Biblical Models of Integrity and Models of Compromise

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Rabbi Hayyim Angel is the National Scholar of the Institute, and teaches advanced undergraduate Bible courses at Yeshiva University. This article appears in issue 41 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Tanakh teaches a principled, religious morality to all humanity. The prophets and their followers stood tall and spoke out for principled religious morality against tyranny and immorality. Others, however, compromised principle and attempted to find a "balanced" way of juggling morality and other less positive values. Of course, the biblical Mordekhai is one of the paragons of the ideal religious position, defying the evil Haman while everyone else fell over in obeisance.

There are many other biblical models—some exemplary, and some that fall short—worthy of our consideration. In this essay, we will consider four figures: Abraham's nephew Lot, an obscure prophet named Micaiah son of Imlah, the prophet Jeremiah, and King David. Lot and David (specifically in the story we will be considering) compromised principle in favor of less positive values, whereas Micaiah and Jeremiah heroically stood for God and the ideal principles of the Torah.

Lot: Compromising Principle for Comfort

Lot is one of the most fascinating figures in the Torah. As the nephew of Abraham and Sarah (known as Abram and Sarai during the first stages of the narrative), he joins them on their long journey to the Land of Canaan.

From the very beginning, God repeatedly promises the Land to Abraham's descendants. Abraham sees no possibility of biological descendants as he and Sarah are barren, so Lot seems like the obvious heir.

Then, famine strikes, and Abraham, Sarah, and Lot descend to Egypt to obtain food. It is a traumatic experience, as Pharaoh takes Sarah as a wife. The episode ends well thanks to God's direct

intervention and protection of Sarah. Abraham and Lot emerge from Egypt much wealthier, as a result of Pharaoh's gifts (Genesis 12).

While Abraham and Sarah rebuilt their lives in Canaan afterward, Lot never forgot the fact that the Nile provided material stability for Egypt. Canaan precariously depended on rainfall, leaving its inhabitants prone for future famines.

When the shepherds of Abraham and Lot quarreled over lands for pasture, Lot chose to move to Sodom. The Torah describes Sodom's appeal: "Lot looked about him and saw how well watered was the whole plain of the Jordan, all of it—this was before the Lord had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah—all the way to Zoar, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt" (Genesis 13:10). The steady rise of the Jordan River resembled that of the Garden of Eden and Egypt. Lot wanted that stability and comfort.

The Torah immediately reports the price of that comfort: "Now the inhabitants of Sodom were very wicked sinners against the Lord" (Genesis 13:13). By moving to the depraved city of Sodom, Lot abandoned the values and lifestyle Abraham and Sarah exemplified.

Over the next several years, Lot married a woman of Sodom, and two of his daughters later married men of Sodom. Deeply entrenched as he was, he still maintained a sense of Abraham and Sarah's hospitality. He invited the angels to his home when the other inhabitants of Sodom ignored the visitors (Genesis 19).

Lot remained head and shoulders above the people of Sodom. Nevertheless, he compromised the dearest principles of the household of Abraham and Sarah by moving to the wicked city, all in the name of comfort. In the final analysis, he never won the respect of his neighbors, he lost his home, his two married daughters, and his wife. On a different plane, Lot also forfeited his position as the potential heir of Abraham and Sarah.

Lot's descendants, the nations of Ammon and Moab, were characterized by Sodom's anti-hospitality culture:

> No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord; none of their descendants, even in the tenth generation, shall ever be admitted into the congregation of the Lord, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt, and because they hired Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Aramnaharaim, to curse you.—But the Lord your God refused to heed Balaam; instead, the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, for the Lord your God loves you.—You shall never concern yourself with their welfare or benefit as long as you live. (Deuteronomy 23:4–7)

Yet, some trace of good remained in Lot, and that streak of hospitality was manifest in Lot's stellar descendant, Ruth the Moabite. Ruth married Boaz, and became the great-grandmother of King David.

