throne, and why he only took action to anoint Shlomo after Natan and Bat-Sheva intervened on his behalf.