



ORTHODOX
UNION

Nach Yommi

COMPANION

by Rabbi Jack Abramowitz

Volume I:
Neviim Rishonim - Early Prophets

Section D:
Shmuel Bet - II Samuel

III Sammuell

Chapter 1

The Death of Saul: The Untold Story

So, David's army had defeated Amalek and returned to Ziklag. Shaul's army had been defeated by the Philistines, and Shaul and his sons were killed. A runner came to David from Shaul's camp with torn clothes and dirt on his head, signs of mourning. He told David of Israel's defeat at the hands of the Philistines, including the deaths of Shaul and Jonathan. David asked how he knew Shaul and Jonathan were dead - did he see it for himself or did he simply hear it from others? The man claimed to have come across Saul mortally wounded on his own spear. According to the messenger, Shaul asked him to finish him off, which he did. He then took Shaul's crown and arm band as proof, which he presented to David. The people cried over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, as well as over the general defeat of the army of Israel.

You may recall that David previously refused to kill Shaul, or to allow him to be harmed by others. He was incensed that this young man, who identified himself as an Amalekite convert to Judaism, would dare put Shaul to death, even if he asked for it. (The factors mentioned in the last chapter as circumstances mitigating Shaul's suicide would not apply to euthanasia. We are not allowed to kill others, even if they are already dying, even if they ask us to.) David used his royal authority to execute the man for killing Shaul. He then sang a dirge in memory of Shaul and Jonathan.

It is unclear whether the Amalekite convert actually killed the mortally-injured Shaul. If he did, this chapter fills in details not mentioned in the last chapter of I Samuel. But it is also possible that the man lied in order to curry favor with David. He may have figured that if he took credit for killing Shaul, David would reward him. Unfortunately, this was not the case.

Chapter 2

Things Get Out of Hand

G-d instructed David to go to Hebron, which was in the territory of Judah. There, the Tribe of Judah anointed him and crowned him king over them. David heard how the people of Yaveish-Gilad recaptured Shaul's remains and gave them a proper burial. David blessed the people of Yaveish-Gilad and promised them his support. But Shaul's general Avner took Shaul's surviving son, Ishboshes, and made him king in Shaul's place. He started gradually, with Ephraim and Benjamin, until Ishboshes eventually reigned over all of Israel except for Judah. Ishboshes reigned for two years; David was king in Judah for seven years. It is unclear from the text whether Ishboshes' two years fell at the beginning, middle or end of David's seven.

(A brief diversion: Avner was a tremendous Torah scholar. He supported Ishboshes not because he insisted on pursuing a lost cause, but because he felt it was the will of G-d. The Torah tells us in Genesis 35:11 that kings (plural) were destined to be born from Jacob. At that time, all the founders of the Tribes were born except for Benjamin. Avner inferred that a minimum of two Benjaminite kings were foretold by this verse. He therefore believed that Ishboshes was the rightful king, at least temporarily.)

Now, here's where things spun wildly out of control. Avner was out with Ishboshes' army. They came to a pool of water, with Yoav and David's men on the other side. Avner challenged Yoav's men to a duel, presumably just fencing for sport. But things got out of hand and the fighting escalated far beyond mere sport. Soon, a full-scale battle broke out between the two forces. Yoav's brother Asahel started chasing Avner. Avner asked him to stop or he would be forced to defend himself. Asahel refused to break off his pursuit, so Avner dealt him a fatal blow, carefully executed by the fifth rib. Yoav and his other brother, Avishai, pursued Avner, but they were unable to capture him. Avner called out to Yoav that things had gone too far; Yoav replied that Avner never should have started with the whole idea of a duel. Nevertheless, Yoav called off his men. David's army lost 19 men, plus Asahel. The army of Ishboshes, however, had 360 casualties. To make matters even worse, the two factions were now at war.

Chapter 3

Ishboshes Hoists Himself on His Own Petard

The war between David and Ishboshes continued, with David growing stronger and Ishboshes losing ground. It was then that Ishboshes dealt himself a disastrous blow.

Ishboshes called in Avner, his trusted general, and accused him of sleeping with a woman named Ritzpah, who had been Shaul's concubine. Avner was appalled not only at the accusation, but at being spoken to thusly by the leader whom he had propped up. "What am I, chief dog-catcher of Judah?" he asked. (Really! Go look it up - verse 8.) Figuring that the word of G-d, to have at least two Benjaminite kings, had been fulfilled, Avner took this as a sign that Ishboshes' time was up; he defected to David's side. Ishboshes was speechless because he knew that without Avner's support, he was lost.

Avner sent word offering his talents to David. David replied that he wouldn't even see him until Avner returned Michal, the wife of David whom Shaul had given away. Avner retrieved Michal from Palti, who is here called Paltiel. (The name of G-d is appended to Palti's name because of the great restraint he showed in not having relations with her.) Avner then contacted his colleagues in the Tribes that supported Ishboshes and told them that David was the rightful king, rallying support for him. But...

David had wisely kept Avner and Yoav apart. (Yoav, you may recall, wanted Avner's head for killing his brother, Asahel.) Yoav yelled at David for trusting Avner, who supported Shaul. He then went after Avner himself. He killed Avner with the same blow that Avner had used on Asahel.

David was NOT okay with that. He declined to use his royal prerogative to execute Yoav, figuring that his reign was too new and still tenuous. Instead, he cursed Yoav, that his family would always include contaminated people, lepers, and other such misfortunes. David instructed Yoav and his other men to tear their clothes and put on sackcloth; he, himself, walked behind the coffin, an act a king is not normally permitted to do, but which was deemed necessary in this instance. Avner was buried in Hebron and David composed a dirge, as he did for Shaul and Jonathan.

People tried to comfort David, but he would not be consoled. Everyone saw how profound his grief was and it was obvious to all that David did not order the murder of Avner. And, while David did not consider his position secure enough to punish Yoav, he didn't forget, either. (Wait until we get to I Kings chapter 2.)

