

SESSION SIX



reatness and Passion: The Story of David

David, Melech Yisrael—Chai, chai v' kyam. (David, King of Israel, is alive now and forever.)

It is three thousand years since King David began his reign, and children are still singing about him. But David is more than just a popular hero who, like Elvis, is never allowed to die. We are intrigued by him. We bask in his glory. We are appalled by his failings—and then we forgive him his faults.

The full sweep of David's life is as accessible as can be. We know more about him than any other biblical figure. He is central to the Book of Samuel (the main source for Wiesel's commentary); the glory of his kingdom is put into historical perspective in the Book of Chronicles; and the end of his life is told in the Book of Kings. His emotions are exposed in more than seventy psalms that are ascribed to him.

But it is something other than the abundance of material that makes David familiar to us. We are in awe of Abraham and Moses, but they impress us from the distance of myth. Their lives seem larger than our own. After all, they have direct intercourse with God, and that makes their predicament, their existential dilemmas, dramatically different from ours. But David resides with us mortals. His relationship with God—with the deity, destiny, meaning, providence, however you want to consider it—is like our own. He prays, he begs for advice, he despairs, he seeks comfort, he celebrates ecstasy.

For the leader. A Psalm of David.

*O Lord, in Thy strength the king
rejoiceth;*

*And in Thy salvation how greatly
doth he exult!*

*Thou hast given him his heart's
desire,*

*And the request of his lips Thou
hast not withholden.*

*For Thou meetest him with
choicest blessings;*

*Thou settest a crown of fine gold
on his head.*

*He asked life of Thee, Thou gavest
it him;*

*Even length of days for ever and
ever.*

*His glory is great through Thy
salvation;*

*Honour and majesty dost Thou
lay upon him.*

*For Thou makest him most
blessed for ever;*

*Thou makest him glad with joy in
Thy presence.*

*For the king trusteth in the Lord,
Yea, in the mercy of the Most*

*High; he shall not be moved.
(Psalm 21:2-8)*

David, King of Israel

During the period from the death of Joshua until the establishment of the monarchy (a period of two centuries or more for which we have little historical corroboration of the biblical texts), the Israelites formed a loosely confederated group of twelve tribes lacking any government or administration except that which was exercised by the head of a family, tribe, or clan. These tribes were broadly organized into two units: Israel (ten tribes) in the north, and Judah (two tribes) in the south. A unifying monarchy was established under Saul but soon passed to David, who was instrumental in the radical transformation of the Israelites from this loose association of tribes into a Jewish constitutional monarchy. Under David's son, Solomon, the influence and power of this monarchy extended over a greater area than at any other time, before or after, in Jewish history.

As a public servant, David was ambitious, resolute, judicious, and more. He was a most successful king, establishing a kingdom that ultimately stretched from deep in the Sinai Peninsula in the south to the Euphrates River in the north, encompassing huge chunks of modern Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. Damascus and Amman, the modern capitals of Syria and Jordan, respectively, both lay within his domain. Jerusalem—referred to as the City of David—was made his capital, and a royal palace was constructed. At his death, only the Holy Temple remained to be built.

David, Music Maker

We first encounter David when God sends the prophet Samuel to Bethlehem to find the future king among the sons of Jesse. Jesse brings seven sons before Samuel, but after examining each and not finding "the Lord's anointed" among them, he questions Jesse: "Are here all thy children?" And he said: "There remaineth yet the youngest, and behold, he keepeth the sheep." It had not even occurred to Jesse that David, a mere shepherd boy, could be a contender, but when Samuel sees David, who is brought up from the fields, he finds him "ruddy, and withal of beautiful eyes, and

goodly to look upon. And the Lord said: Arise, anoint him; for this is he" (I Samuel 16:11-12). This is the humble beginning of the young shepherd boy whose descendant was to be the Messiah.

In the same chapter, we learn again of David, this time as King Saul is introduced to him. Concerned about Saul's extremes of moods, a servant recommends that "a skillful player on the harp" might ease the king's spirit when it was aroused. The servant suggests "a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, that is skillful in playing, and a mighty man of valor, and a man of war, and prudent in affairs, and a comely person, and the Lord is with him" (I Samuel 16:18).

Music was David's entry into history: The cure worked. "David came to Saul, and stood before him; and he loved him greatly. . . . And it came to pass when the [evil] spirit from God was upon Saul, that David took the harp, and played with his hand; so Saul found relief, and it was well with him, and the evil spirit departed" (I Samuel 16:23). But David's music was more than a charm. It vibrates with something deep in him and in ourselves. Wiesel explains it this way: "There is something about David that gives us hope and moves us to peace. There is something in David that is beautiful. Maybe because he was a poet, and who doesn't love poetry?"

