

Perspectives On Jewish Leadership

DAVID THE KING

transcription of a lecture presented
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In the eighth chapter of the first book of Samuel, the people approach Samuel and say to him, "You have become old, and your sons are not following in your footsteps. Give us a king to rule over us, like all the other nations" (I Samuel, 8:6). The people request a king and thus, kingship is introduced as the overriding theme of the Book of Samuel.

The text notes that Samuel himself is opposed - actually, very opposed - to the idea of kingship, and that he is very upset with the people's request. He goes back to God to complain and to cry out. God responds to him, saying, in effect, "Listen, don't feel so bad. I know how you feel. They've been doing this to me for many years. They haven't rejected you; they've rejected me. But go back to them. If they want a king, give them a king. Just warn them about the king." Samuel goes back and he reads this dire prophecy of what a king will do: "He'll take your daughters. He'll take your sons. He'll take your land." And then he asks, "Do you still want a king?" Indeed, they do, and God tells Samuel to give them a king.

The first king of Israel turns out to be King Saul, which means "the one who was requested, the requested one." In response to the people's request, God sends Saul.

There is an interesting question that is central to the Book of Samuel - and also central to other texts of *Tanakh* - what is God's view of kingship? I think that different readers of the Book of Samuel might arrive at different conclusions as to whether God is opposed to kingship or not. In my own view, God is not opposed; indeed, I think God is actually in favor. I say this because in the sixteenth chapter of our book, after Saul has been told that his kingship will not succeed, God speaks to Samuel and instructs him to go to the house of *Yishai* in *Beit Lehem*. "I have seen somebody there," says God, "Someone that I want to be king." And that, of course, is the lengthy story of David's anointing.

In response to God's command, Samuel goes to the house of *Yishai* and

looks at all seven children. One by one they are rejected. "God has chosen none of them," explains Samuel. Finally, David is called in from the field and God says, "This is the one I want. Anoint him."

One gets the distinct impression from that chapter that kingship is not a bad idea, as far as God is concerned. God is pushing the entire time for Samuel to go there: "This is the one I want. No, I don't want that one. I want this one." God could have said, "We gave them a king, Saul. It didn't work. Finished." God is rather pro-actively seeking out the king. So it would appear to me that if you look at the big picture of the Book of Samuel, God is not against the idea of kingship.

On the other hand, there was something very problematic about the way that the people asked for a king. "We want a king like all the nations," they said. It could be perceived as rejection of either God or Samuel, or both. Yes, there is always the danger that the king will displace God, because a king, as opposed to a judge, is king over everybody. A king rules over all, and a king is also, by definition, dynastic, "he and his sons" are kings. The individual king is mortal, but his kingship could last forever. This seems to be a very good description of God's role; God is God of all the people, and God is the Eternal King. So there is a danger, always, that the king will displace God in the eyes of the people.

I'd like to deal today with the last chapter of the Book of Samuel. For those who are relatively unfamiliar with the Book of Samuel, let me just say that, apart from the very important theological issues that it raises - many of which are of contemporary significance - I would also submit that it is one of the great literary masterpieces of our tradition. From a kind of esthetic and literary standpoint, only Genesis and perhaps Exodus, surpass it. In our tradition, this is a great masterpiece.

Chapter 24 of II Samuel is actually the last chapter of the full fifty-five chapters that we call the Book of Samuel. So, at the outset, we have to

ask ourselves a very simple question: "Why is this the last chapter?" The last chapter would seem to us to be very significant, like a last impression. For some reason, this is where the book ends.

This chapter seems to deal with a rather seemingly trivial incident, but I hope to demonstrate that it is not as trivial as it appears. The incident is the story in which King David takes a census of the Jewish people. The final chapter begins as follows: "The anger of God burned against Israel. God incited David against them saying, 'Count Israel and Judah.'" The first verse suggests that David is the unconscious agent of God's anger. In chapter 21, we were told that there had been a famine for three years because of some sin that had been committed. David inquires of God and is told that the sin was committed by King Saul against the *Givonim*. He mistreated them, and the punishment of famine came during David's reign.

Now, in chapter 24, God is again angry, and he incites David against the people, saying "Count Israel and Judah." *Rashi* comments, "'God was angry.' I don't know why." We know why God was angry in chapter 21; it was because King Saul mistreated the *Givonim*. But in chapter 24, *Rashi* says he does not know why God is angry.