Chapter 4

Beware of Merchants Bearing Wheat

Ishboshes was distressed to hear about Avner's death, as without Avner he had no hope of consolidating his rule. Two of his men, Baanah and Reichav, took the opportunity to overthrow Ishboshes. They either dressed as wheat merchants or entered the palace with a group of wheat merchants, and entered the king's chambers while he was sleeping. After killing Ishboshes, they severed his head and brought it to David. This was not the best idea they could have had.

David's reaction: "If I killed the person who claimed to have killed Shaul, rather than rewarding him, why do you think I'd reward you for killing an innocent man in his bed?" He had the two assassins executed and had the head of Ishboshes buried in Avner's tomb in Hebron.

(This chapter tells us incidentally that Jonathan had a son named Mephiboshes who was dropped by his nurse as a small child and, as a result, could not walk. File that piece of information away, as it will become important in a few chapters.)

Chapter 5

David Goes 'Round the Mulberry Bush

Representatives of all the Tribes came to David in Hebron and announced their allegiance to him. They sealed a pact with David and anointed him king over all Israel. David was 30 years old at this time and had ruled over Judah for seven and a half years. The kingdom now united, it was time to consolidate Jerusalem.

Jerusalem, you may recall, straddled the border of Judah and Benjamin. Judah had conquered their half, but Benjamin's was still occupied by Jebusites. The Jebusites taunted David saying that he could not enter until he first removed the blind and the lame, so well was the city defended. Of course, David conquered the citadel and called it "City of David." G-d was with David and his greatness increased.



Hiram, king of Tzor (Tyre, in what is now Lebanon), sent cedar, stone, and workmen to build a palace for David. David realized that G-d had established his reign. He took more wives and had many children with them.

The Philistines weren't too happy about David and they gathered against him. With G-d's okay, David went up to confront the Philistines and defeated them. He destroyed the idols that the Philistines left behind. The Philistines re-grouped. This time, G-d told David not to confront them directly, but to go behind them, opposite some mulberry trees. He was to attack when the tops of the mulberry trees sounded as if troops were advancing. This David did, handily defeating the enemy.

Chapter 6

Michal: Childless Mother

David gathered 30,000 prominent people from all the Tribes to retrieve the Ark from the house of Avinadav, where it resided since being returned by the Philistines back in I Samuel chapter 7. They put it on a new wagon, which was led by Avinadav's sons, Uzzah and Achyo. David and the rest of the people danced and played instruments in celebration.

Then, tragedy struck. The Ark slipped, so Uzzah reached out and grabbed it. The Navi doesn't call it a sin, he calls it an error, but the result was the same: Uzzah died. David was distraught and had second thoughts about bringing the Ark to Jerusalem. Instead, they left it in the home of a man named Oveid-Edom, where it resided for three months.

David saw that Oveid-Edom's household was blessed because of the Ark's presence, so he decided to try again. This time he had the Ark carried by Levites, and he offered sacrifices every six steps. David danced with unbridled joy. His wife Michal saw him leaping about and thought it was undignified; she criticized him that even the maidservants would look down on him. David replied that he danced in front of Hashem and that if he humbled himself in front of G-d, even those same maidservants would praise him for it. As a punishment for speaking so insolently to David, Michal had no children until the day she died.

Now, that last bit requires some thought, as we know that Michal had a son. Two explanations are given: (1) Her son was already born at this time and Michal had no further children for the rest of her life; (2) Michal died in childbirth, with the result that she had no children "until the day of her death."

Chapter 7

"Oh, No, Not I. I Will Survive."

So here's David, living comfortably in his new palace, secure from his enemies on all sides. He turns to the prophet Nathan and says, "Why should I live in a house and G-d's Ark still be covered by a tent?" Nathan understood that David wanted to build the Temple and he agreed that it was a good idea.



G-d disagreed. He appeared to Nathan that night with a message for David. G-d said that His Presence had been in a tent since the Jews left Egypt and He never asked for a Temple. He said to tell David that he would not be the one to build it, but that his son, yet to be born, would be the one to build it. Furthermore, that son's dynasty would be eternal. Even when they deserved punishment, the kings descended from David would never lose the throne as Shaul had. (We see from here that Moshiach - the Messiah - must be descended not only from David, but specifically from his son Shlomo - Solomon.)

David was no doubt disappointed that G-d would not permit him to build the Temple, but his reaction was a prayer of thanks to G-d for treating him with so much kindness - not only him, but his descendants for all future generations!

The reason David was not permitted to build the Temple is not stated here, but it is in the Books of Kings and Chronicles. David was a warrior who had shed much blood. This may have been necessary and permitted, but the Temple, a house of peace, had to be built by someone who had not spilled blood.

The Yalkut Shimoni (II Samuel 145) spins that a little differently. So holy were David's actions, that his warfare was like sacrifices to G-d. Had David built the Temple, it would have been so holy that it could never have been destroyed. That may sound like a good thing, but when the Jews sinned, the only option would be to take it all out on them, rather than a house of wood and stone. The Temple had to be able to be destroyed so that the Jewish people could survive.

Chapter 8

Homeland Security

David subdued the Philistines and captured the city of Meseg Ha'amah, another name for Gath, referring to its role as chief city of the Philistines. He then turned his attention to Moav. He took a rope and measured the captives on the ground. Two-thirds were killed and one-third were kept alive. (According to the Midrash, the reason David treated Moav so harshly was because they promised his family sanctuary - way back in I Samuel chapter 22 - but they killed them, instead. However, King Nachash of Ammon gave refuge to David's brother Elihu because David was the enemy of Saul, who had defeated Ammon and "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." We'll get back to Nachash in chapter 10.)

David also conquered King Hadadezer of Tzovah, who was trying to take control of the Euphrates. David captured his chariots and horsemen; he hamstringed all the horses except enough for 100 chariots. (He had limited options. A Jewish king is not allowed to have more horses than necessary, he couldn't return them to the enemy, and killing them would be unnecessarily cruel. He took his precedent for hamstringing them from Joshua in chapter 11 of that Book.) The kingdom Aram (of Damascus - specified because there was another Aram) came to help Hadadezer and were also defeated. David captured Hadadezer's golden shields and large quantities of copper.

