

You Can't Hurry Love

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A Difficult *Aggadeta*

When David dug the foundation of the Holy Temple, the waters of the deep began to overflow. They were on the verge of flooding the world. David said, “What is the law as far as writing the Name of God on a shard of pottery and casting it into the deep so that it should remain in its place?” Nobody said anything to him. He then said, “May anyone who knows the answer to this question and does not tell me, be strangled by his throat.”

Achitofel reasoned to himself as follows: “If the Torah says for the sake of making peace between husband and wife, ‘My Name that was written in sanctity should be erased by water,’¹ does it not stand to reason that such erasure should be permitted for the sake of the whole world?”

Achitofel then told David that erasing the Name was permitted under the circumstances. David wrote the Name on a shard of pottery and cast it into the deep. Its waters subsided and stood in their place. (*Makkos* 11a)²

¹ The reference is to the law of the *sotah*, a married woman suspected of adultery for having secluded herself with a man other than her husband after having been warned not to. The process by which her innocence or guilt is determined includes scraping the text of a Biblical passage that includes the Name of God off the parchment on which it is written into some water. The *sotah* drinks the water. If she is guilty, she miraculously dies. If she survives, it is clear that she is innocent of the suspicions against her, and harmony is thus restored between her and her husband. The Torah assures her that if she is innocent, she will be blessed with a child.

² A different version of this incident appears in *Sukkah* 53a-b. Rashi's comments to the two versions contradict each other on a number of points, indicating that he viewed the two versions as being in disagreement. Our comments here apply only to the *Gemara* in *Makkos*.

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This story abounds with difficulties. We deal here with only three:

- 1) Had David not followed Achitofel's instructions, the waters of the deep would presumably have overflowed and flooded the world. How could this have happened? Had God not promised Noah³ that He would never again destroy the world by flood?
- 2) Why was David in doubt as to whether it was permissible to erase the Name in order to save the world? It is a well-established principle in halachah that with a few exceptions, any prohibition—including erasing the Holy Name—is suspended in a life-threatening situation. Why was David unaware of this principle and why did Achitofel not invoke it in arriving at his answer?
- 3) Why did God want to destroy the world at that time? The Gemara does not mention any sin committed by David or the Children of Israel that would warrant such a drastic punishment.

Rashi refers to a *Yerushalmi*⁴ which helps us with this last question. The *Yerushalmi* says that while the foundations of the Holy Temple were being excavated, David found a shard of earthenware that raised its voice and said to him, “Do not move me from this spot for I am holding down the waters of the deep ever since the day the Torah was given, when the whole earth trembled.” David did not listen to it. He picked it up, and the waters of the deep began to overflow.

This *Yerushalmi* indicates some wrongdoing on David's part. When a piece of earthenware calls out, it may rightly be assumed that it should be heeded. But why should this error on David's part render the entire world worthy of destruction? Listening to a wondrous piece of pottery is not one of the commandments of the Torah. How could even the gravest sin of any individual hold such dire consequences for all mankind?

David's Error

To answer this question, let us focus on what it is that the shard of earthenware told David. “Do not move me from this spot for I am holding down the waters of the deep ever since the day the Torah was given, when the whole earth trembled.”

These words are clearly an allusion to a *gemara* in *Shabbos* 88a:

³ *Bereishis* 9:15.

⁴ *Sanhedrin* 10:2.

Reish Lakish said: What is the meaning of the verse “And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day” (*Bereishis* 1:31)? What is the purpose of the letter ה used as a prefix in the word הַשְּׁשִׁי, “the sixth”?⁵ This teaches us that the Holy One, Blessed Is He, made a stipulation with all the works of Creation and said to them, “If Israel accepts the Torah you will last, but if not, I will return you to the primordial ‘formlessness and void.’”⁶ ⁷

Until the day the Torah was given, all of Creation was in a state of suspension. If Israel would accept the Torah, it would go on. If not, it would cease to be. The piece of pottery had been holding down the depths since the day the Torah was given. It was in a sense the seal of Creation that ensured that its existence was absolute and unconditional. The *Yerushalmi's* account of David moving the shard indicates that in some way he tampered with the situation in effect since Israel accepted the Torah. The nature of this tampering must be clarified. To understand David's error here, let us look at one of his failures that is less obscure, the incident of Bas-sheva.

