



Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 107a: The Rabbinic “David and Batsheva” Story as Paradigm for Understanding Leaders’ Personal Struggles and Communal Reaction

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This guided text study walks readers through an extended Talmudic passage that retells the story of King David and Batsheva, demonstrating how the Talmud uses the story of David to invite reflection about leaders who abuse their power. Key insights and questions are provided to spark reflection and discussion.

A helpful basis for reflecting on abuses of power in the Jewish community is the biblical episode of King David's treatment of Batsheva and Uriah. II Samuel 12 tells of King David's affair with a married woman, Batsheva, while her spouse Uriah was at war. The text further tells of his shocking directives to his general to place Uriah on the front lines so that he would die at war and David's scandal could be kept a secret. While the Babylonian Talmud in several places defends David from the charges that are so clearly laid out in the Tanakh (see Tractate Shabbat 56a and Avodah Zarah 4b-5a), other sources in the Babylonian Talmud (e.g., Tractate Yoma 22b) emphasize his guilt.

Why do some rabbinic sources exonerate King David while others are open about his scandal? Dr. Richard Kalmin (in *The Sage in Jewish Society of Late Antiquity*, pp. 83-4) suggests that the disparity relates to the positioning of the Palestinian and Babylonian rabbis in their respective societies. Palestinian rabbis, who are dependent upon and enjoy close relationships with Jews who are non-rabbis, seek to rehabilitate David to prevent damage to Judaism's reputation. In contrast, Babylonian rabbis, who are independent of non-rabbis socially, politically and economically, are unconcerned with saving face and have the security to be more forthright about David's big missteps. The irony of this explanation is that, in twenty-first century life, this logic must be reversed: *Today, those who do not directly confront scandal in their midst threaten Judaism's reputation while those who confront it openly reflect the integrity and moral aspirationalism demanded by Judaism itself.*

In this text study, we examine an extended rabbinic passage that not only asserts David's guilt but also constructs an outline of the process that led to his abuse of power as well as the aftermath of his scandal, both personal and communal. I offer guiding questions and ideas for group discussion for each section of this aggadic passage. (Your group does not necessarily need to respond to all of the questions in one session; leaders or participants can choose those that work for your particular context and time frame.)

SCENE 1: ROOT CAUSES

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב לעולם אל יביא אדם עצמו לידי נסיון שהרי דוד מלך ישראל הביא עצמו לידי נסיון ונכשל. אמר לפניו רבונו של עולם מפני מה אומרים א-להי אברהם א-להי יצחק וא-להי יעקב ואין אומרים א-להי דוד? אמר אינהו מינסו לי ואת לא מינסית לי. אמר לפניו רבונו של עולם בחנני ונסני, שנאמר "בחנני ה' ונסני וגו'" (תהילים כו). אמר מינסנא לך ועבידנא מילתא בהדך דלדידהו לא הודעתניהו ואילו אנא קא מודענא לך דמנסנא לך בדבר ערוה.

Rabbi Judah said in the name of Rav: A person should not invite a trial, for David King of Israel did so and stumbled. He said before God, "Master of the Universe, why do people recite 'God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob,' yet they do not recite, 'God of David?'" God responded, "They were tested by Me, but you have not been tested by me." David said before God, "Master of the Universe, test me," as it is written, "Try me, God, and test me," etc. (Psalms 26:2). God responded, "I shall test you, and I will even do you a favor: whereas I did not inform them of the nature of their trials, I am informing you that your trial will be in the realm of promiscuity."

OBSERVATIONS AND QUESTIONS

- In this passage, King David is depicted as wanting to be considered on the level of the Patriarchs, but he does not realize that their status had to be earned by how they endure being tested by God.
- Then David seems sure that he can withstand tests, almost as if he is above human frailty. For example, he confidently asks for his own test. What might be his motivation? How do we want our leaders to view and confront "tests" and challenges in their own lives?
- David's particular request is to be in the category of the Patriarchs by being included in the prayer known as the Shemoneh Esreh, or Amidah. How do you understand this request?

- Tehillim, the biblical book of Psalms, is attributed to King David and is cited in this section and throughout this extended Talmudic passage. The Talmud proposes that a particular line from Psalm 26 references this moment in King David's story. What is the effect of bringing Tehillim into this conversation?

