

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Shoftim

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Leeba *bas* Moshe *a"h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

Dovid and Shimi

As this week's *parshah* contains the section detailing the laws of the monarchy, let us take this opportunity to focus on one of the best known of the Jewish kings – Dovid Hamelech (“King David”). Specifically, it is his final act that bears some scrutiny. We know that this great *tzaddik* holds a special place in the eyes of Hashem and His nation, which is why his conduct from his deathbed seems somewhat out of character.

First, some background is in order: Dovid Hamelech led an eventful life, to say the least. He experienced trials and triumphs, salvation and sorrow, as attested to by the content of the many chapters of Tehillim (Psalms) he left as his legacy.

At one point, Dovid had to flee from his rebellious son, Avshalom, who had usurped the throne. During this particularly trying period, Dovid had another encounter. Shimi ben Geira, a kinsman of the former king, Shaul (“King Saul”), approached the fleeing king. In public view, he unleashed a torrent of curses and derision at Dovid.

Needless to say, Dovid Hamelech's entourage was scandalized at Shimi's effrontery. “Why should this dead dog be allowed to curse you?” remarked one of Dovid's officers, Avishai. “I will confront him and remove his head.”

But with nobility of spirit, Dovid did not allow his attendants to harm the blasphemer. “It has been decreed from Hashem that I should be cursed,” Dovid explained. “Let Shimi be; he is merely carrying out the Will of the Almighty” (*Shmuel II 16:5-13*).

Some time later, the renegade Avshalom was killed, the rebellion put down, and Dovid's reign was restored. A remorseful and penitent Shimi now approached the uncontested king and begged for mercy.

Dovid's servants were not so quick to be forgiving; Avishai once again asserted that Shimi deserved to be killed. But Dovid held his ground and swore to Shimi that he would not kill him. Truly a model of selflessness and restraint (*Ibid. 19:17-24*).

Payback

Fast forward now to the end of Dovid's life. As he lies on his deathbed, he issues instructions to his son and successor, Shlomoh (“King Solomon”). Dovid brings up a matter that had been laid to rest long ago – or so it had seemed. In his final moments, he tells Shlomoh:

“Behold, with you is Shimi ben Geira... he cursed me with an awful curse... but I swore to him that I would not kill him... But now, do not exonerate him... you shall know what to do with him; bring him, in his old age, to the grave in blood” (*Melachim I, 2:8-9*). As the narrative plays out, Shlomoh places certain restrictions on Shimi and eventually has him killed.

Now, what happened here, exactly? As befitting his noble and exalted character, Dovid had initially displayed abundant tolerance, forgiving Shimi even in the midst of the latter's tirade. Eventually – and only when he saw which way the wind was blowing – Shimi sought Dovid's forgiveness. Dovid's compatriots demanded swift and harsh justice; Dovid ignored them and pardoned Shimi with the force of an oath. And then, years

later – at the last minute, literally – Dovid turns around and orders that Shimi be liquidated!

It is not only Dovid’s inconsistency that begs explanation. As R’ Shlomoh Rosenshtain of Lomza points out (*Darchei Mussar, parshas Balak*), Dovid’s behavior pattern here seems to be completely out of sync with the norm. Usually, one who is wronged will seek vengeance in the midst of his fury – while “the iron’s still hot,” so to speak. With the passage of many years, however, after things have calmed down, and the matter is a memory from the past, the aggrieved party may relinquish his grudge and “let bygones be bygones.” Especially as he nears his end, when he has little strength or desire to settle old scores.

Yet Dovid did exactly the opposite. At the height of Shimi’s insolence, while being urged on by his attendants to administer punishment, Dovid stoically accepted the situation and forgave the transgressor. Then, years later, with his final breaths, he suddenly recalls the long-buried insult and demands “payback.”

In a brilliant yet straightforward way, R’ Rosenshtain demonstrates that Dovid’s actions were precisely calculated, down to the very end, and totally in keeping with his noble character.

Pure Motives

The Torah mandates that the people treat the king with a measure of dignity. Some examples are recorded in the Mishnah in Sanhedrin (2:5):

נאין רואין אותו כשהוא מסתפר ול' א כשהוא ערום ול' א בבית המרחץ, שנאמר שום תשים עליך מלך, שתהא אימתו עליך:

“The king can’t be observed while taking a haircut; unclothed; or in the bath-house. As it states: ‘Place a king upon yourself,’ (*Devarim 17:15*) meaning, his *awe* should be upon you.”

Now Shimi had totally *dishonored* the king; even worse, he clearly fell into the category of *moreid b’malchus* – rebelling against the king’s authority – thus incurring the death penalty (*see Rambam, Hilchos Melachim 3:8*). If Dovid would have immediately put Shimi to death, he would have been acting entirely within the bounds of Torah law.

But that is precisely why he delayed punishment. Dovid realized that Shimi was *chayav misah* – worthy of execution; he knew that eventually, Shimi should be killed. However, he feared that if he dispatched him right away, the act of execution might prove somewhat satisfying. Dovid had suffered great degradation at the hands of Shimi, and at a perilous and difficult time to boot (in the midst of a usurpation of the throne). The righteous king feared that an execution at that time might be tempered with ulterior motives. Mixed in with the imperative to exact justice would be some personal feelings of vengeance.

And so Dovid waited precisely for his old age. When he barely retained a breath of life, he knew the time had come. At that moment, any personal grievances were utterly meaningless, and he lacked any vigor for vengeance. He could finally fulfill the dictates of justice in this case, without feeling even a twinge of personal satisfaction. And so his last act was fulfilled with purity – like the rest of his life.