

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter V: Chavei Sarah (Gen. 23:1-25:18)

Essay 10: The downfall of Adonijah

The Haftorah for Chavei Sarah (I Kings 1:1–31 in the Ashkenazi and Sephardi traditions, and I Kings 1:1–34 in the Italian tradition) discusses the struggle for the succession to the throne. The Haftorah begins by explaining that when King David was elderly, he felt cold in his bed regardless of how many covers were added. His servants found a beautiful woman, Abishag of the village of Shunem, to lie in bed with him and provide warmth, though he did not have relations with her. (I Kings 1:1–4).¹

פסוק: וְאֲדֹנִיָּה בֶן־חַגִּית מִתְנַשֵּׂא לֵאמֹר אֲנִי אֶמְלֹךְ. קִשָּׁה: וְכִי לֹא הָיָה יוֹדֵעַ אֲדֹנִיָּהוּ שְׂעֵדֵיין דְּדוֹד קַיִים וְאִין מַלְכוּת נוֹגַעַת בְּחֻבְרָתָהּ, וְעוֹד מֵהוּ לֵאמֹר וְכִי? וְעוֹד, וְלֹא־עֲצָבוּ אֲבִיו וְכוּ', וְהֵלֵא חוֹשֵׁף שְׁבִטוֹ שׁוֹנָא בְּנוֹ? וְאִמְרִינָן בְּמִדְרַשׁ מְשָׁלִי, וְכִי יֵשׁ אָדָם שׁוֹנָא בְּנוֹ, אֲלֵא מִתּוֹךְ שְׂאִין מוֹכִיחוֹ עַל הַתּוֹרָה וְהַתְּכַמָּה וְדַרְךְ אֲרִיץ—עֵתִיד לְשִׁנּוֹאתוֹ. וְאִיךָ אֲפָשֶׁר שְׂדוֹד לֹא הוֹכִיחוֹ, וְמָה עָנָן וְאוֹתוֹ יִלְדָה וְכִי וְגַם הוּא טוֹב־תּוֹאֵר וְכִי?

There are **verse[s]** regarding King David’s son, Adonijah: **“Now Adonijah son of Haggith went about exalting himself, saying, ‘I will be king!’** He provided himself with chariots and horses, and an escort of fifty runners. His father had not ever scolded him: ‘Why did you do that?’ He was very handsome, and he was the one born after Absalom.” (I Kings 1:5–6).² There is a **question: didn’t Adonijah know that David still lived and that “one sovereignty does not overlap with the next”** (Berachot 48b), **and further, what is this “saying ‘I will be king!’”** **Further, “his father had not ever scolded him etc.,” but isn’t it true that “he who spares the rod hates his son”** (Prov. 13:24)? **As it says in a Midrash for Proverbs (Yalkut Shimoni 950:12), “The reason a man hates his son is because he does not reprove him with regard to Torah and wisdom and proper behavior—[the father’s] future is to hate him (i.e., because the child will grow up to be ill-behaved).” How is it possible that David didn’t reprove him, and what is the connection to the verse saying “he was the one born after Absalom” and that “he was very handsome”?**

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¹ Rashi explains that a virgin produces a lot of body heat, and thus King David decided not to marry her, to preserve her virginity. Abarbanel states that another reason was that King David did not marry her was that he already had the maximum number of wives allowed to a king (which the Mishnah in Sanhedrin 21a sets at 18).

² Adonijah was the fourth-born son, but this incident occurred after the deaths of first-born Amnon and third-born Absalom. Little is known about second-born Chileab, who was either also dead or otherwise not considered a candidate for the throne.

וּנְרָאָה לֹא מֵרָאָה שְׂאֲדוֹנְיָהוּ לֹא מִלֶּךְ מִמֶּשׁ, אֲלֵא הֵיךָ מִתְפָּאֵר לֵאמֹר אֲנִי רְאוּי לְמִלּוּךְ אַחֵר מִיַּתְּ דָּוִד, אֲבָל עֲתָה לֹא הֵיךָ מוֹלֵךְ. וְנִהְיָ דִּיּוּק מִלֵּת לֵאמֹר, שֶׁהֵיךָ אֹמֵר, וְלֹא הֵיךָ עוֹשֶׂה שׁוּם מַעֲשֶׂה. וְאִין הֵכִי נִמְי שְׂדוּד לְמִדּוֹ תוֹרָה וְיִסְרוּ לְמַעַן יִהְיֶה יָרָא אֶת ה', וְיִשְׁמֹר מִצְוֹת ה' בְּכָל לְבוֹ וּבְכָל נַפְשׁוֹ, וְהוּא כֵּן עָשָׂה, וּמִשׁוּם הֵכִי לֹא מִצָּא עוֹל לְהוֹכִיחוֹ, לְמָה עָשָׂה הַדְּבָר הַרְעָה הַזֶּה?