To'i, king of Chamas, heard that David defeated Hadadezer, who was an enemy of his. He sent his son Yoram to David with greetings, as well as vessels of gold, silver and copper. David dedicated all of these precious metals to the future Beis HaMikdash (Temple).

So great was David's reputation that even his enemies respected him. Even Edom, the descendants of Jacob's brother Esau, became subjects of David's kingdom.

The chapter ends with a list of David's "cabinet" - Yoav was his general, Yehoshafat was his historian, Tzadok and Achimelech eventually succeeded Evyasar as Kohein (Priest), S'rayah was scribe, Benayahu was military strategist and David's sons were advisors. (At this point, they were too young. As with Tzadok and Achimelech, the verse refers to a position they were destined to hold, rather than one they held at this point.)

Chapter 9

David Keeps His Word

After the fall of Ishboshes, David inquired as to whether Shaul had any living descendants. Most kings would want to know that in order to remove any potential pretenders, but David's motivation was to treat them kindly, as he promised Jonathan he would. It turned out that Jonathan's son, Mephiboshes, was alive. (You may recall from chapter 4 that Mephiboshes was injured as a child and his legs didn't work.)

David had Mephiboshes brought to him. Mephiboshes was understandably apprehensive, but David assured him that he just wanted to treat him well for the sake of his father, who had been David's best friend. Mephiboshes was to eat regularly at the king's table, just like a member of his own family.

Mephiboshes had a servant named Tzivah, who had previously served Shaul. David told Tzivah, "I have given Shaul's estate to Mephiboshes. You, Tzivah, work the land with your fifteen sons and your twenty servants. Use it to provide for Mephiboshes' son Micha, but Mephiboshes will be eating at my table."

Since he couldn't walk, Mephiboshes relocated to Jerusalem to be closer to David, at whose table he always ate.

Chapter 10

A Hasty Act Leads to War

Nachash, king of Ammon, died and was succeeded by his son, Chanun. (Ironically, "chanun" means "gracious" in Hebrew and Chanun was anything but!) David sent messengers to pay a "shiva call" to Chanun. (The consolation call was in gratitude for Nachash saving David's brother Elihu when the Moabites reneged on their promise of sanctuary.) Chanun, however, was suspicious of David's motivations. His advisors told him that the Jews were no doubt spies. Chanun punished the messengers by cutting off half their beards and half their

robes, up to the seat of their pants. He then sent them away in this embarrassing state. (Had he been sure that they were spies he would no doubt simply have executed them. This was what he did because he merely suspected them. Keep that in mind next time you go through screening at the airport.) The messengers sent word to David, who replied that they should stay in Jericho (the city nearest Ammon) until their beards grow back, then return to Jerusalem.

The Ammonites realized that they had goofed and set the stage for war. They decided that if war was inevitable, they'd better make a pre-emptive strike. However, they didn't have much of an army, so they hired mercenaries from local city-states. David heard that Ammon was assembling an army, so he got Yoav to rally his forces. Yoav divided the Israelite forces into two, one half to be directed by him and the other by his brother Avishai. They fought on two fronts with the understanding that if either group was in danger of being defeated, the other would come to save it.

The mercenaries from Aram fled in battle and the Ammonites knew that without them, they could not succeed, so they also ran away. Yoav and his men returned to Jerusalem. The mercenaries regrouped. Hadadezer, king of Tzovah (last seen in chapter 8 and here called Hadarezer) joined with them for another attack. Again, David got word and prepared for battle. Aram was defeated and Israel captured their charioteers and horsemen, as well as killing their commander. Aram saw they were defeated and signed a pact with Israel. They would not hire themselves out to Ammon after that.

Chapter III

Bath-Sheba in the Bath

We now come to one of the most difficult stories in the Book: David and Bath-Sheba. (In Ashkenazi Hebrew, this author's usual default, that would be Bas-Sheva, but I think we'll go with the more easily recognizable Sephardi spelling, Batsheva.)

It was summer and David took an evening stroll on the roof of his palace. From the rooftop, he saw a woman bathing. (Many people misread verse 2 to say that she was bathing on her roof; that's not what it says. She was bathing - or using the mikva - inside; he could see in her window from HIS roof.) David sent messengers to inquire after her; she was Batsheva, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. (According to the Radak, he was called "the Hittite" either because he was an actual Hittite convert to Judaism, or because he used to live in a Hittite neighborhood.) David sent for her and slept with her. Later, she sent David a message that she was pregnant. This was especially awkward for David, since Uriah was away with the army and clearly it could not be his.

David sent a message to Yoav, commander of his army, that Uriah should be given leave and sent to Jerusalem. Uriah reported to David, who asked how things were at the front. After perfunctory conversation, David instructed Uriah to go home to his wife. Uriah, however, did not listen. Instead, he slept in the entrance to the palace. When David found out, he called for Uriah and asked, "What's the matter with you?" (Very loosely paraphrased.) Uriah replied, "What kind of person would I be if I indulged in such comforts while my master Yoav and my fellow soldiers are sleeping in the field?"

So, David wined and dined Uriah, hoping that getting tipsy would loosen him up and get him to go home to his wife. It didn't work. So David wrote Yoav a letter, instructing him to put Uriah in the front lines, where the danger of being killed was greatest. (He wasn't instructed to kill him, just to assign him hazardous duty.) David sent the letter back with Uriah, who was apparently trustworthy enough that David wasn't worried he would read it!

Yoav put Uriah in the front lines and, sure enough, he got killed. Yoav sent word to David that the battle had gone poorly and that Uriah was among the dead. David understood the meaning implicit in Yoav's report and replied with general words of support and encouragement. Batsheva heard that Uriah had died and mourned him. After her mourning, David married her and she had a son. And, the Navi tells us, G-d was none too happy with what David had done.

