

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter XXVI: Shemini (Lev. 9:1–11:47)

Essay 9. David's relinquishment of honor

The Haftorah, II Samuel 6:1–7:17, tells how David brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, and how he celebrated by dancing.

פסוק "מה-נכבד היום" נכו' "ויאמר דוד אל-מיכל לפני ה' אשר בחר-בי מאביה ומפל-ביתו" נכו'. ואמרו במדרש שפסח ב' ומאס בבית אביה עכ"ל.

There are **verse[s]**: “Then David went home to bless his household; and Michal daughter of Saul came out to meet David and said, ‘**How** the king of Israel **has distinguished himself today**—exposing himself in the sight of the slavegirls of his subjects, as one of the riffraff might expose himself!’ **David answered Michal, ‘It was before the L-rd who chose me instead of your father or anyone from his house** and appointed me ruler over the L-rd’s people Israel! I will dance before the L-rd and dishonor myself even more, and be low in my eyes; but among the slavegirls that you speak of I will be honored’ ” (II Sam. 6:20–22). **They say in a midrash, “Who has chosen me and rejected the house of your father”** (Num. Rabbah 4:20).

וקשה מה צורך הנה פאן לדוד להלבין פנים כי מאס בבית אביה, אם סוף סוף היא נתכוננה לטובה שמלך שמל על כבודו אין כבודו מחול. ועוד מה רצה לומר "ונקלתי עוד מזאת והייתי שפל" נכו' דמהו "עוד"?

A difficulty is what need was there for David to embarrass [her] because [G-d] rejected the house of her father, if the bottom line is that she intended good, for “a king who relinquishes the honor due him, his honor is not relinquished.”¹ That is, a king has no right to relinquish his honor, so maybe she was just trying to ensure he did the right thing. **Further, what did he mean when he said, “I will dance before the L-rd and dishonor myself even more, and be low,” for what is this “even more”?** I.e., if he excused his behavior by saying he did it for G-d, then he didn’t think he had dishonored himself, so why would he say “even more”?

* English translation: Copyright © 2021 by Charles S. Stein.

¹ Ketubot 17a; Sotah 41b; Kiddushin 32b; Sanhedrin 19b.

וְנִשׁ לֹאמֵר דְּאָמְרוּ רַז"ל מִפְּנֵי מָה לֹא נִמְשָׁכָה מַלְכוּת בֵּית שְׂאֹוֹל מִפְּנֵי שְׂלֹא הָיָה בָּהּ שׁוּם דּוֹפִי, וְעוֹד אָמְרוּ אִין מַעֲמִידִין פְּרָנָס עַל הַצִּיבוֹר אֶלֶּא אִם כֵּן קוֹפָה שְׂל שְׂרָצִים תְּלוּיָה לֹו מֵאֲחֲרָיו. וְלָכֵן אָמַר לָהּ דָּוִד אֲנִי מַעֲרָכִי שְׂפֵל אֲנִי וְקוֹפָה שְׂל שְׂרָצִים תְּלוּיָה מֵאֲחֹרַי, וְהִ' בַּחֵר בֵּי מִפְּנֵי כֶּד וּמֵאִס בְּבֵית אָבִיךָ מִפְּנֵי שְׂלֹא הָיָה בּוֹ שׁוּם דּוֹפִי. אִם כֵּן צָרִיךְ אֲנִי לְהַשְׁפִּיל עֲצָמֵי לִפְנֵי ה' כִּי לִפִּי הָאָמַת "וְנִקְלַתִּי עוֹד מִזֹּאת" יֵשׁ לִי שְׂפֵלוֹת בְּעֲצָמֵי יוֹתֵר מִזֶּה, שְׂקוֹפָה שְׂל שְׂרָצִים וְכו'.

We can say that the rabbis of blessed memory said, as recorded in Yoma 22b: “Rav Yehuda said Shmuel said: Why did the kingship of the house of Saul not continue? Because there was no flaw [in his ancestry; he was of impeccable lineage].” Also, they said there: “As Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak: One appoints a leader over the community only if he has a box full of creeping animals hanging behind him [i.e., if there is something inappropriate in his ancestry], so that if he exhibits a haughty attitude toward the community, one can say to him: Turn [and look] behind you [and be reminded of your humble roots].” This is why David’s kingdom lasted while Saul’s did not, as David descended from a family with problematic ancestry, namely Tamar and Ruth the Moabite.

Therefore, David said to her, I have a low value, I and my box of creeping animals hanging behind me. G-d chose me because of that, and rejected the house of your father because he had no flaw. If so, I need to lower myself before G-d, because according to the truth, “I will dishonor myself even more,” I have a humiliation myself more than this celebration of dancing, as the box of creeping animals is behind me, I have a problematic ancestry.

וְעוֹד יֵשׁ לֹאמֵר שְׂפָנוּנָת מִיכַל הָיְתָה לְטוֹבַת דָּוִד, מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהָיְתָה יוֹדַעַת שְׂבִית אָבִיהָ אֲבָד יְרוּשַׁת הַמַּלְכוּת, לִפִּי שְׂשֹׂאוֹל מְחַל עַל כְּבוֹדוֹ. וּמַעֲתָה שְׂרָאָתָהּ דָּוִד מוֹחֵל עַל כְּבוֹדוֹ הַזֵּהִירָתוֹ כְּדִי שְׂלֹא יֵאָבֵד גַּם הוּא הַמַּלְכוּת כְּמוֹ שְׂאִירַע לְאָבִיהָ, וּמִשׁוּם הִכִּי הוֹכַרְחָ דָּוִד לְהַשִּׁיבָה הַחִילוּק שֶׁיֵּשׁ בֵּין מַחִילַת הַכְּבוֹד שְׂעֵשָׂה הוּא לְמַחִילַת הַכְּבוֹד שְׂעֵשָׂה אָבִיהָ, שְׂשֹׂאוֹל מְחַל לְאֲנָשִׁים הַמְּבִזִּים אֶת כְּבוֹדוֹ וְלֹא הָיָה רְאוּי לַעֲשׂוֹת כֵּן לִפִּי שֶׁכְּבוֹד הַמְּלָךְ הוּא כְּבוֹדוֹ שֶׁל הַקַּב"ה, שְׂצִינְנוּ בְּתוֹרָתוֹ "שׁוּם תְּשִׁים עָלֶיךָ מַלְךְ" שְׂתַּהֲא אִימְתוּ עָלֶיךָ.

