

KING DAVID OF THE SAGES¹

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ABSTRACT The article opens by discussing the different ways in which the ancient rabbis (in the Talmudic literature) described King David. It seems that they preferred to follow the image of David which emerges from the books of Psalms and Chronicles rather than his description in the books of Samuel. Various verses from Psalms served the rabbis for completing David's biography (seeing this book as his own autobiography), describing him as godfearing, a very kind person, humble and pious, a prophet, a scholar of Torah, a philosopher and a poet. Even his greatest sin – regarding Bathsheba and Uriah the Hittite – was described in such a way that it justifies the famous statement: »Whoever says that David sinned is merely erring» (BT Shabbat 56a). Some sources, on the other hand, admitted his sin but attached to it a long period of suffering and repentance, diminishing by that its impact. This part of the articles ends with a discussion of the main motives for this rabbinic treatment of David: their general tendency to purge the biblical protagonists of sin; David's role as the founder of the Israeli Kingship and various messianic hopes connected to his descendants. The possibility that »David» served sometimes as a code for the Patriarch in the Land of Israel (or, in Babylonia, the Exilarch) is also discussed as another explanation of David's descriptions in rabbinic literature. In this context, special attention is given to some texts that compare David with Moses, seeing Moses usually as worthier of the two. The article ends with a discussion of such texts (taken mainly from the Midrash on the Psalms), suggesting that such a comparison refers in many cases to the rabbis themselves (symbolized by »Moses») discussing their relationship with the Patriarchate (»David»), rather than with the biblical figures.

One of the most popular folk songs in Hebrew – based on a line from the Babylonian Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 25a) – has only one line: *ohheu hjktrah lkn sus* – »David the king of Israel is alive and vigorous.« Many of those singing this song seem to possess an image of a great and glorious king, the conqueror of Jerusalem who laid the foundations for the construction of the Temple, the man who was promised by God that he and his descendants would eternally rule over the Kingdom of Israel, »the sweet psalmist of Israel« (2 Samuel 23:1) as well as the author of the book of Psalms, a religious thinker and the forefather of the Messiah (if not the Messiah himself). But a comparison between this image of David and the actual stories told of him in the books of the Former Prophets, Samuel and Kings, indicates that the perception of David has shifted significantly over time. The biblical David is already a multifaceted individual – portrayed in various ways in the books of Psalms and Chronicles and by the prophets – and even the stories in Samuel and Kings alone describe him in many different ways.² Nevertheless, the predominant character that emerges from these two historical books is that of a tough warrior, a man of reckoning and a shrewd statesman. David of the books of Samuel had no qualms about serving in the Philistine army, committed the greatest of sins (adultery and murder), and failed in educating his three oldest sons. But in the collective memory and imagination of the people of Israel David's character developed fantastic dimensions becoming almost equal to Moses, the man who brought down the Torah, the first prophet, and the humblest of all men.³ David became a person whose spirituality clearly surpassed his mundane dimensions.

It appears that the Mishnah, the Tosephtah, the Babylonian and the Palestinian Talmuds and the many Midrashim – collectively known as rabbinic literature or the writings of the sages – played a key role in the evolution of this image of David. Processes which began in the Bible itself, mainly in books other than Samuel and Kings, were reinforced in the writings of the sages and acquired dominance over other perceptions of this biblical hero. Since rabbinic literature is extensive and extremely diverse,⁴ this paper will provide only a general description of David as emerging therefrom, and only few of the scholarly issues regarding this description will be discussed.⁵ It should, however, be noted that whatever the subject matter, there was never complete con-

sensus among the sages, and the personality of King David is no exception. While in most of the sources David is hailed and praised, other express cautious criticism, depending on the creator of the tradition, his time, audience and goals. It can nevertheless be said that in general the writings of the sages diverged from the books of Samuel and Kings and adopted a viewpoint closer to that expressed in Psalms, Chronicles and the prophetic books.

[A]

One of the headings in the book of Psalms (56:1) contains the expression »A *Mikhtam* of David«. The Babylonian Talmud offers three midrashic interpretations to this obscure word:

»A *Mikhtam* of David« ... David who was meek and perfect to all. Another explanation of »*Mikhtam*« is: his wound was whole, since he was born already circumcised. Another explanation of »*Mikhtam*« is: just as in his youth he made himself small in the presence of anyone greater than himself to study Torah, so was he the same in his greatness (BT Sotah 10b).

The first attempt to midrashize the word *Mikhtam* makes use of a well-known technique of breaking a biblical word into two (or more) words and interpreting them anew. The uncommon term *Mikhtam*, which only appears in the Bible six times and always in the heading of a psalm, is said to be a combination of two Hebrew words: *makh* (self-effacing, humble, modest) and *tam* (innocent, naive and acting in good faith, pure and uncorrupted). David, says the Talmud, was not only humble towards older and wiser men or people he revered, but toward all human beings. According to the second midrashic interpretation, David was born circumcised,⁶ and the third claims that David's modest character did not change over time: he was *makh*, humble, throughout his life, acting no differently when king than when he was a child – in this sense he was *tam*, unblemished. These three midrashic interpretations of *mikhtam* depict David as one who possesses unique physiological and mental traits, and as a person endowed with a special spiritual structure. From the spiritual perspective, the Talmud emphasizes David's kindness to people in general and to his teachers in particular. It is also assumed, as though this was common knowledge, that

David studied Torah – a point we shall expand upon later on.

