

Fundamental Issues in the Study of *Tanakh*
By Rav Amnon Bazak

Shiur #11c: The Sins of Biblical Figures
Part 3 of 4

d. "Anyone who says that David sinned..."

The fourth figure who is defended by R. Yonatan in the discussion in the Gemara (*Shabbat* 55b-56b) is King David. David's greatness and holiness, on the one hand, along with the severity of his actions concerning Bat-Sheva and Uriya, on the other, make this episode the classic test case for our attitude towards the biblical heroes. Owing to the complexity of the discussion, I shall permit myself greater elaboration in this section.

A reading of chapter 11 of *Shmuel* II creates a very negative impression of David's deeds – both in sleeping with Bat-Sheva, wife of Uriya the Hittite, thereby transgressing the prohibition against adultery, and in then sending Uriya to his death at the hands of Ammon. The chapter concludes with the words, "And the thing that David had done was evil in the eyes of God" (verse 27), and immediately afterwards David is chastised by Natan the prophet:

"So says the Lord God of Israel: I appointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Shaul. And I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Yisrael and of Yehuda; if that had been too little, I would have given you as much again. Why have you despised God's command, to do evil in His sight? You have killed Uriya the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon. Now therefore the sword will never depart from your house, for you have despised Me, and have taken the wife of Uriya the Hittite to be your wife. So 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 to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you acted in secrecy, but I will do this thing before all of Israel, and before the sun." (*Shmuel* II 12:7-12)

This episode illustrates our dilemma in all its intensity and complexity. A plain reading of the chapter arouses great perplexity concerning David, the king chosen by God to establish the eternal royal house of Israel. How are we to reconcile God's positive attitude towards His chosen King throughout the grand

sweep of the David narratives, with the straightforward meaning of the verses in chapters 11 and 12 on the other? This question underlies Rabbi Yonatan's words in the continuation of the discussion in the Gemara:

"Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of R. Yonatan: Anyone who says that David sinned is simply mistaken, for it is written, 'And David succeeded in all his ways, and the Lord was with him...' (*Shmuel I* 18:14). Is it possible that he sinned and yet the Divine Presence was with him? [Surely not.] What, then, are we to understand from the words, 'Why have you despised God's command, to do evil in His sight' (*Shmuel II* 12:9)? That he wanted to commit this act, but did not do so." (*Shabbat* 56a)

Rabbi Yonatan argues that it is unthinkable that David would have sinned, for "the Lord was with him." How, then, should we understand the verse? The Gemara proceeds to cite the opinion of another Sage who judged David favorably – Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi – but his opinion is preceded by an interesting comment by Rav:

"Rav said: Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi, who himself was a descendant of the house of David, turns the matter over and offers an interpretation that is favorable towards David."

It is difficult to know with certainty whether Rav's comment is meant as praise or as criticism of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi for trying to judge David favorably as a result of his own lineage that is traced back to the house of David.¹ Either way, Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi takes the most strongly incriminating verse in the speech by Natan the prophet (*Shmuel II* 12:9), "Why have you despised God's command, to do evil in His sight? You have killed Uriya the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon," and interprets it, phrase by phrase, in such a way as to clear David of the most severe aspects of his sin:

"'Why have you despised God's command, to do evil' – Rabbi (i.e., Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi) said: This 'evil' is different from all other 'evils' in the Torah, for in every other place mentioning evil, the text says, 'he did (*va-ya'as*) [evil],' whereas here it says, 'to do (*la'asot*)' – suggesting that he intended to do it, but did not."²

¹ Abravanel writes, in his commentary on our chapter: "Rabbi [Yehuda ha-Nasi] turns the matter over owing to his involvement and the fact that he is descended from David's house, *and not in accordance with the truth.*"

² This argument is difficult to accept, for many times in Tanakh we find the expression "to do (*la'asot*) evil," where the intention is clearly to indicate that the evil is in fact performed. Thus, for example, we find in *Devarim* 9:18 – "And I fell down before the Lord, as on the earlier occasion, forty days and forty nights; I did not eat bread, nor did I drink water, owing to all your sins which you sinned, to do evil in the eyes of God, to provoke Him to anger." See also *Shoftim* 3:12; 4:1; 10:6; 13:1; *Melakhim I* 16:19; 21:20, 25 (Maharsha notes this verse in his discussion of the *sugya*, but does not mention the others); *Melakhim II* 17:17; 21:6; 21:16; *Divrei Ha-yamim* 33:6.

