

LEADER'S GUIDE

PSALM 51

INTRODUCTION

Study of this psalm can take many possible directions. Since it is a psalm located in history, specifically David's plea to God for forgiveness after he has committed adultery and murder, it has context as well as content.

BACKGROUND FOR THE LEADER

Psalm 51 is traditionally interpreted as a psalm of confession and renewal. Its poetry has contributed to the daily Jewish prayer liturgy as well as the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services. Two verses, 13 and 20, have been set to music; one verse, 17, is repeated three times a day as a prelude to silent prayer, and verse 20 is sung in unison four times each week as the Torah is removed from the ark.

This examination of psalm 51 begins with a new translation, but ends with a radically new interpretive reading that calls forth the silenced voice of Bat Sheva herself.

This psalm encourages interpretive tampering. It is one of only nine psalms with an ascription tying it to a specific historical event. David composes it, we are told, after Nathan chastises him for taking his army general's wife to bed and later arranging for this loyal general's death. This great drama, summarized below, is found in 2 Samuel 11-12; it is among the most riveting accounts in the Bible.

The rabbinic response, the ones most often cited, mostly try to exonerate or cleanse David from guilt.

- To establish the inevitability of these events, the sages say Bat Sheva was designated as David's mate from the first six days of creation, but David took her before the proper time. (*Sanhedrin 107a*)
- Bat Sheva was legally divorced, so David could not have committed adultery;
- Uriah, insubordinate by not obeying the king's command to sleep with his wife, was therefore deserving of death. (*BT Shabbat 56a*)
- In *Shabbat 56b*, the sages teach that David's sin with Bat Sheva and his conduct toward Uriah were violations of the spirit rather than of the letter of the law.
- Raba, in *Sanhedrin 107a*, commenting on David's acts, assures us that David could have controlled his lust for Bat Sheva, but because God had told him he was not yet capable of this self-control, he chose to act as God expected him to act.
- Rashi, commenting on *Sanhedrin 107b*, likewise explains that God had told David he would be unable to withstand the temptation of Bat Sheva, and so David capitulated, though he would have been able to do so if left to his own devices. So, in verse 6, David reminds God of his obedience when he says, "so that Your words would be justified/ So that You will be right in Your verdict."

- David now merits God’s forgiveness because he did as God expected. According to Rashi, David demonstrates the cycle of sin, sincere repentance, and forgiveness, as a model of hope for the penitent sinner.
- Those defiled by contact with the dead (Numbers 19:6) or leprosy (Leviticus 14:4) were cleansed of impurity with a mixture of cedar bark and hyssop sprinkled on the infected person. In *Sanhedrin 106b* commentators assert that David himself was leprous for six months after his transgressions.

Summary of II Samuel 11-12

This biblical drama opens as David, pleased by the news that his armies have defeated Ammon and Rabbah, strolls onto his rooftop balcony. From there he spies a beautiful woman bathing. Even though he learns that she is married to one of his generals, he sends after her for sex, and then sends her home.

After learning that she has become pregnant, the general’s wife, Bat Sheva, sends word of her situation to the king.

David concocts a plan to free himself from the consequences of his indiscretion. He calls Bat Sheva’s husband, Uriah, home from the front, scheming to make Uriah think this adulterous child his own. To David’s surprise, Uriah refuses to go home to his wife to sleep, saying that he cannot indulge himself in such pleasures while his men are left in the battlefield. David resorts to making Uriah drunk, yet the general still resists the comfort of his wife’s bed, sleeping instead with other officers bivouacked outside the palace.

Having failed at his attempt to dupe Uriah, David moves a step deeper into the morass. He instructs Uriah to deliver a letter to his own commanding officer, Yoav, instructing Yoav to place Uriah in the front lines where fighting is fiercest and let him be killed there. Uriah is doomed. In the battle, many innocent soldiers die needlessly, but David is pleased when he learns that Uriah is among those killed.