I would like to suggest, with all lack of humility, that I do know why God was angry. As is the case in several other places in *Tanakh*, the last chapter goes back to deal with the core issue of the book, something that had not been fully dealt with. In chapter 8, the people had said to Samuel, the Prophet, "Give us a king like all the nations." It is the people's request for a king "to be like all the nations" that has never been fully dealt with. It may be 40 chapters later, but God still hasn't forgotten and He is still angry. Now, in the final chapter of the book, He will return to the core issue.

An interesting parallel is in the Book of Judges, where the last five chapters are essentially a kind of epilogue that also deal with kingship. "In those

days, there was no king. People did whatever they wanted." The last five chapters are not about individual judges, but they are about the time of the judges, a time in which "There was no king." People and tribes are acting in a kind of anarchic way. Thus, the last five chapters are a kind of summary of the time of the judges, essentially concluding that the system just doesn't work - a king is necessary or there will always be anarchy.

Now, the last four chapters of Samuel serve a similar function. They deal with the core problem: What about kingship? What about the fact that the king could actually displace God? For Samuel the Prophet, it's not the possible corruption of the king that is the main problem. It is rather that the very request is a kind of heresy, because it is asking for a human king to displace God, the Divine King. This is the issue that chapter 24 will raise.

So, the king, David, turns to his commander-in-chief and says to him, "Travel through the land, from *Dan* to *Be'er Sheva*. Count the people. I want to know their number."

The general responds to the king in the third verse. He says, "Listen, you should multiply a hundred times, but my master, the king, why do you desire to do this? Do me a favor, don't count them."

"Well, I insist," says the king. The next five verses describe how they travel, and in verse 9, *Yo'av* returns to give the king the number of the people: 800,000 from Israel, and 500,000 from Judah. That's the census of the combat soldiers. (Interestingly, he divided the population by Judah and Israel, although the division of Judah and Israel actually comes later. That, however, requires a separate discussion.)

Why was *Yo'av* opposed? Is it that there is a prohibition to count and *Yo'av* knows his *halakha*, and King David doesn't? But it would be odd in a

way, that the "religious objection" is put in the mouth of the Commander-in-Chief, and not, so to speak, the Chief Rabbi.

Perhaps *Yo'av's* objection is simply that there is no purpose to the census. Normally, one counts before going to war, but there is no war now. The wars are over. So why does David actually want to count them?

The simplest answer would be that now that David's two major wars are over, he wants to count what he has. The act of counting is a way of establishing which people are under his control. David is therefore saying to his general, "I've been through the wars, *Avshalom* is finished. *Sheva Ben Bikhri* - all the wars are over. Let me see where I stand. I want to count my people."

Yo'av, however, says to him, "You're barely king as it is-(David, at this point, is only a figurehead)-so don't push it. You should have a hundred more times". But he warns, "Don't make statements." Yet David wants to make the statement that he is king.

Yo'av, for whatever reason, is opposed to the count. But David insists: "*Vayehezack Devar HaMelekh*. (But the king's word prevailed)" (II Samuel, 24:4). But, then afterwards, "And David's heart smote him" (II Samuel, 24:10). He felt very contrite after he had counted the people. David says to God, "I have sinned grievously in what I have done. Please God, remove my sin, the sin of your servant. I have been very foolish."

David senses right away that he's made an error and has sinned. Yet, he did not react so quickly at the time of his previous sin - his most famous - his relationship with *Bat Sheva*. In that story, he only confesses after the prophet says to him, "You are the man. It's you. You're the man who took the one little lamb of his friends, because you didn't want to take of your own." Only then does David say to the prophet, "I have sinned unto God."

The story of David and *Bat Sheva* - minus the apologetics - is about a person who didn't really intend to do wrong. That story is about someone who stays home from work one morning. He's tired. Everybody else goes off to fight. David stays home. And then he's bored. So he goes to sleep at two o'clock in the afternoon and he wakes up at seven. He literally starts climbing the walls. And then he sees this beautiful woman, and he brings her to his house, sleeps with her, and then he sends her home.

To David, the story is over, except for one little detail. It turns out that she is pregnant. And that's a problem for David, not so much a personal problem, but an issue because this child could be the next King of Israel. One thing that kings definitely do not want is for the heir apparent to have another line.