'You have killed Uriya the Hittite with the sword' – You should have submitted him to judgment by the Sanhedrin, but you did not.

'And you have taken (*lakachta*) his wife to be your wife' – You had marriage rights (*likuchin*) concerning her, for as Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani taught in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: Everyone who went out to war for the house of David would write a bill of divorce for his wife...

'And have slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon' – Just as you are not punishable for the sword of the children of Ammon, so you are not punishable for [the death of] Uriya the Hittite. Why is this so? Because he rebelled against the king, saying to him, 'and my lord Yoav, and the servants of my lord, are encamped in the open field.'"

According to Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi, David's two sins are not as severe as we might think. There was no adultery here, since Uriya the Hittite, like every other soldier in David's army who went out to war, had given his wife a bill of divorce. Nor was there any unlawful bloodshed, since Uriya the Hittite was deserving of death for being a rebel against David's monarchy.³ Nevertheless, Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi does attribute two lesser sins to David. One concerns his psychological state – "He intended to do so"; i.e., he wanted to commit the sin, but was prevented from doing so. The other is a procedural matter: "He should have submitted him to judgment by the Sanhedrin" – i.e., the rightful execution of Uriya was not carried out according to the proper legal procedure. In any event, it must be emphasized that even Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi does not argue that so righteous an individual as David could not have sinned, owing to his ability to conquer his desires. He merely argues that God was with him, and prevented him from actually committing the sin.

The argument that "Anyone who went out to war for the house of David gave a bill of divorce to his wife" is a key claim in the *sugya*, and the *Rishonim* debate how it should be understood. Rashi explains that it was a conditional bill of divorce: if the husband was killed in war, or did not return from the battlefield, his wife would be considered divorced retroactively from the time he gave her the bill. This arrangement offered a twofold benefit: first, the wife would be considered divorced and no *yibum* (levirate marriage) would be required if her husband had died childless; and second, if the husband did not return (for

³ Further on, the Gemara discusses the circumstances of his rebellion: "He rebelled against the king, for he said (*Shmuel* II 11:11), 'and my lord Yoav and the servants of my lord are encamped upon the open field.'" The *Rishonim* are divided as to how these words reflect his rebellion. Rashi maintains that the very fact that he refers to Yoav as 'my lord,' while standing before the king, represents a rebellion. According to Rabbenu Meir (Rashi's son-in-law), it is Uriya's refusal to go down to his house, as David had commanded him, that constitutes the rebellion (see *Shabbat* 56a, *Tosafot ad loc.*).

example, if he was taken captive, or was missing) she would be divorced and free to remarry, rather than remaining an *aguna* ('chained' wife).⁴

The Tosafot (*Ketubot* 9b; *Gittin* 74a) argue that when David engaged in relations with Bat-Sheva he could not yet have known whether Uriya would return from the battlefield; thus, Rashi's explanation provides no justification. In fact, their question serves to clarify what Rashi is actually trying to say: his understanding of the sugya is not that Rabbi Yonatan is attempting in any way to justify David's actions; all he says is that ultimately God was with David, as testified to in the text, and he did not actually lie with a married woman. However, this is not meant to minimize the severity of what he did.

The Tosafot disagree with Rashi and maintain, in accordance with the plain meaning of Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani's words, that the bill of divorce was altogether valid, and Bat-Sheva was divorced when David lay with her. The Tosafot do not explain why the prophet nevertheless rebukes David so severely for his actions, but Rashba (*Ketubot* 9b) writes,

"The fact that the prophet rebukes him is because he acted improperly, for the husbands issued the bill of divorce only in order that their wives would not end up as *agunot*, but they trusted that their wives would be faithful to them."