The Lot saga reminds us of how easy it is for generally good people or institutions to be overly tempted by financial gain and comfort to the point where they compromise their integrity and core principles. Today's Lots may rationalize this behavior on the grounds that everyone needs financial security. Nonetheless, the price they pay in compromising their values far outweighs whatever temporary gains they obtain.

The Torah enjoins us to emulate Abraham and Sarah—righteous, hospitable, principled individuals who stood firm in their faith and ideals. With all of their struggles, they worked hard to

build a righteous family with authentic values, and they prospered among their neighbors.

Ahab and His Yes Men vs. the Prophet Micaiah

In the ninth century bce, the wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel began a reign of terror in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. They made the worship of Baal into the official religion of Israel. Although people worshipped God also, they constantly wavered between God and Baal. Jezebel massacred the prophets of God and others who spoke up for the truth.

King Ahab struck an alliance with the righteous King Jehoshaphat of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Ahab's daughter Athaliah married Jehoshaphat's son Jehoram. Although the alliance united the two kingdoms on the political level, it caused catastrophic religious and physical harm to the Southern Kingdom.

The fiery Elijah served as the primary prophet who courageously opposed the wicked regime of Ahab and Jezebel. In one of the Ahab narratives (I Kings 22), a lesser-known prophet named Micaiah son of Imlah shines by maintaining his integrity against a powerful and corrupt establishment.

Following a three-year lull in an ongoing conflict between Israel and Aram, Ahab decides to regain control of Ramoth-gilead, which Aram had captured in earlier battles. Ahab invites his ally, King Jehoshaphat, to join him in battle: "And [Ahab] said to Jehoshaphat, 'Will you come with me to battle at Ramoth-gilead?' Jehoshaphat answered the king of Israel, 'I will do what you do; my troops shall be your troops, my horses shall be your horses'" (22:4).

However, the righteous Jehoshaphat insists that they first consult the prophets to obtain the word of God (22:5). Ahab had some 400 prophets at the ready, and they offered a unified positive response to go to war: "So the king of Israel gathered the prophets, about four hundred men, and asked them, 'Shall I march upon Ramoth-gilead for battle, or shall I not?' 'March,' they said, 'and the Lord will deliver [it] into Your Majesty's hands'" (22:6).

With such a unanimous prophetic response, one might have expected Jehoshaphat to enter the war without further hesitation. However, the prophetic response somehow left Jehoshaphat wanting a second opinion: "Then Jehoshaphat asked, 'Isn't there another prophet of the Lord here through whom we can inquire?'" (22:7).

What signaled the need for further prophetic consultation? The 400 prophets spoke in God's Name! Radak and Abarbanel consider this narrative in light of the overall Ahab narrative. Ahab and Jezebel supported Baal worship, and therefore these prophets must have been prophets of Baal. These idolaters tried to deceive Jehoshaphat by using God's Name, but the righteous king saw through their evil ruse. Although reasonable, this interpretation goes beyond the local text and requires interpretation from the global narrative.

It appears that the most likely approach requires a different way of thinking. Like the prophets of many ancient Near Eastern pagan nations, these 400 men were court prophets, who were on the king's payroll. Receiving large salary packages and great royal honor, they understood that they must always support the king's wishes. In this instance, Ahab clearly desired to go to war. Therefore, the 400 prophets repackaged the king's intent into prophetic words. Any other message would have resulted in their getting fired, or worse.

Jehoshaphat recognized that these 400 "prophets" were like pagan prophets, under their king's thumb. True prophets of Israel served God alone. They regularly confronted kings and other powerful figures when they strayed from God's ways. Therefore, Jehoshaphat demanded a true independent

prophet, one who would honestly reflect God's will.

There was indeed such a prophet, Micaiah son of Imlah, available for consultation. The wicked Ahab despised him, and did all he could to silence Micaiah.

First, Ahab expressed displeasure at the mere need to invite him: "And the king of Israel answered Jehoshaphat, 'There is one more man through whom we can inquire of the Lord; but I hate him, because he never prophesies anything good for me, but only misfortune—Micaiah son of Imlah.' But King Jehoshaphat said, 'Don't say that, Your Majesty'" (22:8).

