

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

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Lecture 85: Chapter 13 (I)

The Story of Amnon and Tamar (Part I)

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I. “TAMAR, MY BROTHER AVSHALOM’ S SISTER”

The story of Amnon and Tamar is an exceedingly difficult episode, beginning with a rape in the house of David and ending with murder. There is no doubt that this is the first in a series of misfortunes that befall David following the Bat-Sheva affair and that there is a conceptual relationship between the two. As the Radak says in his commentary to our chapter (v. 15):

This incident was David's punishment for what happened with Bat-Sheva and Uriya, for as punishment for [what happened there], an act of lechery was done in his house that led to the sword, in fulfillment of what the prophet said to him: "Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house" ([II Shemuel 12:10](#)). Similarly, in the case of Avshalom, [we find] lechery and the sword, all measure for measure.^{1[1]}

Before we address the particulars of the story, we must deal with a background question. What was the family relationship between Amnon and Tamar? (It is recommended that at this point the reader examine verses 1-22.)

Tamar is presented in the chapter as "the sister of Avshalom" (v. 4, and similarly in verses 1, 20, 22, 32), but also as the sister of Amnon (verses 2, 5, 6, 10, 12, 20). It might be suggested that Tamar was Avshalom's sister from both his father

1 [1] The root *sh-kh-v* appears six times in the account of David's sin in chapter 11 and six times in the story of Amnon and Tamar in chapter 13.

and his mother (Avshalom's mother was Ma'akha the daughter of Talmai, king of Geshur, as was related above 3:3), while Amnon was only her brother from his father (Amnon's mother was Achino'am the Yizraelitess; see above 3:2). If this were the case, however, Tamar would have been forbidden to Amnon as his paternal sister ([Vayikra 18:9](#); 20:17; [Devarim 27:22](#)). Yet the plain sense of her words, "Now therefore, I pray you, speak unto the king; for he will not withhold me from you" (v. 13),² implies that had Amnon wanted to take Tamar as his wife, he could have done so.

Chazal resolved this difficulty with the assertion that "Tamar was the daughter a non-Jewish female prisoner of war (*yefat to'ar*)" ([Sanhedrin 21a](#)). According to most opinions, a single act of intercourse is permitted with a *yefat to'ar* while she is still a non-Jewess. Tamar – who, according to this view, was conceived from this first act of intercourse with Ma' akha – did not have the status of a Jew, and was therefore permitted to Amnon. This is also the understanding of Rashi, Radak, and the Ralbag in our chapter.

The Abravanel, however, notes:

According to the plain sense of the text and common sense, this view is far-fetched and reason does not tolerate it. For even were we to concede that David slept with Ma'akha before she converted – something that is not mentioned in Scripture and is not fitting for a king who trusts in God as he did, but rather that she should first convert... Nevertheless, after Ma'akha gave birth to David's daughter after she was already a Jewish convert, how was there a difference between her and Avshalom? Both were the children of David, both were from Ma'akha, both were born when she was [already] a convert and the wife of the king. How, then, can we say that she, because her mother conceived her a day or two before she converted, should be permitted to her brother, Amnon? And that which they said ([Kiddushin 68b](#)) that a son born to a non-Jewish maidservant or a non-Jewess is not considered a Jew, that is true as long as she is a maidservant or a non-Jewess. But if she conceived shortly before she converted, and then she converted and gave birth to a son or a daughter in sanctity and purity, would it be pleasing in the eyes of God that we should judge her as a non-Jewess, and permit relations with her, and that the son born to her while she is a Jewess should be called a non-Jew?

2 [2] This is similarly the conclusion from her words in v. 16: "Because this great wrong in putting me forth is worse than the other that you did to me," as will be explained in the next lecture.

The words of the Abravanel are themselves novel, for his disagreement with *Chazal* relates not only to points of Aggada and exegesis, but to matters of Halakha as well. In any event, his objections on the exegetical level are clear and stand on their own.

The Abravanel himself prefers to say that Tamar was indeed born to Ma'akha after she converted, and therefore was forbidden to Amnon, as she was his paternal sister. He is therefore forced to explain that Tamar's words, "for he will not withhold me from you," were "vain words of comfort...and she wanted to push him off with straw." The difficulty with this solution is manifest. It is hard to imagine that Tamar would have employed such a poor argument to persuade Amnon not to rape her. Moreover, from the continuation of the story, it seems that after being raped, Tamar wanted Amnon to marry her, and at that point, we cannot say that we are dealing with "vain words of comfort."

It seems, therefore, that the simplest approach to understanding the story is that of the Tosafot on the talmudic passage in *Sanhedrin*^{3[3]} and of Rabbeinu Yeshaya in his commentary to our chapter. They argue that Tamar was not at all the daughter of David, but rather Avshalom's sister exclusively from his mother's side; thus, there was no blood relationship whatsoever between her and Amnon.^{4[4]} This is also the implication of Amnon's words: "I love Tamar, **my brother Avshalom's sister**" (v. 4). This may also be alluded to in the verse: "That **Avshalom the son of David** had a fair sister, whose name was Tamar; and **Amnon the son of David** loved her" (v. 1). In other words, Avshalom and Amnon were the sons of David, but Tamar was not his daughter. According to this approach, the fact that Scripture refers to Tamar as Amnon's "sister" does not imply a biological relationship, but rather formal closeness, as both of them lived under the patronage of David.^{5[5]}

3 [3] The Tosafot also attempt to reconcile the story with the view brought in the *Yerushalmi* (and followed by Rashi in his commentary to *Kiddushin*) that not even a single act of intercourse is permitted with a *yefat to'ar* while she is still a non-Jewess.