The idea that David was born circumcised is designed to indicate that he was destined for greatness already in his mother's womb. The idea that some babies are born circumcised recurs in the writings of the sages in connection with other figures such as Moses, Joseph, Job and the Messiah.⁷ It highlights the special covenant between God and the child which precedes and even overshadows the covenant of circumcision. By the time David makes his first appearance in the book of Samuel he is already an independent youth whose father sends him as a messenger to the battlefield and a shepherd who had fought wild beasts (1 Sam 16). Unlike other biblical heroes, such as Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Samson or Samuel, the Bible does not tell us about David's birth and childhood. The sages felt the necessity to supply the missing details; the tradition that David was born circumcised should be seen as one of the ways in which the sages attempted to push David's introduction into Jewish history back in time.⁸

Another example of this phenomenon is the statement that Adam gave up a few years of his life for David's sake. When Adam was warned about the forbidden fruit he was told, »for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die» (Gen 2:17), a warning that prima facie did not seem to materialize, since Adam lived on after he committed the sin. The sages, who would not accept that God's words were an empty threat, explained that the »day» which God referred to was not a day according to the human understanding of this term but a heavenly day, of which it has been said that »for a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday when it is past» (Ps 90:4). According to this interpretation Adam was to live another one thousand (human) years, but the Torah tells us that he lived only nine hundred and thirty (Gen 5:5). Therefore we possess this mysterious tradition:

In a measure David was indebted for his life to Adam. At first only three hours of existence had been allotted to David. When God caused all future generations to pass in review before Adam, he besought God to give David seventy of the thousand years destined for him. A deed of gift, signed by God and the angel Metatron, was drawn up.⁹

In this tradition, David's seventy years on earth (see 2 Sam 5:4–5) were allocated to him in a very special way. Shortly after the creation of the

world, Adam was introduced to one of the most important of his descendants and did whatever he could to give David a life of substance, so that David would be able to fulfill the vital roles for which he was destined. Even in the absence of an explanation as to why David was originally given only three hours to live, it is clear that the sages who created this tradition were attempting to connect the progenitor of the human race with one of the most prominent members of his descendants, as if to say that Adam's wrongdoing was finally amended by David, and the lives of the two men complemented each other. It may also be said that this tradition assumes David to be the future Messiah and therefore connects together the first and the last human beings.

Another example of the tendency to supplement David's pre-anointment biography and by that to indicate his worthiness of his destiny, is the story of a prophecy that David made as a child: »When David was young he used to prophesize and said: 'I am destined to ruin the Philistine places of dwelling and kill a great man from among them, named Goliath, and I will build the Temple'.¹⁰ The same applies to a detailed description of David's work as his father's shepherd:

»The Lord trieth the righteous» (Ps 11:5) – By what does He try him? By tending flocks. He tried David through sheep and found him to be a good shepherd, as it is said: »He chose David His servant and took him from the sheepfolds» (Ps 78:70)... He (David) used to stop the bigger sheep from going out before the smaller ones, and bring smaller ones out first, so that they should graze upon the tender grass, and afterwards he allowed the old sheep to feed from the ordinary grass and lastly he brought forth the young, lusty sheep to eat the tougher grass. Whereupon God said: He who knows how to look after sheep, bestowing upon each the care it deserves, shall come and tend my people, as it says: »from following the ewes that give suck He brought him, to be shepherd over Jacob His people» (Ps 78:71) (Exodus Rabbah 2:2).

The skills of the loyal and gracious shepherd tending his flock evidently attest to his capabilities as a leader of his people.¹¹

David's greatness, which, as mentioned above, was evident even before he was born, stems from his unique connection with God. In rabbinic literature, this special relationship was expressed in various practices that were common in the world of the sages. They said that David observed all the commandments, prayed at every opportunity,¹²

ate only food that had been tithed in accordance with Jewish Law,¹³ gave money to charity as required by the Law,¹⁴ never took property that was not rightfully his,¹⁵ and so on. According to the sages, observance should go hand in hand with constant study of the Torah and therefore, in a clear, backward projection of their ideal scholar, David is said to have studied God's words day and night. This belief is brought to an extreme in the following tradition:

Thus was David, the King of Israel, doing: He gathered congregations on the Shabbat and sat and preached ... he sat on the pulpit in the house of study and expounded to the people of Israel good promises and words of consolations, teaching them the laws of Passover on Passover, the laws of Pentecost on the Pentecost, and the laws of the holiday of the Tabernacles on the holiday of the Tabernacles ... David was sitting and explaining the secrets of the Torah ... revealing to Israel secrets and mysteries and drawing them close to the Torah.¹⁶

Public sermons on the Sabbath, the *Beit Midrash* (house of study), public Torah study, pulpits, the laws pertaining to the holidays, secrets of the Torah and the like are all key concepts in the world of the sages and are used here to describe David's religious activity. It sometimes seems that the sages would not have been surprised to find David sitting among them in the *Beit Midrash*, delving into the depths of the Torah, elucidating an unclear verse or developing new legal rule.¹⁷

The following tradition about David the scholar and the poet is particularly well-known:

Said David: Midnight never passed me by in my sleep ... till midnight he studied the Torah, from thence on he recited songs and praises ... But how did David know the exact time of midnight? ... David had a sign... a harp was hanging above David's bed. As soon as midnight arrived a north wind came and blew upon it and it played of itself. He arose immediately and studies the Torah till the break of dawn... (BT Berakhot 3b).

This beautiful tradition combines the study of the Torah with another subject with which David is strongly associated – the playing of music, singing and praise, an expansion of the biblical tradition that depicts David as »the sweet psalmist of Israel» (2 Sam 23:1). David, for the sages, is the author of the entire book of Psalms, since »All the praises that are stated in the book of Psalms – David uttered all of them» (BT

Pesahim 117b).¹⁸ It may also be said that David was considered to be the founder of the Jewish prayer book, which includes many of the psalms. Indeed, it is a common tradition, even today, to recite the psalms in times of sadness and joy, in public and in private.