The complication here is the question of what exactly did David do? Not only is adultery prohibited, one is not permitted to marry a woman with whom he had an adulterous affair. Even if David had done so extra-legally, G-d would never establish David's kingdom (and Moshiach - the Messiah) through an impermissible marriage! So what really happened?

Going to war, if a soldier never returned, his wife would remain an agunah - a woman who can never remarry because it is unknown whether her husband is alive or dead. Accordingly, soldiers would give their wives a get - a bill of divorce - that in the event they did not return was effective retroactive from the date of their departure to war. What David did was to ensure that Uriah's retroactive divorce kicked in, so that his affair was retroactively not extramarital. (It's complicated but technically effective. However, that doesn't make it right.)

As far as getting Uriah killed, David had legal grounds to do this. Uriah refused David's order to go home. His statement about the impropriety of sleeping in comfort while the army was in the fields was a tacit criticism of David, who slept in his palace. Referring to Yoav as "my master" (rather than "your servant") when speaking to David was a grievous breach of protocol, showing honor to the general over the king. A king would be justified in avenging his honor against these little rebellions, so David wasn't technically wrong, but these were small slights that he would normally overlook, were he not trying to cover up his own actions.

So David was wrong - make no mistake. But he wasn't as guilty of certain acts as a surface reading would make it appear. When great people make such spectacularly bad calls, the Torah and Nach express their misdeeds in the harshest terms. (See Talmud Shabbos pages 55b through 56b for many such examples.)

Chapter 12

David is Found Out

G-d sent the prophet Nathan to see David. Nathan told David about an incident that ostensibly occurred in his kingdom:



A rich man and a poor man were neighbors. The rich man had many sheep and cattle; the poor man had one little lamb that he loved like a child. The rich man had a guest and didn't feel like using any of his own flocks for food, so he took the poor man's sheep and served it to the guest. How would David rule in such a case?

David was livid. "A person who would do such a thing deserves to die!" he said. Nathan replied, "That man is you!" David, as king, had many wives and concubines; there was no need for him to deprive Uriah of his one wife. As punishment for having Uriah killed, David's descendants would be plagued by bloodshed. As punishment for taking another man's wife, his wives will be taken - and not privately, as David had done, but in full view of the public.

Unlike Shaul, who, when confronted with his sins by Shmuel (Samuel), protested his pure motivations as mitigating factors, David humbly acknowledged the fact that he was simply wrong. Because of this, his own life was spared, but the baby resulting from the union would die. (A full discussion of the theological implications of babies dying is clearly beyond the scope of this synopsis.)

The baby was born and became sick. David prayed and fasted and slept on the floor. His advisors tried to get him to eat, but he wouldn't give in. On the seventh day (presumably the seventh day of the baby's life, not the seventh day of his illness), the baby died. David's servants were afraid to tell him, but he saw them whispering and figured it out. His reaction was surprising: he got up, washed, changed his clothes, and sat down for a meal. They asked why he was acting so normally. He replied that when the baby was alive, there was a chance he could persuade G-d to spare him, but now that the baby was dead, fasting would accomplish nothing. Poignantly, David added, "I will be going to him; he won't be coming back to me."

Later, David and Batsheva had another son, whom they named Shlomo (Solomon). He was also called "Yedidiah" ("Loved by G-d") because G-d sent word through Nathan that He was especially fond of Solomon.

Yoav, general of David's army, was completing a siege on Ammon. He sent word to David that he should come and personally lead his troops to victory. He did, and acquired a very large ceremonial crown. (In fact, it was so large that certain commentators, such as the Radak, suggest that it was purely decorative and not actually worn.) The Navi tells us that David punished the inhabitants of the conquered city with iron tools, such as saws and axes. What is unclear from the verse is whether he killed them with these instruments, or perhaps merely put them to work with them.

Chapter 13

A Rape and a Murder

David had a son named Avshalom (Absalom). He had a sister named Tamar. Another brother, Amnon, lusted after Tamar.

The exact relationship between Amnon and Tamar is not made clear. They were probably half-siblings, either children of David from different mothers, or perhaps Tamar had the same mother, but a different father. In

either event, they appear to be half-siblings or step-siblings, but not full siblings. (Tamar and Avshalom were full siblings.)

So, as we said, Amnon lusted after Tamar. His friend Yonadav gave him the following advice: Amnon should pretend to be ill and request that his sister Tamar be sent to care for him. (It is not stated whether Yonadav's intention was that Amnon abuse Tamar, as he ended up doing, or whether this was just a ruse to get some "alone time" that Amnon took too far.)

So Amnon did as Yonadav suggested. When Tamar came to his room, Amnon sent his servants out. Then he raped her. She begged him not to, saying that if he spoke to David, he would surely permit them to marry. (If they were step-siblings, she may have meant it. If they were half-siblings, it was probably just a stalling tactic.) When he got what he was after, the sight of her sickened him and he cast her out in her torn, disheveled clothes, locking the door behind her.

Tamar's brother Avshalom found her crying and figured out what had happened. He comforted her and resolved to take care of Amnon but good. David found out and was angry about it, but he did not punish Amnon publicly, possibly to avoid a scandal. Two years passed...

Fast forward: Avshalom was making a feast to celebrate the shearing of his sheep in the territory of Ephraim. He invited his father King David to attend. David declined. So Avshalom said, "Well, at least send Amnon to represent you!" David thought this request was a little strange, but he agreed to it. Avshalom then instructed his servants that, when he gives the signal, they should pounce on Amnon and kill him. This they did.

When the king's other sons saw Amnon attacked, they feared Avshalom was murdering them in order to make a coup. (Remember how Avimelech killed his brothers, the sons of Gideon, in Judges chapter 9?) They mounted their mules and fled. A rumor reached David in Jerusalem that Avshalom had, in fact, killed them all. Yonadav was there and he figured out what must have happened; he assured David that only Amnon must be dead. (Charming fellow that he was, when David's other sons arrived, he basically said, "See? I told you so!" Keep in mind that none of this ever would have happened if not for Yonadav's bad advice in the first place, so he's the last one who should be gloating!)

