Batsheva, Savior of Kings

by Linda Nathanson-Lippitt

Key: Summary of pshat
direct quote from text
old midrash
original midrash

I am Batsheva, mother of Shlomo, the king of Judah and Israel. It has been a long and interesting road to this place of honor. I am told that you are interested in my story.

The kingdom is a peace, and my son reigns securely. This is a good time to talk, to reflect.

I was little more than a child myself that fateful day. It was hot. Uriah, my husband was off to war. He was a good man, a convert. My parents were dead,and with little in the way of a dowery, I was said to be lucky to make this match. G-d had made me fair of face and figure, and Uriah seemed to think that more than compensated for the poor dowery I brought him. This was not a marriage of passion, but it wasnot uncomfortable. Yet, somewhere in the depts of my soul, I sensed that there was more to my destiny than a quiet life as the wife of a minor officer.

Uriah had left for the front, giving me first, the bill of divorcemt that all thoughful husbands gave their wives. Tosefot T.B. Ket. 9b). If, G-d forbid, he should be lost in battle, he did not want to leave me an Agunah,tied to him for all time.There was grumbling among officers of Uriah'slevel concerning the absence of king David from the battlefield.His general, Joab, was held in the highest esteem.

Thus, the stage was set. It was hot, as I said. I called my maid and went to the courtyard to bathe. Suddenly a messenger appeared, a messenger from David, the King!(II Samuel 11, 4)What was I to do? I could feign illness,but I didn't want to do that. David, part legend, part poet.. David with the deep dark eyes, the glow that

commanded everyone's attention when he appeared. I was but a child when he danced before the ark as it was brought from Shiloh to Jerusalem, but even then, the joy, the passion that surrounded him was unforgettable. David wanted me, the wife of Uriah! But wait, I had a *get* I was no man's wife at this moment. I had just been to the mikvah to purify myself after my time as niddah. David! I stopped thinking, and covered my face, wrapped myself in a veil, and went to my destiny.

When I arrived, David provided a simple feast with good wine. Soon the servants disappeared. I knew I would do whatever he wanted. This David, with so many wives and concubines. This powerful warrior and accomplished politician, wanted *me!* He asked if I was married, I said that Uriah had given me a *Get* before he left. He inquired as to my father, I told him he was long dead. He asked as to my brothers. I explained I had none. He gently took me to his bed. He lay with me with tenderness. I knew at that moment, that this is where I was meant to be, that I was to be the mother of kings! But when it was finished, I returned to my house. When my time of the month arrived, there was no menstrual blood. I waited two more weeks, and then sent, and told David, "*I am Pregnant.*"(II Samuel 11,5).

This was truly a disaster. Although I had a legal bill of divorcement, the understanding was that when and if my husband came back, our marriage would resume. David used a ruse to bring Uriah back from the front. I was told when he entered the city. I waited for his arrival. We would know each other, and David's child, already in my womb, would be brought up as Uriah's. This was not what G-d intended for me! I was helpless. I waited one day, two days, but Uriah never appeared. I found out later, that he had refused to go to the comfort of his house when his general and compatriots were sleeping in the field. He sought to underline his loyalty by sleeping on the floor with David's servants, so noone could think he had dallied with his wife!

David was a man of action. Since he could not present this pregnancy as Uriah's, and if I was found out, I could be stoned as an adulteress, David arranged for Uriah's death in battle. (II Samuel 11, 15). I can only imagine the pain it caused him to send a loyal officer to his death. But David understood that to be king is to make hard decisions, and he never flinched from them, well, hardly ever, but more about that later.

Two days after Uriah left for the front, messengers arrived to tell me that I was indeed a widow. I put on my widow's weeds and mourned Uriah for 30 days, as he deserved to be honored. My stomach was beginning to swell with the child of the King. In what was seen as unseemly haste, David sent for me as soon as the Shloshim was over, and married me. Our son was born only 6 months after our marriage. He had David's dark eyes. He had my father's chin. He was so beautiful! But his cry was weak, and he nursed poorly. My maid told me of the the visit of Nathan the Prophet to my Lord David. He told him the story of a poor man with only one "chevsah" one sheep who had it taken by a rich man. David judged the man harshley, commanding that he repay fourfold what he had taken. Little did he know, that he was judging himself. I was the ewe lamb that he had taken, despite all of his wives and concubines, he had to have me. David immediately understood the depth of his sin, and repented with all his heart. G-d forgave him and left

him with his life. But our little unnamed son, was condemned to death, and David payed the fourfold price that he had pronounced on himself as you will soon see.

