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DAVID AND BAT-SHEVA: A CLOSE TEXTUAL READING

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More than any other story in the Book of Samuel, the David and Bat-Sheva narrative stands as the turning point in David's life. Prior to David's sin with Bat-Sheva his life was enchanted; subsequent to the sin, it turned dark. His kingdom fell apart, his children rebelled, and God punished him with a plague.

It is not only the turning point, it is also the most persuasive and effective manner of conveying the central theological message of Book of Samuel; namely, that kingship in Israel was a tragic experiment. Indeed, it was an experiment which contributed to the exile of the people from the land.

Yet despite his involvement in this terrible sin, and despite his association with the flawed institution of kingship, at the conclusion of the story, David's character still shines forth as a spiritual leader worthy of the greatness attributed to him by the rabbinic tradition.

I. ABUSE OF POWER

Even a superficial reading of the David and Bat-Sheva encounter clearly demonstrates that David's kingship has become corrupt and that he is using the power of the throne for his own personal whims. The story begins with everyone except David going out to war. The text makes a point of the fact that it was the time of year, when kings would go to battle—*le'eit tzeit hamelakhim*—but David stayed home (2 Samuel 11:1).¹

David's decision not to go to battle is a terrible mistake. In fact, it negates the very reason for his kingship. When the Israelites first ask for a king from Samuel (1 Samuel 8: 20), they state that they need a king to judge over them and to lead them into battle (*ushfatanu malkeinu, veyatza lefaneinu, venilham et mil-*

* Note: This paper was originally delivered at the YCT Rabbinical School Yemei Iyyun in Tanakh, which took place during June-July, 2004, at the Ma'ayanot Yeshiva High School for Girls in Teaneck, NJ.

¹ See, however, 2 Samuel 21:15-17, where David's men explicitly instruct him not to go out into battle lest he be killed.

hamoteinu). Now that David is not leading the people into battle, we wonder whether it is necessary to have a king. And in a story in which David perverts justice, we wonder if David is the most appropriate person to preside in judgment over Israel.

The sin of not going out to war leads David into committing a chain of sins. First, the sense of the text is that David is leading a soft life in Jerusalem; a life of luxury in the palace while his own men are fighting out in the fields. *Vayehi le'et erev, vayakam David me'al mishkavo, vayithalekh al—gag beit hamelekh*, “It was toward the evening and David arose from his slumber and wandered on the roof” (2 Samuel 11:2). While this act of walking on his roof might have been innocent, there is a tone of opulence. After sleeping the afternoon away, the king arises and walks on the roof of his palace from where he spots the beautiful Bat-Sheva bathing.

The words of the verse imply that there is much more present in this act of wandering on his roof than a simple evening stroll. The words for “on the roof” appear twice in this one verse; as *al—gag*, and then, *al—bagag*. These words starkly remind us of the downfall of Saul, who sinned by not killing Agag (1 Samuel 15: 9). As Saul’s sin with Agag signaled the end of his kingdom, so too David’s sin, *al—bagag* will usher in his demise. Moreover, just before being anointed King of Israel, Saul met with Samuel on a roof, *al—bagag* (1 Samuel 9:25). At that point, the reader wondered why the text needed to mention the strange and uneventful meeting on a rooftop. Now the message of that meeting is clear. It was on a rooftop that kingship in Israel began, and it will be on a rooftop that the kingship of Israel will fall.

On the roof, David wanders in a seemingly innocent fashion. The word *vayithalekh*, to wander, reminds us that David is abandoning the great courageous moments of his past. Perhaps David’s finest moment in his rise to power is when he finds Saul approaching him in the city of Kilah (1 Samuel 23). Saul has just destroyed the entire priestly city of Nov because they unwittingly provided help to David. Finding himself in Kilah—a city that he had just rescued from the Philistines—David has a choice: He can remain in his stronghold of Kilah, thus protecting his own men but endangering the innocent inhabitants of the city; or, he can protect them by abandoning his own secure position. At great personal risk, David obeys the word of God and leaves Kilah and, as the text notes, wanders aimlessly: *vayithalkhu ba’asher yithalkhu* (1 Samuel 23:13). In this story, David is a heroic wanderer.