Avshalom knew he'd better not go home, so he ran away to Geshur. (Talmi, king of Geshur, was his mother's father - see chapter 3, verse 3.) Avshalom stayed in Geshur for three years. David mourned for Amnon and longed for his estranged son Avshalom.

Chapter 14

"Why'd You Set My Field On Fire?"

Yoav saw how much David missed Avshalom and he contrived a plan to reunite them. He hired an actress from Tekoa to "role play" before King David.



The woman came dressed in mourners' clothes and told David that she was a widow who had had two sons. But they argued and one killed the other. Now the rest of the family wanted to lynch the remaining son. This, of course, would leave her completely bereft of husband and sons. David said he would order that no one may touch the surviving son. The woman then asked for permission to speak freely.

Clearly what she was hinting at was that Amnon was gone. Should David be deprived of Avshalom, also? David, being pretty savvy, asked, "Did Yoav put you up to this?" She admitted that he did, so David turned to Yoav and said, "Fine. Go to Geshur and bring Avshalom back to Jerusalem. He can live here safely, but I won't see him."

At this point the Navi tells us that Avshalom was an especially handsome man with an exceptional head of hair that he would have cut once a year. (His hair will be important later on.)

Avshalom lived in Jerusalem for two years without seeing his father. He sent for Yoav several times, but Yoav wouldn't come. (He knew Avshalom wanted him to intervene, but Yoav thought it was a hopeless cause.) Finally, Avshalom told his servants, "Go and set Yoav's field on fire." THAT got Yoav's attention! "Why'd you set my field on fire?" he asked. Avshalom asked, "Why'd you bring me back from Geshur if my father's never going to see me? What's the point? Let him see me! If I'm guilty, let him execute me!"

Yoav told David what Avshalom had said. David agreed to see him and they were reconciled.

Chapter 15

Avshalom Can't Leave Well Enough Alone

You would think that Avshalom would be satisfied. He got his revenge on Amnon and, after five years, was finally reconciled with his father. But here his ambition got the better of him.

First, he got himself a chariot, horses and fifty runners, to make himself look important. Then, he sat himself at the gates of the palace. He asked people coming for court cases about their situations. When they told him their stories, he would say, "It's so obvious you're correct! If only someone would make me judge, I'd see to it that you got justice!" If anyone tried to bow before him, he would stop them, then kiss them. This made him appear humble, like one of the common folk. The Navi tells us that he "stole the hearts" of the people.

Avshalom went to David and requested permission to offer sacrifices in Hebron. Permission granted, he rounded up 200 important guests to accompany him. He then sent agents to the various Tribes with instructions that, at the signal, they should announce that Avshalom was crowned king in Hebron. Achitofel, one of David's advisors, joined Avshalom when he pulled his coup.

David got word that Avshalom had crowned himself. Knowing how popular Avshalom had become, David chose not to stay and turn Jerusalem into a battleground. Instead, he packed up his household and left town. Ten of his concubines remained behind at the palace. Among David's followers was a contingent of supporters he made while living in Gath. He asked Itai, one of the men from Gath, why he should stay, since this wasn't his

battle. Itai replied that David is his king and he will stick by him.

The Leviim (Levites) were carrying the Ark. David sent them and the Kohanim (“priests”) back to Jerusalem. “If it pleases G-d,” David explained, “He will bring me back. If not, let Him do as He sees fit.”

Then David learned that Achitofel was part of the conspiracy against him. This distressed him greatly and he prayed that G-d should confuse the usually-sound advice of Achitofel. David then asked another of his advisors, a man named Chushai, to return to Jerusalem and to pretend to offer his services to Avshalom. This would give David a man on the inside, in addition to Tzadok and Evyasar, the Kohanim he had already dispatched. Anything of importance that Chushai discovered, he would send word to David by way of the Kohanim.

Chapter 16

Lies and Bad Advice

Tziva, servant of Mephiboshes, came to David with donkeys bearing food and drink. While David appreciated the provisions, he wondered where Mephiboshes himself was. Tziva said that he was rejoicing in David’s downfall. He expected that in the chaos, the throne of his family, the family of King Saul, would be restored. This displeased David so much, that he used his royal authority to confiscate all of Mephiboshes’ property, which he then gave to Tziva. (Unfortunately, as we shall later see, Tziva was lying.)

King David continued his travels and came to a place called Bachurim, where a relative of King Saul named Shimei ben Gera came out and cursed him. He threw stones and yelled at David, “This is what you get for what you did to Saul!” Avishai offered to strike him down for his insolence, but David stopped him. “What does it matter?” asked David. “My own son deposed me, what do I care what this Benjaminite thinks?” David walked away, Shimei cursing and throwing stones behind him.

Avshalom and his party reached Jerusalem. David’s friend Chushai arrived and offered his services. “Aren’t you loyal to your friend David?” asked Avshalom. “No,” replied Chushai, “I’m loyal to the position. As I served David, I will serve you.”

Avshalom asked Achitofel, his chief advisor, what steps he should take to cement his kingship. Achitofel told Avshalom to cohabit with the ten concubines of David who had remained behind in the palace; this would demonstrate that he was the king now. So they pitched a tent on the roof (the same roof from which David had originally seen Batsheva!) and Avshalom took the concubines into it, in full view of the public. (This fulfilled Nathan’s prophecy in chapter 12, that what David had done privately would be done to him publicly.)

Chapter 17

The Stage is Set for a Confrontation

Achitofel's next advice: he wanted to gather 12,000 troops to pursue David in order to strike him down while he was tired from fleeing and ill-prepared. With this strategy, Achitofel was sure there would be minimal casualties. Avshalom liked the idea, but he asked Chushai for his input.

Chushai, who was secretly working in David's best interests, might not have been able to forestall the incident with the concubines, but he did feel he could sway this course of action. "You know that your father and his men are skilled warriors - they won't be caught by surprise. When they start to get the upper hand on your army, the rest will become discouraged. I suggest you take the time to gather a massive force from all over the country, then eradicate his army altogether. If he takes refuge in a city, that city should be razed to the ground." G-d caused Avshalom to prefer Chushai's plan to Achitofel's.