The text of Scripture portrays this episode as being sinful in two respects—David apparently commits adultery, and compounds his transgression by having Bas-sheva's husband, Uriah, killed. The Oral Torah mitigates both sins; Bas-sheva was technically divorced, and Uriah deserved to be put to death for *lèse-majesté*.⁸ Nevertheless, David's conduct on this occasion was improper, and the prophet Nassan rebuked him for it. Much of the *Book of Tehillim* is devoted to David's odes of regret and repentance for this sin.

The *Gemara* in *Sanbedrin* 107a casts this incident in a new light.

Rava expounded: “What is the meaning of the verse ‘For I am ready for hobbling (לצלע), and my pain is constantly before me’ (*Tehillim* 38:18)? Bas-sheva daughter of Eliam was fit to be David's wife⁹ since the six days of Creation, but she came to him through

⁵ When the Torah speaks of the other days of Creation, it does not use the ה prefix which denotes the definite article. For example, it uses יום שני, “second day,” not הַשְּׁנַי יום, “the second day.”

⁶ "תהו ובהו", *Bereishis* 1:2.

⁷ Rashi explains that the *gemara* sees “the sixth day” as an allusion to another sixth day, the sixth of Sivan, the date on which the Torah was given.

⁸ *Shabbos* 56a.

⁹ The word the verse uses for “for hobbling,” לצלע, can also be seen as meaning “for a rib,” an allusion to Eve, Adam's wife, who was fashioned from his rib.

pain.” Likewise, they taught in the academy of Rabbi Yishmael, “Bas-sheva the daughter of Eliam was fit to be David’s wife but he took her as if he were eating unripe fruit.”

Rashi explains the metaphor of eating unripe fruit to mean that David took Bas-sheva as his wife too hurriedly, before the appropriate time.

This *gemara* implies that had David waited patiently, he would have had Bas-sheva as his wife in the most honorable manner, without recourse to distasteful means. But David did not act patiently. He wished to eat the fruit before it was ripe.

Rav Tzadok HaKohen writes¹⁰ that David was aware that Bas-sheva was intended for him. He knew through the Holy Spirit that he and she would be the progenitors of the Mashiach, and he could not wait. He was willing to sacrifice his personal spiritual well-being in order to hasten the ultimate fulfillment of the will of God by bringing the Mashiach into being as soon as possible.

After the prophet Nassan rebuked David, the infant son whom Bas-sheva had borne him took ill and died. Rav Tzadok HaKohen writes¹¹ that had that son survived, he would have been the Mashiach and would have built the Temple that would have lasted eternally.

David is not a man who can wait. The Torah relates that at the Covenant Between the Parts, “The vulture swooped down on the cut pieces, and Abram drove it away” (*Bereishis* 15:11). Rashi, based on the Midrash,¹² comments, “[The vulture swooping down] alludes to the fact that David son of Yishai will come to annihilate [the sinful nations represented by the cut pieces], but Heaven will not let him do so until the King Mashiach will come.” Here, too, David wishes to carry out the Divine plan before its time.

This tendency of David’s is also in evidence in *II Shmuel*, ch. 7. David there expressed his desire to the prophet Nassan to begin the construction of the Holy Temple. Nassan’s immediate response was to encourage David. Scripture relates that on that very night, Nassan

By extension the rib can represent any wife, in this case David’s wife Bas-sheva.

¹⁰ *Takanas HaShavin*, Piotrkow, 5686, p. 78–84.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹² See *Yalkut Shimoni*, 76. *Rashi HaShalem* notes that the source of both Rashi and the *Yalkut* is *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer*, ch. 28. The passage referred to is not found in contemporary editions of *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* but does appear in the Venice 5304 edition.

received a prophecy in which God informed him that it would not be David who would build the Holy Temple but rather his son. Rashi, based on the Midrash,¹³ explains why Scripture stresses that God gave this message to Nassan that very night. “The man to whom I am sending you is quick. He might hire workers [immediately] and I would cause him loss [were I not to inform him right away that he is not to build the Temple].” Here again, we see David’s alacrity in carrying out the Divine Will.

We have here three examples of David’s haste.¹⁴ The incident in the *Gemara* where David moves the shard of pottery in order to build the Holy Temple despite its warning seems to be another situation where he is carried away by his enthusiasm. What is at the root of David’s hurry?

“Love ruins the regular order of things.” (*Bereishis Rabbah* 55:8)

David, the great lover of God, would not let himself be restrained by the regular order of things. Lovesickness could lead him to act rashly.

The *Gemara* in *Moed Katan* 16b gives us an insight into the nature of David’s love for God:

Rav Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yehonasan: What is meant by the verse “The statement of David son of Yishai, and the statement of the man established on high” (*II Shmuel* 23:1)? [The verse means,] the statement of David son of Yishai who established the yoke¹⁵ of *teshuvah*.