The explanation offered by the Tosafot is problematic for several reasons. Inter alia, it is not clear how David could have sought to send Uriya home in order that he could be with Bat-Sheva, if she was divorced from him at the time. In any event, even according to this understanding, the proposed defense of David is not complete. While David did not transgress the prohibition of adultery in the formal sense, he sinned in the moral sense: he lay with a woman whose husband trusted that she would remain faithful to him, even if at that specific time she was formally divorced from him.

We find, then, that even those Sages who seek to defend David do not seek to clear him of all sin; they merely diminish the severity of his actions, whether by cancelling the sin retroactively (as in Rashi's explanation) or by transferring it from the formal plane to the moral one (as proposed by the Tosafot).⁵

As we have seen, the cornerstone of the approach adopted by Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi and Rabbi Yonatan is the claim that "Anyone who went out to

⁴ The Tosafot contest Rashi's interpretation, citing the Mishna in *Gittin* (73a) where Rabbi Yehuda rules that a woman who receives a conditional divorce is considered "a married woman for all intents and purposes." This being so, the conditional divorce given by Uriya does not mitigate David's sin in any way.

⁵ Rabbi Yaakov Medan expands on this in *David u-Bat Sheva: Ha-Chet, ha-Onesh ve-ha-Tikkun*, Alon Shevut 5762.

war for the house of David wrote a bill of divorce for his wife," and it is therefore important to clarify whether this is an uncontested historical fact.

"Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: Anyone who went out to war for the House of David wrote a writ of divorce for his wife, as it is written (*Shmuel* I 17:18), 'Bring these ten cheeses to the captain of their thousand, and inquire as to your brothers' welfare, and take their token.' What is meant by 'their token'? Rav Yosef taught, 'Such things as are tokens between husband and wife.'"

Thus, Rabbi Yonatan himself presents his teaching as a midrash aggada rather than as an historic fact passed down by tradition.⁶ It is therefore no surprise that there is no consensus among the Talmudic Sages concerning this bill of divorce.

A direct confrontation in this regard is to be found in a passage in *Ketubot* (9a). The Gemara asks: How could David have married Bat-Sheva? After all, a married woman who commits adultery is thereafter forbidden both to her husband and to the adulterer. Two explanations are offered: the first is that David forced himself on Bat-Sheva. Since she was coerced, she was not forbidden to her husband – and therefore, by the same token, was not forbidden afterwards to David. The other explanation offered is that Bat-Sheva was indeed divorced, by virtue of the bill of divorce that David's soldiers would give to their wives. While the second explanation relies on the existence of a bill of divorce, the first explanation ignores it altogether. Not only does it assume that Bat-Sheva retained her status as a married woman, but it increases the severity of David's act, adding the element of forcing himself on her.⁷

The explanation that "he forced himself on her" is somewhat striking, since until now we have understood "*Chazal's* view" to be that David did not sin. Thus we must conclude that not only does the attribution of a sin to David not go against the view of *Chazal*, but on the contrary, his sin is stressed in many of their *midrashim*. The following excerpt from a discussion in *Sanhedrin* (107a) is but one example:

"Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav: A person should not put himself in a situation where he will be tempted, for David, king of Israel, placed himself in temptation – and failed. He said: Master of the universe, why do they say, 'God of Avraham, God of Yitzchak, and God of Yaakov,' but they

⁶ This midrash is rejected out of hand by Abravanel: "How can I accept their claim that the men gave bills of divorce to their wives? For the verse that they bring as proof is far from suggesting this. [Furthermore,] David told Uriya to go to his home that night, and then return [to the battlefield] in the morning, which indicates that there was no divorce [in effect], and their relations would be proper and appropriate."