So David has two choices. He tries to bring her husband back from battle, send him back to his wife, and hope that nobody will know the difference. He tries that, but it doesn't work. So, King David must get the husband killed. But in order to kill him, he doesn't kill him straight out. He sends him back to battle, with instructions given to *Yo'av* to kill him in battle. But *Yo'av* doesn't kill him in battle alone. That would be too suspicious. In order to kill him, others must die as well.

David didn't wake up that morning thinking: "By evening I'll be a mass murderer." He only said, "My head is bothering me. Let the others fight." But one thing leads to the next. And at the end of the day, it's not just about adultery and murder, and a massive cover-up, but others have to die to cover it up.

That's why David, after he's told he sinned, says, "I have sinned unto God." But regarding the census his reaction is different. Here he says, "*hatati me'od asher asiti*. (I have sinned greatly in that which I have done)" (II Samuel, 24:10). For taking a census, he pleads, "I have sinned grievously. Please forgive me. Remove the sin of your servant, *ki niskalti me'od* (for

I have done very foolishly)" (II Samuel, 24:10). The word *me'od* appears twice.

How are we to understand this? Adultery and murder are sins. But the census is a grievous sin. What is this crime involved in David's taking a census? Why is that a grievous sin? What's wrong with taking the census? According to the simple text of the Torah in Exodus, God says that if you count the people of Israel, then I will send a plague upon you. But that doesn't explain why it's wrong, only that it is wrong.

The Book of Exodus is about the creation of the nation. We become a nation through a series of communal revelations. Slavery in Egypt, crossing the sea, the manna, Sinai - it all ends with the Tabernacle. But God is "*veshakhanti betokham*" (I will dwell in their midst)" (Exodus 25:8).

It's a continuum, and a continuous revelation - a series of communal revelations, culminating in this Tabernacle. In the Book of Exodus, the census is taken by having all the men between 20 and 60 give a half sheqel to build the Temple, the Tabernacle, *Mahazit ha-sheqel*.

God is in the center of our camp, and we express that by virtue of the fact that the camp is built by all the people (at least by the group of men, 20 through 60, who represent all the people). Indeed, that was Samuel's complaint against the people. God is at the center of the camp. God, the Eternal God, is at the center of the camp. We reside around God in the Book of Exodus, and that is what defines us as a people. "And now you are telling me," says Samuel, "That you want a king to be at the center of the camp? You want an eternal kingship? You want to anoint a king of all the people? But, is that not disgracing God who already serves that very purpose?"

Now, the point is, if the census-taking ritual in Exodus expresses the fact that God is at the center, then David's taking the census of the people, is

really a major sin, because David is saying, "I'm your God. I count them as mine." Of course, from an objective standpoint, the census is a minor sin compared to murder. But, from the standpoint of the Book of Samuel, the census is a much deeper crime because of the core issue of Samuel - Is the king a displacement of God, or not? What David did in the last chapter is something that goes to the gut issue of the book and really evokes God's anger, not only against David, but against the people who had requested a king like all the other nations.

God then speaks to *Gad*, the prophet of David, telling him to offer David three choices - seven years of famine, to run from your enemy for three months of war, or three days of plague? "Tell me," *Gad* says, "What should I send back to the One who sent me?"

Now, what should we make of this? Anybody who has studied Tanakh knows that God is not squeamish about punishing. There were ten plagues, Sodom and Gemora were destroyed, there was a flood that destroyed almost all of mankind; God is definitely not squeamish about meting out punishment. And, He usually does not consult. What is going on over here? Indeed, what should David answer? If you were David, what would you answer?

What does David answer? First he admits, "I'm very upset." Then, while putting himself in God's hands, he eliminates fighting his human enemy: "One thing I know. I don't want to be in the hands of a human being," he says. "I'd rather be in God's hands. So God, you make the choice."

David realized that he was being tested and that the correct answer was, "It's not for me to choose." God says (obviously, in an ironic tone): "Okay, Mr. King, You tell me what the story is." David replies, "No, You're the King. It's really Your choice."

Interestingly, we actually know what the punishment will turn out to be,

for the Torah specifies that the punishment for counting is plague. Not only that, but the choices he's given are seven years of famine, three months of war, or three days of plague. It's almost an invitation for David to say what we know is going to happen. It's going to be a plague. Yet David restrains himself; his self-restraint is wonderful. He says, "I can't say. It's up to God to say."