On hearing the news of her husband’s death, Bat Sheva laments. After her period of mourning is over, David sends for her, and she becomes his wife. David’s son is born.

It is at this point that Nathan, David’s chief advisor, comes to chastise David. Nathan confronts the king indirectly, recounting the story of a wealthy man who raids a poor man of his one treasured possession, a single ewe, rather than go to his own abundant flock for food. David flies into a rage at hearing this story, declaring that the rich man should pay the poor man four times over. Further, David declares, the rich man deserves to die because he lacked pity for his poor neighbor. Nathan responds to David’s rage with the powerful indictment, “That man is you!”

David’s punishment, Nathan tells him, will be public calamity in his own family as well as the death of the son born to Bat Sheva.

According to the ascription of this psalm, it is at this moment of awareness and calamity that David brings his sins before God, struggles with his passions and the deep grief he feels, and composes Psalm 51.

Reading 1
THE TRADITIONAL TEXT
An Interpretive Translation

Leader: *Let's read the psalm a stanza at a time. At the end, tell me if this psalm works as a plea for forgiveness.*

What words or ideas reinforce the idea that the poet is full of sin and wants absolution?

¹ For the conductor, a song of David
² When Nathan the prophet came to him
After David had been with Bat Sheva

³ Be gracious to me, God, with your kindness
With great compassion, erase my crimes

⁴ Completely wash away my iniquities
And make me pure despite my sins

⁵ Because my crimes I acknowledge
And my sins haunt me endlessly

⁶ Before You and You alone I sinned
I did evil in your eyes
So that Your words will be justified.
So that You will be right in Your verdict

⁷ Look! In iniquity was I born
Sinful was my mother's heated passion

⁸ Here! You seek truth in my innermost being,
So, make me know wisdom in my innermost heart

⁹ Disinfect me with hyssop and I will be pure
Wash me and I will be as white as snow

¹⁰ Let me hear joy and gladness
Then the bones You crushed will rejoice

¹¹ Hide Your Face from my sins
And erase all my iniquities

¹² A pure heart create for me
O God
A proper spirit renew in my inner being

¹³ Don't send me away from Your presence
Don't take away Your holy spirit from me

¹⁴ Return to me the joy of Your salvation
And with a generous spirit support me

¹⁵ I will teach sinners Your ways
Sinners will return to You

¹⁶ Rescue me from this blood!
God, God of my Deliverance
Let my tongue sing joyously of Your righteousness

¹⁷ My Lord, open my lips
And my mouth will tell of Your praises

¹⁸ Since You do not wish an offering,
else I would give it
Nor a burnt offering do you want

¹⁹ The slaughter offerings of God are
a broken spirit
and a broken, battered heart
These God will not reject

²⁰ Do good as is Your will, to Zion

Rebuild the walls of Jerusalem

²¹ Then You will desire righteous
sacrifice,
burnt offerings and whole offerings
Then bullocks will be offered on Your
altar.

PSALM 51 Listening to Her Voice

INTRODUCTION

In the biblical account in II Samuel 11-12, the story of David and Bat Sheva, we never hear Bat Sheva's voice. In this interpretive reading, Bat Sheva comes to life; she herself is called forth to compose her own psalm, creating a radical re-reading in two voices, hers and David's. Though both speak, a wall separates them. To read this drama, imagine David inside his chamber, crying out to God in the voice of the poet, composing Psalm 51, unaware that Bat Sheva is listening from outside the room. You will recognize David's voice in the second reading. It speaks most of the text of the psalm itself. Bat Sheva's dilemma--an adulterous affair, a murdered husband, and a dead child--are not David's issues as he approaches God for mercy and forgiveness. "Before You and You alone I sinned," he tells God.

Bat Sheva's voice, unheard by David, is given ear only by us. Some of David's psalm infuriates her, some of it becomes hers, and some of it she takes for her own and changes.