Chushai then told Tzadok and Evyasar, the Kohanim ("priests") about both plans, so that David could prepare. They sent Achimaatz and Jonathan, sons of Evyasar to David, but they were spotted en route. Avshalom's men went to capture them, but they were hidden by a farmer's wife in Bachurim. They hid in a well, which she covered with a blanket. She then spread grain out on the blanket, as if it had been drying there. The soldiers went right past the blanket, not even realizing that it covered a well. The woman told the soldiers that the messengers had headed off in the direction of the Jordan river. The soldiers never found them and they had to return to Jerusalem empty-handed.

The messengers safely reached David and gave him warning, so he moved his camp safely across the Jordan.

When Achitofel saw that Avshalom had accepted Chushai's advice over his own, he got his affairs in order and hanged himself. He saw which way the wind was blowing and knew that David would be restored, marking him a traitor. He opted to take his own life, rather than be executed upon David's return.

Avshalom's army crossed the Jordan. His general was a man named Amasa. He'll become important in a few chapters.

Meanwhile, a number of locals, including a man named Barzilai, brought David food and supplies. (Again, we'll hear more about Barzilai in a little while.)

Chapter 18

The Battle Joined

David divided his army into three forces, appointing Yoav, Avishai and Itai each to head a division. He wanted to go into battle, too, but his men objected. Capturing or killing David was the main objective of Avshalom's army. Having David on the battlefield was what they wanted! It would be better if David stayed in the city and helped with prayer. David acquiesced. He only asked that they spare Avshalom. Despite everything, he was David's son.

The battle took place in a forest and David's forces defeated Avshalom's. Avshalom tried to escape, but his long hair became tangled in some branches. (Remember his long hair from chapter 14? We told you that was going to be important!) Avshalom's mount moved on, out from under him, leaving him suspended from the branches by his hair. One of David's men saw Avshalom and informed his commander, Yoav. "Why didn't you strike him down?" asked Yoav. "I heard the king command you not to harm him!" replied the soldier. "Fine," said Yoav, "I'll do it myself."

Yoav stabbed Avshalom in the chest, but he did not die right away, so Yoav's armor-bearers beat Avshalom until he died. Yoav then blew a shofar to signal his troops that the battle was ended. Avshalom's body was tossed in a pit, which was then covered by large stones. We are told that Avshalom had erected a huge monument to himself; nevertheless, he ended up being buried in a pit.

Achimaatz wanted to go to the city in order to tell David what had happened, but Yoav tried to stop him because of the news of Avshalom's death, which David would not like. Yoav sent another messenger instead. Achimaatz persisted until Yoav finally relented and let him go, too. Achimaatz took a different route and overtook the other messenger.

David's lookouts saw a lone runner and realized it was a messenger. They saw another runner behind him and knew that he, too, was a messenger. When he got closer, they recognized the first messenger as Achimaatz and David cheered up that it must be good news. When Achimaatz arrived, he told David that the battle was over and his position was secured. Right away David asked how Avshalom was and Achimaatz realized why Yoav didn't want to send him. Achimaatz held off answering until the second runner arrived with the news of Avshalom's death.

Chapter 19

Absalom, Absalom!

David grieved over Absalom's death. He went upstairs and cried, "Avshalom, my son! If only I could have died in your place!" (He actually said "Avshalom" five times and "my son" eight times.) This turned the victory celebration of David's followers into a period of mourning. Yoav came and gave David a metaphorical "slap in the face."

"These people put their lives on the line for you! By mourning over Avshalom like this, you're sending the message that you'd rather he lived and they died. Now get out there and act like a king before you lose the support of everyone who fought on your behalf!" So David went out to the people.

The Tribes who had abandoned David in favor of Avshalom heard about the battle's outcome and started moving towards properly reinstating David. David wanted his own Tribe, Judah, to be foremost among them. Furthermore, he told Amasa, who had commanded Avshalom's forces, that he would make him general of his army. (The words in Hebrew "tachas Yoav" could either mean "instead of Yoav" or "under Yoav," so it is unclear which David meant. Either way, it was a good offer.) Amasa encouraged the heads of Judah towards reconciliation.

On his way back to Jerusalem, David once again encountered Shimei ben Gera, who had cursed him on his exile. Shimei begged for his life. Avishai again wanted to punish Shimei for his insubordination, but David again stopped him. "What difference does it make?" said David, "I know I'm king."

Mephiboshes came to greet David. He had been mourning since David's exile from Jerusalem and his unkempt appearance showed it. "Why didn't you join me with the rest of my followers?" asked David. "I wanted to," said Mephiboshes. "I was the one who instructed Tziva to load those donkeys with supplies for you, but he left without me, knowing that I can't walk!" David wasn't sure who to believe, so he split the property he had given to Tziva in two, between them. "I don't care about the property," Mephiboshes said, "I'm just glad to see you restored safely to the throne."

Barzilai also came to greet David. The king wanted to reward him for sending provisions to his men when they were down and out. He offered Barzilai to come live in Jerusalem. "I'm 80 years old and I have lost the capacity to enjoy the finer things in life," said Barzilai. "I'd rather live out my life in my own town. It would be better if you took my son Chimham." So David took Chimham to Jerusalem with him.

When they crossed the Jordan, representatives of the Ten Tribes asked why Judah (and to a lesser degree, Benjamin) were monopolizing David. The people of Judah replied that it was simply because David was from their Tribe - he was a relative of theirs. "That makes no difference!" replied the Ten Tribes, "We have ten times as much stake in the king even if he is from Judah!" They reached an impasse in this debate, although Judah appears to have gotten the last word.

