BS”D

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Parshas Masei

The Dilemma of Right and Wrong

By Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

This week’s Torah portion speaks about the grave sin of murder.

The Midrash Rabbah discusses the reason David HaMelech told his son Shlomo to execute Yoav ben Tzeruya for the crimes that he had committed. The text in the book of Melachim (Kings I) reads, “You know what Yoav, the son of Tzeruyah, did to me, what he did to the two generals of Israel, Avner, son of Ner, and Amasa, son of Yesser.  He killed them shedding blood of war in a time of peace“(2:5).

Later when Shlomo gives the order of execution to Benayahu ben Yehoyada, Shlomo states, “He struck down with his sword two men more righteous and better than he, without my father [David]’s knowledge:  Avner ben Ner, the general of Israel, and Amasa, the general of Yehuda.

Now, on the simple level, it is quite clear why Yoav was killed; he murdered two generals.  To be sure, those killings were not as black and white as they seem.  After the death of King Shaul, his general Avner met with David in a bid for reconciliation.  Yoav was incensed.  He felt that Avner, David’s erstwhile enemy, was not to be trusted and was deceiving King David (See Samuel II 3:25).  Also, in a previous battle, Avner had slain Yoav’s brother Asael (ibid 27).  According to the Talmud’s interpretation (Sanhedrin 49a,) Yoav considered Avner guilty of murder as he could have defended himself from Asael by merely wounding him rather than killing him.

Similarly, in the case of Yoav’s killing of Amasa, Yoav felt justified.  David’s son, Avshalom, had rebelled against his father.  The battle between the forces loyal to David and the forces loyal to Avshalom had ended in the routing of Avshalom’s forces.  David had ordered that Avshalom be spared. However, when Avshalom had been pinned down in the branches of a tree, Yoav killed him.  David was very distressed.  He dismissed Yoav from his position as the top general of his army and offered it to Amasa, the former head of Avshalom’s army.

Subsequently, a man named Sheva ben Bachri rebelled against David.  David ordered Amasa to muster the army of Yehuda within three days.  But Amasa tarried, and the army was not ready with the result that David’s position was threatened.  Yoav felt that Amasa had thereby betrayed David.  Using subterfuge, he killed Amasa.  Then he led David’s men to a victory over Sheva ben Bachri.

Despite the rationalizations in Yoav’s mind, David considered the killings of Avner and Amasa by Yoav as unjustified and thus as murder.  Therefore, he instructed Shlomo to punish Yoav when Shlomo ascended the throne.

The Midrash, however, gives a third reason that David ordered the execution of Yoav.  The text cited earlier says, “You know what Yoav ben Tzeruyah did to me.”  According to the Midrash, “to me” refers to an entirely different incident.

Chapter 11 and 12 of Shmuel II tells the story of David, Batsheva, and Uriah.  You can look it up for all the details.  Basically, David took Uriah’s wife Batsheva.  She became pregnant.  David sent orders to Yoav to position Uriah in the most dangerous part of the battle, and his fellows were not to come to his aid when the enemy attacked.  Yoav followed these orders and, sure enough, Uriah was killed in battle.  David was now free to marry Batsheva.

On the face of it, David committed adultery and murder.  However, the Talmud maintains that this was not the case.  In those times, soldiers would give their wives a divorce before going to war.  In Jewish law, if a man is missing and there is no proof of his death, his wife may not remarry.  Since during wartime it is possible to be killed and the body never recovered, this would pose a serious problem to the soldier’s wife.  Therefore, the custom was to give a divorce prior to going to war.  After the war, if the husband returned safely, he would remarry his wife.  Thus, according to this explanation, David had not committed adultery since Batsheva was technically divorced.  Although it wasn’t adultery legally, it certainly looked like it.  David had acted in secret rather than openly marrying Batsheva.