Standing on the rooftop on that fateful evening, however, he has become a destructive wanderer. David’s wandering on the roof leads him to look—even through the oncoming darkness of night—at Bat-Sheva. This leads to David sleeping with Bat-Sheva, bringing back her husband Uriah from battle in order to cover up David’s role in Bat-Sheva’s pregnancy, lying to Uriah, throwing parties with the food and wine of the palace in order to convince Uriah to return to Bat-Sheva, arranging for Uriah’s death in battle, and ultimately, the death of

many innocent soldiers who died alongside Uriah in that intentionally mismanaged campaign.² Furthermore, David justifies all of these sins and says to his general, Yoav, *al yera be'einekbah et badavar hazeh*, "let this matter not seem evil to your eyes." (2 Samuel 11:25). After first sinning with his eyes, David concludes his chain of sins by desiring to justify his actions in the eyes of Yoav.

David's sin with Bat-Sheva is compounded by the fact that some evidence suggests that their physical encounter might have been motivated by politics. Before summoning Bat-Sheva to him, David inquires as to who she is. He is told that she is Bat-Sheva, the daughter of Eliam, and the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Elsewhere we are told that Uriah was one of the thirty-seven *gibborim* of David (2 Samuel 23:39); he was a part of David's inner circle. Another name on that list is Eliam the son of Ahitofel. Thus, Bat-Sheva was married to one of David's key warriors and might have been the daughter of another one, Eliam. Additionally, it is likely that this Ahitofel—perhaps, her grandfather—is the same Ahitofel who is recognized as chief counselor to David.

Throughout the book of Samuel women of the court are constantly sought for political reasons.³ By sinning with Bat-Sheva, it is possible that David is attempting to strengthen his kingdom through another alliance. It is possible that he seeks control over or a partnership with a powerful woman, as earlier he isolates Michal or colludes with Abigail. Yet, this time, as a result, David ends up not only sinning to God, but also against his own most loyal supporters, the people of Israel. He is abusing his power by lying with the wife and daughter of his fiercest warriors and the granddaughter of his chief advisor. He seduces her for his own benefit. He betrays his people for his own power.

First introduced to us a person who "looks good," (*tov ro'i*) and "watches sheep," (*ro'eh tzon*), David now sins through looking and does not watch his own flock. Rather than protecting his sheep, he betrays them.

In retrospect, one notices that David has a habit of seducing the beloved of others. He has seduced the "daughters of Israel", who sing to him, "Saul slays in the thousands, but David slays in the tens of thousands." (1 Samuel 18:7). In his rise to power, he has seduced Abigail from Naval (1 Samuel Chapter 25). He takes Michal, the daughter of Saul, from her husband, Paltiel (2 Samuel 3:15). Finally, David has come to power in large part due to the help of Jonathan, who betrayed his own father on behalf of David. David is a serial seducer. This time, however, it is different. This time the abuse of power is so great and so egregious that it brings about the destruction of his kingdom.

² See Moshe Garsiel, *Immanuel II*, 1973.

³ See for example the stories concerning Michal and Abigail.

II. LOST POTENTIAL

The tragedy of David's sin and the hardship of his closing years grows when contrasted with the enormous potential he demonstrates in his rise to power. One way to see this is through a comparison of the Bat-Sheva story with the Abigail story. If the Bat-Sheva story marks the turning point for the worse in David's life, the Abigail story signals the onset of David's ascension to the throne. As Abigail is married to Naval, a man of great wealth, her subsequent marriage to David will catapult David from the status of a nomadic warrior into a powerful force.⁴

The two stories are in many ways opposites. David could easily have had an adulterous relationship with Abigail. She betrays her husband and secretly runs to David; falling off of her donkey, she beseeches David. Despite the obvious political incentive to sin with Abigail, David refrains from sinning. In the case of Bat-Sheva, it is the opposite. David sins without any obvious incentive.

