

Mizmor 51: David as Model of Repentance

Introduction

Perhaps the most honest moment of the entire *Tanakh* is the excruciating story of David and Bat Sheva. *Sefer Shmuel* devotes ten full chapters to his sin, Natan's prophetic condemnation of the sin, and the aftermath as David's family and nation fell apart as a consequence of the sin.²⁹

There is no analogy to this candid criticism of kings in all known ancient Near Eastern literature,³⁰ and, for that matter, one would be hard-pressed to find anything remotely approaching this level of religious and ethical honesty today. R. Amnon Bazak aptly remarks that this narrative attests to the divine inspiration behind prophetic texts. Everyone, even the most beloved figure in *Tanakh*, is held to the objective standards of the Torah. There are no political "spin doctors" shaping the narrative.³¹

Confronted by Natan's scathing prophetic rebuke in chapter 12, David responds with two of the most poignant words in all *Tanakh*: *chatati Lashem*, I have sinned to God. With these words, David embarks on a profound process of repentance.³²

After Natan's rebuke, David composed *Mizmor 51*. Offering a penetrating psychological dimension into the connection between David's confession in *Sefer Shmuel* and *Mizmor 51*, R. Haskel Lookstein quoted his teacher R. Joseph Soloveitchik, who noted the open gap (*parashah setumah*) in the middle of the verse after David confessed his sin (*Shmuel Bet 12:13*): *Va-yomer David el Natan chatati Lashem [...] va-yomer Natan el David gam Hashem he'evir chatatkha lo tamut*. R. Soloveitchik interpreted this open gap as reflecting the raw, unexpressed emotions that accompanied David's admission of guilt to the prophet. *Mizmor 51* poignantly fills that gap by using words to express his grief.³³

This *mizmor* does not appear in the Ashkenazic liturgy. However, many Sephardim include it in the *selichot* recited from the beginning of *Elul* through Yom Kippur and in the *Pesukei De-Zimrah* on Yom Kippur itself. We now turn to an examination of the *mizmor*.

Mizmor 51

¹For the leader. A psalm of David, ²when Natan the prophet came to him after he had come to Bat Sheva.³⁴

²⁹ Jewish tradition debates the extent of David's actual sin. This debate is beyond the scope of this article, but interested readers should read the extensive survey and discussion by R. Yaakov Medan, *David U-Bat Sheva: Ha-Chet, Ha-Onesh, Ve-Ha-Tikkun* [Hebrew] (Alon Shevut, 2002).

Classical commentators also elaborate on the delicate religious balance of viewing biblical heroes as being exalted yet human enough to guide our lives by example. See especially R. Amnon Bazak, *Ad Ha-Yom Ha-Zeh: Until This Day: Fundamental Questions in Bible Teaching* [Hebrew], ed. Yoshi Fargeon (Tel Aviv, 2013), 432–470; R. Shalom Carmy, "To Get the Better of Words: An Apology for *Yir'at Shamayim* in Academic Jewish Studies," *Torah U-Madda Journal* 2 (1990), 7 *Tanakh* 24; R. Aharon Lichtenstein, "A Living Torah" [Hebrew], in *Hi Sichati: Al Derekh Limmud Ha-Tanakh*, ed. Yehoshua Reiss (Jerusalem, 2013), 17–30.

³⁰ George Mendenhall, *Ancient Israel's Faith and History: An Introduction to the Bible in Context* (Louisville, 2001), 112.

³¹ *Ad Ha-Yom Ha-Zeh*, 469.

³² For exploration of David's repentance within the narratives in *Sefer Shmuel*, see Hayyim Angel, "The Yoke of Repentance: David's Post-Sin Conduct in the Book of Samuel and Psalm 51," at http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/818982/Rabbi_Hayyim_Angel/The_Yoke_of_Repentance:_David%E2%80%99s_Post-Sin_Conduct_in_Sefer_Shemuel_and_Tehillim_51; Ari Mermelstein, "Retribution, Repentance, Restoration: The Motives and Message Underlying Absalom's Rebellion," *Nahalat* 1 (1999), 51–64.