The sages also explain that Uriah was considered disloyal to David.  He expressed his allegiance to Yoav rather than to the king.  Technically, he could have been put to death as a traitor.  Having Uriah killed was thus not murder.  Nevertheless, it was considered a sin.  If Uriah was a traitor, say so publicly and punish him publicly.  The secret, quiet way in which Uriah was killed had the appearance of murder.  (David was confronted by Natan, the Prophet, for what he did and suffered grave consequences as a result.  See Samuel II, chapter 12).

With this background information, we can approach the Midrashic interpretation of what Yoav “did to me.”

When Uriah was killed in battle, many of his comrades were angry at Yoav for they realized that Uriah had been set up to be killed.  To absolve himself, Yoav showed them the letter in which David had told him to arrange for Uriah’s death.

This interpretation of the Midrash is very hard to understand.  Was it a great sin of Yoav to tell the truth that he had been acting at David’s orders?  After all, David was wrong for bringing about Uriah’s death.  David was the one who had done something bad.  Does the Midrash blame Yoav for telling the truth and for not covering up David’s crime?

I would suggest an understanding of the Midrash’s interpretation based on the Talmud in Sanhedrin 49a:

Yoav killed Amasa because he considered his tardiness in rallying the troops an act of disloyalty to David.  Actually, Amasa did go to assemble the troops, but he found them engaged in Torah study, so he waited for them to finish.  Even though he was disobeying the King’s orders, he was justified based on the following passage and its interpretation in the Book of Yehoshua (1:19).  It says,”Any man who flaunts your commands and does not obey every order you give him shall be put to death.  Only be strong and resolute.”  The first sentence tells us that whoever does not obey the word of the king (Yehoshua had the status of a king) may be put to death.  But the second sentence has an exclusionary phrase “only.” Listen to the king, but only if he does not order you to violate the Torah.  If he does, you need not listen.  Torah trumps obeying the king.

Avner, too, did not obey the orders of King Shaul when they contradicted the Torah.  Shaul accused the Cohanim of the city of Nov of being traitors because they abetted David’s escape from Shaul.  (Actually, they didn’t even realize that there was a feud between Shaul and David).  Shaul ordered Avner to slay the Cohanim.  Avner refused. It was against the Torah to kill innocent people even when the king orders it.

The Talmud concludes that this is why Avner and Amasa were “more righteous and better” than Yoav.  They refused to obey the king’s direct order since it was a violation of the Torah.  Yoav, on the other hand, carried out David’s order to set up Uriah’s death even though he didn’t hear it directly, but had received written instructions.  Avner and Amasa had placed Torah and conscience above the king and Yoav had not.

Now, here is my suggestion to explain the Midrash based on what the Talmud says:

If Yoav felt that it was justified to have Uriah killed because he was considered a traitor, he should not have blamed David.  He should have said that Uriah deserved to die.

On the other hand, if he felt it was wrong to kill Uriah, he should not have obeyed David’s order.  He should have sent word back to David that it was wrong according to the Torah to have Uriah killed and that he refused to participate in the act.  (Who knows, perhaps David would have been persuaded to desist).  Thus, Yoav was to blame for showing David’s letter.  If killing Uriah was right to do, he should have defended the king’s action, and if it was wrong, he should not have obeyed the order.

Here’s something I think we can all learn from this.  Although we don’t have a king ordering us around, we sometimes do things because of pressure.  We may compromise our values because “everyone is doing it,” and we don’t want to be different.  We just follow what society says.  Sometimes figures in authority, whether a boss or someone with high status, expects us to do something.  And we just do it regardless of whether it’s right or wrong from the Torah point of view.  That is not the way of the Torah.  The laws and values of the Torah are of paramount importance.  We must abide by those values no matter what an individual or a community expects of us.  If we are not sure if something is right or wrong we must seek guidance from Torah scholars of integrity to help us and guide us to do what is right.

“Only be strong and resolute.” The righteousness and goodness of Torah values must be our guide.