The text invites us to see a parallel between the two stories. Both begin with David sending out messengers. In the case of Abigail (1 Samuel 25:5), David sends messengers to ask for a share of Naval's shearing; so too with Bat-Sheva, messengers play a prominent role throughout the story. David sends the messengers to bring Bat-Sheva, to bring back Uriah from battle, to kill Uriah in battle, and to tell Yoav that he has acted appropriately. The Bat-Sheva story comes to a climax when God sends His messenger, Natan, to deliver a sharp message. (2 Samuel 12:1.)

In both stories, David deceptively begins his discussion with his adversary by a threefold prayer for peace, *shalom*. To Naval he says (1 Samuel 25:6): "Peace to you, and peace to your family, and peace for everything you own," *ve'atah shalom, ubeitkhah shalom, vekhol asher lekha shalom*. To Uriah, the text relates (2 Samuel 11:7): "David asked about the peace of Yoav, the peace of the people and the peace of the battle," *vayish'al David lishlom Yoav, velishlom ha'am, velishlom hamilhamah*. Of course, in the end, both of these adversaries, whom David was so concerned about, end up dead.

Other details in the stories match as well. David acts with Bat-Sheva in secret, *ki atah asitah vasater*, (2 Samuel 12:12), and Abigail goes to David in secret, *veyoredet beseter* (1 Samuel 25:20). Abigail gets her husband drunk by giving him wine like a king, *kemishteh hamelekh* (1 Samuel 25:36). So too, David gives Uriah to drink from the winery of the king (2 Samuel 11:13). In his anger against Naval, David pursues him with his sword, *vayahgor gam David et harbo*

⁴ Indeed, it is likely that Saul sees David's marriage to Abigail as a political threat, for immediately after their marriage, Saul takes back his daughter Michal from David (1 Samuel 26:1). Apparently, Saul was concerned that David was consolidating too much power through his marriages.

(1 Samuel 25:13). Without fear, David uses his sword to pursue a corrupt enemy. On the other hand, David justifies his actions with Uriah by saying, *kha-zoh vekhazeh tokhal baharev* (2 Samuel 11:25), “Such is the way of the sword to consume.” Ironically he curses himself. The sword which earlier symbolized David’s courage against corruption, now symbolizes his own corruption and downfall. Thus, Natan curses David (2 Samuel 12:10), “The sword will never depart from your house,” *lo tasur herev mibeitkha ad olam*.

The Abigail story represents David’s rise to kingship, as he assumes physical and material power through his marriage to Abigail, the wealthy heiress. More importantly, through Abigail, he gains moral strength as well. By causing him to withhold his sword, Abigail guides David to greatness. He symbolizes strength because he conquers his rage and withholds from attacking Naval. Saul’s rage had led him to wipe out the city of Nov. In contrast, David, with Abigail’s help, does not act upon his rage and is thus worthy to be king.

In an attempt to temper David’s anger, Abigail gives David the following gifts (1 Samuel 25:18): bread (*lehem*), wine (*yayin*), sheep (*tzon*), grain (*kali*), raisins (*tzimukim*), and figs (*develim*). These gifts symbolize the promise of David’s rise to the throne. When Saul was first promised the kingship by Samuel, Samuel offered him a sign (1 Samuel 10:3). Saul too, would receive gifts of bread (*lehem*), wine (*yayin*), and meat (*gedayim*). Later, when David finds an Egyptian man on the road (1 Samuel 30)—who very possibly symbolizes Saul—David offers him a cluster of figs (*pelakh develah*) and raisins (*tzimukim*). Abigail’s gifts to David are a conferral of a blessing. She is telling David that she knows he will be king of Israel.