The commentary on *Moed Katan* attributed to Rashi explains in what sense David “established the yoke of *teshuvah*”:

He was the first to repent, and he paved the way for penitents, as we say in the first chapter of *Avodah Zarah* (4b), “David was not fit for that incident (i.e., he was too saintly to have sinned with Bas-sheva), but [it was planned that he commit that sin] so that if an individual sins, they tell him, ‘Take an example from David, for the Holy One, Blessed Is He, forgave him for that sin. You, too, should do *teshuvah*.’”

¹³ *Midrash Shmuel* 26.

¹⁴ We find another example when Saul ordered David to bring him one hundred foreskins of Philistines within a certain time limit. David brought him not one hundred foreskins but two hundred, and in advance of the time limit. See *I Shmuel* 18:26 and Rashi there.

¹⁵ The verse uses the word על for “on high.” Rabbi Yehonasan expounds it as a form of עול, “yoke.”

How can the *gemara* say that David “established the yoke of *teshuvah*”? Did not his ancestor Judah repent before him? Did not Reuben repent before him? Had the Jewish people not been fulfilling the commandment to do *teshuvah* for centuries before he was born?

Rav Tzadok HaKohen explains that David established the yoke of *teshuvah* in the sense that he was the first to do *teshuvah* of the highest order.¹⁶ No one before him had repented purely out of such deep love of God.

There is a great difference between repentance that is the result of fear of God and repentance that is the result of love of God. After *teshuvah* inspired by fear the sins a person has committed intentionally are considered as if they were unintentional. But after *teshuvah* inspired by love, the sins a person committed intentionally count to the credit of the penitent.¹⁷

How can this be? How can violating God’s will count to a sinner’s credit? There are those who explain this on the basis of the fact that repentance is itself a fulfillment of one of the Torah’s commandments. It is impossible to repent unless one has first sinned. Thus, after repentance, the sin has become a vehicle for coming closer to God. But this explanation is insufficient. For according to it, it is repentance that follows the sin that is the fulfillment of a commandment, not the sin itself.

The *Mei HaShiloach*¹⁸ and his disciple, Rav Tzadok HaKohen,¹⁹ deal with this problem. Addressing the Children of Israel before his death, Moshe Rabbeinu says, 'ממרים הייתם עם ה' (*Devarim* 9:7). It is clear from the context that this phrase means, “You have been rebellious towards Hashem,” or, “You have been rebellious against Hashem.” But the most literal rendition of the words is, “You have been rebellious *with* Hashem.” This verse tells us that on some level of existence, even when the Jews rebel, they rebel not *against* God, but *with* Him. Nothing can exist counter to the will of God the Omnipotent. At the core of existence, all of man’s actions, be they the fulfillment of commandments or sins, are manifestations of His will.

This is an idea found in several places in the works of Rav Tzadok, and he usually qualifies it with an important caveat. He says that this is a concept that we can accept intellectually, but it does not penetrate our

¹⁶ *Machsbevos Charutz*, Piotrkow, 5672, p. 186.

¹⁷ *Yoma* 86b.

¹⁸ *Mei HaShiloach*, vol. 2, *Parashas Eikev*, s.v. ממרים הייתם.

¹⁹ *Pri Tzaddik, Bamidbar, LeRosh Chodesh Menachem Av*, 1.

conscious experience. Man feels himself and views himself as the possessor of free will. This is the condition into which his Creator has put him. It is the only reality man knows, and the Torah he has been given is tailored to that reality. In it, man is in control of his decisions and responsible for them. He is ordered to fulfill commandments and forbidden to commit sins. The fact that God wills everything that man does is not part of human experience in its present stage. It is something man will realize at a future point in the evolution of the cosmos. In the current state of things, to the extent that God has in some sense withdrawn His Presence to allow for the existence of entities other than Himself, so He has withdrawn His absolute control and foreknowledge, and allowed for free will to exist. If man uses it properly, he reaps its benefits. If not, he suffers the consequences. For all intents and purposes, free will is reality. With one exception.