Despite all this, the Midrash insists, David was never vain. Neither his knowledge of the Torah and his military victories, nor his poetry and riches made him forget his Creator:

It is written: »A song of ascents of David: O Lord, my heart is not lifted up» (Ps 131:1) – when Samuel anointed me. »My eyes are not raised too high» (Ibid.) – when I slew Goliath. »Or too wondrous for me» (Ibid.) – when they put me back on my throne... »But I have calmed and quieted my soul» (ibid.) ... my soul is humbled.¹⁹

In another tradition, David seems to be praising himself. In fact this is only a literary manner of speech that actually reveals some of David's characteristics:

Thus spoke David before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the world, am I not pious? All the kings of the East and the West sleep to the third hour [of the day], but I – »at midnight I rise to give thanks unto Thee» (Ps 119:62)... All the kings of the East and the West sit with all their pomp among their company, whereas my hands are soiled with blood, with the fetus and the placenta, in order to declare a woman clean for her husband. And what is more, in all that I do I consult my teacher, Mephibosheth, and I say to him: My teacher Mephibosheth, is my decision right? Did I correctly convict, correctly acquit, correctly declare clean, correctly declare unclean? And I am not ashamed [to ask for his advise] (BT Berachot 4a).

In addition to the familiar concepts of studying the Torah, nighttime prayers, and modesty and humility before the rabbi-teacher, this passage introduces a new notion: David used to inspect women who came to him to inquire about blood stains they had seen (to determine whether they were menstruating and therefore forbidden to have conjugal relations). He also checked women who miscarried at some point during the pregnancy. The examination of the fetus or the placenta is designed to determine whether the woman may, under Jewish Law, continue to have conjugal relations with her husband or must wait a long period before doing so. David engaged in these activities in order to find ways to allow women to unite with their husbands, enhance

domestic happiness and promote procreation among the people of Israel. This depiction of David sharply contradicts the explanation given in the Bible as to why he would not be allowed to build the Temple: »You have shed much blood and made great wars. You shall not build a house for My name, because you have shed much blood on the earth in My sight« (1 Chronicles 22:8). The Talmud admits David's bloody connection, but maintains that this is not the blood of war victims or that of Uriah the Hittite, but quite the opposite: blood that comes from pregnancy and birth, from the giving of life, from harmonious family life. Although both activities involve blood, the difference could not be more striking.

Finally, David's greatness and his wonderful qualities are also manifest in the story of his death:

David said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Sovereign of the Universe, »Lord make me to know mine end« (Ps 39:5).

– It is a decree before Me, replied He, that the end of a mortal is not made known.

– »And the measure of my days, what it is« (ibid.)

– It is a decree before Me that a person's span of life is not made known.

– »Let me know how frail I am« (ibid.)

– Said He to him: Thou will die on the Sabbath.

– Let me die on the first day of the week!

– The reign of thy son Solomon shall already have become due, and one reign may not overlap another even by a hairbreadth.

– Then let me die on the eve of the Sabbath!

– Said He: »For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand« (Ps 84:11), better is to Me the one day that thou sit and engage in learning than the thousand burnt-offerings which thy son Solomon is destined to sacrifice before Me on the altar (BT Shabbat 30a).

Here, too, the choice of a verse from Psalms to shed light on an event from David's life is not coincidental, since this book was conceived in many ways as David's autobiography. In this instance, David, who is conversing with God, has the confidence and courage to negotiate the time of his death. It appears also in this passage that David is immersed in the study of the Torah – a commitment that God cherishes much more than the thousand sacrifices Solomon will offer when he becomes king (1 Kings 3:4). The Talmud continues by saying:

Now every Sabbath day he [=David] would sit and study all day. On the day that his soul was to be at rest the angel of death stood before him but could not prevail against him, because learning did not cease from his mouth. What shall I do to him? said he. Now, there was a garden before his house, so the angel of death went, ascended and soughed in the trees. David went out to see. As he was ascending the ladder it broke under him. Thereupon he became silent [from his studies] and his soul had reposed (ibid.).

Although, like all mortals, even a great man such as David must die, in his case the angel of death had to resort to trickery to take his soul, because of David's constant preoccupation with the Torah. Since under Jewish law a body must not be carried from one place to another on the Sabbath, David remained lying in full view under the scorching sun. And some said that Solomon »summoned eagles who spread their wings over him that the sun should not beat down upon him» (Ruth Rabbah 3:2).²⁰ This is, indeed, a fitting, miraculous conclusion to the life story of a great person!

All the sources I have brought – and many more could be provided – indicate the unmistakable tendency of most of the sages to describe David as a humble, righteous man who studies the Torah, observes the commandments and composes religious psalms, an honest judge, a prophet and a holy man (the reasons for this description shall be explained below). Readers are invited to compare this image of David and the one that emerges from the biblical stories, particularly those of the books of Samuel and Kings. A compelling comparison indeed.

[B]

As demonstrated above, most of the sages chose to describe David essentially as a man who lives a life similar to their own, committed to the world of Torah and commandments, and exhibiting sublime religious and spiritual qualities. Nevertheless, they were unable to ignore those embarrassing traits that emerge from the biblical description of King David, traits which are in stark contrast to their ideal depiction of him. How, therefore, did they deal with these issues and, primarily, with perhaps the most difficult episode in David's biblical biography,

the story of his relationship with Bathsheba and Uriah the Hittite as recorded in Samuel (chapters 11-12)?²¹

The author of Chronicles – who repeats many traditions found in the books of Samuel and Kings – seems to have chosen a simple way out by ignoring the story of David and Batsheba altogether.²² Whoever was responsible for the title of Psalm 51 opted for a different solution, putting words of remorse in David's mouth that far exceed the King's reported penitence in the Book of Samuel:

To the chief Musician, A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba (v. 1). Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your loving kindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions (v. 2). Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin (v. 3). Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight (v. 5). Hide Your face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities (v. 10). Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a steadfast spirit within me (v.11). Then I will teach transgressors Your ways; and sinners shall be converted to You (v. 14).

The sages followed the clues from Psalm 51 on the one hand, and from Chronicles on the other, and built upon them. Thus, for example, it was argued – in line with Chronicles – that »Whoever says that David sinned is merely erring» (BT Shabbat 56a). This blunt statement is found in a well-known passage in the Babylonian Talmud:

R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in R. Jonathan's name: Whoever says that David sinned is merely erring, for it is said »and David behaved himself wisely in all his ways and the Lord was with him» (1 Sam 18:14). Is it possible that sin came at his hand, yet the Divine Presence was with him? Then how do I interpret [the words of rebuke said to David by the prophet Nathan:] »Wherefore hast thou despised the words of the Lord to do that which is evil in His sight?» (2 Sam 12:9). He [=David] wished to do evil but did not (ibid.).