We can say that Adonijah did not exactly rule; rather he boasted that, “I am fit to rule after the death of David,” but he was not ruling at the time. This is the precise meaning of the word “saying,” that he was asserting that he was only talking, but not acting. In fact, David taught him Torah and disciplined him so that he would have a fear of G-d, and observe the commandments of G-d with all his heart and with all his soul, and [Adonijah] did this, and because of this [David] did not find a wrong for which to reprove him, “Why did you do this bad thing”?

וְנִהְיָ וְלֹא-עֲצָבוּ אָבִיו וְכוּ' לֵאמֹר, מִדּוּעַ כָּכָה עָשִׂיתָ, מִפְּנֵי שְׂאָף מִנְעוּרָיו הֵיךָ יָרָא אֶת ה'. וּכְבָר פָּסֵק הַרְמַבָּ"ם ז"ל בְּהַלְכוֹת מְלָכִים, שֶׁהַמְּלָכוֹת נִיתְּנָת בִּירוּשָׁה לְאוֹתוֹ הַבֵּן שְׂמוּפְלֵג בְּיָרְאָת ה', לֹא הַמוּפְלֵג בְּחֻקָּהָ. וְלָכֵן אָמַר הַתּוֹב, וְגַם הוּא טוֹב-תּוֹאֵר מְאֹד, כְּלוּמַר אֵף עַל פִּי שֶׁהוּא טוֹב-תּוֹאֵר וְשְׂאוֹתוֹ יִלְדָה וְכוּ', עִם כָּל זֶה הוּא יָרָא אֶת ה'. וְהִרְאָה שֶׁלֹּא-עֲצָבוּ אָבִיו וְכוּ', וּמִשׁוּם הֵכִי הֵיךָ חוֹשֵׁב בְּדַעְתּוֹ שְׂתַגִּיעַ לוֹ יְרוּשָׁת הַמְּלוּכָה.

This is why “his father had not ever scolded him: ‘Why did you do that?,’ ” because even from his youth he was G-d-fearing. The Rambam, of blessed memory, has already ruled in the Mishneh Torah, Sefer Shoftim, Laws of Kings and Wars 1:7, that the kingship is given as an inheritance to whichever son is distinguished in his fear of G-d, even if not distinguished in wisdom. Therefore, Scripture says [Adonijah] was very handsome, as if to say that even though he was handsome (which could lead one to sinful behavior) and even though he was born [after Absalom] (so that he would not ordinarily have had any hopes of becoming king), he was nevertheless also G-d-fearing. The proof is that “his father had not . . . scolded him,” and because of this he was thinking that the inheritance of the kingship would come to him.

וְנִתְּן הַנְּבִיאָה אָמַר לְבַת-שִׁבְעָה, הֲלוֹא שָׁמַעְתָּ כִּי מֶלֶךְ אֲדוֹנְיָהוּ בֶן-שִׁבְעָתָה. וְקִשְׁשָׁה וְהִלָּא עֲדִיין לֹא מִלֶּךְ, רַק הֵיךָ מִתְנַשֵּׂא. וְעוֹד, כְּשִׁבְעָה אֲצֵל דָּוִד, אָמַר לוֹ וַיִּנְבַּח וְכוּ'. וַיִּקְרָא לְכָל-בְּנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְכוּ'. וַיֹּאמְרוּ יְחִי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲדוֹנְיָהוּ. וְלֹא מִצָּאנוּ שִׁיֵּאמְרוּ זֶה.

Nathan the prophet said to Bathsheba, “You must have heard that Adonijah son of Haggith has assumed the kingship without the knowledge of our lord David” (I Kings 1:11). The difficulty of the verse is that [Adonijah] was not yet ruling, but only exalting himself. Further, when [Nathan] came to David, he told him, “O lord king, you must have said, ‘Adonijah shall succeed me as king and he shall sit upon my throne.’ For he has gone down today and he has prepared a sacrificial feast of a great many oxen, fatlings, and sheep. He invited all the king’s sons and the army officers and Abiathar the priest. At this very moment they are eating and drinking with him, and they are saying, ‘Long live King Adonijah!’ ” (I Kings 1:25). But we don’t find in Scripture that they actually said this!

וגיש לומר שסמך עצמו על האי דאמרינו בירושלמי, שמופתר לומר לשון הרע על בעלי המחלוקת, ומשום הכי נתן הנביא אמר עליו לשון הרע. ולבסוף, כשחלה שלמה, אמר על אדוניו, אם יהיה לבן-סיל, לא יפל משערתו ארצה, ואם-רעה תמצא-בו נמת. ורבים מקשים: למה אמר לבן-סיל, ולא אמר בן-סיל, ועוד מהו אם-רעה תמצא וכו'.