⁷ It is possible that what *Chazal* mean is not rape in the physical sense of overpowering a woman and forcing oneself on her, but rather refers to the political power of a king who sends for a woman, such that the woman is not free to act as she wishes.

do not say, 'God of David'? [God] said, 'Them I placed in temptation, but I did not place you in temptation.' He said, 'Master of the universe, You tested me and tried me, as it is written: Examine me, O Lord, and try me...' (*Tehillim* 26:2). He said, 'I shall test you, and I shall grant you a special privilege, for I did not make known to them [what sort of test they would face], but I make known to you that I will test you concerning sexual relations...'

Rabba taught: What is the meaning of the verse, 'When I stumble they rejoice, and wretches gather themselves that I have not known, they tear me in pieces without ceasing' (*Tehillim* 35:15)? David said to the Holy One, blessed be He: Master of the universe, it is clear and known to You that if they were to tear my flesh, my blood would not flow. And furthermore, while they discuss the four deaths inflicted by the *beit din* they pause in their study and say to me (tauntingly): David, one who engages in relations with a married woman – what death sentence does he receive? I said to them, One who engages in relations with a married woman dies by strangulation, yet he still has a place in the world to come, but one who publicly shames his neighbor – he has no place in the world to come...

He said: Master of the universe, forgive me this sin in its entirety! [God] said, Your son, Shlomo, is destined to say, in his wisdom, 'Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned? Can one go upon hot coals, and his feet not be burned? So he that goes in to his neighbor's wife – whoever touches her shall not be innocent' (*Mishlei* 6:27-30)...."

Elsewhere we find:

"It is written, 'He shall repay the worth of the lamb fourfold' (*Shmuel* II 12:6): Rabbi Yehuda bar Chanina said, The Holy One, blessed be He, said to David: You committed adultery once; sixteen adulteresses shall come to you. You murdered once; sixteen murdered ones shall come to you, 'fourfold' (*arba'tayim* – meaning,) four times four."⁸

We may therefore summarize our discussion until this point as follows: *Chazal* did not try to clear David of all sin; rather, the prevailing view accords to a considerable extent with the plain reading of the text – i.e., that Bat-Sheva was a married woman. At the same time, there is also a view that partially exonerates David (Rabbi Yehuda ha-Nasi and Rabbi Yonatan) as well as an approach that takes a harsher view of his behavior (the first opinion cited in the Gemara in *Ketubot*).

⁸ Midrash Tehillim (Shochar Tov) *mizmor* 3,4; Buber edition 19a-b; see Buber's comment that the basis for this calculation is unclear.

Just as there is no uniform view amongst *Chazal* concerning David's sin, so there is no uniform view among the medieval commentators. Rashi (Shmuel II 11:15) adopts Rabbi Yonatan's view and adds a surprising element – that the dispatching of Uriya to his death on the battlefield was meant to overcome the halakhic problem of Bat-Sheva being married:

"In order that she would be divorced retroactively, such that he would not have engaged in relations with a married woman. For anyone who went out to war for the house of David would write his wife a conditional bill of divorce, in case he died in battle."

Radak, in contrast, suggests two different approaches:

1. "'She had purified herself of her impurity' – this teaches that he did not lie with her while she was menstrually impure, for she had already purified herself of her impurity, just as the text had previously said 'washed' – to tell us that this washing was for the purposes of purification from menstrual impurity. Thus, the transgression did not involve sexual relations with a woman who was menstrually impure, but rather with a woman who was married.
2. But our Sages taught: Anyone who went out to war for the house of David would write a bill of divorce for his wife, in case he died in battle. Therefore David brought about the death of Uriya, so that she would be retroactively divorced."

According to the first explanation, Bat-Sheva was indeed married, and therefore she immersed herself in order to be purified of her menstrual impurity. Only according to the second approach was Bat-Sheva divorced retroactively after the death of Uriya. Other commentators, such as Ralbag and Rabbi Yosef Kara, understand the verses in accordance with their plain meaning.

However, all those who understand the story in its plain sense must address the question of how we are to explain the unique status occupied by David, if he indeed committed such terrible sins as the plain text suggests. How are we to understand and respond to this story?

