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Haftarat Pikudei: *The Bloody Hands of King David*

A Puzzling Refusal

Unlike any other king of Israel, David holds a unique place in the hearts and minds of the Jewish people, to this very day. He is the gold standard for a leader of Israel; a man who combined great righteousness with wisdom, courage, and self sacrifice. He slew Goliath, united the tribes of Israel, and established Jerusalem as the capital of the nascent Israelite state. It was only natural for David to personally lead the Israelite nation in the building of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, a house for the God of Israel, to whose service David had dedicated his life.

But alas, it was not to be. Not David but Shlomo, David's young son, would be granted the privilege of building the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*. In the words of Shlomo:

Now it was in the heart of David my father to build a house for the name of the Lord, the God of Israel. But the Lord said unto David my father: Whereas it was in thy heart to build a house for My name, thou didst well that it was in thy heart; nevertheless thou shalt not build the house; but thy son that shall come forth out of thy loins, he shall build the house for My name.¹

David's yearning to build a house for God, much like Moshe's great desire to enter the land of Israel, is silenced by the word of God. What is the reason for this apparent injustice? Why is David, among the greatest of men, refused the chance to build God's Temple? Unlike God's refusal to listen to Moshe's pleas, which remains unexplained, we are given a reason why David cannot build the Temple. In *Divrei Ha-Yamim*, David himself reveals the reason behind God's refusal:

And David said to Solomon: My son, as for me, it was in my heart to build a house unto the name of the Lord my God. But the word of the Lord came to me, saying: Thou hast shed blood abundantly, and hast made great wars; thou shalt not build a house unto My name, because thou hast shed much blood upon the earth in My sight. Behold, a son shall be born to thee, who shall be a man of rest; and I will give him rest from all his enemies round about; for his name shall be Solomon, and I will give peace and quietness unto Israel in his days. He shall build a house for My name...²

"Dam la-rov shafakhta u-milchamot gedolot asita" – "You have shed blood abundantly, and have made great wars." As the great warrior of Israel, David slew tens of thousands among the enemies of Israel, bringing peace and security to the tribes of Israel that they had rarely experienced before. And for this 'sin' of defending the people of Israel and expanding the borders of the Holy Land, David is refused the right to build the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*? All of David's battles were fought for the honor of, and

¹. *Melakhim Aleph* 8:17–19.

². *Divrei Ha-Yamim Aleph* 22:7–8.

at the word of God! This phrase, “*dam la-rov shafakhta*,” is practically begging for an explanation, prompting commentators throughout the generations to suggest fascinating explanations for this puzzling ‘sin’ of David.

Some Classic Responses

The *Yalkut Shimoni*, in counterintuitive fashion, explains that when David was told that he could not build the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* due to the blood that he had shed, he became frightened, and said: “I am not worthy of building the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*!” God replied soothingly to David: “Do not fear! Those [whom you killed in battle]...are like sacrifices before me.” If so, why was David forbidden to build the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*? God continued and explained that if David would build the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, it could never be destroyed; and if the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* were to be indestructible, there would be no physical object upon which *Hashem* could pour out His wrath when the people of Israel sin. The people themselves would be forced to bear the brunt of God’s anger.³

The *Yalkut’s* answer, though interesting, turns the simple reading of the verses in *Divrei Ha-Yamim* on their head. David was not unfit to build the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*; rather, he was *too* fit.

The Malbim⁴ offers a more straightforward approach, explaining that David was unworthy of building the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* due to shedding blood unnecessarily, by engaging in voluntary wars, “*milchamot ha-reshut*.” Radak⁵ adds that although David did nothing wrong by killing his enemies, he was, ultimately, responsible for the deaths of thousands of gentiles, among whom were surely good people. A man who has killed innocent victims, no matter how unavoidable his actions were, is not fit to build the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, the house of peace.

In contrast to Malbim and Radak, who focus on the *actions* of David, Rambam understands “*dam la-rov shafakhta*” as an inherent flaw in David’s character. He writes, shockingly, that David was a “*ba’al achzariyut*” – a man of cruelty. While David’s cruelty was wielded only against the enemies of Israel, nonetheless, a man with such a character flaw was not the appropriate choice to build the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*.⁶

How can Rambam make such an assumption about the character of David, based solely on the phrase, “*dam la-rov shafakhta*”? While Rambam does not state so explicitly, he appears to base his presumption on the principle of “*acharei ha-peulot nimshakhin ha-levavot*” – “One’s heart is drawn after one’s actions.”⁷ Our character traits are shaped, to a great degree, by our actions. No matter how kind he may naturally be, a man who spends years of his life immersed in battle and bloodshed will develop, at least to some degree, the trait of cruelty.