It can be said that [Nathan] relied himself on what is said in the Jerusalem Talmud (Pe'ah 4b), that it is permissible to speak poorly about people engaging in dispute, and because of this the prophet Nathan spoke poorly about [Adonijah]. But in the end, when Solomon ruled, he said regarding Adonijah, “If he will be like an honorable man, not a hair of his head shall fall to the ground; but if he is caught in any evil offense, he shall die” (I Kings 1:52). Many ask why he said, “like an honorable man,” instead of, “an honorable man;” and further what is this, “if he is caught etc.”?

וגיש לומר שכך אמר שלמה, אתה אמרת שלא היתה פונתך לחלוק על המלכות. רק הית סובר שפניי שאתה ירא טא, המלכות נוגעת לך. לכן, אם תהיה כל ימיך לבן-סיל—ירא ה' בכל לבבך, לאותו בן-סיל שחשבת בעצמך להיות, פדאי לירש המלוכה—אז אומר שלא חלקת על מלכות בית דוד ואין אתה חייב מיתה. אבל אם אמצא בך רעה, איגלאי מילתא שאין בך יראת ה', ובנדאי שאתה חלקת על מלכות בית דוד, ואתה חייב מיתה.

It can be said that Solomon meant, “You said that it was not your intent to create division regarding the kingship. Rather, you were giving your opinion that because you have a fear of sin, the kingship would be relevant to you. Therefore, if your entire life you will be like an honorable man—fearing G-d with all your heart, like the same honorable man you considered yourself to be, i.e., worthy to inherit the monarchy—then I will say that you didn't create division in the kingdom of the House of David and you are not deserving death. But if I find within you any evil offense, then the matter will be revealed that you do not have the fear of G-d within you, and certainly in that case, if you create division in the kingdom of the House of David, you will be deserving death.

Adonijah later came to Bathsheba and professed to accept the kingship of Solomon, but at the same time, he requested that he be given as a wife Abishag the Shunamite, the concubine with whom King David had not been intimate. Bathsheba agreed that she would relay the request to Solomon. (I Kings 2:13–18). When she did, Solomon recognized that this was an act of subterfuge on Adonijah's part, for taking possession of a king's concubines was a way of establishing a claim upon the throne, as Absalom had done when he led a coup against King David (II Sam. 16:22).

וכשבאת בת-שבע אצל שלמה, אמר לה, פה יעשה-לי אלהים וכה יוסר, כי בנפשו דבר אדניו את-הדבר הזה. ועתה, סיי ה', אשר הכיניני וישיבני עלי-פסא דוד אבי, ואשר עשה-לי בית, באשר דבר, כי היום יומת אדניו. בנפשו דבר הדבר הזה, דאיגלאי מילתא למפרע שחלק על מלכות בית דוד וחיב מיתה על מה שעשה מתחלה.

When Bathsheba came to Solomon, he said to her, “So may G-d do to me and even more, for Adonijah broached this matter at the cost of his life. Now, as the L-rd lives, Who has established me and set me on the throne of my father David, and Who has provided me

with a [royal] house, as He promised, Adonijah shall be put to death this very day!” (I Kings 2:23–24). “**Broached this matter at the cost of his life,**” means that **the matter was retroactively revealed that he created division in the kingdom of the House of David and is deserving death because of what he did initially,** i.e., when he was exalting himself and saying he would be king, it really was with evil intent.

ועוד, סײה, כי בן מנת הוא עתה מסדש, שרוצה לתזור ולתלוק על המלכות, שהרי שואל נגד הדין ונגד התורה. דאמרין בפרק ב' דסנהדרין: אבישג השונמית מותרת לשלמה ואסורה לאדונייהו. מותרת לשלמה, דמלך היתה, ומלך משתמש בשרביטו של מלך. ואסורה לאדונייהו, דהדיוט הוא ואין משתמשין בשרביטו של מלך. מדכתיב, שום תשים עליך מלך.

Furthermore, the verse says, “**as the L-rd lives,**” because [Adonijah] is deserving death now, for he again wants to return and dispute the kingship, for here he petitions in opposition to the law and in opposition to the Torah. As it says in the second chapter of Sanhedrin [22a, quoting the Gemara]: “Rav Yaakov says that Rabbi Yochanan says: **Abishag the Shunamite³ was permitted to Solomon but forbidden to Adonijah. She was permitted to Solomon, as he was a king, and a king may use the scepter of a king.** (Abishag’s status was similar to that of the king’s scepter, as she had been designated to serve King David.) However, **she was forbidden to Adonijah, as he was an ordinary person, not a king.**” [An ordinary person] may not use the king’s scepter, as it says in Sanhedrin 22a [quoting the Mishnah], “One may not ride on his horse, and one may not sit on his throne, and one may not use his scepter, and one may not see him when he is having his hair cut, nor when he is naked, nor when he is in the bathhouse. **As it is stated: ‘You shall set a king over yourself’** (Deut. 17:15), i.e., ensure that his fear should be upon you.” As these actions would lessen one’s fear of and reverence for the king, they are forbidden.

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³ Most printed editions and manuscripts omit the word “Shunamite.” Munich cod. Hebr. 95 is the only version that has the word.