Many scholars have suggested an understanding that arises directly from the text itself and that views the crux of the story as a message about the power of repentance. When David hears Natan's rebuke, he utters only two words: "*Chatati la-HaShem*" (I have sinned to God, *Shmuel* II 12:13). Unquestionably, this is a very powerful statement. Other kings, confronted by the rebuke of prophets, responded very differently. Some grew very angry and ordered that the prophet be put to death, as happened in the case of Yerav'am ben Nevat (see *Melakhim* I 13:4) and Achazyahu (see *Melakhim* II 1). Others tried to evade blame – a phenomenon clearly demonstrated in the case of Shaul, who tries

again and again to justify himself rather than accept blame for his actions.⁹ David, in contrast, acknowledges his sin; he does not show anger towards the prophet, nor does he make any attempt to justify himself. His response is appreciated by God Himself, and Natan tells David that his repentance has been effective in the immediate term, saving him from death: "The Lord has commuted your sin; you shall not die."¹⁰ From here we learn that even when a person has committed very serious transgressions, the gates of repentance are not closed; even when the person involved is a king, he still has the potential to acknowledge his sin accept responsibility.

Rabbi Yehuda ben Natan (Riban)¹¹ adopts this line in explaining why David did not lose his kingdom for his sin, while Shaul, whose misdeeds appear less severe, lost his kingdom. Riban also offers (in rhyme!) an interesting perspective¹² on Rabbi Yonatan's approach which views David's soldiers as divorcing their wives before they went to war. He starts by noting that "our Sages judge David favorably, and while their reward [for this endeavor] is great, the text is not to be stripped of its plain meaning." Hence, we must ask how it is that Shaul lost his kingdom for a seemingly lesser transgression, and even Shmuel's pleading on his behalf was ineffective, while David's kingdom will remain with his descendants for posterity, despite a far greater transgression. The reason, as he explains it, is that Shaul, when confronted by the prophet, responds in an indirect manner, misrepresenting his behavior, and suggesting that the nation is guilty while he himself is innocent. David, on the other hand, responds directly, recognizes his sin, and accepts responsibility.¹³

Abravanel, too, is sharply critical of exegetical approaches that try to mitigate the severity of David's deeds in this episode:

"The teachings of our Sages in this matter are midrashic explanations, and I will not address them... How can we propose that 'he sought to commit [the transgression] but did not commit it'? The text testifies explicitly to this evil act in its entirety; if David had not sinned, why would he say, 'I have

⁹ See *Shmuel I* 13:11-12; 15:14-30; 28:15.

¹⁰ David's response here is expanded upon in *Tehillim* 51, which opens with the words, "When Natan the prophet came to him, after he had come in to Bat-Sheva." This chapter deals with asking forgiveness and regretting sin.

¹¹ A son-in-law of Rashi who composed commentaries on various tractates. See Y.N. Epstein, "Perushei ha-Riban u-Perushei Vermiza," *Tarbitz* 4, 5693, pp. 11-24; 153-178, and the appendices pp. 179-192; for a more concise review see E.E. Urbach, *Ba'alei ha-Tosafot* 1, Jerusalem 5746, pp. 38-41.

¹² To be found in *Shu't Chakhmei Provence*, siman 71.

¹³ Riban's explanation that David does not lose his kingdom gives rise to a certain difficulty owing to the fact that a review of the verses shows that even prior to his admission and his repentance, there is no mention of David losing his kingdom. The text states explicitly that David's repentance cancels only the death penalty that would otherwise have awaited him, but nothing is said concerning the continuation of his royal dynasty. Therefore we must find a different explanation for why he and his descendants retain the monarchy, while Shaul loses his. I examine this question in my book *Shmuel II – Malkhut David* (Maggid, 2013).

sinned unto God'? And why would he have engaged in such sincere repentance, saying, 'for I know my wrongdoing, and my sin is before me always' (*Tehillim* 51:5)? Furthermore, the verse that they cite in support of [the approach seeking to exonerate him] – 'And David succeeded in all his ways, and the Lord was with him...' (*Shmuel* I 18:14) comes prior to this episode, such that it does not rule out the possibility of him sinning afterwards. For even if at that time he was prudent, wise, and successful in all his undertakings, and God was with him in whatever he did, then certainly if he did in fact sin, God would be with him since he accepted his punishment and engaged in repentance.