³³ R. Lookstein shared this insight during my *shi'ur* on *Mizmor 51* at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun in Manhattan on August 29, 2015. This formulation for the article was confirmed by R. Lookstein by email on February 21, 2016.

³⁴ Translation of the *Mizmor*, with minor modifications, is from the New Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh* (Philadelphia, 1985).

Based on the introductory verses of the *mizmor*, it appears that David composed this prayer while Natan still stood before David. However, Radak maintains that David composed this prayer after Natan left the palace. This interpretation appears logistically preferable, since it may have been difficult for David to compose this heart-wrenching petition in the middle of the conversation with the prophet.³⁵ Alternatively, Amos Chakham suggests the possibility that David did compose the *mizmor* in Natan's presence.³⁶

³Have mercy upon me, O God, as befits Your faithfulness; in keeping with Your abundant compassion, blot out my transgressions. ⁴Wash me thoroughly of my iniquity, and purify me of my sin; ⁵for I recognize my transgressions, and am ever conscious of my sin. ⁶Against You alone have I sinned, and done what is evil in Your sight; so You are just in Your sentence, and right in Your judgment.

David petitions God to wash away his sins,³⁷ and reflects on how his sin constantly plagues him. In verse 6, David surprisingly remarks, "against You alone have I sinned." Didn't he also sin against Bat Sheva and Uriah?

Rashi explains that of course David wronged people as well. However, every sin against another human being also is a sin against God. While David sinned against people, this prayer focuses on repairing David's broken relationship with God.

Radak adds that although David was conscious of his sins, the other characters could not have known that David's intent was sinful since David successfully covered up the affair. Therefore, David proclaims that only God knows of David's sinful intent, and David honestly faces up to his sins before God.

⁷Indeed I was born with iniquity; with sin my mother conceived me.

Needless to say, David was not really born with iniquity. Rashi offers two explanations of this surprising verse:

Indeed I was born with iniquity: So how can I not sin? I was created through a sexual act, through which many sins occur. Alternatively, I was created from a man and woman, who are filled with sin.

Perhaps David is expressing a basic fact of human nature. Since we are all created out of a sexual act, the sexual urge is deeply ingrained into our nature.³⁸ Alternatively, David states that since he is human, he is naturally fallible from birth.³⁹

Adopting a different approach, Me'iri explains that David is poetically exaggerating his sin:

Indeed I was born with iniquity: In my opinion, this means that throughout all of my days, from birth, I have done only evil, from my very conception. This is poetic exaggeration, similar to "you were called a rebel from birth" (*Yeshayahu* 48:8).

David is so devastated that he feels as though he has sinned his entire life. It is unlikely that David is making any excuses to mitigate the magnitude of his sin. Me'iri's reading captures the power of David's prayer, as the penitent king is completely overwhelmed by his guilt.⁴⁰

⁸Indeed You desire truth about that which is hidden; teach me wisdom about secret things. ⁹Purge me with hyssop till I am pure; wash me till I am whiter than snow. ¹⁰Let me hear tidings of joy and gladness; let the bones You have crushed exult. ¹¹Hide Your face from my sins; blot out all my iniquities.

³⁵. Amos Chakham likens this superscription to that of *Mizmor* 34: "Of David, when he feigned madness in the presence of Avimelech, who turned him out, and he left." It is more likely that David composed this *mizmor* after his initial encounter with Achish-Avimelech (*Da'at Mikra: Psalms* vol. 1 [Hebrew] [Jerusalem, 1979], 296).

³⁶. *Da'at Mikra*, 304.

³⁷. The imagery of washing away sin is also found in *Yeshayahu* 1:16; 4:4 (with the root *r-ch-tz*), and *Yirmiyahu* 2:22; 4:14 (with the same root as here, *k-b-s*).

³⁸. See also Ibn Ezra and Malbim.

³⁹. See also R. Yeshayah D'Trani.

⁴⁰. See also Amos Chakham, *Da'at Mikra*, 298.

Following *Midrash Tehillim* 51:2, Rashi and Ibn Ezra observe that hyssop is used in the purification process of the *metzora* and one defiled by a corpse (*Vayikra* 14:4; *Bemidbar* 19:6). David feels banished from God, and pleads that God reinstate their relationship.