SCENE 2: HEADFIRST AND ALONE

מיד "ויהי לעת הערב ויקם דוד מעל משכבו וגו' (שמואל ב' יא). " אמר רב יהודה שהפך משכבו של לילה למשכבו של יום ונתעלמה ממנו הלכה אבר קטן יש באדם משביעו רעב ומרעיבו שבע. "ויתהלך על גג בית המלך וירא אשה רוחצת מעל הגג והאשה טובת מראה מאד (שם). " בת שבע הוה קא חייפא רישא תותי חלתא. אתא שטן אידמי ליה כצופרתא פתק ביה גירא פתקה לחלתה איגליה וחזייה. מיד "וישלח דוד וידרוש לאשה ויאמר הלא זאת בת שבע בת אליעם אשת אוריה החתי וישלח דוד מלאכים ויקחה ותבא אליו וישכב עמה והיא.

Immediately, "And it was that evening, David got up from his bed (II Samuel 11:2)." Rabbi Judah said, "He had intercourse during the day rather than at night [in hopes of quelling his desires], yet he forgot a key principle that there is a small body part in a man that can satisfy him when he hungers but also leaves him hungry when he is satisfied." "And he walked upon the roof of the king's house, and he saw a woman bathing upon her roof, and the woman was very beautiful. (ibid.)" Batsheva had been bathing behind a screen; the evil inclination took the form of a bird, and David shot at the bird, knocking down the screen. Batsheva was thus revealed, and he saw her. Immediately, "And David sent to inquire after the women, and one said, 'is this not Batsheva daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?' And David sent messengers and took her, and she came to him, and he slept with her, for she had been purified from her tum'ah (ritual impurity). And she returned home. (II Samuel 11:3-4)" And this is what is meant by the verse, "You have tested my heart; you have visited me in the night; you have tried me, and shall find nothing; I am purposed that my mouth shall not transgress. (Psalms 17:3)." David said, "If only a bridle had been in my mouth, so that I would never had issued this challenge!"

OBSERVATIONS AND QUESTIONS

- Rather than running away from his test, King David runs right towards it by engaging in sex with permitted partners during the day; he believes that doing so and "in the light of day"—at a time that is more visible—will keep him from having sex with someone forbidden to him.
- Rather than seeking guidance or help from a support system or a prophet, King David goes it alone.
- In the Talmudic passage, he realizes that this was the test, and he has failed.
- In your experience, when people know that something challenges them, how often do they try to prove to themselves or others that they can overcome it by engaging in it rather than moving away from it? What makes it more likely that they will choose one path over the other?
- A leader who turns to someone for help with a personal failing may fear being judged and diminished in the eyes of that person.⁽¹⁾ To whom can leaders turn when they are feeling challenged by a personal flaw or failing? What makes such outreach more or less possible?

SCENE 3: PANIC AND EXCUSES

דרש רבא מאי דכתיב "למנצח לדוד בה' חסיתי איך תאמר לנפשי נודי הרכם צפור (תהילים יא). "אמר דוד לפני הקב"ה רבש"ע מחול לי על אותו עון שלא יאמרו הר שבכם צפור נדדתו

Rava expounded: What is meant by the verse, 'To the Chief Musician, a Psalm of David. In God I put my trust; how do You say to my soul, Flee as a bird to your mountain' (Psalms 11:1)? David said before God, 'Master of the Universe, forgive me for that sin so that people do not say, 'Your mountain has been put to flight by a bird!'

דרש רבא מאי דכתיב "לך לבדך חטאתי והרע בעיניך עשיתי למען תצדק בדברך תזכה בשפטך (תהילים נא). "אמר דוד לפני הקב"ה גליא וידיעא קמך דאי בעיא למכפייה ליצרי הוה כייפינא אלא אמינא דלא לימרו עבדא זכי למריה.

Rava expounded: What is meant by the verse, "Against You, and only You, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight, that You might be justified when You speak and clear when You judge" (Psalms 51:6)? David said before God, "You know full well that had I wished to suppress my lust, I could have done so, but I thought, let people not say, 'The servant triumphed against his Master.'"

דרש רבא מאי דכתיב "כי אני לצלע נכון ומכאובי נגדי תמיד (תהילים לח). "ראויה היתה בת שבע בת אליעם לדוד מששת ימי בראשית אלא שבאה אליו במכאוב וכן תנא דבי ר' ישמעאל ראויה היתה לדוד בת שבע בת אליעם אלא שאכלה פגה.

