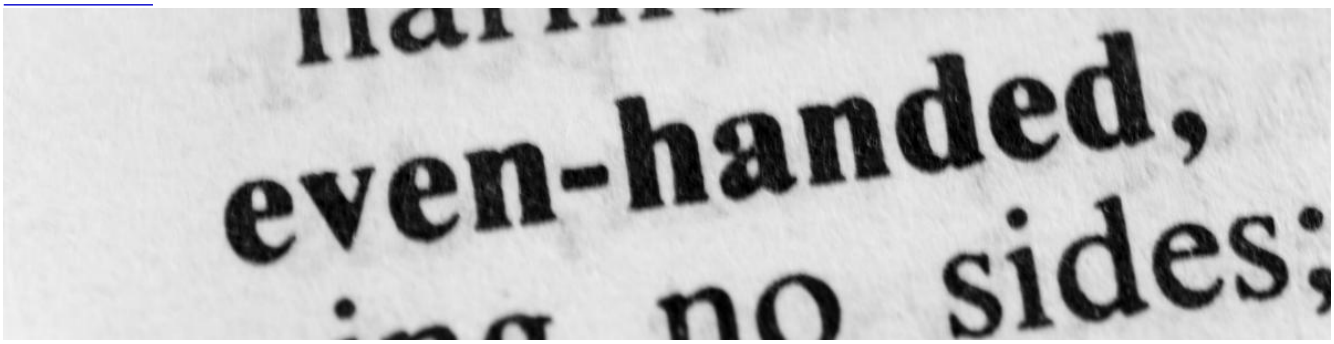
David and Mephibosheth: Being Overly “Even-Handed”

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Being Overly “Even-Handed”

King David is famed for his incredible righteousness, his inspiring prayers, and his powerful leadership over Israel as he brought his nation security by defeating nations which had bullied Israel for centuries. When we think of his sins, the episode of Uriah and Bathsheba comes quickly to mind. In this piece, we consider a lesser-known saga in the Book of Samuel, from which we may learn from David’s mistakes.

David and King Saul’s son, Jonathan, had a singular friendship. In addition to their mutual love and admiration, the political dimension of their relationship was essential. In addition to offering his unwavering support to David, Jonathan repeatedly had David swear that he would not exterminate Jonathan’s family once David became king. Of course, David honored that request.

Following Saul and Jonathan’s death and David’s assumption of the throne, David searched the kingdom for any living descendants of Jonathan. He learned that Jonathan had one son, named Mephibosheth. David planned to invite Mephibosheth to dine with him whenever he would like, and care for him. David could not have anticipated that he would be entering an incredibly complicated situation.

It turns out that a man named Ziba, who had been Jonathan's chief servant, had taken over Jonathan's house! Mephibosheth, who was physically lame from childhood, lived with a wealthy patron east of the Jordan River. It appears Ziba forced Mephibosheth out and became the master of the house. Enjoying his transition from servant to mansion owner, Ziba lived like a king, boasting fifteen children and twenty servants of his own.

When David learns of this travesty, he immediately orders Ziba to return the house to Mephibosheth and to serve him:

> The king summoned Ziba, Saul's steward, and said to him, "I give to your master's grandson everything that belonged to Saul and to his entire family. You and your sons and your slaves shall farm the land for him and shall bring in [its yield] to provide food for your master's grandson to live on; but Mephibosheth, your master's grandson, shall always eat at my table."—Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty slaves—(II Samuel 9:9-10).

David thus fulfills his promise to Jonathan, cares for Mephibosheth, and demonstrates how he "executed true justice among all his people" (II Samuel 8:15).

Reluctantly, Ziba obeyed David's decree and returned the house to Mephibosheth (II Samuel 9:11). Nevertheless, he longed for his former royal lifestyle and waited for an opportunity to wrest control of the house from his weak master.

That opportunity arose years later, when David's son Absalom rebelled against David. David and his loyal followers fled Jerusalem to the forest, bewildered and abandoned. During David's flight, Ziba brings food and donkeys for David and his weary men. He accuses Mephibosheth of treason against David, and David subsequently awards the house to Ziba:

> David had passed a little beyond the summit when Ziba the servant of Mephibosheth came toward him with a pair of saddled asses carrying two hundred loaves of bread, one hundred cakes of raisin, one hundred cakes of figs, and a jar of wine. The king asked Ziba, "What are you doing with these?" Ziba answered, "The asses are for Your Majesty's family to ride on, the bread and figs are for the attendants to eat, and the wine is to be drunk by any who are exhausted in the wilderness." "And where is your master's son?" the king asked. "He is staying in Jerusalem," Ziba replied to the king, "for he thinks that the House of Israel will now give him back the throne of his grandfather." The king said to Ziba, "Then all that

> belongs to Mephibosheth is now yours!" And Ziba replied, "I bow low. Your Majesty is most gracious to me" (II Samuel 16:1-4).