Chapter 20

Another Rebellion

A man from the Tribe of Benjamin named Sheva ben Bichri held a grudge that David (from the Tribe of Judah) had "usurped" the throne from Saul (a fellow Benjaminite). He refuted David's claim to the throne and called upon others to join him in his rebellion. (He either wanted to become king himself or perhaps to abolish the monarchy altogether.) Representatives from all Tribes except for Judah supported him.

David returned to Jerusalem. He supported the ten concubines who had been violated by Avshalom, but he no longer lived with them. One opinion in the Jerusalem Talmud is that it is prohibited for a king to continue to have relations with a woman who has been with another man, even by force. The other opinion is that, since this was a punishment for David's lack of restraint with Batsheva, he was repenting by showing restraint.

David summoned his new general, Amasa (who was either Yoav's deputy or replacement) and told him to assemble his forces and report in three days. Amasa went, but failed to return at the appointed time. David told Avishai (another general) that Sheva was potentially a bigger threat than Avshalom, so he took the army to defeat Sheva.

Amasa arrived at the site of the battle and Yoav went to greet him. But Yoav grabbed Amasa's beard, and jabbed his sword in by his fifth rib (Yoav's signature blow). His pretext was that Amasa had defied the king's order to return, but of course he was motivated by his own loss of position and prestige. Amasa dead, Yoav and Avishai took off after Sheva. Yoav's faithful soldiers tossed Amasa's body in a field and covered it with a blanket (or something). "Nothing to see here, folks! If you're for David, follow Yoav!"

(Just to keep a body count here, Yoav has now killed Avner, who defected to David's side, Avshalom, who David had ordered not be harmed, and Amasa, who David had appointed general. If you've had enough of Yoav, imagine how David must have felt. Stick around for I Kings and you'll see Yoav get his!)

They went to the walled city of Aveil, where Sheva had taken refuge. They started a siege, when a woman called out to Yoav. She asked why he was trying to destroy an innocent city without making overtures of peace. "G-d forbid!" he responded, "We just want Sheva ben Bichri." The woman assured Yoav that Sheva's head would shortly be flying over the wall to him. She told the people of the city of her arrangement and they gladly offered up Sheva. (Presumably they opted to execute him rather than turn him over alive so that he would not implicate them in their crimes.) Sheva dealt with, Yoav called off the siege and headed back to Jerusalem.

The Talmud derives a halacha from this incident. If enemies attack a city and say "Choose someone for us to kill" we may not single out a victim. But if they ask for a particular person, he may be handed over.

The chapter ends with an update of David's "command crew." Yoav was reinstated as commander of the army, a man named Adoram was in charge of taxation, and a man named Ira was David's "personal Kohein," to whom David would give all portions dues to Kohanim ("priests"). Again, we will see why this is important very soon.

Chapter 21

Famine, Vengeance, and an Unusual Number of Fingers and Toes

There was a three-year famine during the reign of King David. (The commentators disagree as to whether this incident occurred at this time in the narrative or earlier.) David inquired of G-d as to the cause and he was told that there were two reasons. First, it was because Saul was not properly eulogized and second, it was because Saul had killed (or tried to kill) the Gibeonites. (These two reasons may seem contradictory, but it's important to note that, for all his flaws, Saul was still a righteous person. Righteous doesn't mean perfect.)

You may recall that the Gibeonites tricked their way into a pact with Joshua and were servants to the Tabernacle. There is no recorded incident in which Saul persecuted Gibeonites. Either he figured that Joshua's deal of protection had expired and he actively tried to kill them, or many were killed as "collateral damage" in Nov, or that by killing the Kohanim of Nov, he had deprived the Gibeonites of a living. In any event, David called the Gibeonites and asked what he could do to square things. "Not much," they replied, "Just kill seven of Saul's descendants and we'll call it even!" This goes against the normal due process; David used his extra-legal authority, with G-d's indication that it was appropriate to do so.

So David gave the Gibeonites seven descendants of Saul, but not including Mephiboshes, who was under protection of his oath to Jonathan. They were killed and the corpses were publicly displayed. (Again, not normally permitted, but deemed necessary here as a warning not to mess with the Gibeonites.) Ritzpah, the mother of two of the victims, made a makeshift tent and kept a vigil over the corpses. She scared away birds by day and animals by night. When David heard about the dedication she was showing to the deceased, it inspired him how to rectify the other problem: that of not properly eulogizing Saul. David had the remains of Saul and Jonathan exhumed and reburied in a place of honor. While it was too late to officially eulogize them, David was able to eulogize them incidental to the seven victims.

Now, about Ira, David's "personal Kohein" from the end of the last chapter. The Talmud in Eruvin (63a) says that the juxtaposition between Ira and the famine is a message. If a person gives all his "priestly portions" to one Kohein, he brings about hunger, as other Kohanim will have nothing. So our actions in the micro affect the world in the macro.

The chapter ends with a description of various Philistine giants that were killed by David and his men. David had lost his fighting edge, so his men retired him from the battlefield and Avishai killed the giant Yishbi-b'nov. In another battle, a soldier named Sibchai killed Saff. In yet another battle, Elchanan of Bethlehem killed Goliath. (We know that David killed Goliath; presumably Elchanan is another name for David, as per the commentary of Rashi and others. The corresponding verse in I Chronicles (20:5) says that Elchanan killed Goliath's brother, Lachmi. Take your pick.) Finally, David's nephew Yehonason killed an unnamed giant who had six fingers on his hands and six toes on his feet, for a total of twenty-four digits.

The commentators all ask why the Navi has to give us the math; can't we figure out that the giant had twenty-four digits? The answer is that if it said "six fingers and six toes" we might mistakenly think that there were three on each hand and foot, total twelve. If it just told us twenty-four, we might think there was one regular hand and foot of five each and one deformed hand and foot of seven each. This way we know, $6 + 6 + 6 + 6 = 24$. (Of course, why it's important to have this information at all is still something of an enigma.)