¹²Fashion a pure heart for me, O God; create in me a steadfast spirit. ¹³Do not cast me out of Your presence, or take Your holy spirit away from me. ¹⁴Let me again rejoice in Your help; let a vigorous spirit sustain me.

David's praying for a new, pure heart and spirit includes a request that he should not sin ever again (Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Radak). David wants to reset his relationship with God and emerge with a new state of purity and perfection.

On a deeper level, David asks for God to create for him a new heart and spirit, instead of asking God to repair his old heart. This petition touches on a fascinating divergence between the prophecies of Yirmiyahu and Yechezkel. The Torah, followed by Yirmiyahu, speaks of repentance in terms of "circumcision" of the heart (*Devarim* 30:6, 16; *Yirmiyahu* 4:4). This imagery suggests that Israel began with a pure heart, their sin then created blockage in their relationship with God, and repentance functions as spiritual heart surgery to remove that blockage, restoring the original pristine state of purity.

In contrast, Yechezkel prophesies that Israel's repentance requires a God-initiated spiritual heart transplant. Israel's old heart is dead, made of stone. God therefore must remove Israel's lifeless heart and replace it with a heart of flesh (*Yechezkel* 11:19; 36:23–27).

By pleading with God to create for him a pure heart and new spirit, David expresses the anguished feeling that his sin has caused him to "die" inside. Within this analysis, we may extend Rashi and Ibn Ezra's explanation of the hyssop discussed above in verse 9. Not only does David feel alienated from God like one who is impure, but he feels dead inside, and therefore wants the hyssop purification of the *metzora* – who is likened to one who is dead⁴¹ – and one who came into contact with a corpse.

¹⁵I will teach transgressors Your ways, that sinners may return to You. ¹⁶Save me from bloodguilt, O God, God, my deliverer, that I may sing forth Your beneficence.

After focusing on his own guilt and repentance in verses 3–14, David looks beyond himself and views his sin and repentance as an opportunity to teach others. He now can inspire all future generations to repent since God's forgiveness of David's grave sins would demonstrate that the gates of repentance are always open.

¹⁷O Lord, open my lips, and let my mouth declare Your praise. ¹⁸You do not want me to bring sacrifices; You do not desire burnt offerings; ¹⁹True sacrifice to God is a contrite spirit; God, You will not despise a contrite and crushed heart.

We preface every *Amidah* with verse 17.⁴² Although it is the supreme privilege to be invited to stand before God, we begin by pleading with God to help us pray. This introductory verse becomes all the more poignant when we understand its context in *Mizmor* 51. Before we stand before God, we should feel humbled and unworthy, as David felt after his sin.

Because David sinned intentionally, he understands that sacrifices do not atone for his sins, but rather he must repent directly to God (Rashi, Ibn Ezra). David also reflects the spirit of the prophets, who regularly teach that sincere righteousness and repentance are the ideal aspirations. Sacrifices without repentance are worthless and offensive.⁴³

²⁰May it please You to make Zion prosper; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. ²¹Then You will want sacrifices offered in righteousness, burnt and whole offerings; then bulls will be offered on Your altar.

We often find movement in *Sefer Tehillim* from personal prayers to those for the entire community. Therefore, it is unsurprising to find a prayer for national forgiveness at the end of a prayer for the penitent individual. However, the last two verses appear to reflect a reality from a time period different from that of David. Why would David pray to God to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem? In his time, Jerusalem's walls were standing. One also gains the impression that

⁴¹. See, for example, *Nedarim* 64b; *Shemot Rabbah* 1:34; *Tanchuma Tzav* 13.

⁴². This practice traces back to the third-century Amora R. Yochanan in *Berakhot* 4b; 9b.