The Talmud goes on and sheds light, albeit dim, on the thinking mechanism and the historical background behind the attitude of some of the sages toward David. The Talmud portrays David's defense as being led by his descendants, the family of the Patriarch (the head of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel) and their supporters:

Rab observed: Rabbi [=Judah the Patriarch] who is descended from David, seems to defend him, and expounds the verse in David's favor [thus:] The »evil« mentioned here is unlike every other »evil« mentioned elsewhere in Scriptures. For of every other »evil« mentioned in Scriptures it is written »and he did«, whereas here it is written »to do that which is evil«, [this means] that he desired to do but did not (ibid.).

In a new and surprising interpretation of Nathan's reproach, the Talmud goes on to explain why David should be seen as blameless:

»Thou hast smitten Uriah the Hittite with the sword« (2 Sam 12:9), thou shouldst have had him tried by the Sanhedrin, but didst not. »And hast taken his wife to be thy wife« (ibid.), thou hast marriage rights in her. For R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in R. Jonathan's name: Every one who went out in the wars of the house of David wrote a bill of divorce for his wife ... [and] you are not to be punished for the death of Uriah the Hittite. What is the reason? He was rebellious against royal authority, saying to him »and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are encamped in the open field; shall I then go into mine house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? ...I will not do this thing« (2 Sam 11:11) (ibid.).

According to this tradition, David's only sin was that he killed Uriah before the Sanhedrin approved this otherwise justified act. The creator of this tradition believes Uriah to be an insurgent who therefore deserves the death penalty, but due process required the prior approval of the court for the sentence, which was not received. David is thus guilty merely of a procedural misdemeanor. Uriah is considered a rebel because he refused to follow the king's order to return home and stay there with his wife (2 Sam 11:8), and instead stayed to sleep at the palace gate.

As for Bathsheba, the Talmud explains that all the soldiers in David's army left at home a *get* (a legal document dissolving the marriage bond) in case they did not return safely, and such documents were effective retroactively, i.e. from the moment they were drafted and given to the woman. If a soldier died on the battlefield – or was officially declared missing in action – his wife was considered to be divorced from the moment that she received the *get*. Upon Uriah's death, therefore, Bathsheba was considered already divorced (from the day her husband left for the battlefield), or, at least, her marriage was

considered questionable (BT Baba Metzia 59a). Either way, according to this explanation, David's actions do not constitute adultery. This midrashic rationalization clears David completely from the horrendous acts of murderous greed and adultery. Accordingly, David was not possessed by the evil inclination at all (BT Baba Batra 17a) and is as righteous as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

A more moderate school of thought reluctantly admits David's sin but places much more emphasis on his remorse, punishment, and penitence and on God's forgiveness, or alternatively offers various, mitigating circumstances for his deed. According to this approach, the whole Bathsheba affair was, from the outset, a test of David's ethics:

One should never bring himself to the test, since David, king of Israel, did so, and fell. He said to Him: Sovereign of the Universe, why do they say²³ »The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob» but not »the God of David»? He replied: They were tried by me, but thou wast not. Then, replied he: Sovereign of the Universe ... »Examine me, O Lord, and try me» (Ps 36: 1). [God answered:] I will test thee, and yet grant thee a special privilege, for I did not inform them [of the nature of their trial beforehand] yet I inform thee that I will try thee in a matter of adultery. Straightaway »and it came to pass in an evening tide that David arose from his bed ... and he walked upon the roof of the king's house and from the roof he saw a woman washing herself and the woman was very beautiful to look upon» (2 Sam 11:2). Now, Bathsheba was cleansing her hair behind a screen, when the Satan came to him, appearing in the shape of a bird. He shot an arrow at him, which broke the screen, thus she stood revealed and he saw her (BT Sanhedrin 107a).

David may have failed the test, but the fact that the entire affair is said to have been orchestrated by God serves as a mitigating circumstance. The advocates of this approach believe in general that »Bathsheba the daughter of Eliam was predestined for David from the six days of creation, but she came to him with sorrow» (ibid.) i.e. after much agony or serious trials.

Although the biblical story seems to indicate that David was the one to stand on the rooftop and look at Bathsheba, who was in a lower (and concealed) place, according to one midrashic tradition it was actually Bathsheba's actions that attracted David's attention:

Every day Bathsheba used to wear clothes of fine linen, one thousand in the morning, one thousand in the afternoon and one

thousand in the evenings, and she was adorned with one hundred and fifty perfumes and covered with one thousand and eighty golden coats and she stood in front of David, with the hope that he will favor her. Once she saw that he did not favor her, she went up to the roof and stood there naked and was washing herself on the roof, naked.²⁴

Interestingly, this tradition is actually intended as praise for Bathsheba, since it claims that the verse »She makes tapestry for herself; her clothing is fine linen and purple« (Prov 31:22), which describes the woman of valor, is about no other than her. In any case, this aggadic tradition provides an active partner for David's sin and partially absolves the man who is tempted by the well-intentioned seductress who wanted to father Solomon the Wise.