The powerful effect of war upon soldiers is described quite powerfully in *The Seventh Day: Soldiers’ Talk about the Six-Day War*, in which Israeli veterans of the Six Day War describe the impact of the fighting on their psyche and character. One soldier related:

As we went on fighting, I began to care less. For the whole three days that we fought I was sick and vomiting, but it meant less and less to me. All my friends were going down and we grew madder and madder...As we grew angrier, we stopped being human beings. You start out shouting, but by this time, we were all just machines for killing. Everyone’s face is set in a snarl

³. *Yalkut Shimoni, Shmuel Bet, Remez* 145.

⁴. *Divrei Ha-Yamim Aleph* 22:8, “*dam la-rov*.”

⁵. *Divrei Ha-Yamim Aleph* 22:8, “*dam la-rov*.”

⁶. Rambam, *Shemoneh Perakim*, chapter 7.

⁷. *Sefer Ha-Chinukh, Mitzvah* 16.

and there's a deep growl coming from your belly. You want to kill and kill. You grow like an animal, you know – no, worse than an animal.⁸

One can argue that a soldier's intense emotions during the time of battle, however cruel they may be, do not necessarily have a long term impact on a soldier's character traits. However, Amnon, another veteran of the Six Day War, described his eye witness account of a car accident and the way in which his battlefield experiences affected his reaction to the accident:

A few days after the war, I was standing by the road...when suddenly a man was flung out of a car and just lay there on the roadside. Everyone nearby started running around in a panic, but I found myself standing there quite indifferent to it all. The first picture that flashed into my mind was of bodies like this lying on the roadside. I really saw it like that – and I just stood there...And he was one of us [a Jew]. So if that's what you mean by life becoming cheaper, then perhaps...⁹

Clearly, the traumatic experiences of a soldier in war can leave a lasting impact. As such, Rambam's assessment of David's character, while harsh, at least has a leg to stand on.

Sacrificing Purity for the Sake of Righteousness

While insightful, the explanations offered by the classic commentaries are ultimately unsatisfying. Was David truly worthy of punishment for simply following God's command? And while the effects of war on the psyche of soldiers are real, Rambam's assessment of David as possessing the trait of cruelty is hard to accept, given his great love for the people of Israel, so evident in *Sefer Tehillim*. Is there another approach to be found, a more satisfying explanation of "*dam la-rov shafakhta*"?

In his analysis of *Megillat Esther*, Yoram Hazony presents a fundamental tension that exists in the life of every human being: the tension between the ideals of purity and righteousness.¹⁰ Every human being, explains Hazony, has a body that constantly urges man to occupy himself with its physical and emotional needs, such as eating, digestion, physical relations, honor and anger, depression, etc. It is possible, and perhaps likely for much of humanity, to live one's life entirely preoccupied with the satisfaction of these bodily and emotional needs, only to find that one "has nothing to show for his efforts other than having worn out a body which started its career fresh."¹¹

It is therefore considered a great virtue to minimize, as much as possible, one's focus on the body and emotions in order to enable the soul to concentrate on the higher aspects of life. This virtue, according to Hazony, is the classic Jewish ideal of *kedushah*, of purity. "Be Holy!"¹² The struggle of Jews throughout history, to transcend their struggles for a livelihood and fears of gentile persecution in the pursuit of Torah scholarship and meaningful prayer, is a struggle for *kedushah*, for the mastery and transcendence of the self.

Alongside the ideal of purity, we find a second, equally important value – that of *tzedek*, or righteousness. "Righteousness, righteousness you shall pursue."¹³ Simply put, it is to help, heal and improve the world for the sake of other people. Whether we seek to improve the lives of our family,

⁸. Avraham Shapira, *The Seventh Day: Soldiers' Talk about the Six-Day War* (New York: Simon Schuster Trade, 1971), 67–68.

⁹. Ibid., 92.

¹⁰. Yoram Hazony, *The Dawn: Political Teachings of the Book of Esther* (Jerusalem: Genesis Jerusalem Press, 1995), 216–222.

¹¹. Ibid., 217.

¹². *Vayikra* 19:2.

¹³. *Devarim* 16:20.

community, our nation or the world as a whole, the ideal of righteousness demands that we focus our energies and efforts outwards.

The tension between these two lofty ideals lies in their attitude towards power. The ideal of purity demands that man reject power, while the ideal of righteousness can only be accomplished through the accumulation of power. By definition, man's success in realizing one ideal leads him away from the realization of the other:

For the saint, the man of perfect study and prayer, power is essentially exorcised as a motive, and so the entire world of spiritual blemishes – the obsession with honor and wealth, tantrums and rages, depressions, competitiveness, cruelty – all these are not found in him. But power is lost to him as a tool: He may give charity from what he has, but the good he can do is of necessity circumscribed; he may wish to do right in the world, but he has few resources and does not really know how. For the hero, the man of great deeds, the endless game of accumulating power and the preoccupation with wielding it...leaves him relatively little time for contemplation, for study and thought, for prayer. He may include such activities in his daily routine, but finds it difficult to concentrate as the world presses in on him, demanding that he return to it. The saint and hero may be religious men both. Yet the saint makes a token effort towards power and leaves the rest to God, while the hero leaves nothing to God until he himself reaches exhaustion.¹⁴