Rava expounded: What is meant by the verse, "For I am ready to halt, and my sorrow is continually before me" (Psalms 38:18)? Batsheva daughter of Eliam was predestined for David from the six days of creation, but she came to him with sorrow. And the school of Rabbi Ishmael taught likewise: She was meant for David from the six days of creation, but he enjoyed her before she was ripe.

OBSERVATIONS AND QUESTIONS

- After recognizing his mistake, this section describes the panicky defenses and excuses that David makes: "If people see that I have failed [“a mountain has been moved by a bird”], people will lose faith in my leadership." "I could have succeeded if I had wanted to, but I had my own reasons for making it look like I failed the test." Which aspects of these statements sound familiar to you?
- Rava laments that perhaps there would have been a way for David and Batsheva to end up together if only he had gone through the proper channels. Does this resonate with what you have seen of scandalous behavior and reactions to it—a focus on how things could have ended differently or might have been more defensible if only the proper process had been followed?
- Absent from this treatment of David's sin is Batsheva's perspective. How would a consideration of her perspective have changed this narrative? In our own communal discourse, whom do we put in the center of our discussion of a scandal and how do we do so? Those who cause harm? Those who have been harmed?

SCENE 4: COMMUNAL RESPONSE

דרש רבא מאי דכתיב "ובצלעי שמחו ונאספו ונאספו עלי נכים ולא ידעתי קרעו ולא דמו (תהילים לה). " אמר דוד לפני הקב"ה רבש"ע גלוי וידוע לפניך שאם היו קורעים בשרי לא היה דמי שותת ולא עוד אלא בשעה שהם עוסקין בארבע מיתות ב"ד פוסקין ממשנתן ואומרים לי דוד הבא על אשת איש מיתתו במה? אמרתי להם הבא על אשת איש מיתתו בחנק ויש לו חלק לעולם הבא אבל המלבין פני חבירו ברבים אין לו חלק לעולם הבא.

Rava expounded: What is meant by the verse, "But in my adversity they rejoiced and gathered themselves together; against me, and I knew it not. They did tear me, and would not stop" (Psalms 35:15)? David said before God, "Master of the Universe, You know full well that had they torn my flesh, my blood would not have flowed. Moreover, when they are engaged in studying the four death penalties inflicted by beit din, they interrupt their studies and taunt me, saying, 'David, what is the death penalty for one who sleeps with a married woman?' I respond to them, 'One who commits adultery with a married woman is executed by strangulation but has a portion in the world to come but one who publicly shames another person has no portion in the world to come'"(2).

OBSERVATIONS AND QUESTIONS

- This section moves away from the critique of King David and turns to the critique of his colleagues, depicted here as rabbis. They are presented as responding to his sinful behavior through mockery and humiliation.
- Joking about David's sin treats this as an embarrassing scandal about a public person rather than a concern about what actually transpired. What can we learn as a Jewish community from this implicit critique of making perpetrators into the butt of our jokes?
- In what ways does a communal fascination with scandal interfere with addressing the seriousness of a crime? What are acceptable ways and goals of publicly naming the sins and crimes of those who abuse power? How can we factor in values like (and Jewish law about) constructive use of speech while still forthrightly addressing abuse?

SCENE 5: TELLING THE STORY

דרש ר' דוסתאי דמן בירי למה דוד דומה? לסוחר כותי. אמר דוד לפני הקב"ה רבש"ע... "שניאות מי יבין (תהילים יט)?" אמר ליה שביקי לך. "ומנסתרות נקני (שם) שביקי לך. "גם מזדים חשוך עבדך (שם) שביקי לך. "אל ימשלו בי אז איתם (שם) דלא לישתעו בי רבנן שביקי לך. "ונקייתי מפשע רב" שלא יכתב סרחוני. אמר לו אי אפשר ומה יו"ד שנטלתי משרי עומד וצווח כמה שנים עד שבא יהושע והוספתי לו שנאמר "ויקרא משה להושע בן נון יהושע (במדבר יג). " כל הפרשה כולה על אחת כמה וכמה! "ונקייתי מפשע רב (תהילים יט) אמר לפניו רבש"ע מחול לי על אותן עון כולו. אמר כבר עתיד שלמה בנך לומר בחכמתו "היחתה איש אש בחיקו ובגדיו לא תשרפנה אם יהלך איש על הגחלים ורגליו לא תכונה כן הבא על אשת רעהו לא ינקה כל הנוגע בה (משלי ו). "א"ל כל הכי נטרד ההוא גברא א"ל קבל עליך יסורין קבל עלי..."