Other sources, however, stress that David was severely punished for his actions. The death of his sons (as provided in the biblical story) was not the only penalty: he was also afflicted with leprosy,²⁵ and »for twenty two years the Holy Spirit was taken away from David ... and that in his grief he shed a cupful of tears every day and ate his bread sprinkled with ashes, as it is said: 'For I have eaten ashes like bread, and mingled my drink with weeping' (Ps 102:9)«. ²⁶ David's suffering, it seems, was tremendous:

Our masters said: For thirteen years David was sick and bound to his bed and every day they changed seven mattresses under him, because they were drenched, as it stated: »I am weary with my moaning, every night I flood my bed with tears, I drench my couch with my weeping« (Ps 6:7). These thirteen years he suffered because he did that deed.²⁷

The fact that David's sin is only referred to indirectly (»that deed«), coupled with the vivid descriptions of his physical suffering and remorse, serve to lessen our impression of the severity of his actions; after all, no one is infallible: »For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good and sinneth not« (Eccl 7:20). Moreover, once God appears and explicitly states that David is forgiven, the focus shifts to forgiveness, and the horrific sin is pushed to the sidelines:

David prayed before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Sovereign of the Universe, forgive me for that sin. – It is forgiven thee, He replied. – Show me a token in my lifetime, he entreated. – In thy lifetime I will not make it known, He answered, but I will make it known in the lifetime of thy son Solomon. For when Solo-

mon built the Temple, he desired to take the ark into the Holy of Holies, whereupon the gates cleaved to each other. Solomon uttered twenty-four prayers, yet he was not answered ... but as soon as he prayed »O Lord God ... remember the good deeds of David thy servant« (2 Chron 4:22) he was immediately answered. In that hour the faces of all David's enemies turned black like the bottom of a pot and all Israel knew that the Holy One, Blessed be He, had forgiven him that sin (BT Shabbat 30a).²⁸

David also became a model, or a symbol, for penitence: »'whoever confesses and forsakes [his sins] will have mercy' (Prov 28:13) – [this] applies to David«. ²⁹ According to another source, David himself asked to be punished for his great sin. ³⁰ Yet another tradition seems to state that it is because of his magnitude that David was put to this terrible test. Quoting Rabbi Shimon Ben Lakish, Rabbi Yohanan says the following of David's sin with Bathsheba and the sin of the golden calf, two traumatic and embarrassing incidents involving the nation and its greatest king:

David was not the kind of man to do that act, nor was Israel the kind of people to do that act. David was not the kind of man to do that act, as it is written: »my heart is slain within me« (Ps 109:22), nor were the Israelites the kind of people to commit that act ... why then did they act thus? In order to teach thee that if an individual has sinned he could be referred to the individual [i.e. to David who sinned, repented and was forgiven] and if a community commits a sin they should be told: Go to the community [i.e. to the people who sinned by worshipping the golden calf, repented and were forgiven] (BT Avodah Zarah 4b-5a).

According to this tradition, God led David into sin so that he could serve as a role model for repentant sinners. The entire Bathsheba affair was orchestrated in order to instill the concept of »the burden of penitence« (which is mentioned later on in the same text) and to demonstrate that everyone is human and that all sins can be atoned for. To do this, an example had to be set by a person of greatness. The very biblical story that portrays David's low moral standard has become, in this midrashic text, a testimony of his merits!

Other negative stories about David – such as his sin at the census (2 Sam 24) or his suspicious relationship with his wife-to-be Abigail, when she was yet married to Nabal³¹ – are treated by the sages in the same way, employing similar strategies for re-interpreting elements

that seem to cast David in a negative light. Generally speaking, the sages defended David's actions, glossed them over or, alternatively, admitted David's sins but diminished them by adding elements such as penitence, suffering and the like.

[C]

Even the limited selection of texts reviewed above – a fraction of the vast literary world created by the sages – causes us to wonder at the sages' depiction of David. Why did they choose to follow the lead set by the later authors of the Bible and describe David as a man whose spirituality far outweighs his mundane traits, rather than keeping in line with the image described in the books of Samuel and Kings?

Two explanations can be offered, which should be seen as complementing one another. The first explanation is that most of our sages were generally inclined to purge the biblical protagonists of sin. While the Bible does not hesitate to provide complex descriptions of its key players and admits their human faults and even their sins, the sages generally strove for a purer, more perfect picture. The defects or sins described in the Bible often get reinterpreted in rabbinic literature in a way that upholds the dignity of the nation's founders and forefathers, even if at times these interpretations appear to deviate from the biblical story or even to contradict it. The sages opted for this approach both in response to criticism from outside the Jewish world (such as various Hellenistic circles that mocked the biblical protagonists and described them in unflattering ways) and in order to deal with Jewish skeptics. The sages thus created figures who were »guilty in the Bible but unimpeachable in the Talmud and the Midrashim.«³² At the same time, those of the sages who chose to focus on the less noble qualities of the biblical heroes may have done so because of didactic reasons. They may have wanted to give the people of Israel models with which they could identify: ones that were not free of sin or sinful thoughts, but amended their ways and proceeded in a lifestyle worth emulating.³³

In David's special case, the general inclination to cleanse biblical protagonists of sin is enhanced by the fact that the Bible itself marks David and his descendants as the legitimate rulers of the people of Israel for generations to come and also connected David with the

Messiah and the hopes associated with his coming. God's promise to David that his descendants would always rule Israel (2 Sam 7:16 and elsewhere) led later generations to search for connections between their own rulers and David's lineage. This explains the lengths to which various Israelite groups – such as the followers of the Patriarch's family in the Land of Israel, the Exilarch in Babylonia³⁴ and those of Jesus³⁵ – have gone in an effort to establish the descent of their leaders from the house of David. Understandably, the founder of such a lineage of kings and rulers, in general, and the Messiah, in particular, is expected to be beyond reproach. We have already seen the honest and frank statement of Rab in the Babylonian Talmud: Judah the Patriarch and his confidants were David's staunchest advocates simply because they had a stake in the matter and were fighting for the honor of their own family. This analysis may also explain the choice made by those who focused on David's flaws: they may have belonged to one of the social groups that opposed the Patriarch and may therefore have been looking for a discreet way to proclaim the rule that »one should not appoint any one administrator of a community unless he carries a basket of reptiles on his back, so that if he became arrogant one could tell him: turn around!« (*T.B., Yoma 22b*). They sought to illustrate the fact that the Patriarch's family – including the Patriarch himself – is not infallible.

Be as it may, whether we prefer the first explanation, regarding the rabbinic variegated attitudes toward biblical figures, or choose the second, which sees the use of »David« as an excuse to tackle issues relating to the institution of the Patriarchate and the Patriarch himself – the divergent and even contradictory descriptions of David, on the one hand, and the prevalence of the school of thought that praises him, on the other, can certainly be accounted for.