So David passes the test completely. The understanding that I am in God's hands is important for all of us, but even more important for the king, because the king truly could feel himself as one who is not in God's hands. That's when kings get in deep trouble, at least according to the message of the Book of Samuel. The king has enormous powers, but the issue is, for Samuel, what is legitimizing the king's power? When we come to the last chapter, do we think that kingship, from a religious standpoint is a viable institution? We'll see the answer as it emerges from this chapter.

God causes a plague and seventy thousand people die, a terrible thing. Then we read: "the Angel stretched out his hand upon *Yerushalayim* to destroy it. But God relented of the evil. God said to the Angel that destroyed the people: 'Enough. Hold back your hand.' The Angel of God was at the threshing place of *Aravna*, the *Yevusi*. David spoke to God when he saw the Angel that killed the people, and said, "I have sinned and I have done perversely. These sheep - what have they done? God, let your hand be against me and my father's house." At that time, *Gad* the prophet came to David and said, "build an altar to God on the threshing floor of *Aravna*, the *Yevusi*."

This Angel is about to destroy *Yerushalayim*, and God calls to the Angel and says, "Hold back your hand: *Heref yadekha*." The Angel, it says, is above the threshing place of *Aravna* a Canaanite king, the *Yevusi*.

When I first read that, it reminded me of another incident in the Torah, a famous incident in which someone is about to hurt somebody else, and

God calls out and says, "Hold back your hand." The incident is obviously the story of *Aqedat Yitzhak* (The Binding of Isaac). Abraham is about to kill *Yitzhak* and God called to Abraham and said, "*Al tishlakh yadekha el ha-na'ar, ve'al ta'as lo me'uma* (Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do anything to him)" (Genesis 22, 12). You've passed the test. Do not stretch forth your hand. If Abraham kills Isaac, then there is no future. In the case over here, *Yerushalayim* will be destroyed. In each case, God is calling out to somebody, "Hold back your hand."

Is this simply a kind of reminder, maybe a literary coincidence? Or is there something much deeper over here about the two stories, a real deep connection between the story of *Aqedat Yitzhak* and this last chapter of Samuel? I want to suggest that there is much more.

The binding of Isaac is the 22nd chapter of Genesis. It's the last time that God speaks to Abraham, the last communication, one that is very similar to the first communication, "*Lekh lekha* (Get thee [out of thy country])" (Genesis 12:1). In chapter 12, God commanded Abraham to get up and go out. And, again in chapter 22 of Genesis, God commands Abraham to get up and go to the place that I will tell you.

Aqedat Yitzhak is called a "*nisayon*", a test. God tested Abraham. The question we can ask ourselves is - what is the test all about? Why is this the test? We have a sense that it is a very difficult thing to do. But precisely why is this an appropriate test?

I had said that every text has its own particular issues. If we ask the question about Abraham, what is the issue? What is the core issue of these 12 or 14 or 15 chapters that deal with Abraham's life? I think that the answer is clear.

The man's name is *Avram*, 'exalted father.' But Exalted Father, we are told from the very beginning, has no children. When God first speaks to Exalted

Father, he is seventy-five years old and God makes all kinds of promises to him. "Leave your land, *Lekh lekha*, and I'll make you a great nation. I will bless you." And initially, his nephew, *Lot*, the potential heir, goes with him.

The one issue that dominates Abraham's life, from beginning to end, is who will succeed him. Who will be Abraham's successor? *Lot* is the initial choice, but that doesn't work.

Then the question is, which of his sons will succeed him? His first son is *Yishma'el*, born to *Haggar*. And then Sarah, later on in life, gives birth to *Yitzhak*, the second son. In combination with the question of who will succeed Abraham, is another question: Is it to be my son? Or is it our son, Sarah's and mine? This brings us to another issue which is very central to the story of Abraham and his family, the peculiar situation which Abraham states initially, and later comes to believe, that his wife, Sarah, is actually his sister.

When Abraham first went out to Egypt, he says, "It's my sister. Say it - I know you are my wife, but say it." Then later, in chapter 20, we have the very peculiar situation, where Abraham travels down south through the land of the *Plishtim*, and then he says, "She's my sister," and *Avimelekh* actually takes her.

God then speaks to *Avimelekh*, "Give back the man's wife. She's a married woman. He'll pray for you. He's a prophet." *Avimelekh* confronts Abraham in chapter 20. He says, "Listen, last night your God appeared to me. You almost got me killed. How could you do this to me? You did a terrible thing."