Man can align himself with God's will to the point that he regrets his past actions not out of any feelings of self-preservation. Man can put personal interest aside, and harmonize with the Divine intent to the extent the he feels pain over his sins because of the "pain" of the *Shechinah*. When he does this, he transcends the confines of the material world. He puts himself on that higher plane where everything, even actions that in this world are corrupt, is seen to be an expression of the Divine will. Thus, when the penitent attains this state, God considers even sins that he committed intentionally to the credit of the penitent.²⁰

This is the reasoning behind the opinion in the *Gemara* (*Berachos* 34b) that holds that "In the place where penitents stand, the perfectly righteous are unable to stand." Someone who has repented out of love of God has transformed evil into good. He has brought the Divine Presence into an area that the perfectly righteous never set foot in. And it is for this reason that Israel will be redeemed through repentance.²¹ When God will show His people how everything that happened throughout the course of history was a manifestation of His will, it will come about through Israel's ascent through penitence to the dimension in which this state is a part of their reality.

David, through the power of his repentance fueled by his burning love of God, was able to glimpse the level on which everything can be seen as emanating from the Divine.²² "Even as I walk in the valley of the

²⁰ *Takanas HaShavin*, op. cit., p. 20.

²¹ *Sanhedrin* 97b.

²² *Likkutei Maamarim*, Lublin, 5687, p. 96. Rav Tzadok writes there of David, דמדת מלך כך הוא יגיע והשתדלות אדם עד שמוצא דבר זה דהכל בידי שמים.

shadow of death, I shall not fear evil, for You are with me” (*Tehillim* 23:4). David saw that the existence of evil is not absolute. Even in its realm, “You are with me.”²³ He, the progenitor and soul of Mashiach, knew that this state was attainable universally and that it would be the ultimate fulfillment of God’s objective.

To one who deeply loves God, the desire to attain this objective is great, so great that one’s judgment can become seriously clouded. “One who says, ‘I will sin and repent, I will sin and repent,’ is not given the ability to repent.”²⁴ Rav Tzadok explains²⁵ that despite its appearance, this *mishnah* does not deal with someone who thinks he can “beat the system.” *Mishnayos* would not deal directly with someone so low. The *mishnah* addresses someone who appreciates the unparalleled heights that can be gained through repentance. Such a person could be tempted to sin just so he could have the opportunity to repent. The *mishnah* tells him that this path is guaranteed to end in failure.

This, in fact, is the subject of the *aggadeta* we have been discussing. David’s objective in life was to bring mankind to perfection. He devoted himself passionately to it, and rushed to attain it. David—the vulture at the Covenant between the Parts—was in a hurry to consume the enemies of God, the evil nations. He was in a hurry to father the Mashiach. He was in a hurry to construct the Holy Temple, from which the ultimate good would emanate and permeate all existence. He was in such a hurry that when a shard of pottery miraculously warned him not to move it, he did not listen. He could not wait.

“King David, *alav haShalom*, wanted to be Mashiach, and that the ultimate redemption should take place in his days.” (Rav Tzadok HaKohen, *Pri Tzaddik, Parashas Vayeishev* 9)

God saw what was at the root of David’s failure in this instance. Someone who lets passionate love affect his good judgment puts himself at a great risk. David understood that the most powerful way to bring the Divine Presence into the world is through repentance inspired by love. It not only eradicates evil, it transforms it into good. Someone motivated by this idea who acts rashly might start to consider ways to maximize its effect. He might ponder what barriers to break, what new areas into which to bring the Presence of the *Shechinah*. The promise that

²³ *Doveir Tzedek*, Piotrkow, 5681, p. 77.

²⁴ *Yoma* 8:9.

²⁵ *Takanas HaShavin*, op. cit, p. 82.

teshuvah mei'abavah holds might tempt a man to sin. "I will sin, and I will repent." This is a perversion of God's will, an abuse of His greatest gift.

The Undoing of Creation

The shard of pottery told David, "Do not move me from this spot for I am holding down the waters of the deep since the day the Torah was given, when the whole earth trembled." We noted above that David's failure to heed this warning indicated some defect in Israel's acceptance of the Torah. This in turn resulted in the overflow of the waters of the deep, a reversion to the primordial state of formlessness that existed at the beginning of Creation. We now have some insight into this.

When the Jewish people accepted the Torah, they committed themselves to do that which it commands and to refrain from that which it prohibits. When a Jew sins, it is not a denial of the Covenant between him and God. The Torah recognizes that man is prone to violate its commandments, and fixes rules that apply in that contingency. Punishments and repentance are also parts of the Torah.