As she tries to approach God, whose Presence is distant yet whose punishment she knows, hearing David's psalm expresses not renewal but unremitting suffering. Yet, in this two-character drama, Bat Sheva has been given parts of the psalm to speak. Listen carefully.

Instructions for the Leader:

Choose three actors:

1. The narrator, who will read the introduction and the stage directions (in *italic*)
2. David (in **bold**)
3. Bat Sheva (in ***bold italics***)

The actors should come to the front of the room. After you have introduced the dramatic reading with the information above (setting the framework) let the actors station themselves in the foreground, Bat Sheva and David separated or facing in opposite directions but within earshot of each other.

Remind the group that David speaks **ONLY** the lines of Psalm 51. Bat Sheva, overhearing him, is reacting to his psalm aloud and occasionally adding a word into the text of the psalm.

Instruct the participants to listen carefully to the dialogue.

READING: FOR TWO VOICES – A Drama
Bat Sheva's psalm of unremitting suffering

David's psalm of confession and renewal

Narrator:

Bat Sheva weeps from outside David's chamber.

Inside the room, David cries to God for forgiveness, approaching God with the gift-offering of the poet. David's words comprise the text of Psalm 51 in its entirety.

From the periphery, outside the inner sanctum, Bat Sheva sobs out her anger, her loss, her psalm. She hears David as he approaches God. He cannot hear her, though she speaks words of the psalm as well. Hers is the marginalized voice of the silenced soul.

Bat Sheva:

I hate him. Rushing about. Howling. Shrieking. I despise him. Nathan is gone now and suddenly, he cries out, all contrition and tears. And I am left to mourn my dead husband, and to nurse this child of sin. His lips won't suck; his eyes are hollow. His tiny fingers cannot grasp my shaking hand.

God, what have You done to me?

Narrator:

From within the chamber she hears David's voice, filled with weeping and remorse.

David:

**Be gracious to me, God, with Your kindness
With great compassion, erase my crimes
Completely wash away my iniquities
And make me pure despite my sins**

Bat Sheva:

How dare his guilty lips give voice to such a cry. He knows how to cry for forgiveness, while I live with this guilt. I know the guilt of women. I know the bargain we strike. I know my choices.

I, too, acknowledge my crimes because my sins haunt me endlessly.

Is there no comfort from my grief?

David:

**Before You and You alone I sinned
I did evil in your eyes
So that Your words will be justified
So that You will be right in Your verdict**

Bat Sheva:

*Before You and You alone!? Who? Before whom? Before God --and not before me!?
Before whom will I repent? When you summoned me forth to sin, to whom should I
have appealed? Let him never forget!*

I will never forget.

*I will never forget that day. The air was so clear. I had gone to the ritual bath late, as
the sun began to set behind the Judean hills. The ritual waters surrounded me and
cleansed me.*

It was the last time I felt clean.

*Could I have known? I was dressing when I saw the king's guard inquiring of the
bathhouse attendant. She cast a glance my way and whispered to him. He grinned,
no—leered—when he looked my way.*

*I had rounded the corner to my house when they approached, those three, snickering
into their stinking robes. “Dress quickly, lucky lady. You have been chosen to warm the
king's bed tonight.”*

He cries to You for mercy?! He cries to You for compassion, to make him pure?!

Who can make me pure?

Narrator:

They speak together, he from inside, she from outside.

David:

Look! In iniquity was I born. Sinful was my mother's heated passion.

Bat Sheva:

*And in sin this baby was conceived with the guilt of heat. Through me my sins have
borne such sickly fruit.*

David:

**Here! You seek truth in my innermost being
So make me know wisdom in my innermost heart
Disinfect me with hyssop and I will be pure
Wash me and I will be white as snow
Let me hear joy and gladness
Then the bones You crushed will rejoice**

Bat Sheva:

There is not water enough on earth to wash this stain from me.