Abraham replies, "The truth of the matter is that I was afraid. I was afraid you were going to kill me." (One could ask the question: If you were so afraid, why did you travel there? There was actually no reason to go there.

There was no famine. But let's put that aside.) "The truth is," he says, "she really is my sister - she is my sister from my father's side, not my mother's side. I took her as a wife."

The problem is; how did that answer the question? It answers it on one level, maybe in some sort of technical way, but it doesn't really answer the question. *Avimelekh* is not asking a technical explanation of their relationship; he's saying something different: "You almost got me killed because I took your wife." Abraham's response doesn't answer that question.

But Abraham actually gave an answer, which is both true and very sad. "Let me explain to you," he says. "She really is my sister. Yes, she is also my wife. But I don't see her as my wife." That's what he's saying. "I see her, primarily, as my sister."

Of course, God is screaming "wife" throughout the chapter. But the point of the story is - and this is very important - while he can love his sister, he doesn't see her as a person who shares his destiny. Which is why he can say, when God says Sarah is going to have a child, "But what about *Yishma'el*?" He has *Yishma'el* on his mind. My son, *Yishma'el*. Not our son, but my son.

So I would argue that, in combination with the issue of "Who is my real son?" is also the other question of "Who is my real wife?" But until *Yishma'el* is kicked out and *Hagar* is thrown out, which are necessary evils, he can't see clearly. The moment *Yishma'el* and *Hagar* are gone, then he sees: Sarah is my wife.

What then is *Aqedat Yitzhak* about? It's about Abraham's need to reclaim Isaac as his son, because otherwise he'd be a father only by default. Abraham must reclaim Isaac as his son, and he does so by an act of substitution. The *Aqeda* is about Abraham symbolically reclaiming Isaac

through an act of substitution.

There is another motif that runs through all the Abraham stories: his search for the sacred place. From day one, he's a nomad searching for "the holy place". He discovers this sacred place, "*Ha-makom*", at the place of the binding of Isaac, the place in which he brings the sacrifice. So the sacrifice, it turns out, serves two ends simultaneously: One is an act of reclaiming Isaac. Yishma'el is the son who is sent away and not reclaimed. Isaac is the son who was sent away and is reclaimed through a sacrificial substitution. And, simultaneously, at that instant, at the moment he does that, he discovers the sacred place. One might say that Abraham discovers the place that God has chosen at the moment that he discovers how his own inner life should be working.

Of course, the moment he discovers that, the very next story is finding Sarah's burial place. Not because he wants to bury Sarah, but he wants Sarah's grave to be the national shrine for the Jewish people, to be the place that represents Jewish possession of the land. The moment he understands Isaac is his son, he understands Sarah is his wife. It takes place through an act of sacrifice, sacrificial substitution.

Let us return to the concluding chapter of the Book of Samuel, and see that the author had his *Humash* open when writing it. The point of the chapter is that the ideal king's existence will coincide with the king discovering the sacred place, which turns out to be the threshing floor of *Aravna*, the *Yevusi*. (Of course, "*Aravna*" as spelled in Hebrew (*Alef-Resh-Vav-Nun-Hey*) is a play on the word "*Aron*", (*Alef-Resh-Vav-Nun*) which means "ark". The book began with the Ark being captured. "*Goren, Aravna HaYevusi*" is the place of the "*Aron*".) If David will be allowed to discover God's holy place, the place that God chooses, that will be a sign that God has chosen David forever. The same way, the moment Abraham finds the holy place, it's a sign that God has chosen Abraham,

through Isaac forever. That's what it's about. It's about being chosen by God.

But how does David discover the holy place? The holy place is always a place that God chooses never one that we choose. Our job is to figure out what God wants of us. The point of *Aqedat Yitzhak* is that only God chooses the place, but the human responsibility is to be perceptive enough to figure out what it is that God wants. And there are no code books for each of life's situations. The trick, in my view, is to be able to make autonomous moral judgements, based on an understanding of what God would want in each particular situation. But you never get to choose the place, the place is always outside of you.

The same thing is true of David. "And David saw the Angel. And the Angel was above the threshing place of *Aravna* the *Yevusi*." It's God who chooses the place. What does the Torah call the holy place? "*Ha-makom asher amar lo Elokim* (the place of which God had told him)" Genesis 22:3. It doesn't name the place. It's the place that God will choose. It's always that way.

