

A Story of Return and Longing: The Life of King David

Rabbi Adam Stock Spilker, Mount Zion Temple
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This is the story of David, King of Israel, in three acts.

His story is complex and somehow real – a boy shepherd, a musician with healing powers, a poet laureate, a general, a king. His life may feel distant, yet his words, the psalms he wrote, still speak to us. To anyone who has ever sought forgiveness or yearned for anything or anyone, this is a story for you - a sermon in parable.

Act 1 – David, a Shepard Healer

In the book of Samuel, we meet young David. The prophet Samuel is told by God to anoint one of the sons of Jesse who lives in Bethlehem as the future king of Israel. This is all happening while Saul is still king. Trouble and intrigue start from the beginning of David's life.

As Samuel tries to figure out which of the sons of Jesse to anoint, God says: "Pay no attention to his appearance or his stature; ...for I see not as man sees; for man looks only what is visible, but the Eternal looks into the heart." (Sam 16:7).

Soon after David is anointed, we are told that his heart actually is not the only thing people find attractive. One of the attendants in King Saul's court says: "I have seen a son of Jesse ... who is skilled in music; he is a stalwart fellow and a warrior, sensible in speech, and handsome in appearance and the Eternal is with him." (Sam 16:18).

David is brought into King Saul's court by playing beautiful music on his harp, soothing the king's melancholy. Later David comes to Saul's attention for defeating the Philistine giant Goliath with a slingshot. David is made a general for the Israelite kingdom.

Many become loyal followers of David and Saul's suspicion and anxiety are heightened. David flees Saul's vindictive wrath. In another testament to his charisma, David who is loved by many women is loved by Saul's own son Jonathan who should be his rival.

After various battles, Saul is killed by the Philistines and David is made the second king of Israel. After a few years of ruling from the city of Hebron, David moves his capital to Jerusalem in a Washington-like move, a city connected to none of the tribes, and thus secures lasting peace, a new order.

In the many intrigues of David's life, God appears to be more in the background at times, very different from the God we meet in Torah. God is no longer the pillar of fire at night, cloud by day as in Moses' time, but assumes more of a consultative role. In David's day, the prophets and kings have to inquire of God. Punishments seem to be explained more as natural consequences, than in lightning bolts from the heavens. In other words, David seems to be operating in a world more like our own than the days of the patriarchs and matriarchs. And yet, no one gets away with anything. Sins lead to natural negative consequences; abuse of power leads to demise.

And yes David does commit a few sins. But his handling of Bathsheba is only the beginning of David's troubles. Years later, after much agony within David's household, one of his sons Absalom rebels against his father's rule and starts an uprising.

For the second time in his life, David is in flight as the majority of the country stands behind Absalom. But then a window into David's soul at his weakest political moment: When Absalom is killed by David's general, David does not rejoice but is shaken with grief: "He went up to the upper chamber of the gateway and wept, moaning these words as he went: "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you! O Absalom, my son, my son." (2 Sam 19:1).

Throughout his life, David poured out his soul in music, turning his life experience into words. Midrash imagines what it would be like to see King David late at night as he lies with his heavy dreams....

The cool Jerusalem night air swirls peacefully through King David's palace. In his chambers, a harp hangs above David's head as he sleeps. At midnight, the dry air of the Judean Desert gives way to the crisp wind from the North. It blows across the strings and the harp plays on its own. David rises, as he does every night, to spend the hours until dawn composing the Psalms. [cf, Berachot 3b. R. Ashi]

David, "the anointed of the God of Jacob; the sweet singer of Israel" would play the harp and the *Shechinah*, God's presence, would rest upon him.

According to tradition, the strings of David's harp came from the sinew of the ram that Abraham sacrificed in place of his son, the ram which God created at twilight of the 6th day of creation. As if the anguish over a son, over the yearning for a future, for a home for one's legacy, could transfer over the generations.

When David dies, he is weakened in every sense. His life had given him every experience from success and rejoicing to trial and bereavement. At the end of his days, he still wanted something that was not possible. The one thing he wanted, to build the Temple in Jerusalem, a house of Adonai, was denied him by God.

Act 2 –David's sin and his return to God

At the time of year when kings normally go out to battle, the *teshuvat ha-shana* – literally the returning of the New Year, David is hanging out in Jerusalem. Space and time open up for David to do something he may know in his head was not right, but his heart leads him astray. His leisure time allows him to act on his darker passions.