[D]

As a continuation of our claim that the sages sometimes used the name »David« to refer to the Patriarch (or, in Babylonia, the Exilarch), and based on the fact that some of the sages, as seen above,³⁶ established lines of comparison between David and Moses, the last part of this article will examine the numerous instances in which the sages mention

David and Moses in the same breath, comparing the greatest prophet with the greatest king and attempting to decide which is more illustrious.³⁷ This may further our understanding of the sage's description of David in their literature.

There are more than three hundred instances in which David and Moses are mentioned together, although for different purposes, in the Tosephta, the Talmuds (the Babylonian and the Palestinian) and the midrashic literature (but not in the Mishnah). It seems that no two other biblical figures share the stage in the literature of the sages as much as these two.

We shall demonstrate this point by citing texts from a single composition, the *Midrash on Psalms*,³⁸ which refers to Moses more than one hundred and eighty times. In more than twenty of these instances similarities and differences between the king-cum-poet and the prophet-cum-legislator are drawn and a hierarchy is established. My choice of the *Midrash on Psalms*, a relatively late composition, was by and large arbitrary – enhanced by the fact that the book of Psalms is attributed by the sages to David, and therefore the presence of Moses in the midrash on this book is especially intriguing, yet the picture that emerges from this compilation is very much the same as that which surfaces from the writings of the sages in general.

In some instances in the *Midrash on Psalms*, Moses and David are mentioned along with other biblical figures as part of comprehensive lists, like that of the thirteen individuals who were born circumcised: Adam, Seth, Enoch, Noah, Shem, Terah, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Samuel, David, Isaiah, and Jeremiah (9:7 [Braude, I, p. 139]), or that of the four persons of which it was said: »all that come seventh are beloved»: Enoch, Moses, David and Asa (9:11 [I, p. 143]). In other cases only Moses and David are mentioned, but no comparison is drawn between them. One such instance is the tradition that both studied the Torah while God fought their wars (35:1 [I, p. 412]), or the tradition according to which both have asked what one should do to go to heaven (119:5 [II, p. 255]). However, the references relevant to our discussion are those in which David and Moses (and sometimes other biblical figures as well) are compared to one another and a hierarchy is defined. Moses is usually the worthier of the two; at best, it is said that David is as good as Moses. See for example:

David said to the Holy One, Blessed be He: »Stained with sin am I». A parable of a man who set out on a journey with but two issars.³⁹ Seeing an inn, he entered it and saw some people eating meat, and others eating fish. He said: »What shall I do? If I say 'give me something to eat', the innkeeper may bring me a pair of pheasants, and I have only two issars». And so he said to the innkeeper: »give me two issars' worth of food». The innkeeper said: »what shall I give thee?» and the man answered: »Hast thou not heard the common saying, 'dance my shilling's worth for me'?»⁴⁰ Just so David said to the Holy One, Blessed be He: »I have not enough merit to sit with the great, so let me be with the lesser. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are in the bedchambers, and Moses and Aaron are in the banqueting hall, so let me be but at the threshold, as it is said: »I had rather stand at the threshold of the House of my God» (Ps 84:11) (*Midrash Ps 16:13* [vol. I, p. 203]).

On the face of it, in this text David only humbly admits his insignificance compared to the Patriarchs, Moses and Aaron; his self-effacement indicates his virtue and humility. A closer reading, however, reveals a clear preference of Moses over David, reflected in the following tradition as well:

R. Azariah, R. Nehemiah and R. Berechiah told the parable of a king who had two stewards, one in charge of the house and the other in charge of the fields. The one in charge of the house knew all that happened in the house and all that happened in the fields, but the one in charge of the field knew only what happened in the fields. Just so, Moses, who had gone up to heaven, knew the upper as well as the nether worlds, and with the names of both praised the Holy One, Blessed be He, as it said »Behold the heaven and the heaven of heavens is the Lord's, thy God's, the earth also with all that therein is» (Dt 10:14), but David, who had not gone up to heaven, praised the Holy One, Blessed be He, only with what he knew, as it is said: »the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof» Ps 24:1) (*Midrash Ps 24:5* [vol. I, p. 340]).

This parable shows that Moses was superior to David in terms of knowledge and was also closer to God. The following example is even more unequivocal:

David said to God: »master of the universe, Thy will is that I keep Thy words, so 'Unveil Thou mine eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy law' (Ps 119:18). For if Thou dost not unveil mine eyes, how will I know Thy words? ... Yet though mine eyes are open I still know nothing ...and wherefore do I call

upon Thee? Because »such knowledge is too wonderful for me ... I cannot attain unto it» (Ps 139:6), the wonderful knowledge being the Torah ... so David said: »Knowledge of the Torah is too wonderful». But Moses said: »it is not too wonderful, as it is written 'It is not too wonderful except for thee' (Dt 30:11), that is: Knowledge of the Torah is too wonderful for thee, because thou has not labored in it» (*Midrash Ps 119:9* [vol. II, pp.257–258]).

Moses and David's knowledge of the Torah and their dedication to its study are juxtaposed. David remarks, »Knowledge of the Torah is too wonderful», to which Moses allegedly says, apparently in response to David's observation – »It is not too wonderful except for thee». The words of reproof »because thou has not labored in it» could be interpreted as addressed to David as well, if not essentially to him.

The general picture that emerges from *Midrash on Psalms* is clear: Moses is the teacher and David is the student; The prayer that Moses offers for the people is worthier than that of David's self-centered prayer (90:7 [vol. II, pp. 90–91]), while the teachings of Moses are more comprehensive and profound than David's. Even David himself confesses his inferiority to Moses. I could not find a single instance in this particular Midrash that reflects the opposite hierarchy.⁴¹ The best David gets in this text, in a clear polemic-apologetic tone, is a statement that he was as good as Moses:

The foremost among prophets – he is Moses ... the foremost among kings – he is David. You find that whatever Moses did, David did. As Moses led Israel out of Egypt, so did David lead Israel out of servitude to Goliath; as Moses fought the battles of the Lord against Sihon and Og, so David fought the battles of the Lord in all the regions around him ... As Moses divided the Red Sea for Israel so David divided the rivers of Aram for Israel⁴² ... As Moses built an altar (Ex 24:4), so David built an altar (2 Sam 24:25) ... as Moses gave the five books of law [=the Torah] to Israel, so David gave five books of Psalms to Israel ... Finally, as Moses blessed Israel with the words »Blessed art thou O Israel» (Dt 32:29), so David blessed Israel with the words »blessed is the man» (Ps 1:1) (*Midrash Ps 1:2* [vol. I, pp.4-5]).

