

# King David's tribulations

• ALAN JOTKOWITZ

I have noted in previous articles that the last 40 years has seen a revolution in the study of Tanach (the Hebrew Bible) in the country's national-religious sector. This revolution has centered around the Har Etzion Yeshiva, though it is certainly not exclusive to that institution. The study of Tanach has become a central part of the curriculum in many yeshiva-Solomon's rival, Adonijah, to the king-ship. The advisers wish to demonstrate the infirmity of David as the reason for their rush to appoint their preferred heir. However, Solomon's mother, Bathsheba, becomes aware of the plan and springs into action to remind David of his promise to pass the kingship on to her son. Israel makes the telling point that missing from Adonijah's political camp was a prophet, emphasizing that "he [Adonijah] is not concerned about receiving the message of God - or alternatively, that no prophet would associate with him!" Yet the author argues that there is a deeper meaning as well. In Israel's view, the story harks back to David's grave sin in taking Bathsheba. "The text reminds us that the king was very old and we recall that the king did not know her" [the virgin girl]; yet this scene raises the stark contrast between the young, virile David, who could not resist the temptation of Bathsheba, and his current feeble and impotent state. The coalescence of the images gives the impression of David broken and wasted, his strength having left him."

Parallel to this renewed emphasis on Tanach study, a new methodology has developed as well. It centers on learning the "simple meaning" of the text, but also incorporating the disciplines of literary theory, geography, archeology and history to understand the text better. We have witnessed - particularly in the last decade - the beginning of a conversation between this new approach and the academic world, primarily on the use of literary approaches in the understanding of the text. There has been criticism of this methodology for its lack of fealty to the traditional medieval commentators and the mid-rashic tradition, and for the relative ease with which it accepts that our spiritual ancestors might have committed grave sins (e.g., King David).

With *I Kings: Torn in Two*, Tanach teacher Alex Israel - a second-generation practitioner of this methodology and a student of some of the movement's pioneers - offers a wonderful treatise on the Book of Kings. The volume is an excellent opportunity for the English-speaking public to enter this exciting world, as most of the previous work in the field has been written in Hebrew.

The book begins with the story of the aging and infirm King David, who is unable to keep warm, and the search throughout the kingdom for a virgin girl to help him do so. Israel rightfully asks about the significance of this rather

strange story. He suggests two possible solutions, one political and one spiritual - an approach that provides a good paradigm for the whole book, which tells the story of the Davidic monarchy's tragic breakup from both a political and a spiritual perspective.

The first explanation is that the "advisers" who suggest bringing a young maiden to the king are apparently the same "advisers" who are in a hurry to appoint Solomon's rival, Adonijah, to the kingship. The advisers wish to demonstrate the infirmity of David as the reason for their rush to appoint their preferred heir. However, Solomon's mother, Bathsheba, becomes aware of the plan and springs into action to remind David of his promise to pass the kingship on to her son. Israel makes the telling point that missing from Adonijah's political camp was a prophet, emphasizing that "he [Adonijah] is not concerned about receiving the message of God - or alternatively, that no prophet would associate with him!"

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I would add that the narrative is teaching the ultimate fate of all sinners seduced by momentary gain and unaware of what awaits them.

Israel is right that a profound change occurred to David after the sin with Bathsheba - "a distinct lack of involvement in public life... one [senses] that he feels paralyzed. [Weighted] down by his past sins." Asking what this chapter is "communicating by presenting David in this manner," the author responds that "first it informs us that David has suffered terribly for his sins." However, he continues, "the ascent of Solomon as David's successor and his building of the temple is the clearest affirmation that David and Solomon are untainted by David's sin. David has paid his price and the sin is absolved." While I am not sure if David is "untainted by the sin," the message is clear.

This reading beautifully ties together the political and spiritual aspects of the story. It is the rare teacher who can com-

municate both aspects so effectively, and Israel continues to do so throughout the book.

As anyone who has studied the Book of Kings knows, the first 10 chapters describe what is probably the high point of the Davidic monarchy. The country is at peace and wealthy, and the Temple is built. But as Israel notes, there is a sinister undercurrent to all this prosperity. In chapters 9 and 10, the word "gold" appears no fewer than 17 times, hinting that the kingdom has become too preoccupied with wealth and material prosperity - perhaps foreshadowing the destruction to come.

Notwithstanding the completeness of the volume, some topics are discussed only briefly. For example, I would have liked to see a more extended discussion of the famous story of Solomon identifying the correct mother of a disputed infant by threatening to cut the baby in half. Israel dedicates only three pages to this fascinating story, which perhaps foreshadows a "kingdom torn in two."

In my opinion, the theological implications of God's famous call to Elijah - "and after the earthquake, a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; And after the fire a still, small, voice" - are not fully developed.

In a nice touch, the book concludes with nine pages of questions to help guide further study, which the author suggests doing with a *havruta* (study partner).

In the introduction, Israel notes his indebtedness to his teachers - among them rabbis Yoel Bib-Nun, Elchanaan Samet, David Nativ, Menachem Leibtag, Mordechai Sabbatto, Yaakov Medan - and one senses their voices in the pages of the book as well. This volume is a welcome addition to the commentary on Tanach, and required reading for anyone beginning a serious study of the Book of Kings. Hopefully this author will continue to produce more works of this genre to help us better understand "the word of God" as reflected in the teachings of the prophets.