⁴³. See, for example, *Shmuel Aleph* 15:22; *Yeshayahu* 1:10–17; 43:22–24; *Yirmiyahu* 7:22; *Hoshea* 6:6; *Amos* 5:21–25; *Mikah* 6:4–8. See also *Tehillim* 40:7.

nobody could bring sacrifices – “*then* bulls will be offered” – but David certainly could and did offer sacrifices in his time!⁴⁴

⁴⁴. One of the great *siddur* translators of the twentieth century, Dr. David de Sola Pool, expressed his ambivalence over how to interpret these last two verses in relation to the rest of the *mizmor*. In his translation of the New Year *siddur*, he set off the last two verses with a line and parentheses. Here is his translation of verses 18–21 as laid out in his *siddur*:

For Thou takest no delight in a sacrifice,
Else would I give it;
A burnt-offering Thou dost not desire.
The sacrifices of God are a contrite spirit,
A broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt
not despise.
(Do good unto Zion in Thy loving will,
Build up the walls of Jerusalem.
Then Thou wilt be pleased with sacrifices of righteousness,
Burnt-offering and whole offering;
Then bulls shall be offered on Thine altar.)

(*New Year Book of Prayers*, Union of Sephardic Congregations, 8)

In his translation in the Yom Kippur *siddur*, however, Dr. Pool used the same translation but did not insert a line or parentheses to set off the final two verses (*Day of Atonement Book of Prayers*, Union of Sephardic Congregations, 100).

Rashi follows the lead of *Vayikra Rabbah* (7:2) and suggests that David is praying for the Temple to be built by his son Shlomo. However, *chomot Yerushalayim* refers to the walls of Jerusalem, not the Temple. Additionally, David was able to bring sacrifices, whereas these final two verses suggest that people were unable to do so.

Offering a different interpretation, Ibn Ezra quotes an anonymous rabbi from Spain who maintained that these verses were added by someone living in the Babylonian exile centuries after David:

One Spanish sage said that these two verses were added by a righteous individual in Babylonia who beseeched God and prayed with this Psalm, for it was not yet known [in David's time] that Zion was God's chosen place until David's old age. It also is possible that this Psalm was composed through divine inspiration.

These two verses reflect the reality of the Babylonian exile. They either were composed then and added to David's *mizmor*, as per the comments of the Spanish sage, or else David prophetically anticipated the period of the exile. Radak and Me'iri agree with the notion of prophetic anticipation of the Babylonian exile.⁴⁵

Within this reading, the Jews in the Babylonian exile plead to God: just as You forgave David for the sin of Bat Sheva, please forgive us now and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and the Temple so that we may again bring sacrifices in Jerusalem. David's prayer in verse 15, that he should become a model for repentance, is fulfilled within this very *mizmor*.

Conclusion

David powerfully expresses his feelings of being overwhelmed by sin, and pleads to God to help restore their relationship. He then looks outward, hoping that God will forgive him so that he may become a model for penitents for all time:

R. Shmuel b. Nachmani citing R. Yonatan explained: The saying of David the son of Yishai and the saying of the man raised on high (*Shmuel Bet* 23:1), [means, it is] the saying of David the son of Yishai who established firmly the yoke [discipline] of repentance. (*Mo'ed Katan* 16b)

The conclusion of the *mizmor* shifts from the sin and repentance of the individual to that of the community.

Whether one is Sephardic and recites this *mizmor* in the prayers throughout the season of repentance, or whether one is Ashkenazic and does not, there is no more suitable *Mizmor* than 51 for us to learn and internalize to trigger the deepest process of repentance, religious growth, and connection to God and the community of Israel.

⁴⁵. The issue of dating of *Sefer Tehillim* goes far beyond the parameters of this essay. Suffice it to say here that several traditional sources maintain that parts of *Sefer Tehillim* were composed after the time of David. For further discussion, see Hayyim Angel, "Authorship and Structure of Psalms," in Angel, *Vision from the Prophet and Counsel from the Elders: A Survey of Nevi'im and Ketuvim* (New York, 2013), 210–219. For extensive discussion of Ibn Ezra's view of the authorship of *Tehillim*, as well as the positions of two of his illustrious predecessors, R. Saadiah Ga'on and R. Moshe ibn Gikatilah, see Uriel Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms: From Saadiah Gaon to Abraham ibn Ezra* (New York, 1991).