Although the statement that »whatever Moses did, David did» is based on the assumption that David is just as good as Moses, the starting point is still the greatness of the latter. The comparison includes few parameters, and the most important were clearly selected to make

David look more distinguished and bring him closer to Moses: the redemption he led (from Goliath!⁴³) is said to be as momentous as the Exodus, and like Moses before him, David too divided a body of water. The comparison between the five books of the Torah and the five parts of the book of Psalms is yet another attempt – not of the author of this midrashic tradition, of course, but by his predecessors – to put David on a par with Moses. Indeed, it is more than reasonable to assume that this was the motivation for the division of the book of Psalms into five parts.

Why, to begin with, did the sages value Moses and David above any other biblical figure? And why did they generally present Moses as worthier than David? We now can try and answer these questions.

On the one hand, the relative status of Moses and David was a subject of discussion already in the Bible itself, as seen in the books of the Prophets and the Hagiographa.⁴⁴ Attuned to the intricacies of the Bible, the sages developed this comparison as part of their studies of the Holy Scriptures. At the same time, the legacy of the Second Temple Period was also at play: dealing with Moses and David provided those generations the opportunity to address issues pertaining to the legitimacy of the Hasmonean dynasty. There would seem to be some merit to the observation, whose most uncompromising advocate was Aptowitzer,⁴⁵ that the debate over the legitimacy of the Hasmonean dynasty influenced rabbinic literature in general, and the images of Moses and David that emerges from this literature in particular. The Hasmoneans were priests and thus – like Moses – members of the tribe of Levi. However, this seems to contradict the biblical promise according to which the rulers of Israel would come only from David's family, i.e. the tribe of Judah. Aptowitzer claims that the glorification of Moses in the literature of the Second Temple Period should be read in this context. The Hasmoneans and their followers magnified Moses because they found him to be a fitting precedent: a member of the tribe of Levi who was also a king.⁴⁶ This was also their motivation for disparaging the image of David and the tribe of Judah. The opponents of the Hasmonean family fought back by doing the same to Moses.⁴⁷ According to this assumption, the question of the status of the tribes of Levi and Judah and of Moses and David, their descendants, was handed down to the sages, who followed the traditions started in the Bible and in the

Second Temple Period, and continued to dwell on this issue even when the status of the Hasmoneans was no longer relevant.

Was it only because the debate about Moses and David was handed down to the sages from previous generations that they focused on this issue? Was it only inertia that made them carry on the comparison between these two great figures, or did the sages make their own contribution to this ancient conundrum, and if so – what was their motivation? As important as was their literary-historical heritage, it seems clear, as suggested above, that there was also another incentive for developing the comparison between Moses and David: in the typological thinking of the sages, Moses represented the sages while David, as demonstrated already above, represented the family of the Patriarch. Although unequivocal evidence of this cannot always be provided, I propose that in the time of the sages contemporary undercurrents, resulting from the constant tension between the Patriarchal lineage and the sages, found their way into this ancient debate. In this I follow the suggestion of Shimoff⁴⁸ and the research method developed primarily by Moshe Beer,⁴⁹ who illustrated that the treatment of specific biblical personas by the sages was propelled to a large extent by a hidden agenda, namely contemporary issues, including the known tension between the Patriarch and the sages.⁵⁰ In my mind, »Moses« can at times be seen as a code name for the sages, whose status derives from their knowledge of the Torah, hard work and charisma, while »David« is the forefather of the Patriarch's lineage, those who were entitled to rule the nation mainly by birthright alone.⁵¹

The preference given to Moses over David in many midrashic traditions, as seen above, is consistent with the worldview of the sages, who perceived themselves as »the Moses of their generation«,⁵² and with their attitude toward some of the members of the Patriarch's family, David's descendants. The relatively few traditions that favor David over Moses may have been handed down from previous generations or, perhaps, composed by proponents of the Patriarch. The relative supremacy of Moses over David that emerges from rabbinic literature does not contradict the rabbinic tendency to describe David in a more favorable light than his biblical image: they are just two sides of the same coin.

The portrayal of David has experienced constant changes throughout Jewish literature: the stories in the books of Samuel and Kings, the other (and later) books of the Bible, the literature of the Second Temple Period, the literary activity of the sages, and further on in the Jewish literature of the Middle Ages, up into the present. David did not become a remote figure of the past: On the holiday of the Tabernacle he is believed to visit each *Sukkah*, while his tomb on Mount Zion in Jerusalem is still a pilgrimage site frequented by many. The image of »David King of Israel« is indeed »alive and vigorous«.