David, Winner

Elie Wiesel tries to understand our infatuation with David by looking at Saul. Both are handsome, both anointed by God, both fearsome warriors, and both popular among the people. But one came to pursue and one to be pursued, one came to be the loser in history, the other the winner. Wiesel's sympathies go first to Saul: "I always prefer those who lose," he says, "and Saul was the loser." Despite Wiesel's admitted propensities, he cannot help but love David. "We love David. Oh, we admire Saul, we feel sorry for Saul, and we admire him. But we love David."

David is loved, but there is much in him to wonder about. His motives often seem ambiguous. Wiesel calls him overly ambitious, even "pushy," and considers his eagerness "a little bit, really, out of taste."

“Brash” is the word Wiesel uses to describe David’s entrance onto the Philistine battlefield. His brother Eliab accuses the “presumptuousness, and the naughtiness of [his] heart.” (I Samuel 17:28) Refusing King Saul’s proffered sword, David confronts the contemptuous Goliath with only five stones and a sling. It is at once a clever contrivance to fool the disdainful giant who threatened his people and a dramatic crowd-pleaser.

As a fugitive from Saul’s court, David returns to his humble roots among the people he had known as a shepherd in Bethléhem—and there he gathers forces. Was this a democratic urge or just simple expediency? As king, David continues to return to the people for referendums of support. He is ever respectful of people’s opinions—and of his ratings.

When David makes a spectacle of himself by dancing wildly with ecstasy as he brings the long-homeless ark into Jerusalem, his wife Michal rebukes him for “shamelessly” uncovering himself in front of the people, including slavegirls. Was she being prudish or jealous of his spontaneity, or was the exhibition perhaps too calculated, too narcissistic, even for the joy that was merited? Is it another example of David’s wanting the spotlight, seeking glory, even beyond the glory of his kingship?

David was a master tactician, diplomatic and wily. Throughout his reign, a string of much loved but politically dangerous or troublesome characters were conveniently removed, and yet David’s hand rarely seems to be bloodied. Someone else does his dirty work—and we feel only compassion toward him. For example, when his son Absalom challenges the throne, David requests that he be dealt with gently, but David’s loyal commander-in-chief, Joab, kills this rebellious son. David is left grieving painfully. “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!” (II Samuel 19:1) It is not clear whether Joab is carrying out deeds too repugnant for David or whether David is the overindulgent father who would have sacrificed his kingdom for his son.

Saul stood in the way of David’s destiny. Even more, Saul threatened David’s life. But David passed up three

*Of David the servant of the Lord,
who spoke unto the Lord the words
of this song in the day that the Lord
delivered him from the band of all
his enemies, and from the band of
Saul;*

and he said:

I love thee, O Lord, my strength.

*The Lord is my rock, and my
fortress, and my deliverer;*

*My God, my rock, in Him I take
refuge;*

*My shield, and my horn of
salvation, my high tower.*

Praised, I cry, is the Lord,

And I am saved from mine enemies.

(Psalm 18:1-4)

*Ye daughters of Israel, weep over
Saul,
Who clothed you in scarlet, with
other delights,
Who put ornaments of gold upon
your apparel.
How are the mighty fallen in the
midst of the battle!
Jonathan upon thy high places is
slain!
I am distressed for thee, my
brother Jonathan;
Very pleasant hast thou been
unto me;
Wonderful was thy love to me,
Passing the love of women.
(II Samuel 1:24-26)*

opportunities to kill him. Was this out of loyalty and love? Was it because Saul too had been God's anointed? Or was it to prevent the still popular king from becoming a martyr? Perhaps it was for all these reasons.

Wiesel condemns David's absence from the battle in which both Saul and Jonathan die. He was neutral at a time of danger, Wiesel says, "a neutral Jew when Jews were victims." Did David—great warrior that he was—fail to act because Saul's death was the political opportunity he needed? Whatever his motives were, one thing is clear. His grief rings true. Saul was like a father to him, Jonathan a brother. David's eulogy for them, Wiesel notes, is one of the most moving pieces of biblical literature.

Through attempts on his life and rebellions against his kingship, David remains a winner—perhaps because he always saw himself as such, and he embraced his own destiny along with a vision for his people. Saul died in defeat, skewered by his own sword during a hopeless battle, his son alongside him, also dead. David dies in the fullness of his years, lying in his own bed on Shabbat, surrounded by his books and family, his favorite son already on the throne.