The contrast with Bat-Sheva could not be greater. She leads him from the heights of Abigail into utter failure. As a result of his encounter with Bat-Sheva, David uses force and innocent men are accidentally killed. All the food and drink that appears in the Bat-Sheva story cannot equal the promise of the food sent by Abigail. Through Bat-Sheva, David loses the grace he gained from Abigail.

III. DAVID, SAUL AND THE PARABLE OF NATAN

The prophet Natan visits David with a stinging message from God. He teaches David this lesson through the didactic technique of a parable. It is through this that the central message of this story is taught. Yet, the parable, and thus the lesson as well, are not easily understood.

The parable of Natan must be read against the backdrop of the intertwined fates of the first two kings of Israel. Saul and David share a common story. Both were selected from obscurity and chosen without explanation to become king of Israel. As part of their kingship, both suffer tremendous personal losses.

At many places in the text, we see a clear parallel between the two lives. For example, right before the death of Saul (1 Samuel 30), the text goes out of its way to describe David in a way that is reminiscent of Saul. David returns from battle to Tziklag and finds that the Amalekites have burned his city and stolen the women and children. With his men about to stone him, David, unsure of what to do, turns to the *efod* and asks if he should pursue the Philistines in battle. This indecisiveness reminds us of Saul who remains under a pomegranate tree asking the *efod* about going to battle, at the same time that his son Jonathan simply attacks the Philistines (1 Samuel 14:2). The early decisiveness of David, as in his battle with Goliath, is now absent. In the ensuing battle, David defeats the Amalekites, but does not kill all of them. He captures the booty of the Amalekites, and takes the best for himself. Saul too, had failed to kill all the Amalekites. Saul too, had taken the booty for himself. David is now repeating the sins of Saul.

In his battle with Amalek, David makes a new law. “Those who went down to battle and those who remain with baggage shall have the same lot,” *kehelek hayored bamilhamah ukehelek hayoshev el hakelim yahdav yahloku.*” (1 Samuel 30:24.) David intends this as a law focused narrowly on splitting the booty of war. But his own words seal his fate. Throughout the narrative, David is famous as the one who goes into battle; he battles Goliath, the Philistines, and Amalek. In contrast, Saul is known for remaining with the baggage. When Samuel wants to anoint him, the text states (1 Samuel 10:22), “Behold, he was hiding amongst the baggage,” *hineh hu nebbah el hakelim.* With his words, David is now declaring that both he (the one who goes down to battle) and Saul (the one who remained with the baggage) have the same fate. We already know Saul’s fate; David’s will be the same.

With this in mind, we can analyze Natan’s parable. All the earlier messengers of chapter 11 give way to the messenger of God, Natan; he alone carries the true message. What is his message?

Prof. Robert Polzin offers a bold reading of this story:⁵ On the surface, Natan’s parable is simple and easily understood (2 Samuel 12:1-6). There were two men in the city, one rich and one poor. The rich man had many cattle. But the poor man had only one ewe (*keves*); the poor man raised this *keves* as though it were his own child, eating with it, drinking with it, and even lying in bed with it. A wanderer came to the rich man presumably seeking food to eat. The rich man did not want to take from his own sheep for the wanderer, so he took the poor man’s sheep and prepared it (*vaya’asehah*) as food for the wanderer. Upon hearing this David cries that this man (*ha’ish ha’oseh zot*) is worthy of death, to which Natan responds that David that is the man (*atah ha’ish*).

When Natan says to David (v.7), *atah ha’ish*, which *ish* is he referring to?

⁵ The ensuing analysis of the parable of Natan is largely borrowed from Robert Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist*, 120-130.

Most commentators presume that David's taking of Bat-Sheva makes him equivalent to the rich man who stole the *keves* of the poor man. David had many wives and yet, he took the wife of Uriah. However, if that indeed were the entire point of the parable then the rich man should have taken the *keves* for himself, and not for the wanderer.