So, whether the person's institution will be realized - the permanent patriarchal institution of the Jewish people or the eternal line of kingship - is represented in each story and the issue is decided by that person's discovery of the place that God has chosen. Each case involves a sacrifice at the place.

But what enables David to find the place? In the case of Abraham, I have made a suggestion. It's his understanding of his family dynamic: Who is his son? He has to understand that *Yitzhak* is "your one and only son." Covenantally, he only has one son. He never knew that. Rashi makes the comment, "I have two sons." "You have one," God replies. "But I love them both," say Abraham. "No, you don't get it," says God. "You only have one." Covenantally, there is just one.

But what enables David to see what he must discover? David's admission of guilt is part of it, but that is insufficient. "*Hatati*" is only the beginning. David first thinks about the fact that he sinned in front of God. Then, later, he said that "I am the king and I am therefore responsible for them. Spare them, and I should be the one to suffer." What is the king's job? The Torah says two things about a king: first, the king is the one that God has chosen, and second - it may be in the wrong order, but number two - "you are to choose a king from amongst the people."

The king has to understand two things. First of all, the king must know that he works for God who is the true King. The king is there to carry out God's will, God's mandate. That's number one. That was actually David's mistake in the census. God tested him and said, "Well, you choose your punishment." And he answered, "No God, you choose. You're the one, you make the choices."

But the other point that the king has to understand is that he was chosen to serve the people. It sounds so simple, but in actuality, it's not. We have a lot of principals here, and I run a school, so let me speak about myself. I founded Drisha twenty years ago as a little tiny thing. The last couple of years it's gotten pretty big, maybe it's gotten too big. I don't know. In any event, I remind myself of one thing all the time: and that is that Drisha is a great place. It's a vehicle to do good. The moment it ceases to be a vehicle to do good, I hope somebody will actually disband it, because it's not important in and of itself. Drisha is irrelevant, actually. It's only relevant inasmuch as it serves people. The moment it stops serving people, it has no relevance. That's true of every institution. It's only there to serve. It has no inherent value whatsoever.

The king is the same. The king is there, with all the rights and power that he possesses, but God doesn't really care about the king outside of the way he serves the people. That's the profound message.

We can go beyond that. Of course, God loves his servants. God loves Moses. But in some certain way, actually, Moses is irrelevant. The Humash is not about Moses. Moses is there to serve, as we all are. The moment Moses serves his part, does his thing, it's good-bye. "But don't I get some kind of, you know, reward? I've worked my whole life. Just let me cross over. Aren't I entitled to something?" That's what I would have said. Moses pleads, "Just let me cross over there. My whole life - I sacrificed my whole life for the people." "Your time is up," is the answer. "I can't let you cross because you're going to impinge on the next leader. You'll prevent him from serving; therefore, you're finished." It's cruel. You read it. You want to cry. It's so sad. But that's the way it works in the Torah.

Now the fact of the matter is, that's what the king has to understand. Nobody is more ambitious than King David. And yet he says in this chapter - its amazing - when he sees the people suffer, he says: "These sheep, what have they done?" "Destroy me and my father's house" is an amazing statement. I will step down from the kingship. Beit Avi is the kingship. I will abdicate the kingship, if it's good for the people. Then God says to David: "Now you are ready for eternal kingship, because you understand the two jobs of the king."

The truth of the matter is, the fact that this perception is the essence of kingship, is already found at the end of chapter 6, when David brings back the Ark. The Ark is brought back in chapter 6, and the Ark finds its permanent place here in chapter 24. In chapter 6, David is dancing with all the people in front of the Ark. His wife, *Michal*, Saul's daughter, looks out the window and she sees him dancing with all these lowly men, and especially with the women, "and she despised him in her heart." When he comes back home, she attacks him. She says to him: "Oh, King of Israel! How much glory you brought upon yourself. You revealed yourself before the eyes of the maidservants of your slaves as a base person reveals himself." It's a kind of promiscuous behavior in front of these lowly people.

And David's answer (it's quintessential David, actually): "Before the God who chose me over your father and his house and commanded me to be the ruler of his people Israel - I danced before God. I would make myself even lowlier, and with these maidservants that you talk about, with them will I find honor." And the text comments that *Michal*, Saul's daughter, had no children until the day of her death. That is quintessential David.