David, Love Maker

No other biblical character seems to have been loved as much as David was. Saul "loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer" (I Samuel 16:21). Brave, tender Jonathan loved him as much as he loved his father and more than he loved his own right to the kingship. His wife Michal loved David more than she loved her father, but it is never clear how much David loved her.

Bathsheva loved David more than she loved her husband. In this, the most troublesome episode in David's life, we see him actively involved in a plot. After Bathsheva becomes pregnant, he arranges for the death of her husband, Uriah, a dedicated captain in his army. David is summarily reprimanded by God for his sins of adultery and murder-by-proxy, and the child that was conceived dies, despite David's contrition and seven-day fast. The rabbis did not know what to do with this story. They compounded David's

*And there shall come forth a shoot
 out of the stock of Jesse,
 And a twig shall grow forth out of
 his roots.
 And the spirit of the Lord shall rest
 upon him,
 The spirit of wisdom and
 understanding,
 The spirit of counsel and might,
 The spirit of knowledge and of the
 fear of the Lord.
 And his delight shall be in the fear
 of the Lord;
 And he shall not judge after the
 sight of his eyes,
 Neither decide after the bearing of
 his ears;
 But with righteousness shall he
 judge the poor,
 And decide with equity for the
 meek of the land;
 And he shall smite the land with
 the rod of his mouth,
 And with the breath of his lips
 shall he slay the wicked.
 And righteousness shall be the
 girdle of his loins,
 And faithfulness the girdle of his
 reins.
 And the wolf shall dwell with the
 lamb,
 And the leopard shall lie down
 with the kid;
 And the calf and the young lion
 and the fatted together;
 And a little child shall lead them.
 (Isaiah 11:1-6)*

punishment: for a half-year, they say he suffered with leprosy, and the *Shekinah*, God's presence, departed from him. Others try to find acceptable explanations: it was Uriah's fault; Bathsheva was really divorced; David was only doing what had been predestined by God.

The way that the biblical narrative unfolds suggests these events ended any domestic tranquillity that may have existed—a causal connection also seen by the rabbis. From then on tragedy and unrest rocked David's household until his death. His overindulged sons seem emotional caricatures of their father. They are ruled by their passions. Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar. Absalom, boasting his own beauty, popularity, and charisma, avenged his sister's violation by murdering Amnon. Later, he mounted a revolt against David. Likewise, Adoniah caused an insurrection to thwart his father's will and usurp Solomon's claim to the throne.

But despite his sin and the internecine battles in his household, the Davidic line continued, the kingship having been passed to Solomon—David's son from Bathsheva.

From Monarch to Messiah

It is from David, moreover, that the Messiah—the future, eternal king of Israel—is to be descended. How is it that such a quintessentially human figure, with an abundance of personal faults and private emotions, becomes larger than life?

The link is traceable to the historical development of the Jews in the time following David. It was believed that David's position of power would be inherited by an endless chain of his descendants, but after the death of David's son Solomon, the Davidic empire split. For a time, David's descendants continued to rule over Judah, the southern kingdom. Israel, the northern kingdom, gradually fell under Assyrian dominance and disappeared by the end of the eighth century B.C.E. The belief in the perpetuity of the Davidic dynasty over a united kingdom, however, did not die. It was transformed into a hope for the future. By the late seventh century B.C.E., the prophet Isaiah expanded this idea to include a vision of the messianic time to come, when

R. Yohanan said: "When you see a generation ever dwindling, expect the Messiah then." R. Yohanan also said: "When you see a generation that is overwhelmed by many troubles." R. Yohanan said further: "Messiah son of David will come only in a generation that is altogether righteous or altogether wicked" (Sanhedrin 98a). R. Eleazar bar Avina said: "When you see the great kingdoms fight one another, look for the footprints of the Messiah" (Genesis Rabbah 42:4). The sages said: "King Messiah will not come until all souls that have been considered for creation have been created" (Genesis Rabbah 24:4).

*Be gracious unto me, O God,
according to Thy mercy;
According to the multitude of Thy
compassions blot out my
transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from mine
iniquity,
And cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions;
And my sin is ever before me.
(Psalm 51:3-5)*

the Messiah will reign with complete justice and there will be peace throughout the land.