Our poor little son, so innocent! It was not his fault that he had been conceived out of wedlock. David prayed and fasted, as if nothing else mattered except the life of our son. How I loved him as he put that little life ahead of the country, his other children, his other wives. But alas, it was to no avail,,, on the seventh day of his life, the unnamed child was gone. I thought to name him Judah, after the great ancestor of our *Shevet* but he did not live to the crucial 8th day, and was buried without a name. While David had fasted, I had been numb. Less than a year ago, I had been barely a 16 year old bride. Now I was a widow, wife to the king, and a grieving mother. The David who had been so stricken that he did not eat and drink when our son fought for his life, quickly became the king again at his death. I could not shake off my mourning as quickly as my husband. His was the better outlook. He said *"While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, "Who knows? Perhaps the Lord will be gracious to me, and the child will live. But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." (II Samuel 12,22-23).* David tried to comfort me, but my heart was heavy. He came to me, but I could not accept him, lest a healthy child born of our union be tormented for our sin. But David swore to me that if we had a son, he would reighn after him. And I lay with my husband and I bore him a son. This son, I called Shlomo, the name came thru me, as if from G-d. Shlomo, I was complete.

I settled into the palace with my son. I had much to learn. Abigail, the third of David's wives, mother of Chilieb, who was considered the most learned man in the entire kingdom, befriended me. It was clear that the learning and wisdom of Chilieb was at least in part, from his mother. She was the soul of discretion. She taught me the ways of the court. So many wives, so many desiring that their son become king after David. I held on to David's promise. I told noone but Abigail. Chilieb, although the oldest surviving son, had no interest in political power. It was Torah that he loved and studied. Abigail was content for him to be the trusted advisor, and so, she was my good friend. From her I learned Torah. I found out that the Judah, for whom I would have named my first son, had a wife named Bat Shuah. The only difference between our names was a "vav" and a "vet". One letter, and such different circumstances. She has not one recorded word in the Torah. She had three sons, witnessed the death of two of them, when they did not treat their wife, Tamar, properly; and died, still silent, before the marriage of her surviving son. There was another Tamar,the daughter of David. Judah's Tamar had been quite a forceful and courageous woman. The midrash teaches that she declared "in my womb will be kings". Even when faced with death by burning because it was thought her pregnancy came from harlotry, she did not directly expose Judah. She had his staff, signet and cloke brought to him and said "hakir na", do you recognize? The same words that Judah had said to his poor father, Jacob, when they brought back Joseph's *katonet passim* : coat of many colors, dipped in goat's blood, to make it seem that he was dead. That *Katonet passim,* would soon come back to haunt this royal family. Like my David, his ancestor, Judah, quickly took responsibility

for his action and acknowledged Tamar's rightful pregnancy, and their son Peretz was the line to Boaz, who with Ruth begat Jessie, the father of David. I could find no other case of a duplication of names, there was only one Abraham, one Miriam, one Hannah.

I found myself thinking, how much more like Tamar I was, than like Bat Shuah. And then the tragedy that Nathan had predicted struck out home. Aminon, a spoiled and arrogant man, was apparently obsessed with his sister Tamar. He pined for her so, that his cousin convinced him he should just go and take her. They conspired to have him fake being sick, and when his father came to see how he was, Aminon pleaded with David to have his sister, Tamar come and prepare food for him. David, of course, agreed to this seemingly inocent request. The evil Aminon raped his innocent sister, and then mercilessly threw her out making her private humiliation public. How ironic that she, like Joseph so long ago, was wearing a *katonet passim,* a coat of many colors, as it was the custom for the king's virgin daughters to wear. Tamar sought refuge with her brother Absalom, with whom she shared not only David as a parent, but the same mother as well. David was silent. He did nothing about the degradation of his daughter. Absalom, could not allow his sister's ruin to go unpunished and he killed Aminon. David loved Absalom so, indeed I feared that this love would cause him to break his promise to me and annoint him as the next king. But the anger that Absalom bore his father for Tamar's sake lead to a disasterous rebellion and the death of Absolom. David had proclaimed a fourfold payment for the robbing of Uriah. He paid with our unnamed son, Amninon, Absolom and Tamar. Nathan was a true prophet.

I passed a decade and more in the palace. David, 90 years my senior when we met, grew old and feeble. Solomon, scarcely more than a boy, was clearly G-d's beloved. Bright and wise and kind. He was loved by all, except for Adoniahu, the son of Haggith. As the oldest surviving son, both he and his mother wanted to secure his succession to the throne. Haggith had never been a friend of mine, or my son's. David was old and infirm. It was clear that he would soon sleep with his fathers. Our passionate relationship had long since cooled to one of courtesy as we watched our son grow, in our separate parts of the palace. Abishag, a beautiful young woman was brought to "warm " him. David's fabled potency had faded and so all she did do indeed is minister to the failing body of this great king.

I came to know Nathan quite well. He came to study with Chilieb, and Shlomo. Abigail and I often joined them. One day he strode into my rooms with a look of great concern on his face. *"You have surely heard that Adoniahu, the son of Haggith has reigned, and our lord, David did not know it. And now come and I shall council you with advice, and you shall save your life and the life of your son, Solomon. Go and come to Kiing David, and you shall say to him, "Surely, you, my lord the king, did swear to your maid saying that, "Solomon your son will reign after me and he shall sit upon my throne," Now why did Adoniahu reign?" Behold, you are talking there with the king, and I shall come in after you and I shall complete your words." (I Kings 1:13-14).*

I immediately went to the king's chamber and bowed, and prostrated myself before David.