Chapter 22

Bentching Explained

As you may be aware, King David composed Tehillim, the Book of Psalms. Throughout all the trials that he endured in his life, whether being pursued by Saul, his family being abducted, a baby dying, one child raping another then being murdered by a third, being driven from his throne, etc., etc., etc., he always remembered to ask G-d for help, to thank Him and to praise Him. We heard some of David's songs earlier in the Book of Samuel; here we have an example of one that would be included in Psalms, with some minor edits, as Psalm 18. The version included here was David's "personal" version, sung by him as a Psalm of thanks in times of victory. The version included in Psalms is intended for posterity, for all people to sing to G-d about salvation from their troubles in life.

In this Psalm, David calls G-d his protector, in Whom he takes refuge. When threatened with death, David calls upon G-d, Who hears and answers him. David alludes to the way G-d answered the Jewish people when He redeemed them from Egypt, enveloping the oppressors in darkness and splitting the Red Sea. David then thanks G-d for personal kindnesses, such as enabling him to defeat foes who were mightier than he. David credits much of his success to his refusal to kill Saul when the opportunity presented itself, because G-d rewards righteousness and punishes sin. With G-d's help, David says that he can defeat any foe and overcome any obstacle. David pursued his enemies and defeated them; G-d even saved David from Jewish foes, such as Saul, Doeg and Achitofel, among others. David conquered foreign lands and they yield to him. For all this, David praises Hashem and ascribes his successes to Him; He is the Source of strength to him and his descendants forever.

Probably the most striking difference between this chapter and the way David's song appears in Psalm 18 is the last verse, which we say at the end of bentching (birkas hamazon, grace after meals). Here it reads, "migdol yeshuos malko," G-d is the tower of His chosen king's salvations. The corresponding verse in Psalms says "magdil yeshuos malko," that G-d increases His chosen king's salvations. For his personal praise, David used the word migdol - tower - referring to his complete salvation. For the "public" version in Psalms, he used magdil - increases - referring to gradual growth leading towards the ultimate salvation. On weekdays, we bentch using magdil - gradual growth. On Shabbos, which is a taste of the "World to Come," we bentch with the word migdol, reflecting the completion of our salvation.

Chapter 23

David's "Last Words" (Not Really)

These are not literally David's last words; they are his last prophetic words. (If so, what were his first prophetic words? Rashi says the song in the previous chapter. All of Psalms were written with Divine inspiration, but not all of its songs are referred to as "words," meaning words of prophecy.) In his "last words," David relates how G-d commanded him to be king and how his dynasty is not like a cloudy day, which passes. Other dynasties are temporary, but David's is destined to be everlasting.

The Navi then discusses some of David's most valiant warriors. Adino, Elazar ben Dodo, and Shammah ben Agei were one triumvirate of heroes. Adino may be another name for Yoav (see Rashi on verse 8 and cross-reference it with Rashi on chapter 20, verse 17). Elazar fought a battle so fiercely that his hand could not be pruned from his sword. Shammah defended a field of crops from a Philistine raiding party.

On one occasion, three of David's officers (presumably the three described in the next paragraph) were leading a force against a Philistine raiding party in Bethlehem. David longed for a drink of water from the well in his hometown, so the three officers surprised him by sneaking into the Philistine camp and drawing water. David, however, did not want to encourage such foolhardy behavior and he refused to drink it. Because of the bravery and dedication of the men who brought it, he poured it out as an offering to G-d.

The next triumvirate of warriors were Avishai, Benayahu and... somebody else. Avishai we already know; he is the brother of Yoav. Benayahu defeated two Moabite commanders and a mighty Egyptian warrior, as well as a lion in a snowy pit. (That's not easy to do!) The third warrior is not named here. It may have been Asahel, third brother of Yoav and Avishai, named in verse 24.

After that, we are told the names of David's other warriors. The list includes Uriah, first husband of David's wife Batsheva. All told, there were 37 mighty warriors, though if you count them, you might not come out with that number. As Rashi points out (verse 32), one of the names is "the sons of Yashein." That's an indeterminate amount. Then, of course, does the number 37 include either or both of the two sets of three warriors, and/or Yoav, whether or not Yoav is the same as Adino... So, you see why it's not so easy to just count 'em all up.

Chapter 24

An Important Real Estate Transaction

G-d got angry at the Jewish people (we're not told why) and He tempted David to sin. (Why did He tempt David to sin? Way back in I Samuel 26, David said to Saul, "If G-d put the idea in your head to persecute me..." Basically, G-d was saying, "Oh, I put such ideas in people's heads, do I? Fine, here's one for you.") David was tempted to conduct a census of the people. We know from Chumash that this is only permissible in a certain way and for a compelling need, not to count heads and not just because. Yoav tried to talk David out of it, but his mind was made up, so they took a census. They took nine months and twenty days to travel the whole country. They counted 800,000 men of military age in Israel and 500,000 in Judah. (These numbers differ from the parallel account in I Chronicles, which says 1,100,000 and 470,000, respectively. The reason for the discrepancy is that our account here does not include the Tribes of Levi and Benjamin among Israel, and Judah is rounded off.)

David realized that the census was a sin and he asked G-d to forgive him. G-d sent the prophet Gad to offer David a choice of punishments: seven years of famine, three months of occupying forces or three days of plague. David chose the plague, figuring it was better to let G-d strike the people than an enemy force. (Verse 24, "David said to Gad, I am greatly distressed..." is the opening line of the prayer Tachanun.) G-d sent the plague and 70,000 people died. G-d stayed His messenger of destruction when it reached Jerusalem, at the threshing floor of a Jebusite named Aravnah.

David inquired as to the merit of that place. The prophet Gad brought word to David that he was to build an altar there. Aravnah wanted to donate the threshing floor, the cattle and the tools, but David would not accept them as a gift; he insisted on paying. He paid fifty silver shekels for the property and the cattle. He offered his sacrifices and G-d answered his prayers; the plague stopped.

You're probably familiar with the location of Aravnah's threshing floor. Perhaps you've even been there. It was on a mountain called Moriah. Today we call it the Har HaBayis or Temple Mount. The threshing floor of Aravnah the Jebusite was the location where David's son Solomon would build the Temple