*I can still feel the blood leak down my legs. It stains me forever. I carry my sin in my
arms. Blood pulsates through those tiny veins, that pallid flesh.*

My shame envelops me, as once You did.

David:
Hide Your Face from my sins.

Narrator:
As both speak "from my sins," David's voice fades but Bat Sheva's rises.

Bat Sheva:
From my sins, too, erase all my iniquities.

David:
A pure heart create for me.

Bat Sheva:
O God, don't let my hatred consume me. Don't let my grief press me into the earth. Don't let this baby suffer for my sins. You love his father. Then love him. Save this child for his sake, if not for mine.

Surely not for mine.

Are You so cruel?

David (his voice growing stronger):
A proper spirit renew in my inner being

Bat Sheva:
I deserved Your cruelty. For some sin of mine that I know not, God, forgive me. Don't leave me.

Don't send me away from Your Presence.

Narrator:
Bat Sheva weeps, for her blasphemy, for her sorrow, for the innocent child who she fears will be sacrificed to atone for her sin, for her dead husband, for her arrogant lover.

David (his voice stronger still):
Don't take away Your holy spirit from me.
Return to me the joy of Your salvation
And with a generous spirit support me
I will teach sinners Your ways
Sinners will return to You

Bat Sheva:
Your lips are golden. How sweetly they form the words.
And yet you dare to exclude me from your prayer? Those honeyed lips that dared to call me to your bed then dared to call for the murder of my husband. What remorse did your lips form then? You. You! You will teach sinners!?

Nathan came to tell you a children's story so you could understand what you had done. He told a story about sheep, so you could understand. You shepherd, in king's robes-- You arrogant self-centered killer! What were your prayers when you sent Uriah away, his death warrant in his hand? Did nothing, no one, none of the deaths count to you until Nathan came and told you a story he made up? And oh, to watch you fly into a rage over a rich man who took another's sheep! It was comical, your anger so easily aroused. You! Too selfish to notice anyone or anything. Or to see yourself. What you had done.

David:
Rescue me from this blood!

Bat Sheva:
Rescue me from this blood.

David:
God, God of my Deliverance
Let my tongue sing joyously of Your righteousness
My Lord, open my lips
And my mouth will tell of Your praises
Since You do not wish an offering, else I would give it
Nor a burnt offering do You want.
The slaughter offerings of God
are a broken spirit and a broken, battered heart.
These God will not reject.

Narrator:
Bat Sheva falls to the ground, clutching the child in her arms. He does not cry out.

Bat Sheva:
The slaughter offerings of God are a broken spirit and a broken, battered heart. These God will not reject.

My broken spirit, my battered heart I bring before You. What else have I to offer? Can I heal from this sorrow? O God, open my lips too, that my sorrow will give way to...to what? What? I cannot even say the words. As he opens his heart, so do I yearn for comfort. But You have turned from me. Taken from me to give to him.

David:
Do good as is Your will, to Zion
Rebuild the walls of Jerusalem
Then You will desire righteous sacrifice,
burnt offerings and whole offerings
Then bullocks will be offered on Your altar.

Bat Sheva:

When will You have taken enough? When will I have given enough?

I pray

Dear God,

Let the yelps and spraying blood of some dumb beast

Hurled helpless upon Your altar

Replace the sacrifice of this dying babe.

Rebuild the walls of my womb to house the seed of Your people.

Heal me, O God. Heal me now.

For I am broken.

Leader: *How would you characterize Bat Sheva in this interpretation?*

[Answers might include]

- angry
- bitter
- inconsolable

Leader: *Are there other ways you might see Bat Sheva?*

[There are endless possibilities. Invite and explore as many as can be justified with some connection to the text of 2 Samuel 11-12. This is just one of them; encourage other “reads” of this voiceless character.]

Discussion Question: *Does this sort of dramatic view bring the psalm to life or corrupt the text? Should we feel free to take these psalms wherever we want?*