He sees Bathsheba, a married woman, bathing on her rooftop and he longs for her. Bringing her to his palace, he later tries to cover his act of lust by bringing her husband back from the battlefield to lay with his wife. Uriah resists the king's encouragement to visit his wife. Uriah could not experience such pleasure while his fellow soldiers were still in battle. Uriah's goodness infuriates the king who tells his general to put Uriah in the most dangerous battlefield and Uriah is thus killed.

Bathsheba becomes King David's wife. The son from their union is born. Then Nathan, the prophet, comes to David with a parable of two men, one rich, the other poor and the rich man takes the poor man's lamb. David's anger is kindled against the rich man and

says: 'As the LORD lives, the man that has done this deserves to die; and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.'

Nathan responds in words that cut to core of David's being: "That man is you." From this moment on, life becomes difficult for David. His life is spared, but immediately, his and Bathsheba's son becomes sick. For seven days, David laments, prays, and contritely speaks of his *teshuvah*, his desire to return to God. We are witnesses to David's humanity and angst in these dark moments.

Their son dies. David arises from his mourning and returns to life, a shadow of his former self. Years later, when his son Absalom rebels against him, he would have done anything to brought him back home.

A contemporary parable.

The story is recorded in a little book, The Language of Faith, by Robert Dewey. A man and a boy, in a lonely vigil, share a seat on a train ride to Smithville. The man first notices the boy when he is coming down the aisle and, when the train gives a great lurch, he finds himself flung into an unoccupied aisle seat next to the boy. Surprise cannot hide the anxiety on the boy's face.

"How old is the boy?" the man asks himself. 'Is he seventeen or eighteen? What could worry someone so young?"

The man thinks: "The look on the boy's face is not easy to explain. Is it shame or guilt? Whatever it is the boy's tension is obvious. He pays no attention to any passerby"

The man wonders if the boy is looking outside but he peers out the window and sees nothing. The man tries to forget the boy by opening up a magazine but looks up to see the boy's head drop dejectedly against the window. He notices that the hand against the window is clenched into a fist. The man feels sure the boy is fighting form crying.

The man begins to read and the boy sits quietly. Every now and then the boy steals a look at the man instead of peering out the window.

Finally, the boy asks the man if he knows what time it is and when the train will get to Smithville. The man gives him the time, but he does not know the arrival time in Smithville. "That's where you're headed?" he asks the boy. "Yes," the boy replies.

"It's a very small town, isn't it," replies the man. "I didn't realize the train stopped there."

"It doesn't usually, but they said they would stop for me," says the boy.

"You live there do you?" said the man. "Yes, that is, I used to." "Going back then?" "Yes, that is, I think so...maybe?" The questions turn the boy back to the window. It is quite a while before he speaks again. When he does, it is to tell the story of his life.

Four years ago, he had done something so wrong that he ran away from home. He couldn't face his father, and he had left without telling anyone. Since then, he had worked here and there, but never for long in one place. He had learned about the pain in life and he had often been without money. Sometimes he was very sick, usually very lonely, and once in a while very close to real trouble.

Finally, he had decided to go home to his father's house. For a while that is all the boy says. The man doesn't press him with questions, but finally he asked just one. "Does your father know you're coming?" "Yes," replies the boy. "Then he will be there to meet you, I imagine."

"Maybe, I don't know." Silence again...and a long look out the window...then the rest of the story. "I don't know if he wants be back after what I did. I'm not sure he can ever forgive me."

He has never known where I was all this time, and I've never written to him, except for a letter I wrote three days ago in which I said I would be coming home. I know how much I hurt him...he must have been very hurt."

"In the letter I said I would be coming home if he wanted me to. There's a tree a few hundred feet beside the little station in Smithville. We used to climb it all of the time...my older brother and me. In the letter, I told my dad to put a sign on the tree if he wanted me to get off the train and come home. I told him I'd look for a white rag on one of the branches that hangs over the fence where the train passes. So, if there's a rag on the tree, I'll get off. If there isn't, I'll ride to somewhere else. I don't know where."

The train rushes on through the night and once again the conversation wanes. A kind of silent companionship has developed between the man and boy; both are now waiting for Smithville. Suddenly, the boy turns from the window and speaks with such intensity that it takes the man by surprise. "Will you look for me? I'm sort of scared. All of a sudden I don't know what to expect." "Sure. I'll be glad to," the man replies.

They change seats. Shortly after the man had begun to peer into the darkness, the conductor comes through announcing, "Smithville! Next Stop!" The boy makes no move. He says nothing. He merely drops his head into his hands waiting.