How frail he was. His hands trembled. Once so strong, they now picked absently at his robe. His voice was soft, but kind as he asked me what it was I wanted. (We were long past spending time together just for pleasure). I Thus I measured my words carefully, taking into account Nathan's council, but also my knowledge of this complex man and king, knowing that above all else he loved G-d, and jealously guarded his sovereignty. I ammended Nathan's words and said, "*my lord, you swore by the ___Lord your G-d __ to your maid, that "Solomon, your son, shall reign after me, and he shall sit on my throne." And now behold Adoniahu has reigned, and now my lord the king, you did not know."* I did not stop there, knowing that details would make this fantastic story believable, so I continued. *And he has slain oxen and fatlings and sheep in abundance, and he called all the king's sons and Abiatar the priest, and Joab the General of the army, but Solomon your servant he did not call. And you, my lord, the king, they eyes of all Israel are upon you, that you should tell them, who shall sit on the throne of my lord the king after him. And otherwise when my lord the king shall sleep with his fathers, and I and my son Solomon shall be considered offenders". (I Kings 1:* 17-21). At that moment, Nathan came in, as we had planned, and repeated all that I had said and more.

It was truly amazing to see that frail old man become the monarch again. When he called me back to the room, he affirmed his promise, and arranged to have Shlomo immediately crowned, thus cutting all support from Adoniahu. What David lacked in physical vigor at the end, appeared to make his political instincts even sharper.

Soon after David did sleep with his fathers, and my young son, just beginning to grow a beard, was on the throne. I was quite wise in the ways of the palace by this time. I knew, I did not want to usurp my son's power, and have him appear to be merely a front for his scheming mother. He had to be seen as the king, and a wise king, despite his youth, if he was going to keep the kingdom together. Adoniahu came to me. He was groveling, and trying so hard to be obsequious; but this handsome, spoiled arrogant prince was transparent. I chose to play along with him so as to fully understand his plan.

I said to him" *Do you come peaceably?"* using the same shoresh as in my son's name (shin lamed mem). "Shalom" he replies" And then he went on to tell me *"You know that the kingdom was mine, and that all Israel set their faces on me, that I should reign, but the kingdom turned about, and has become my brother's, for it was his from the Lord. And now I ask one petition of you, do not refuse me"* I drew him in again with"*Say on".* He then "begged me" to ask Solomon to give him Agishag as wife!(I Kings 1:13-17) What kind of fool did he think I was? If Solomon gave him David's last consort, even if he didn't "know" her, that would strengthen his claim on the throne. I started to storm to the throne room to tell Solomon exactly what he must do. Then I thought, "all eyes are on us. I must make it clear that Solomon, as young as he is, has the wisdom and strength to reign." I slowed my pace and walked slowly to my son. What a fine man we had raised. He quickly arose, and bowed to me and had a seat placed at his right hand for me. I played the innocent, and asked him for a "small favor" that Agishag be given to Adoniahu as wife. Solomon answered as I knew he would, quickly grasping the political implications of Adoniahu's "small request". He quickly ordered the death of his rebellious brother and with that, his reign was assured.

Remember I told you about BatShuah , the wife of Judah, and the links between her, me and the two Tamars. Abigail taught me to look into the hidden meanings in the letters of our aleph-bet. Bet - vet, this is the word for "house". G-d gave me the role of building and saving the house of David and Solomon. Poor Bat Shuah, She got the "vav". Vav is a connector not a house. Because she produced children for Judah, Tamar, Grand daughter of the great sage Shem, was brought into the family of Abraham and Sarah, merging her wisdom and strength with that of Judah, and inspiring him to grow to much greater moral heights. What to we learn from the letters of this name? Tav is the most precious sound. It is the sound of man calling G-d, Tefila, and singing G-d's praises. Tehilim, and the sound of man returning to G-d, Teshuva. It is also the sound of G-d speaking to man. Torah, and Tanach, and it is man working with G-d in Tikkun. Mem is the substance of earth. food. ma'achal, water. mayim, and mitzvot. So we start with connection and substance, but what of the "resh"? This is the Yetzer Ha-ra, the inescapable wish to believe that you are closer to G-d than anyone else, the Pachil . gossip that can cause so much evil. But Resh can also be the endof pretending, as in Rosh Hashanah, and kindness. Rachamim. This is the striving of ReshOne who is pious knows she is far closer to wickedness than someone who is in between. Look with so little as a smudge, the Dalet of Echad. G-d is One, becomes the Resh of Achaer. another. and the world is destroyed. Judah's Tamar overcame the gossip that almost killed her and her unborn children, and began the line that leads to Moshiach and the ultimate Tikkun Olam. David's Tamar was destroyed by her brother's Yetzer Harah that made him think that he was entitled to anything he wanted. He saw another human being asAchaer, instead of Achot, and destroyed his sister. And as to Joseph and Tamar having the same coat of many colors..that is a mystery for another day.

Interpretation of individual letters is from THE BOOK OF LETTERS, by LAWRENCE KUSHNER