Ziba explains that Mephibosheth has harbored hopes for the return of the monarchy to *himself*! The narrative does not corroborate or refute Ziba's claim. However, David knows Mephibosheth is physically lame and therefore may have been unable to make this journey. It also is puzzling as to how Mephibosheth would have expected to regain the throne. If Absalom wins the rebellion, he would become king. If he loses, David would remain king. In any event, Mephibosheth's lameness makes it unlikely that he ever would vie for the throne. No less importantly, Ziba already has a proven track record of stealing this house, and therefore his credibility seems very low. There are good reasons for David to doubt Ziba's story.

Nevertheless, David appreciates Ziba's generosity (notice how wealthy the servant is to supply all this food!), and accepts Ziba's story without being able to hear Mephibosheth's side. David concludes that Mephibosheth is an ungrateful traitor, and therefore awards Ziba the house. Ziba is most pleased.

David goes on to prevail over Absalom and the rebellion ends. Because the civil war had torn Israel apart, many rifts needed to be healed. A man from the Tribe of Benjamin, Shimei son of Gera, had gravely insulted David when David fled Jerusalem. As the victorious David returned to Jerusalem after the rebellion, Shimei arrived with a large delegation of 1000 fellow tribesmen to apologize. Among them were Ziba and his fifteen sons and twenty servants (II Samuel 19:18).

Ziba says nothing, but he is visibly present when Mephibosheth subsequently appears to David:

> Mephibosheth, the grandson of Saul, also came down to meet the king. He had not pared his toenails, or trimmed his mustache, or washed his clothes from the day that the king left until the day he returned safe. When he came [from] Jerusalem to meet the king, the king asked him, "Why didn't you come with me, Mephibosheth?" He replied, "My lord the king, my own servant deceived me. Your servant planned to saddle his ass and ride on it and go with Your Majesty—for your servant is lame. [Ziba] has slandered your servant to my lord the king. But my lord the king is like an angel of the

> Lord; do as you see fit. For all the members of my father's family deserved only death from my lord the king; yet you set your servant among those who ate at your table. What right have I to appeal further to Your Majesty?" The king said to him, "You need not speak further. I decree that you and Ziba shall divide the property." And Mephibosheth said to the king, "Let him take it all, as long as my lord the king has come home safe" (II Samuel 19:25-31).

Mephibosheth had not groomed himself from the moment David fled Jerusalem until this point. It appears that these gestures were signs of mourning and solidarity with David (Radak, Ralbag). Mephibosheth explains why he did not accompany David with the other loyal followers: He had ordered Ziba to take him on the donkey to flee the city, but Ziba rode off with the donkey, leaving the lame Mephibosheth stranded in Jerusalem.

Despite his accusations of Ziba's slander (and likely disappointment that David had believed Ziba initially), Mephibosheth humbly expresses profound gratitude for all David had done for him and his family. He reiterates his abiding loyalty to David. Ziba remains silent, but no doubt his physical presence served to remind David that he had helped David during the rebellion.

Spread over three separate episodes, we may summarize the "narratives" of the two characters:

Mephibosheth: My father Jonathan's house belongs to me. Ziba forced me out, and stole my home. You, David, justly returned it to me and ordered Ziba to serve me again. However, during Absalom's rebellion, Ziba stole my donkey, left me stranded, bribed you and your men with food, and lied about the reasons for my remaining in Jerusalem. You see now that I am unkempt, having mourned for you and your kingdom from the moment you fled Jerusalem until now. Ziba's story is an outright lie.

Ziba: I fed you when you were at your lowest point and expressed my allegiance to you. Mephibosheth supported Absalom and believed the throne would ultimately return to him. You, David, awarded me Jonathan's house as a result of my loyalty and Mephibosheth's treason.

Although the prophetic narrator falls short of outright justifying Mephibosheth's claim, many facts support his narrative: Ziba is a proven

house thief, Mephibosheth is lame, he was in a prolonged unkempt state, and it seems most implausible that Mephibosheth ever expected to regain the throne himself.

It is therefore shocking that David uses an "even-handed" approach to resolve the conflict: "The king said to him, 'You need not speak further. I decree that you and Ziba shall divide the property'" (II Samuel 19:30). It is unclear if Ziba's bribe inclined David to divide the property, or whether David simply did not want to be bothered any further because he had many other important matters to attend.

The evidence supports Mephibosheth. Instead of being treated as a criminal who exploits and abuses a handicapped man and steals his home, Ziba gains half of a mansion and continues to live as a prince. In the Talmud, Rav expresses chagrin that David would rule in this manner:

> Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: When David said to Mephibosheth: You and Ziba shall divide the estate, a Divine Voice emerged and said to him: Rehoboam and Jeroboam shall divide the kingdom (Shabbat 56b).

In the earlier parts of David's reign, he was famed for executing "true justice among all his people" (II Samuel 8:15). Now, however, his listening to patently unequal narratives to act "even-handedly" dealt a profound injustice to Mephibosheth, rewarded the dishonest Ziba, and, according to Rav, sowed the seeds for the nation itself falling apart.

By not standing for truth, justice, and principle, David directly failed his friend Jonathan and his family, and, ultimately, divided his nation. Through this intricate narrative, there is much we may learn from the prophetic author of the Book of Samuel.