

Zera Shimshon

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Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter XXXV: Naso (Num. 4:21–7:89)

Essay 8. In what way was David “alone and impoverished”?

פְּסוּק "פְּנֵה־אֵלַי וְחַנּוּנֵי כִּי־יַחֲדֵד וְעָנִי אָנִי". מֵה טַעַם הוּא זֶה שֶׁיִּפְנֶה אֵלָיו מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהוּא יַחֲדֵד, וְהָא אֲדַרְבָּא "הָרֵאָל כְּבִיר וְלֹא יִמָּאָס". וְאִם לֹא הָיָה יַחֲדֵד הָיָה יוֹתֵר טוֹב, וְעוֹד אֵיךְ "יַחֲדֵד וְעָנִי" אִם הָיָה מְלֶכֶךְ?

There is a verse: “Turn to me, have mercy on me, for I am alone and impoverished” (Ps. 25:16). What is the sense that [G-d] should turn to [David] because he is alone? To the contrary, “See, G-d is mighty; He is not contemptuous” (Job 36:5); i.e., G-d will accept a prayer, whether it comes from an individual or the community. Also, if [David] were not alone, it would have been better, for one might think that the prayers of a community seeking repentance will be heard more readily than the prayers of an individual.¹ Also, how can David say he is “alone and poor” if he was king, as we know that he had numerous attendants and wealth?

וְנִשְׁ לומר דְּבַעְבוּדָה נָרָה אֲמַרְיִנּוּ שְׁלֹא הָיָה דָּוִד רְאוּי לְאוֹתוֹ מַעֲשֵׂה אֱלֹהִים שֶׁאִם חָטָא יַחֲדֵד אוֹמְרִים לוֹ וְכוּ', כְּלוֹמֵר שֶׁהָיָה הַקַּב"ה עוֹזְרוֹ, כְּדַכְתִּיב "ה' לֹא־יַעֲזֹבֶנּוּ בְּיָדוֹ".

It can be said that in tractate Avodah Zara, we say:

Rabbi Yochanan says in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai: **David was not fit to** [act as he did in] **that incident** [involving Bathsheba], and the Jewish people were not fit to [act as they did in] that incident [of the Golden Calf]. . . . **Rather**, why did they perform [these sins]?

. . . **If an individual** has sinned, **one says to him**: Go to [that famous] individual [who sinned, King David, and learn from him that one can repent]. And if the community sinned, one says to them: Go to the community [that sinned, i.e., the Jewish people at the time of the Golden Calf.]

It is necessary [to learn about repentance both in the case of an individual and in the case of a community]. For if we had learned [this idea only with regard to] an individual, [one might have thought that he has the option to repent only] because his sin is not publicized. But [in the case of] a community, whose sin is

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¹ The translator speculates that is what is meant, as the idea was considered (and then rejected) in Avodah Zara 5a, which is quoted below.

publicized, [one might] say [that the community] cannot [repent]. If we had learned [this idea only with regard to] a community, [one might have said that their repentance is accepted] because their prayers are more numerous [than those of an individual, and they are heard before G-d]. But [in the case of] an individual, whose merit is not as strong, [one might] say [that he is] not [able to repent]. [Therefore, it is] necessary [to teach both cases.]

- Avodah Zara 4b-5a

That is as if to say that the Holy One, Blessed be He, was helping [David] achieve repentance, as it is written, “The wicked watches for the righteous, seeking to put him to death; **the L-rd will not abandon him to his power**; He will not let him be condemned in judgment” (Ps. 37:2–3).

וְלִכֵּן אָמַר דָּוִד "פְּגַה־אֱלֹהִים" מִפְּנֵי שָׁמָּה נִשְׁחַטְטָאתִי לֹא הָיָה אֱלֹהִים פְּדֵי לְהוֹרוֹת תְּשׁוּבָה עַל הַיְחִיד, וּבִשְׁבִיל זֶה הָיִיתִי עָנִי מִן הַסִּיּוּעַ הָעֲלִיוֹן שֶׁלֹּא עֲזַרְנִי לְהִנָּצֵל מִן הַיָּצָר.

Therefore, David said, “‘Turn to me,’ because that which I sinned was only in order to teach how an individual can obtain repentance. For this reason, I was impoverished from the uppermost assistance, i.e., from Heaven, for He did not help me to escape from the [evil] inclination.”² That is, David was not denying that he sinned because of his evil inclination, but he said that G-d did not save him from the evil inclination because He wanted David to serve as an example that an individual could obtain repentance.

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² The translator is not sure how this essay relates to parshat Naso. In Naso, we learn the laws of the *sotah*, the suspected adulteress, and perhaps that made Rabbi Nachmani think of the incident between David and Batsheva. However, that’s far from certain, as the rabbis tend to place all the blame for the affair upon David.