With an understanding of this tension, Hazony explains that it is only natural that David, despite his greatness, was disqualified from building the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*. David was a man of righteousness, the king responsible for drastically improving the lives of the people of Israel by defeating their enemies in war. Yet his focus on righteousness, and on acquiring the power necessary to further his righteous efforts, came with a price: a sacrifice of personal purity. As a man of the world, David's hands were of necessity bloodied: "*dam la-rov shafakhta.*" Consequently, God's refusal to allow David to build the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* must be seen not as a sign of David's unworthiness, but rather as an indicator of his greatness and accomplishments in the realm of *tzedek*. Shlomo, to whom the task of building the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* falls, is not a greater leader than his father David. Rather, there is a division of labor amongst the great leaders of Israel; it was David's role to defeat the enemies of Israel, while Shlomo was destined to be a man of peace. Shlomo, the man whose very name derives from "*shalom*" (peace), was destined to build the house of peace, the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*.

Equally enlightening is the contrast between David and his immediate predecessor – *Shaul Ha-Melekh*. Shaul, chosen by God as the first king of Israel, is one of the more fascinating figures of *Tanakh*. He was a unique man, a great leader of his generation. And yet, tragically, his reign fell apart, beginning with his inability to follow God's command in the battle against the Amalekite nation. His misplaced mercy led to a strange and terrifying downfall, culminating in suicide just moments before he could be captured by the *Pelishtim*, the mortal enemies of the Jewish people.

The general perception of Shaul is one of failure; he is the great man, who for one reason or another, simply couldn't make it as king, and is soon replaced by the great king David. However, R. Avraham ben Dov Ber, the reclusive son of the Maggid of Mezeritch, offers a very different perspective on Shaul, and in the process sheds light on the matter at hand:

There are two types of *zaddikim*. The first is the elevated *zaddik* who is unable to lead his generation; he is so spiritual that his generation cannot tolerate him. Saul was such a type: "from his shoulders and upward he was higher than any of the people" (Shmuel I 9:2). This means that his power of comprehension was so profound that his generation could not tolerate him for he was in touch with the supernal wisdom and was unable to descend to his generation

¹⁴. Hazony, 218.

down beneath in order to raise them up. The truth is that Saul was not suited to be king and belonged in a different rank...¹⁵

Shaul was not too small a man to be king; he was too *holy* to be king! He was so spiritual, so great, that he could not effectively lead the people of his generation. He lived in the ivory tower of Judaism, a man infused with holiness but unable to relate to the practical needs of his people.

R. Avraham continues, and in a passage strikingly in step with Rambam's interpretation of David, explains that Shaul was *too* compassionate to be an effective leader: "He had the quality of compassion...and his sole intention was for the sake of heaven...But the truth is otherwise. For just as the quality of compassion is necessary, so is the quality of cruelty. Just as the Creator commanded us to have compassion when compassion is demanded, so did He command us to be cruel when circumstances demand cruelty."¹⁶

Shaul's excessive compassion, his overemphasis of the ideal of purity, rendered him an ineffective leader, and led ultimately to his tragic demise. The king's role is not to immerse himself in deep spirituality, but rather to pursue righteousness for the sake of purity; to exercise power in order to create a haven of spirituality.

Rambam attributed the quality of *achzariyut* (cruelty) to David, as a character flaw. However, it is possible to reinterpret David's "cruelty" in a positive fashion. It is precisely David's "cruelty," better described as his ability and willingness to dirty himself for the sake of others, which distinguished David from Shaul and made him the great leader that he was. David was the ultimate man of righteousness, and thus the ultimate king, and it is this greatness that prevented him from building the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*, the house of purity.

R. Adin Steinsaltz, in his interpretation of the *Tanya*, describes the complete *tzadik* as "one who abnegates not only the desires of his animal soul but also those of his Godly soul, because the only desire that drives him is the desire to serve God...A true leader is one who is capable of the ultimate self sacrifice: the sacrifice of his very "I" ...of his soul's yearning to cleave to God."¹⁷

"*Dam la-rov shafakhta*": King David sacrificed his own personal spiritual greatness, his own purity, for the sake of righteousness, for God and the Jewish people. For this, the people of Israel are eternally grateful.

¹⁵. Avraham ben Dov Ber, *Chessed L'Avraham* (Jerusalem: Mekhon Sifte Tsadikim, 1994), 22–23; translation by Louis Jacobs, *Hasidic Thought* (New York: Behrman House, 1976), 83–84.

¹⁶. *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁷. Adin Steinsaltz, *Opening the Tanya: Discovering the Moral and Mystical Teachings of a Classic Work of Kabbalah* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 262–263.