Moreover, in the text the rich man (*ashvir*), the poor man (*rash*), and the wanderer (*helekh*) are all referred to with the prefix *ish* (2 Samuel 12:4). This is especially noteworthy in light of the fact that they have also all previously been referred to without the prefix *ish*.

When Natan tells David, *atah ha'ish*, he means that David has filled the role of all three of these men at different points in his life.

God says (2 Samuel 12:8), "I gave you *neshei adonekha beheikekha*." Like the wayfarer who gets the *keves* from the bosom of the poor man, so too, God gives David wives from the bosom of other men. (This might refer to God taking Abigail from Naval and giving her to David, *vayigof Hashem et Naval*).⁶ God also has transferred the loyalties of the daughters of Israel—and indeed, Saul's own daughter⁷—from Saul and given them over to David (2 Samuel 12:7). God has taken the kingdom from Saul and given it to David.

According to this analysis, then, God parallels the rich man of Natan's parable, Saul the poor man, and David the wanderer. Thus, at first David should be identified with the *helekh* of the parable. Indeed, he has already been referred to in this way in a number of key narratives.⁸

As Natan continues to relay the message of God, David becomes associated with the rich man (*ish ashvir*). In taking Bat-Sheva, David's actions parallel the deeds of the rich man who took the sheep. The text too, has already referred to David as a rich man. The one who will kill Goliath will become a rich man and marry the king's daughter (1 Samuel 17:25), *ya'ashbrenu hamelekh osher gadol ve'et bito yiten lo*. David was the wanderer, but he is now the rich man taking the goods of the poor man.

Finally (2 Samuel 12:11-12), in the future David will become the poor man of the parable (*ish rash*). Earlier, when Saul's servants had tried to convince David to marry Saul's daughter, David had innocently said (1 Samuel 18:23), "But, I am a poor man, *ve'anokhi ish rash*." Now, we see that David's words were prophetic. As the poor man's *keves* was taken, so too, in the future will David's wives be taken by Absalom, and his kingdom by Yeravam, then Ashur, and then Bavel.

This is not only a parable to the life of David, but to Saul as well. Saul too, is a wanderer on the road, whom God makes king over all of Israel.⁹ He too, becomes a rich man taking other people's wives, when he takes Michal from

⁶ 1 Samuel 25:38.

⁷ 1 Samuel 19:13.

⁸ 2 Samuel 11:2; 1 Samuel 23:13.

⁹ 1 Samuel 9:6. *Atah nelkhab sham, ulai yagid lanu et darkeinu asher balakhnu aleha*.

David and gives her to Paltiel ben Laish.¹⁰ And, he too, becomes a poor man. “*Vayikra Hashem et hamamlakhah miyadekha vayitnah lereakha leDavid*” (1 Samuel 28:17). God takes away the kingdom from Saul because he finds another man, a different *ish*. Samuel tells Saul (1 Samuel 13:14), *ve’atah mam-lakhtekha lo takum, bikesh lo Hashem ish kilvavo*. God replaces Saul with another man, and so Saul, who had originally transformed from a wanderer into a rich man (*venehafahta le’ish aber*),¹¹ eventually becomes a poor man.

Ultimately, this is a parable about kingship in Israel. The narrative had given us warnings that kingship can degenerate through abuses by the king. When the people first approach Samuel and ask for a king (1 Samuel 8:16), God allows it, but only after the people are first taught the *mishpat hamelekh*, the protocol of the king. “He will take your sons and place them in his chariots and cavalry, and they will run before his chariot . . . he will take your daughters to be perfumers, cooks, and bakers . . . he will take your servants and maid-servants and your best young men and your donkeys and press them into his service.” Is this not the way that Saul and David have acted? Is this not what the kingdom has become?

It is also a parable about the Children of Israel. At first, the people are like wanderers. God takes from the “poor” nations and gives Canaan to the Jewish people.¹² Then the people are like the rich man; they are rich, but they seek what is not theirs. They want to be like the other nations; they desire a king just like all the other nations. They sin by lusting after other gods. David’s adultery reminds us of the religious adultery of the Israelites. In the end, the Israelites will become poor themselves. God will take from them and give their land to the people of Ashur.

