

David, the King of Israel.

Author of the Book of Psalms

Yahrzeit day – 6th of Sivvan (Festival of Shavuot)

The story of David is enough to stagger any imagination. He had most humble beginnings as a shepherd boy and ended his life at such sacred stature that he is considered to be "the fourth leg of the heavenly Merkava" (Hafetz Haim, Shmirat ha-Lashon, Sha'ar hatevunah, chap. 8).

In this short essay we shall attempt to have a brief glimpse of the characteristic traits which caused him all this glory. The major keynote of David's life was that of implicit faith in the workings of G-d. David was never disappointed at the catastrophes of life. He always kept a clear head, knowing full well: "G-d knows best!".

Let us scan the troubles that David encountered:

(A) In his early youth, he was scorned by his father and brothers, as attested to by his words: "I was considered "odd" by my brothers; I was estranged by the sons of my mother" (Psalms 69, 9). The Midrashic reason for this is related in the Compilation book "Yalkut ha-Makhiri", Psalms chapter 118. So too another reason is given in "Midrash HaGaddol, (Dvorim, 1, verse 17). The P'shat reason is that he was considered overly pious, and many a time contemporaries and peers take vengeance at a person who appears to be "holier than thou". As written there in the preceding verses "My enemies, who hate me in vain, outnumber the hairs of my head... G-d of Israel, in your name I have suffered shame, chagrin covers my visage... The idle gossipers of the market place besmirch my name, as do the wine drinkers" (Psalms 69, 8-13).

(B) Through-out life David was the object of slander and insult. We are told that when being present at the deliberations of the sages of the Sanhedrin, the most vicious ones asked him (as if innocently) "David, he [who] has fornicated with forbidden women, how is he to be put to death?" (Bava Metzia 59a). The word structure of this sentence was so arranged to be a pun, to be capable of being understood as a double intention; not intonated with a comma after the proper name (David) and as if asking him for the answer to this question, but rather the tone of voice

was as if it was a run on sentence, phrasing a general indictment: "David who has fornicated etc. How is he to be put to death!"

(C) Our Rabbis recount that when his son Absalem attempted to usurp the throne, all of the twelve tribes forsook David's banner. This was so even though for decades already he had endangered his life in fighting their battles against all neighboring enemy countries (See Shmuel II 8, 12). They had no gratitude and forgot all. Not only that, but of all the people of Jerusalem (where his reign had benefited the populace for nearly 40 years!) all joined the Absalem banner, due to the sly flattery whereby Absalem caught their fancy (Samuel II 15, 2-6) and only 600 adherents remained loyal to David (ibid, 15, 18). Is there a greater humiliation than that?

(D) Our Rabbis (in Tractate Yevamot 76b) tell us that when David courageously killed the giant warrior Goliath, King Saul feared that he would usurp the throne, and inquired whether David was a descendent of an illustrious family. Whereby Do-eg the slanderer replied: "Before you ask whether he is eligible for royalty, inquire whether he is even Jewish. Since he is a descendant of the Moabites, and these (according to his Halachic opinion) were disqualified from the becoming proselytes". Is there a greater slander for David than that, to be considered non-Jewish?

Yet David heard all of these wild accusations and nevertheless stood steadfast by his faith in G-d. David describes his close relation to the Creator of the world:

"Oh Lord, my spirit was not proud, my eyes did not look haughtily; I did not put my strivings in things that were too great and too remote for me. For I had put my soul at peace and soothed it like a weaned child with its mother. Like a weaned child was my soul with me" (Psalms 131, 1-2).

As the commentary "Metzudot" jots down on this passage: "Just as a young babe whose entire reliance is upon his mother, so my fortitude is with G-d". That is, a half year old child knows not of any brothers or friends. The only "real" thing in his life, the one who soothes him when in pain, the one who feeds him when in thirst or hunger pangs, the one who cleanses him when soiled and uncomfortable, the only address towards whom to pend is - his mother. So too, for David the one and only source of succor, of reliance, is the True G-d. This was the staff of life for David in all of his vicissitudes.

(E) When David was a refugee in the desert, fleeing for his life for fear that his (demented) father in law Saul would slaughter him, he returned to his encampment (where other persecuted elements accompanied him) at Ziklag and discovered to his dismay that in his absence some Amalekite hordes had sacked his tents and put all to fire. Not only that, but these bandits had kidnapped all of the women and children and taken them off to some unknown and perhaps terrible destiny. These associates of David were not of high moral caliber, they were of the dregs of society (some of them were debtors incapable of paying their debts, and therefore fled from society). Their impromptu reaction to this disaster was **to stone David to death** for not having protected them properly (Shmuel 1 30, 6). But what was David's reaction? The Bible records: "But David strengthened himself via G-d Almighty". What does this mean? How is this to be understood tangibly? The answer is that he pondered and considered what he himself wrote: "The Lord is my shepherd etc. Yea, though I walk in the valley overshadowed by death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff, they will comfort me" (Psalms 23, 1-4).

Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch comments upon these concluding lines (in his Commentary to Psalms) "I take comfort in the knowledge that whatever I receive from Thee, be it chastisement ("rod") or support ("staff") is indeed Thine and comes solely from Thee". What does he mean? He teaches that even our suffering is so directed so as to avail us. It teaches us that our heart is at peace, even though our body has its problems.

Rabbi Hirsch makes an astonishing statement. In Psalms (63, 1) David adds the extra words: "A Psalm of David, when he was in the wilderness of Judah". Why is it important to cite his locale? Is this his wont, to mention always in what area he penned his words?

Rabbi Hirsch comments: "This psalm stems from an event in the early days of David's flight from Saul. He had fled abroad to the king of Moab (comment by M. Zuriel: he was a relative of David via his maternal grandmother, Ruth) and entrusted his parents to the latter's care. Gad, the prophet, however instructed him not to remain abroad but to dwell in the midst of the land of Judah. David obeyed this behest and dwelt in the forest of Chereth (I Sam. 22, 5). There, an exiled refugee in the land of the Jews, isolated, parted from his family, his nation, his home, and alone before His G-d in the desolate wilderness, he speaks as follows: "Oh G-d of the Universe, Thou art

my G-d also. At early dawn I will seek Thee. My soul thirsts for Thee. My flesh longs for Thee in the barren land, (although) it grows weary without water. Thus I have perceived Thee in the Sanctuary, and to see Thy invincible power and Thy glory. That Thy loving kindness is better than life. Thus my lips are wont to praise Thee" (Psalms 63, 1-4).

We must analyze the situation closely. David had bolted to the Land of Moab. There he was certainly unreachable by his arch foe Saul, or by his malicious slanderers. For what good reason did G-d (via the Prophet Gad) advise David to return to the desert? Not only that, but certainly in the king's palace he had all of the comforts of life, food and drink. A normal bedroom and not to sleep on the rocks, a trusty shade under a roof and not to be scorched by the desert sunrays. He returned to the desert in order to suffer? Especially so since now he was more susceptible to being captured and killed by Saul. Certainly David could not get a full night's sleep due to minute to minute fear of being observed by some wayfarer, and the fact being brought to the attention of his pursuers. Not only that, but our Sages (see Rashi to Shmuel book two, 8, 2) tell us that the King of Moab immediately after David's exit, assassinated David's father and mother and so too the brothers that David mistakenly delivered to the Moabite "protective" custody. Since G-d foresaw the catastrophic results of David's departure, for what good reason did He order David to return to the terrors and dangers of the Land of Judah?

The answer is that it is better to undergo a life of suffering and tribulation, and thereby pend to G-d with prayer and good deeds, rather than live an opulent life, free of any physical problem, and live a life being unconnected with the Lord. This is what David briefly stated with great force "Thy loving kindness is better than life" (Psalms 63, 4).

All of the troubles of life are so prearranged so that a person should turn towards his Creator, and this is really the end goal of life. Everything is so calculated so that a person should build his soul bridge towards his Heavenly Father. Therefore G-d really wanted David to suffer, to lose his parents, be departed from his beloved wife Michal, be detached from his many children, be hounded and harassed by his enemies, suffer hunger, thirst and the burning sun. All is so, so that he find solace only by G-d.

Therefore, Midrash Tehillim (90, 15) testifies "All of the lifetime of David were years of trouble and suffering". But nevertheless, we find David saying: "Search my heart etc. See if I bear sadness within me" (Psalms 139, 23-24).

Even more so, David was a constant jokester, attempting always to bear good humor (Zohar, Shmot 107a).

This is an important lesson for all of us to learn from David, to be of good cheer. This is what we achieve by recognizing fully G-d's constant closeness to us.

When Shim'i ben Gera vilified David and called him vicious appellatives (see Tractate Shabbat 105a), David accepted the situation with implicit faith (see Shmuel II chap. 16, 10).

The Hafetz Haim said, (in his book "Shmirat ha-Lashon, Sha'ar Tevunah, chapter 8) it was then that David became part of the Heavenly Merkavah.

May his merit stand to our stead.