Furthermore, it can be said that Michal’s intent was for the good of David, because she knew that her father’s house had lost its inheritance of the kingship, for Saul had inappropriately relinquished his honor. For Yoma 22b, in addition to explaining why Saul’s descendants didn’t reign as king, explained his own personal downfall: “Rav Yehuda said Rav said: Why was Saul punished? Because [at the beginning of his reign] he relinquished his honor, as it is stated, ‘And some base fellows said: How can this man save us? So they disparaged him and brought him no present; but he made himself as if he did not hear’ (I Sam. 10:27). [Immediately after this, Scripture says:] ‘And Nahash the Ammonite marched up and encamped against Jabesh-gilead’ (I Sam. 11:1). [The implication is that if Saul had responded forcefully against those who had mocked him, Nahash would not have dared to attack Jabesh-gilead. So in this way, Saul’s humility led to the crisis.” Even after Saul defeated the Ammonites, his loyalists asked the prophet Samuel to identify those who had belittled Saul, saying they would kill the scorners, but Saul again said that nothing should be done to them. (I Sam. 11:12–13)

Now that she saw that David relinquished his honor, she warned him not to lose the kingdom as had happened to her father. Because of this, David was compelled to respond to her about the distinction between the relinquishment of honor on his part and the relinquishment of honor on the part of her father. For Saul forgave people who despised his honor, and it was not proper to do so, according to the fact that the honor of the king is the honor of the Holy One, Blessed be He. This is as we were commanded in His Torah, “you shall be free to set over yourself a king, one chosen by the L-rd your G-d.” (Deut. 17:15), that his awe shall be upon you.²

אָבֵל כַּאֲשֶׁר כָּאֵן בְּדוֹד מְחַל עַל כְּבוֹדוֹ מִשּׁוֹם כְּבוֹד הַשְּׁכִינָה, כְּדֹאֲמַרִּינּוּ בְּסוֹף פֶּרֶק אֱלוֹ נְאֻמָּרִין מִצְוָה שְׂאֵנִי גְבִי אֲגִרִיפּוּס. וְכָתְבוּ שָׁם הַתּוֹסְפוֹת דְּכִשְׁמוּחַל עַל כְּבוֹדוֹ מִשּׁוֹם כְּבוֹד הַמִּצְוָה וְהַתּוֹרָה הֵינּוּ כְבוֹד הַשְּׁכִינָה וּמִרְאָה בְּעֵצְמוֹ שְׂאִימַת שְׁכִינָה עָלָיו וְהוּא מוֹכֵן לְקַיִּים מִצְוֹת מֶלֶךְ עוֹלָמִים וְכוּ' וְעֵי"ש.

But here with David, he relinquished his honor because of the honor of the Shechinah, as it is said at the end of the 7th chapter of tractate Sotah, entitled “Elu Ne’emarin.” In Sotah 41b, we read that it was taught in a Mishna that, “The king stands, and receives [the Torah scroll], and reads [from it while] sitting. [However,] King Agrippa arose, and received [the Torah scroll], and read [from it while] standing.” He was praised by the Sages for remaining standing, and regarding the question about whether it was proper for a king to relinquish the honor due him, i.e., the right to sit, the Gemara answered, regarding Agrippa, “[Since it was for] a mitzvah, [this situation] is different [and did not dishonor him].” The Tosafists wrote there that when he relinquished his honor because of the honor of the mitzvah and the Torah, it was equivalent to the honor of the Shechinah. He showed that the awe of the Shechinah was upon him, and that he was ready to fulfil the commandments of the Eternal King etc., and see there.

וְכוּ כְתֹב הַרְמַב"ם (בְּפֶרֶק ב' מֵהַלְכוֹת מְלָכִים) כְּדֶרֶךְ שְׁחַלֵּק לוֹ הַכְּבוֹד הַגָּדוֹל וְהַפֶּל חַיִּיבִים בְּכְבוֹדוֹ כִּי צִיּוּנָהוּ לִהְיוֹת לְבוֹ בְּקֶרְבוֹ שְׁפָל. וְהֵינּוּ מֵהַ שְׂאֵמֵר הַכְּתוּב "וְשַׁחֲקֵתִי לְפָנָי ה'" וְכוּ' "וְהֵינְתִי שְׁפָל בְּעֵינָי" וְכוּ'.

Thus the Rambam wrote (in the second chapter of the Mishneh Torah, from the Laws of Kings, halacha 6), “In the same way that [Scripture] has given him great honor, and everyone is obliged to give him honor, so has he been commanded to be of a subdued and unpretentious heart.” This is what Scripture said, “I will dance before the L-rd and dishonor myself even more, and be low in my eyes.”

* * *

² Ketubot 17a: “As the Master said that the meaning of the verse ‘You shall place over you a king’ (Deut. 17:15) is that his awe shall be upon you.” The subjects’ awe is an essential component of kingship, and the king has no right to waive that.