Late in the Second Temple period, figures of the Davidic Messiah began appearing in the eschatological literature. In the Dead Sea Scrolls there are several such figures. During the Roman occupation, Rabbi Akiba (along with many others) mistakenly considered Bar Kochba, who temporarily reconquered Jerusalem from the Romans, to be such a savior. In rabbinic thought, the Messiah is the king who will redeem and rule Israel at the climax of human history and the instrument by which the kingdom of God will be established. In Christian theology, Jesus is the Messiah son of David. (Only Christianity attributed divine qualities to the Messiah.) Stories of the Messiah and messianic movements have proliferated since then—all rooted somehow in the Davidic dynasty of three thousand years ago.

David, Sinner and Penitent

David was musician, lover, warrior, king. But more than anything, David was human. His poetry aches with his humanity. And as artful as David is with people, he is without guile as he turns toward God in his poetry. He prays. He meditates. And, above all, he repents.

Even the rabbis who were satisfied to see David punished for his sins with Bathsheva were moved by his remorse, which, they say, caused him to weep an hour a day and to eat his bread with ashes for twenty-two years. So adamant was his contrition that even God forgave him. Wiesel refers to a talmudic midrash (Shabbat 30a): When King Solomon tried to place the ark into the newly built Temple, the gates would not open. He tried various incantations but nothing worked. Finally, he said, "O Lord God, turn not away the face of Thine anointed, remember the good deeds of David Thy servant." And then the gates opened. The midrash continues: The faces of David's enemies turned as black as the bottom of a pot, for all the people—all Israel—knew that God had forgiven him his sin with Bathsheva.

Some rabbis suggest that there was a purpose in David's transgressions. God knew that after the enormity of David's sins would come the intensity of his repentance. And in this

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall
not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green
pastures;
He leadeth me beside the still
waters.
He restoreth my soul;
He guideth me in straight paths
for His name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the
valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
For Thou art with me;
Thy rod and Thy staff, they
comfort me. (Psalm 23:1-4)*

way, God could demonstrate to weaker souls that not only is repentance possible, but so is forgiveness.

Wiesel tells us, "Our Masters teach us not to idolize human beings. No one is a saint, no one is perfect. All our figures have shortcomings, weaknesses, all of them face problems similar to ours. That doesn't make them less great. The more human they are, the greater they are." Perhaps the rabbis are right. It is because David is human that we love him. Like us, he sins. And, if he sins and repents and is forgiven, so we can be appalled by the flaws within ourselves and still be forgiven. Perhaps it is this David, the sinner and penitent, who teaches us about redemption and salvation.

While you watch, consider . . .

- ◆ The ethics and responsibilities that informed David's relationships and roles.
- ◆ Why this video opens with a children's chorus and how the meaning of that song changes by the end.
- ◆ Your own sympathies and disappointments with David.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ The longstanding association of David with the Messiah is deeply rooted in our culture.
 - ◆ Does this association make sense to you?
 - ◆ What are your images of the Messiah? Of the Messianic Era?
- ◆ What do we want from a leader? How does a leader win us? Does a successful leader have to be loved? What of the tension between the ideal and the real?
- ◆ A sculptor picks a moment to freeze for eternity. For his magnificent statue of David, Michelangelo selected the moment David holds a stone in his hand, before hurling it at Goliath. What may be essential about this moment?
- ◆ What do you think of Wiesel's summation, "a man with human weaknesses, he loved beautiful women"? David was loved by many. Do you think he loved anyone in return?
- ◆ What does Wiesel mean in his final explanation for why we love David: "There is something about David that gives us hope and moves us to seek peace. There is something in David that is beautiful. Maybe because he was a poet, and who doesn't love poetry?"
- ◆ How would you compare the relationship of God to David with the relationship of God to Abraham? To Moses? To Job?

Suggestions for Reading and Viewing

The following books, stories, and films focus on the lives of leaders, both ancient and modern.

Books and stories

- ◆ Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom*. New York: Random House, 1986.
- ◆ *The Iliad of Homer*. Translated by Richmond Lattimore. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951.
- ◆ *The Odyssey of Homer*. Translated by Richmond Lattimore. New York: Harper Perennial, 1965.
- ◆ Malcolm X. *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. With the assistance of Alex Haley. New York: Ballantine, 1992.
- ◆ Kazantzakis, Nikos. *The Last Temptation of Christ*. New York: Bantam Books, 1965.
- ◆ Ozick, Cynthia. *The Messiah of Stockholm*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.
- ◆ Rosenberg, David. *The Book of David*. New York: Harmony Book, 1997.

Films

- ◆ *Beckett*
- ◆ *Gandhi*
- ◆ *The Last Temptation of Christ*
- ◆ *Malcolm X*
- ◆ *A Woman Called Golda*