4 [4] According to this, there is no need to say that Ma'akha was a *yefat to'ar*, and it stands to reason that her marriage to David was an ordinary political marriage between one king and the daughter of a neighboring king. In light of the beauty of her children, Avshalom and Tamar, it may be assumed that Ma'akha also stood out in her beauty.

5 [5] See I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 3:9: "All these were the sons of David, beside the sons of the concubines; and Tamar was their sister."

II. YONADAV' S ADVICE

(1) And it came to pass after this, that Avshalom the son of David had a fair sister, whose name was Tamar; and Amnon the son of David loved her. (2) And Amnon was so distressed that he fell sick^{6[6]} because of his sister Tamar; for she was a virgin;^{7[7]} and it seemed hard to Amnon to do any thing unto her. (3) But Amnon had a friend, whose name was Yonadav, the son of Shim'a, David's brother; and Yonadav was a very subtle man. (4) And he said to him, " Why, O son of the king, are you thus becoming leaner from day to day?^{8[8]} Will you not tell me?" And Amnon said to him, " I love Tamar, my brother Avshalom's sister." (5) And Yonadav said to him, " Lay you down on your bed, and feign yourself sick; and when your father comes to see you, say to him, ' Let my sister Tamar come, I pray you, and give me bread to eat, and dress the food in my sight, that I may see it, and eat it at her hand.' "

The verses imply that Amnon was not interested in taking Tamar as his wife. The "love" about which the verses speak does not suggest romantic feelings, but Amnon's lustful desire for the fair Tamar.^{9[9]} He is distressed because he wants to satisfy his desire, but Tamar was not interested in a relationship of this type. As a result, Amnon fell sick owing to his misery and could not come up with a solution.

6 [6] "Until he appeared sick owing to his great desire for her" (Radak).

7 [7] Why is it noted here that Tamar was a virgin? According to Rashi, this is an exposition necessary to understand the continuation of the verse: "And it seemed hard to Amnon to do any thing to her." Since she was a virgin, Tamar did not leave her house much. But the Radak suggests that this explains Amnon's state: "Therefore, he craved for her especially strongly."

8 [8] "Because at night he thought about her and he was up because of her, and in the morning he had a downcast face" (Radak).

9 [9] This is evident from, among other things, what is related later: "Then Amnon hated her with exceeding great hatred; for the hatred wherewith he hated her was greater than the love wherewith he had loved her."

This point strengthens the correspondence to the story of David and Bat-Sheva, which also stemmed from David's lustful passion for Bat-Sheva, who was also very beautiful (11:2), and not from a desire to marry her, as we emphasized in earlier lectures.

His cousin, Yonadav the son of Shim'a, came to his rescue. Yonadav is described here with the unusual appellation, "a very subtle man," a term used nowhere else in Scripture. Yonadav's keen perception is evident already in his assessment that something is weighing heavily upon Amnon's mind, and also in the sophisticated plan that he suggests to his friend. Yonadav's plan is based on several things:

1. Amnon's playing sick clears him of all suspicion, for who would think that a sick person in a weakened state is filled with lecherous thoughts?

2. Yonadav tells Amnon to ask of David: "Let my sister Tamar come, I pray you;" emphasizing the family connection is also meant to cover up Amnon's true intention.

3. The request that Tamar should come and "give me bread to eat,"¹⁰[10] as proposed by Yonadav, is strange, and would be accepted with understanding only if it were considered the caprice of a sick man, whose state evokes empathy.

4. Had Amnon directed his request straight to Tamar herself, she might have refused; bringing David into the picture denied her the possibility of refusing.

It is precisely for this reason that the question may be raised: If Yonadav was so smart, how did he not foresee what would happen in the end? Did he not know Avshalom? Could he not have predicted that Avshalom would not pass silently over the rape of his sister?

¹⁰ [10] The term "*beriya*" is unique to the book of *Shmuel*. It refers to the eating of a person who finds himself in emotional or physical distress. In that sense, it was used in reference to David following the death of Avner ("And all the people came to cause David to eat (*le-havrot*) bread; 2:35), and when he fasted prior to the death of the child born to Bat-Sheva ("neither did he eat (*bara*) bread with them;" 12:17).