Hannah foretold all this in her introductory prayer to the book (1 Samuel 2:7). Even though men become kings, she says, it is God alone who plays king-maker. God makes rich and poor, *Hashem morish uma’ashir*.

God says to David, you have scorned the word of God, *bazita et devar Hashem* (2 Samuel 12:9). The only other time the root נב appears in this book is when God sends another messenger to Eli (1 Samuel 2:30). “Indeed, I had promised you that your family would walk with me forever (*yithalkhu lefanai*). But now those that scorn me will be cut off (*ubozai yekalu*). David, Saul, and the Children of Israel—having all been promised the kingdom—will share the fate of the house of Eli; they will all be exiled.

IV. DAVID’S REPENTANCE

The root נב, “return,” reappears over and over again throughout this story. At

¹⁰ 1 Samuel 26:1

¹¹ After he is first anointed, 1 Samuel 10:7.

¹² *va’etnah lahem et artzam*, as in Judges 6:9.

its end, the David and Bat-Sheva story teaches about the power and limitations of repentance.

According to the Talmud (*Avodah Zarah*, 4b-5a), God allows David to sin in order to teach us about the power of repentance. David utters two words, *hatati laHashem*, “I have sinned to God,” and seemingly all is forgiven (2 Samuel 12:13). Yet, the limitations of repentance are also evident. David suffers greatly for his sin. His first child with Bat-Sheva dies. His son (by a different wife) Absalom, lies with David’s concubines in “the sight of all Israel,” *le’enei kol Yisrael* (2 Samuel 16:22), a direct fulfillment of the curse of Natan (2 Samuel 12:11). In gaining absolution, David suffers for the rest of his life, as his kingdom never regains its former glory.

The theme of repentance also connects the lives of Saul and David. After Saul sins by not killing Agag, he too, says (1 Samuel 15:24), “*hatati.*” He then begs Samuel (1 Samuel 15:26), “Return with me so that I may bow down to God, *veshuv immi ve’eshtahaveh laHashem.*” Samuel at first rejects Saul’s plea (1 Samuel 15:26), *lo ashuv imakh*, “I shall not return with you,” because (1 Samuel 15:29), “God is not like man who can relent,” *ki lo adam hu le’hinahem*. With these words Samuel is rejecting the concept of repentance. God has issued a decree; His word is final.

Saul beseeches Samuel again, and Samuel relents and returns with Saul, “*Vayashav Shmuel aharei Shaul*” (1 Samuel 15:32). But, soon after, God tells Samuel that he must replace Saul. The repentance is not accepted by God.

Samuel was mistaken that God cannot change His mind. Repentance is always possible; yet, God is not obligated to accept it. The possibility always exists for help from God. As Jonathan says in the chapter preceding Saul’s sin (1 Samuel 14:6), “Perhaps God will save us, for nothing prevents God from saving whether through many or through few, *ulai ya’aseh Hashem lanu, ki ein laHashem matzor lehosbia berav o vime’at.*”

Why does God entirely reject Saul’s repentance, yet partially accept David’s? The worst part of David’s sin was that he tried to cover up his own actions. The text demonstrates this through a peculiar exchange between Yoav and David—an exchange that never actually occurs. In sending David news of Uriah’s death, Yoav anticipates that David will rebuke him for coming too close to the wall, thereby killing the innocent men that died along with Uriah. Yoav predicts that David will say, “Did not Avimelekh die at the hands of a woman by coming too close to a wall?” The way things work out David never mentions Avimelekh. Thus, the reader is left wondering why the narrator includes this unusual interaction in the text (2 Samuel 11:21).