When you read it, you say to yourself, this is true. I hate to use this language, but David is essentially being a very nasty person. Here's a woman that he dragged back to him, a woman who saved his life. Is that the way to talk to her? Say that she is wrong.

Divrei Hayamim says he doesn't answer her and walks off and composes Tehilim. "*Hodu laShem ki tov* (O give thanks to the Lord; for He is good)" (*I Chronicles 16:34*). But the Book of Samuel is very different. Here, David is portrayed with all his flaws. On the other hand, he's a hundred percent right, and that's the important point over here, not whether you like him or not. He's saying, "You're just like your father. He understood nothing about kingship, and neither do you. That's why God chose me over you and your father's house. That's why you are out of it, honey." That's exactly what he says.

The truth of the matter is, if David had had a child with *Michal*, he would have united the two kingdoms and Saul would have lived on. But the point of the story is that the kingship can't be through Saul, because Saul's perception of kingship and David's perception of kingship, are radically different. Thus, the text comments that *Michal* had no children.

David's perception of kingship is completely right. He says, "you think I lowered myself? I didn't lower myself. I serve them; they don't serve me. God doesn't care about me. God cares about these people, not about me. He commanded me to be king over His people, over Israel. I dance before God. Your father didn't get it. But I understand why I am king."

That's a great story, because it captures all of David. Actually, it captures the other side also - he didn't have to be that harsh. There is a terrible cruelty here. On the other hand, there is an incredibly correct perception of what a king is. That's the character of David in the Book of Samuel. What David is saying - and that's why David is the great king - is, "I understand, really." And that's the interesting story of David. He's a man who understands it perfectly.

But he is also a man who is prone - maybe all kings are - to stray very far. That's the story of David and *Bat Sheva*. That's why David is given a parable. Because if you tell David a story removed from himself, he sees perfectly. His trouble is in connecting it to his own experience. And everybody who reads the story says: "Doesn't he know it's him?" No, he doesn't. He doesn't know it. Actually, it's amazing. We are all guilty of it. It's hard to see ourselves - and that's the point.

So, the point of chapter 24 is -- when does David discover the holy place? At the moment that he fully understands and can fully articulate what is. And that's why the author of Samuel chose the *Aqeda* as his model.

Let us make one more point. Where does the story of Abraham begin and where does it end? One could give two true answers to where it ends.

One could say that it ends with the binding of Isaac, because that's the last time God speaks to Abraham. It's the second "*Lekh lekha*". It's all parallel to chapter 12. There is a nice structure: it begins with "*Lekh lekha*", with the *korban*, with going out, and it ends with a blessing, with a *korban*, with "*Lekh lekha*", "the place that I will show you." On the other hand, the story doesn't end yet, because the story continues. In chapter 23 Abraham finds a burial place for Sarah. In chapter 24 he sends out his servant to find a wife for his son, Isaac. So the story has two endings.

What is the nature of these two endings? I would say one is a theoretical ending. In *Aqedat Yitzhak* we are told that Abraham will have an eternal blessing. But then he still has to work it out. He still has to take care of Sarah's place. He still has to find a helpmate for Isaac. He has to work out the practicalities of this eternal blessing. To work out the practicalities, he sends his smartest man, a wonderful negotiator, to deal with *Lavan* with a blank check. He has to work it all out; he has to deal with the real world.

The same thing is true, you see, for David, and that is why the Book of Samuel ends with this beautiful theoretical idea, that David's kingship can exist. It's possible to have an eternal king. He's going to build God's temple. He's going to atone for his taking the census by finding the place for the Temple. That's what it comes down to. But then we still don't have a king.

The next book begins with David, old and dying. He seems pretty much out of it, and there is a need for maneuvering David into choosing the right man as king. *Adonia*, the oldest son, who is not good, wants to make himself king. So the prophet goes to *Bat Sheva*, and there is a long, complicated negotiation to get David to do the right thing. Then *Shlomo* takes over and he has to kill X, Y and Z to become the king. But it's never the dream; the dream and the reality are never the same. Our goal is to try to make the reality as close to the dream as possible. It's easy to criticize; anybody can do that. But our responsibility is, whether here or in the States - everywhere, there are enormous challenges, is to do the best we can to try to move in small steps. We try to move closer to a spiritual reality, and to a reflective, religious life. We try our best. We make a lot of mistakes. But, we try our best.