But David's error in not listening to the piece of pottery would have led to something more serious. It would ultimately have made a mockery out of the acceptance of the Torah. For Israel to accept that a sin defined by the Torah is a sin, with the intent to willingly transgress it—even with the hope of eventual repentance—is an abrogation of the compact between God and Israel embodied in the Torah. The Jewish people were meant to accept the Torah in order to obey it, not—God forbid—in order to violate it. Thus, when David, the king and representative of the Jewish people, displays rash judgment in his love-sickness in a way that indicates that he does not accept the terms of the agreement between God and the Jewish people as binding in the same sense that God meant them as binding, it is tampering with the very acceptance of the Torah. And when the Jewish people do not accept the Torah, God returns the world to its state of formlessness and void, the state described as "The Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters" (*Bereishis* 1:2).²⁶

²⁶ The *Or HaChaim* (*Bereishis* 37:18) discusses the basis of the brothers' decision to kill Yosef. He suggests the possibility that they decided to kill him with the intention to repent afterwards. *Imrei David* (Rav David HaLevi Horowitz of Stanislav, Bilgoraj, 5694), no. 147, notes that this suggestion runs counter to the Gemara we cited above, "One who says, 'I will sin and repent, I will sin and repent,' is not given the ability to repent." But according to what we are saying here, it is possible that it was only after the Jewish people accepted the

This, then, was the sin for which the world was worthy of obliteration when David dug the foundations of the Holy Temple. And now we can understand why its obliteration was not in contravention of the Divine pledge never again to destroy the world by flood. God said of the Flood in the days of Noach, “I will obliterate man whom I created” (*Bereishis* 6:7). It was a destruction of the world as it had been. But the potential devastation of the world that would have resulted had the Jews not accepted the Torah would not have been destruction in the true sense. For Creation was conditional upon Israel’s acceptance of the Torah. Had the condition not been fulfilled, it is not that the world would have been destroyed. There would have been no need to destroy it. It would retroactively never have existed. The Divine promise would not have been broken.

This difference between the Flood in the days of Noach and the flood that was on the verge of taking place in the days of David is illustrated by the ways they took place. While it is true that the depths overflowed in the days of Noach, that Flood was primarily characterized by rain. Heaven was actively bringing destruction upon Earth.²⁷ But in the incident involving David there is no mention of rain. The earth self-

Torah that one who says “I will sin and repent” is not given the ability to repent to ensure that the Torah was accepted as God intended it to be. Before the Jewish people accepted the Torah, sinning with intent to repent may have been a viable option.

²⁷ *Bereishis* 7:11 says, *בשנת שש מאות שנה לחיי נח בחודש השני בשבעה עשר יום לחודש*, “In the six hundredth year of Noach’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on this day all the springs of the great deep burst open, and the windows of the heavens opened up.” Rashi comments, *תהום רבה. מדה כנגד מדה הם*, “*The great deep*. Measure for measure. They sinned with “*great* is man’s evil” (*Bereishis* 6:5) and they were punished by “the *great* deep.”

The commentators discuss what textual problem Rashi clarifies. *Gur Aryeh* says it is the superfluity of the word *רבה*, “great,” for the deep is great by definition. Rashi solves the problem by noting that the seemingly extra word links our verse with 6:5 and teaches us why God inflicted this particular punishment. *Maskil LeDavid* suggests that Rashi is bothered by a grammatical irregularity. The noun *תהום*, “deep,” is masculine. It should take the masculine adjective *רב*. Yet in our verse it takes the feminine adjective *רבה*. Rashi explains that the feminine adjective is used to link our verse to 6:5 which uses the same word. According to what we are saying here, Rashi may have had an additional point in mind. He may be explaining why God had the springs of the deep burst open at all and did not bring the Flood through rain alone.

deconstructs through an automatic mechanism with Heaven playing no visibly active role.

Moreover, when God formed the world, He first created *ex nihilo* the Foundation Stone of the Altar in the Holy Temple, the approximate location of David's excavation. It became larger and larger and developed into the earth.²⁸ Thus, were God to have undone Creation, He would have done so from its point of origin.

And now we understand why David and Achitofel did not resolve the question of erasing the Name of God in order to save the world on the basis of the principle that the laws of the Torah are suspended in life-threatening situations. The source of this principle is the verse "You shall live by them" (*Vayikra* 18:5), i.e., by the commandments of the Torah. The commandments are there to give life, not to cause its loss. But this doctrine is built on the assumption that life in fact exists. Preserving an existing life overrides the commandments of the Torah.

David and Achitofel, however, were not faced with such a situation. They were in an extraordinary predicament in which the very existence of life at all was in question. "You shall live by them" did not apply. That was a commandment given to the living obligating them to sustain their lives. It was not a commandment for the quasi-living to consolidate their lives at the expense of showing dishonor to the Name of God. Other principles had to be invoked to resolve that problem. ❧

²⁸ *Yoma* 45b.