Therefore my thinking cannot accept a minimizing of David's sin, and I shall not deny the simple truth. Likewise, how can I accept their claim that the men gave bills of divorce to their wives? For the verse that they bring as proof is far from suggesting this. [Furthermore,] David told Uriya to go to his home that night, and then return [to the battlefield] in the morning, which indicates that there was no divorce [in effect], and their relations would be proper and appropriate. This is a further reflection of *Chazal's* teaching in the Gemara there that Uriya rebelled against the king, and was deserving of death, for he had said, 'and my lord Yoav' – calling Yoav 'my lord' while standing before the king.

In summary, if the text calls him a sinner and he acknowledges his own sin, then how could anyone make any mistake in believing him? It seems to me better to say that he did indeed sin very gravely, and he acknowledged his sin very profoundly, and returned in complete repentance, and accepted his punishment – and it was for this reason that his sins were atoned for."

Abravanel draws a very clear distinction between *midrash aggada* and "the simple truth" – in other words, the plain meaning of the verses, and he rejects outright the midrashic interpretation as a substitute for the *peshat*. In his view, the greatness of David finds expression in his complete, wholehearted repentance, which brings atonement for his sins.

A different direction in exploring the significance of the story perceives its essential lesson as focusing on David's misdeed, and hence the importance of precautions in the area in which he was led into temptation. The *Rishonim* who adopt this approach offer two possibilities as to the message we should take from the story. Ralbag writes:

"This teaches that a person should not turn to pleasure while his fellow is in distress. We see that Uriya himself did not agree to go home, to lie with his wife, while Yoav and all of Israel were in distress – i.e., encamped on the open field to lay siege to Rabba. And see what happened to David, as a result of the evil of permitting himself pleasures at that time – to the point where he desired Bat-Sheva, even knowing that she was married, and he came in to her and she conceived; and this in turn caused him to sin even

further and to make efforts to have Uriya killed by the sword by the children of Ammon, when he saw that what he had hoped would happen – that Uriya would lie with his wife, such that David's disgrace would be concealed – would not come to pass."¹⁴

In Ralbag's view, the story's message concerns the sense of solidarity and identification with the troubles of the nation: when the nation is in distress, it is not proper to engage in frivolous pleasures – which were the root of David's sin.

Rabbi Yehuda he-Chassid, who also follows the plain understanding of the text, suggests a different message:

"Likewise the stories of Shimshon, David, and Shlomo's sins are recorded, in order to teach us the overwhelming power of love for women, such that the evil inclination was able to overcome these righteous men... And the story of David comes to teach that this greatest of the pious ones, whose entire occupation was for the sake of Heaven, nevertheless stumbled when he saw a woman, although he was nearing old age. How much more so, then, must a young man take care not to look at a woman, and to distance himself from women." (*Sefer Chassidim, siman 619*)

If even King David himself could stumble owing to sexual attraction, then the message to everyone is the extent to which caution must be exercised in this realm. Obviously, the very evidence that such conclusions are reached is dependent on the assumption that David did indeed sin.

We have reviewed some of the *Rishonim* – Radak, Ralbag, R. Yosef Kara, R. Yehuda he-Chassid, and Abravanel – who understand the account on the plain level, and draw different conclusions as to the themes and moral lessons that it conveys. As we have seen, this perspective was not an innovation on the part of the medieval scholars, but rather the continuation of a view prevalent amongst *Chazal* that did not seek to clear David of the sin attributed to him in the text. Hence we conclude that those seeking to address this complex story on the plain level of the text are not deviating from the path of *Chazal* and of the great Jewish scholars of previous generations; on the contrary, they are continuing the central view amongst *Chazal* and the path adopted by many of the medieval commentators.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

¹⁴ From Ralbag's list of 'to'alot' at the end of *Shmuel II* 21, no. 42.