Finally let us look at the end of the Book, where I see an exciting parallelism. At the end of the Book, *Gad* the prophet says to David, "Build me a *mizbe'ah*," and David goes out to do just that. *Aravna*, this *Yevusi*, this Canaanite, sees David coming, and he says to him: "Listen, take whatever

you want. I'll give you whatever you want. You can build your altar." But David says to him, "No, I want to buy it from you. I don't want to bring the sacrifices for nothing." David then bought the threshing place for 50 sheqalim, built an altar, and the plague stopped.

Of course, the obvious parallel is the story when Abraham wants to bury his wife. He goes to the people of *Het*, also Canaanites, and he says to them, "My wife is dead." So they say to him, "Anybody here will give a burial place to you for nothing. Abraham responds, "No, I don't want that. I want to buy it. There is someone named *Ephron*. I hear he sells land." So, he approaches *Ephron*, "I want to buy the grave at the edge of your field." *Ephron* says, "Take the grave and take the field." "I don't want to take the grave and the field." "Oh, you don't want it? You want to pay for it? Okay. Let's see. The grave costs \$250. It comes with a field, though. The field costs \$175 million. You want it?" "It won't be a problem." He gives him 400 *sheqel kessef*, which is a massive amount of money. What is the point? He could have had it for nothing? But he doesn't want it for nothing, because his real purpose is not merely to bury his wife, Sarah, but to establish an "*Ahuzat Kever* (burying place)" (Genesis 23:4). It's the acquisition that represents the fact that Abraham possesses the land.

So we have these two stories. Abraham's insisting on buying the land follows the story of the *Aqeda*. And, David's purchase of the place that he's offered for nothing follows his discovery of the sacred place. A parallel sequel follows each story.

In Genesis, the sequel begins with "*Abraham zaqen ba bayamim*", "Abraham was old." He has a son, Isaac, but Isaac, without a wife, can't do anything. He must find someone who will help him. Without Rivka, Isaac is not going anywhere or doing anything. In the story, Abraham is too old to do anything, so he sends a messenger out. Through the messenger, and the negotiation, he is able to secure Rivka.

The Book of Samuel ends here, but the very next chapter, is chapter 1 of the Book of Kings; "And King David was old, *Vehamelekh David zaqen ba bayamim*". It's exactly the same story and is the *Haftorah* for that parasha. But, what does this mean?

The author of Samuel (and probably the continuation), has the *Humash* in front of him and actually bases three consecutive stories on the three stories about Abraham: (1) The story of the census and David's discovery of the sacred place is based on *Aqedat Yitzhak*. (2) The purchase of the place, that David insists on paying for, is based on Abraham's purchase of Sarah's burial place. (3) The "*Vehamelekh David zaqen ba bayamim*" is based on the next chapter, the "*Avraham zaqen ba bayamim*."

Of course, when I say "based on" I don't suggest they're identical. I actually mean quite the opposite. There is a variation upon the theme; indeed, in many ways they are opposite. But similar text stories can be analyzed and the differences can be seen, only if their similarities are compared. When we are studying these texts, we find the basic similarities. Then we are entitled to distinguish one text from the other. If they are radically different, we can't distinguish between them. We can only distinguish between similar things.

Let me just summarize what I tried to accomplish here. I said at the outset that I'm dealing with the seemingly trivial story of the census. But I don't actually think that it's trivial. I've tried to show you how - I hope I succeeded in this - even what appears to be a story of minor significance, is not minor at all.

First, it's the last chapter of the book. We have to ask ourselves, in our tradition, why the book ends here. So I suggest that the story of David has two endings. One is the theoretical ending, the end of Samuel that deals with the core issue of the Book - can kingship really exist? To which the Book gives a positive answer; it can ideally exist. We know the dangers.

Maybe the ideal is never fully realized. But it can exist, theoretically. It's a kind of messianic idea. It can, in theory, exist.

Then I tried to show how the story of David's kingship is parallel to the story of the *Aqedat Yitzhak* in a significant and basic way - you discover the sacred place at the moment that you understand your own mission.

Then I tried to show how the mission of the king, understanding what kings are all about, serving God and serving the people, is something that we find earlier in the Book of Samuel, and it appears here as well. David, in a sense, is being tested by God and he passes the test. Last, I tried to show how, in a larger sense, the stories of the Book of Samuel have been shaped by, or play off, earlier stories in the Torah.

If I've accomplished one thing, I hope it is that you'll all go back and study the Book of Samuel.