It seems that as far as Yonadav was concerned, the advice ended at this point; he never imagined what Amnon would end up doing. It stands to reason that Yonadav wished only to create a situation in which Amnon could turn directly to Tamar and seduce her with no intention of marriage, but he never intended that Amnon should assault her and force himself upon her against her will.¹¹[11]

This difference may also be expressed in the difference between Yonadav's advice – to ask that Tamar "give me bread to eat" – and the way it was formulated by Amnon - "And make me two cakes (*levavot*) in my sight, that I may eat at her hand." The latter is a much more personal request in two senses. First, Amnon asks for "two cakes" – that is, food for two people – for himself and for Tamar. Second, the word "*levavot*" itself has an intimate connotation, as in the verse: "You have ravished (*libavtini*) my heart, my sister, my bride; you have ravished my heart with one of your eyes" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 4:9) (a verse that gains special meaning against the background of our chapter). Amnon was unable to control himself, and already at this stage he alluded to his true goal.¹²[12]

At first, the plan works as intended, and Amnon succeeds in getting Tamar to enter his room alone:

(6) So Amnon lay down, and feigned himself sick; and when the king was come to see him, Amnon said to the king, "Let my sister Tamar come, I pray you, and make me two cakes in my sight, that I may eat at her hand." (7) Then David sent home to Tamar, saying, "Go now to your brother Amnon's house, and dress him food." (8) So Tamar went

¹¹ [11] This argument is supported by Yonadav's cold reaction to the death of his "friend" Amnon in the continuation of the story: "And Yonadav, the son of Shim'a, David's brother, answered and said, 'Let not my lord suppose that they have killed all the young men the king's sons; for Amnon only is dead; for by the appointment of Avshalom this has been determined from the day that he forced his sister Tamar. Now therefore let not my lord the king take the thing to his heart, to think that all the king's sons are dead; for Amnon only is dead' " (below, vv. 32-33). This change in Yonadav's attitude toward Amnon is understandable if indeed Amnon veered from the advice that Yonadav had given him.

¹² [12] Indeed, when David sends Tamar to Amnon, he does not mention the matter of the two cakes, but rather says, "Go now to your brother Amnon's house, and dress him food." From here it may be inferred that David did not have felt completely comfortable with Amnon's request, but nevertheless did not refrain from sending Tamar to him.

to her brother Amnon's house; and he was lying down. And she took dough,¹³[13] and kneaded it, and made cakes in his sight, and did bake the cakes. (9) And she took the pan, and poured them out before him; but he refused to eat. And Amnon said, "Cause every man to go out from me." And they went out every man from him. (10) And Amnon said to Tamar, "Bring the food into the chamber that I may eat of your hand." And Tamar took the cakes which she had made and brought them into the chamber to Amnon her brother.

But at this point, Amnon loses his patience. Instead of trying to seduce Tamar, he grabs her by force and presents her with a demand:

(11) And when she had brought them near unto him to eat, he took hold of her, and said to her, "Come lie with me, my sister."

III. NAY, MY BROTHER

Tamar begs her brother not to act on his desire:

(12) And she answered him, "Nay, my brother, do not force me; for no such thing ought to be done in Israel; do not this vile deed. (13) And I, where shall I carry my shame? And as for you, you will be as one of the base men in Israel. Now therefore, I pray you, speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you." (14) But he would not hearken to her voice; but being stronger than she, he forced her, and lay with her.

Tamar's words are directed at two separate levels. On the one hand, she employs emotion:

1. Tamar uses the term "a/" (do not) three times: "Nay (a/), my brother, do not (a/) force me; for no such thing ought to be done in Israel; do not (a/) this vile deed" (v. 12).

13 [13] The commentators understand that "*mashret*" is some kind of a pan.

2. She turns to Amnon with the words "my brother," in order to direct his attention to the familial connection between them.

3. At the end, she adds a term of supplication: "I pray you (*na*), speak to the king."

In addition, Tamar addresses Amnon with simple logic and lists four arguments against the deed:

1. "For no such thing ought to be done in Israel; do not this vile deed." The expression "doing a vile deed in Israel" refers almost always in Scripture to sexual crimes.¹⁴[14] Tamar argues that Amnon is about to do an action that ought not be done.

2. "And I, where shall I carry my shame?" Tamar tries to arouse Amnon's compassion for her state should he rape her. He will cause her "shame" – the result of this vile deed¹⁵[15] - and she will not be able to find a husband.

3. "And as for you, you will be as one of the base men in Israel." Even if the severity of the act does not deter him, the act will harm him as well – he will be considered a base man.

4. Tamar even suggests an alternative: "Now therefore, I pray you, speak unto the king; for he will not withhold me from you." As for the practical significance of this proposal, see above.

14 [14] See, for example, [Bereishit 34:6](#); [Devarim 22:21](#); [Shofetim 20:6,10](#); [Yirmiyahu 29:23](#).

15 [15] "Make me not the reproach of the base" ([Tehillim 39:9](#)); "Remember Your reproach all the day at the hand of the base man" ([Tehillim 74:22](#)). It is possible that this was David's exposition following the death of Naval the Carmelite: "Blessed be the Lord, that has pleaded the cause of my reproach from the hand of Naval" ([I Shmuel 25:39](#)).

But Amnon was unwilling to heed Tamar and her logical arguments:

(14) But he would not hearken to her voice; but being stronger than she, he forced her, and lay with her.

In the next lecture, we shall see that this dreadful deed was only the beginning of Amnon's wickedness.

(Translated by David Strauss)