The man peers into the darkness. Then he sees it. He shouts so loudly that everyone in the car can hear him. "Son! The tree is covered with rags!"

* * *

Teshuvah is an act of return, the promise of new life, the hope that our actions do not have to dictate our lives forever, that renewal is possible. Home becomes the symbol of desire and return.

There are still consequences to our actions. David and Bathsheba's son dies. Nothing could be more horrifying. *Teshuvah* doesn't change what happened. *Teshuvah* allows us to not see those consequences - as horrific as they may be - as dead ends.

Bathsheba and David have another son. His name is Solomon. He will build the House of God, the Temple in Jerusalem.

Act 3 – David's angst and what he still needs most of all

In many psalms, David's life echoes in his words. In Psalm 27, the psalm of *teshuvah* that we recite in preparation for these days of awe, David speaks with longing:

אַחַת | שְׂאֵלְתִי מֵאֵת־יְהוָה אוֹתָהּ אֲבַקֵּשׁ
שְׁבֹתִי בְּבֵית־יְהוָה כָּל־יְמֵי חַיֵּי לַחַיּוֹת בְּנֵעַם־יְהוָה וּלְבַקֵּר בְּהֵיכָלֹ

*One thing have I desired of Adonai that I will seek after;
That I may dwell in God's house all the days of my life;*

That desire for God's house, the hope for return, for reconciliation, is at the heart of Psalm 27. In whatever ways our own emotions are now tied to David's, in whatever ways our heart yearns for something we seek but cannot attain, in whatever ways our lives have been changed by some event and yet we long for return, we tonight are David.

Said Rabbi Yudan in the name of Rabbi Judah, "Whatever David says in his book [of psalms] pertains to himself, to all Israel, and to all times." (*Midrash Tehillim* to Ps. 18:1)

One person who understood the power of psalms was Anatoly Natan Sharansky. He spent nearly nine years of deprivation and suffering as a prisoner of Zion in Soviet prisons and labor camps. He kept a copy of Psalms with him through all the appalling misery and anguish. While he was still imprisoned his wife Avital accepted an honorary doctorate from Hebrew University on his behalf. She told the audience: "Anatoly has been educated to his Jewishness in a lonely cell in Chistopol prison where, locked along with the Psalms of David, he found expression for his innermost feelings in the outpouring of the king of Israel thousands of years ago."

Returning home in actuality or in one's heart permeates the psalms. David sought home, that feeling of return to favor. If one were to have met David and ask him about his life, he would not have spoken about his childhood shepherding the flock, his killing Goliath against all odds, his soothing of King Saul's soul by playing the harp. Most likely he would speak about what woke him at night, his desire to build the Temple, to make right his relationship with his parent in heaven, his longing for a place for his relationship with his sons.

In psalm 27, David imagines himself in a temporary sukkah and he longs for a house of cedar. Throughout the psalm, he moves between fragility and security echoing his life.

Hear now David's psalm 27:

Adonai is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?
Adonai is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?
When the wicked, my enemies and my foes,
came upon me to devour me, they stumbled and fell....
Though a host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear;
though war should rise up against me, even then will I be confident.

One thing have I desired of Adonai that I will seek after;
That I may dwell in God's house all the days of my life;
To behold the beauty and to inquire in God's dwelling-place.....
Therefore, I will offer in God's sukkot sacrifices of joy;
I will sing and I will make melody to Adonai.
Hear, Adonai, when I cry with my voice;
Be gracious to me and answer me.
Of You my heart has said: Seek my face.

Adonai, I seek Your face.
Hide not Your face from me; put not Your servant away in anger.
You have been my help, do not abandon me,
Do not forsake me, O God of my salvation.
Even if my father and my mother forsake me,
Adonai will take me in.
Teach me Your way, Adonai,
and lead me in an even path because of my enemies....
Wait for Adonai; be of good courage and God will strengthen your heart.
Wait for Adonai.
Translated by Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub

David wanted to come home, to see the tree full of rags. He moved past a grave sin and found a way to return to life. He could not build God's house, but his son did. We may not get everything we seek, but we can find new paths forward, and find comfort in the words of understanding that echo across the ages:

אחת | שאלתי מאת־יהוה אותה אבקש ...

*One thing have I desired of Adonai that I will seek after;
That I may dwell in God's house all the days of my life;*

May David's words reach our own hearts, our own desires for *teshuvah*, of return to relationship, to deeper connection with the people in our lives, to God, to home.

Ken yihi ratzon.