On a basic level, Yoav wants to remind David that another general—Avimelekh—died because he came too close to a wall which had a woman behind it. Avimelekh was killed by a woman on a roof. Yoav subtly warns David that he could lose his whole kingdom on account of a woman. However, even more poignant is another message of Yoav. In the Avimelekh story too,

Avimelekh tries to cover up truth. He tells his armor bearer (Judges 9:53), “Draw your sword and kill, lest they say about me, ‘a woman killed him.’” Yoav shows David that everyone knows the true story of Avimelekh’s death. Avimelekh was killed by a woman, and everyone knows it! David’s sins too, will come out. The truth can never be covered up.

After Natan rebukes him, David finally grasps this central lesson of Avimelekh’s death. The Bat-Sheva story offers many potential excuses for David. He might have tried to cover-up his sin. He could have told Natan that Uriah died by a misfortune of war; or, perhaps his encounter with Bat-Sheva was simply an accident as he just happened to be walking on the roof when she was bathing. Instead, he recognizes the futility of covering up a sin. David simply says, “*hatati laHashem.*”¹³

David’s willingness to admit a mistake contrasts with Saul’s denial of his own sin. When Samuel first confronts Samuel, Saul defensively says (1 Sam.15:13), “I have fulfilled the word of God.” David not only admits the sin, he incorporates the rebuke into his life. David has a child named Natan, which demonstrates that Natan’s advice became a daily reminder for him.¹⁴

When David tries to get Uriah to eat and drink (2 Sam.11:11) Uriah rebukes him: “The Ark of Israel and Judah are staying in huts, and my lord Yoav and the servants of my lord are camping out in the field—shall I then come to my house to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife?” After David repents, when David’s baby becomes sick (2 Sam.12:15), David refuses to eat, only eating again after the baby dies. If David’s child is in pain, how can he eat? David no longer celebrates when his children are in mortal danger.

At the end of chapter twelve, immediately after Solomon is born, David leads his people out to battle. In doing so, he repents for his sin of staying home when his children are in battle. At the very end of the entire story, the text states (2 Sam.12:31), “David returned with all of the people,” “*vayashav David vekhol ha’am.*” Not only did David repent, but through his repentance he taught his people about the power of repentance.

Psalm 51, discussing David’s sin with Bat-Sheva, presents a model of repentance. David publicly admits his sin without any excuses. In 2 Samuel 12:13, David says, “I have sinned to God.” (*hatati laHashem*); in Psalm 51:6, he says, “To you alone did I sin” (*lekha levadkha hatati*). He begs God for forgiveness. David, whose great sin was trying to hide his sin from God, now says (Psalm 51:11), *Haster panekhab mihata’ai*, “hide your face from my sin.”

One can readily identify with David. He is a fearless and pious young hero whom we admire and desire to emulate. Yet, most of us do not identify with

¹³ As suggested by Yehudah Elitzur in *Iyyunim beSefer Shmuel*, edited by B. Z. Lurie (Jerusalem, 1992), volume I, 187.

¹⁴ 2 Samuel 15:14. This point was made to me by Rabbi Jack Riemer in private communication.

that side of him. We probably identify with his other side; the side of a sinner who gets caught, a person who makes embarrassing mistakes: who among us does not sin?

Through David's sin with Bat-Sheva he brings about the downfall of his kingdom. On a national level it is a disaster. The kingdom disintegrates. It continues the steady downward path of the book of Samuel. Eli has two sons who die; Saul has three sons who die; David has four sons who die. The Bat-Sheva encounter is the incident that marks the turn to failure of the house of David.

But despite the failure marked by this story, it is also a story of hope. The Talmud states, "David will be the one who recites the blessing on the cup of wine (*kos shel berakhah*) at the meal that God will one day make for all His most righteous people."¹⁵ David merits this great honor, not because he was perfect, but because he sinned. Even though his sin cannot be absolved, David still returns to God. The punishment is there; the kingdom is forever changed—yet, David still seeks closeness with God. By sinning and returning, David teaches us all about the power of faith, hope, and the ever-present ability to return to God.

¹⁵ *Pesahim* 119b