... Rabbi Dosetai of Beri expounded: "What is David like? A heathen merchant. David said before God, 'Master of the Universe, Who can understand errors?' (Psalms 19:13). God responded to him, 'These are forgiven.' 'Cleanse me from secret faults. (ibid.)' 'Granted.' 'Keep back Your servant from presumptuous sins' (Psalms 19:14). 'Granted.' 'Let them not have dominion over me; then I shall be upright' (ibid.). 'So that the scholars may not discuss me.' 'Granted.' 'And I shall be innocent from the great transgression' (ibid.). 'So my sins shall not be recorded.'" God replied, 'That is impossible. If the single yod which I removed from Sarai [when she was renamed Sarah] continuously cried out in protest for many years until Joshua came and I added it to his name, as it is written 'And Moses called Hoshea the son of Nun, Yehoshua (Numbers 13:16),' how much more so a complete section!" (3).

"And I shall be innocent from the great transgression' (ibid.). David pleaded before God, 'Master of the Universe, pardon me that sin completely as though it had never been committed.' God replied, 'It is already ordained that your son Solomon will say in his wisdom, 'Can a person make a fire in their bosom and their clothes not be burned? Can one walk upon hot coals and their feet not be burned? Likewise, one who commits adultery with his neighbor's wife; whoever touches her shall not be innocent' (Proverbs 6:27-29). David lamented, 'Must I suffer so much?' God replied, 'Accept your chastisement,' and he accepted it..."

OBSERVATIONS AND QUESTIONS

- God refuses to remove this story from Tanakh, citing that just as the "yud" from the end of "Sarai" the matriarch's name, had to be kept in the Tanakh (in the name of Yehoshua), likewise David's story must be kept in Tanakh. This returns us to the beginning of our passage where David compared himself to the patriarchs. One way of reading God's response here is that if David wishes to be like the patriarchs—and implicitly, like the matriarchs—he is going to have to bear responsibility for his story. Moreover, the story already has a future of its own—David's son, Solomon (credited by the rabbis as author of the biblical book of Proverbs) will make reference to David's sin. Perhaps there is a didactic reason to include this story in Tanakh: people must learn from it.
- In sum, even as the previous section warned us against excessive humiliation or derision, we cannot erase history, and we must continue to tell it.
- In the wake of scandalous abuses of power, the impulse to cover up leaders' misdeeds is powerful. What lessons does this passage convey about the value of being forthright and transparent?
- Finally, looking at this text study as a whole, which insights about personal and communal accountability are most relevant to your community or organization?

CONCLUSION

There is an additional layer to this story. King David *did*, in a sense, actually make it into the Shemoneh Esreh prayer; in fact, it is words from the very chapter in Psalms that discusses David's reflections on his sin with Batsheva (Psalm 51), that open each and every Shemoneh Esreh: **ה': שפתי תפתח ופי יגיד תהלתך**: Lord, open my lips, and let my mouth tell Your praise! In other words, David is in the Shemoneh Esreh—but not where he wanted to be. Moreover, David's poetry also closes every Shemoneh Esreh in that the words **יהיו לרצון אמרי פי והגיון לבי ה' צורי וגואלי** May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You, HaShem, my Rock and my Redeemer" (Psalms 19:15).

Rather than being in the coveted position of being named in a referent for God (e.g., "the God of Abraham"), David's place in the Shemoneh Esreh is in the opening statement of unworthiness to stand before the Creator, a reminder of how he fell short. In this way, he becomes a reminder to each and every one of us that we too face tests that we may fail, that we too experience moments of arrogance in which we believe our own mythologies and get in our own way by trying to prove something rather than ask for help, that we too are prone to look for excuses for our behavior, and that we too must confront our failings and potential weaknesses. Only then can we stand with integrity before our Creator and within our communities, accountable to both.

Endnotes

1. See Dr. Michelle Friedman, "Who's Taking Care of the Rabbi?" in *The Jewish Week*, Oct. 28, 2014.
2. See also Bava Mešia 58b-59b which states that the rabbis discuss David's sin even when studying nega'im and ohalot.
3. See also Vayikra Rabbah, Vayikra 5, where David does not make this request.

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