Notes

1. All biblical quotations (unless cited as part of a rabbinic text) are according to: *Holy Bible – New King James Version*, New York 1982. Citations from rabbinic literature are according to their English translations wherever available. All citations from the Babylonian Talmud [=BT] are according to: *The Babylonian Talmud ... translated into English ... under the Editorship of I. Epstein*, London 1935-1948 (Soncino Press). All citations from *Midrash Rabbah* to the Pentateuch and the Five Scrolls are according to: *The Midrash Rabbah – translated into English ... under the Editorship of H. Freedman and M. Simon*, London 1977 (Soncino Press). All other translations are mine.
2. See: Zakovitch, 1995; Steussy, 1999; Halpern, 2001.
3. The comparison drawn by the sages between Moses and David and its purpose will be discussed later on.
4. For a collection of traditions dealing with David, including those of the sages, their contemporaries (such as the church fathers) and later generations, see: Ginzberg, 1968, IV, 81–121. For a more traditional collection of rabbinic sources, see: Chasida, 1994, 132–163.
5. For a comprehensive bibliography see: Kalmin, 1999, 142, note 1.
6. The linguistic »proof« of this claim is rather convoluted and cannot be properly translated into English. See Rashi, ad loc.
7. See for example: See for example: J. Neusner (tr.), *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan – an Analytical Translation*, Atlanta 1986, chapter 2, p. 25, and many parallels.
8. Another such instance is the odd story that is recorded in the late *Yalkut HaMachiri* – discussed by Zakovitch, 1995, 35–55 and Grossmann, 2000, 341–349 – regarding the special way in which David’s mother was impregnated, a story that adds an extraordinary event to David’s pre-birth biography. On this and other traditions see also: Zakovitch, 1998, 185–198.
9. This is Ginzberg’s free paraphrase of a tradition found in *Yalkut Shimoni* to Genesis, No. 41, and other late sources (Ginzberg, 1968, IV, 82).
10. *Midrash Hagadol* to Deuteronomy 1:17, ed. S. Fish, Jerusalem 1972, 32 (Hebrew).
11. A similar tradition is told (*Exodus Rabbah*, *ibid.*) about Moses, and an underlying comparison is drawn between these two leaders. See below.
12. *Pesikta Rabbati*, ed. M. Ish Shalom, Wien 1880, 31b–32a (Hebrew).

322–323. I did not note parallels within rabbinic literature; they are recorded in Buber's edition (*Midrash Tehilim*, Vilna 1891 [Hebrew]) and in Braude's translation of this Midrash (ibid. note 29). On a different issue, yet relevant to our discussion, as reflected in this particular midrash see: Menn, 2001, 1–26; 2002, 298–323.

39. The *issar* was »a small bronze coin of little value« (Braude, II, 435, note 17).

40. This is a proverb which means: »serve me according to the amount of money I have paid you«. Cf. Elkoshi 1981, 277.

41. To provide a more balanced picture I would like to mention, in a footnote, one example – found in the Babylonian Talmud – that depicts David as better than Moses (and the other patriarchs): »The Holy One, Blessed be He, will make a great banquet for the righteous ... after they have eaten and drunk, the cup of grace will be offered to our father Abraham, that he should recite grace, but he will answer them 'I cannot say grace because Ishmael issued from me'. Then Isaac will be asked 'take the cup and say grace'. – 'I cannot say grace' he will reply 'because Esau issued from me'. Then Jacob will be asked ... - 'I cannot say grace because I married two sisters during both their lifetimes, whereas the Torah was destined to forbid them to me'. Then Moses ... - 'I cannot say grace because I was not privileged to enter the land of Israel either in life or in death'. Then Joshua ... then David will be asked 'take it and say grace'. – 'I will say grace and it is fitting for me to say grace' he will reply, 'as it is said: I will lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord' (Ps 116:13)» (BT, *Pesahim* 116b). This tradition is problematic, since also some of David's children were far from perfect. But this is immaterial; the main point is that the author is clearly doing his best to lavish praise upon David. It should nevertheless be noted that examples like this are few and far between, and taken as a part of the broad »debate« concerning the hierarchy between Moses and David, this tradition only serves to underscore the unequal treatment of the two.

42. The Hebrew word in Psalm (60:2) *be-hatzoto* (=when he, David, fought Aram) is read as *be-chatzoto* (=when he divided [the rivers of Aram]). The replacement of the Hebrew letter *he* (v) with *chet* (j), for the sake of creating a midrash, is a common practice in rabbinic literature.

43. Braude preferred to amend the text, *uhukd* (=servitude in exile) and reads instead, *hkud*, »Goliath«.

44. See: de Vries, 1988, 619–639; Zakovitch, 1997, 117–202, esp. 179.

45. Aptowitz, 1927.

46. For a thorough discussion of this idea, see Meeks, 1967. This issue is too broad for this paper.

47. The question of the relative status of the patriarchs of the tribes of Judah and Levy also emerges in the apocryphal books from that era, such as *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, in which both competing views are represented. For a brief analysis, see Kee, 1983, 777–778.

48. See above, note 37, and her article: Shimoff, 1993, 246–256.

49. See in particular his two articles about Moses' riches and sons: Beer, 1973–4, 70–87; Beer, 1976, 148–156. A similar way of interpreting the rabbinic debate regarding David is proposed by Cohen, 1991, 49–65.

50. For more details about this tension, see Baumgarten, 1982, 135–172; Levine, 1985, 134–191. In his recent and fascinating book, Kalmin rejects the assumption that the sages' treatment of David can be explained as being motivated by this hidden agenda (p. 88) and proposes instead to view it as reflecting the different attitudes of the sages of Babylon and Palestine toward what he calls the »non-rabbinic Jews«, i.e. Jews who did not travel in rabbinic circles. According to Kalmin,

the more favorable depictions of David were the work of the Palestinian sages, who maintained closer relations with that non-Rabbinic Jews and who felt the need to defend David from their criticism. The Babylonian rabbis, who distanced themselves from the non-Rabbinic Jews, felt no such a need (Kalmin, 1999, 83).

51. Some hedging may be in order: not every reference to Moses is symbolic of nor representative of the world of the sages, just as not every reference to David refers to the family of the Patriarch. Each text should be studied independently, on the basis of its different versions, contexts, the identity of its authors, and so forth.

52. Cf.: BT, *Rosh Hashanah* 25b: »Jerubaal in his generation is like Moses in his generation«. This statement reappears in various rabbinic sources as a basis for the claim that every court of the sages should be seen as the courts of Moses. See *Midrash Shmuel* (ibid, note 17) 15:2 and parallels. It may be added that the phrase »those who sit on the chair of Moses« is used by Jesus (Mat 23:2) to describe the Pharisees.

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[Hebrew Texts and their English translations (whenever available) are fully registered in the footnotes].

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