When that strategy failed, Ahab let his henchmen intimidate the prophet: "The messenger who had gone to summon Micaiah said to him: 'Look, the words of the prophets are with one accord favorable to the king. Let your word be like that of the rest of them; speak a favorable word'" (22:13). Of course, the true prophet refused to kowtow to this pressure: "'As the Lord lives,' Micaiah answered, 'I will speak only what the Lord tells me'" (22:14).

When he arrives at the palace, Micaiah sarcastically mimics the false prophets. Irritated by the sarcasm, Ahab demands that Micaiah state God's true prophetic message: "When he came before the king, the king said to him, 'Micaiah, shall we march upon Ramoth-gilead for battle, or shall we not?' He answered him, 'March and triumph! The Lord will deliver [it] into Your Majesty's hands.' The king said to him, 'How many times must I adjure you to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord?'" (22:15–16).

Micaiah then replies with true prophecy, suggesting that Ahab will perish if he goes to war against Aram: "Then he said, 'I saw all Israel scattered over the hills like sheep without a shepherd; and the Lord said, 'These have no master; let everyone return to his home in safety'" (22:17).

After dismissing the 400 prophets as false prophets who mislead Ahab, those court prophets attempt to intimidate Micaiah: "Thereupon Zedekiah son of Chenaanah stepped up and struck Micaiah on the cheek, and demanded, 'Which way did the spirit of the Lord pass from me to speak with you?'" (22:24). Micaiah stood his ground despite the insult and the overwhelming numerical superiority of the opposition.

Ahab had hoped his yes-men would convince Jehoshaphat. He attempted to discourage Jehoshaphat from inviting Micaiah. His emissary pressured Micaiah to join the 400 court prophets. Zedekiah struck Micaiah, attempting to intimidate the prophet. All of these strategies failed.

The wicked Ahab therefore ordered that the prophet be imprisoned: "Then the king of Israel said… 'Put this fellow in prison, and let his fare be scant bread and scant water until I come home safe'" (22:26–27).

The process of silencing Micaiah was complete. Ahab followed his initial decision and went to war, and met his fate on the battlefront as prophesied by Micaiah. What happened to the imprisoned prophet? We never find out. Perhaps he was released after Ahab's death, perhaps he was forgotten and died in prison.

In addition to the tragic conclusions to the story, it is worth focusing on King Jehoshaphat's role. He initially demanded a true, God-fearing prophet to convey God's word. He knew Ahab's 400 court prophets were fraudulent. He witnessed Ahab's shameless intimidation of Micaiah. He heard Micaiah's prophetic words. And despite all that, Jehoshaphat joined Ahab in war, almost losing his own life (see the rest of the chapter). He was a king and a powerful ally, and certainly could have opposed Ahab with greater force. However, Jehoshaphat demonstrates that no longer has the courage to stand by God's prophet against Ahab and his powerful establishment.

Ahab thus developed a self-serving and well-financed system of court prophets; he intimidated, silenced, and cancelled true prophets; and he kept righteous voices like those of Jehoshaphat adequately silent so that he could achieve whatever he wanted. If Jehoshaphat had shown more resolve,

perhaps the story could have turned out differently.

Jeremiah and the False Prophets

Jeremiah began his prophetic career in 627 bce, and gained national notoriety when he first prophesied the destruction of the Temple during the wicked King Jehoiakim's reign in 609 bce. He warned that if the Judeans would not improve their religious behavior, the destruction of the Temple and exile would follow. Unwilling to listen, the wicked king, the nobility, and the priesthood persecuted Jeremiah and attempted to have him executed.

After the traumatic exile of Jehoiachin (Jehoiakim's son) and 10,000 other leading Judeans 12 years later, there was widespread concern. Suddenly, Jeremiah's bleak prophecies appeared to be materializing. Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia was rapidly conquering the world, and the tiny nation of Judah was extremely vulnerable. However, a group of false prophets arose in Judah who predicted a miraculous downfall of Babylonia followed by the return of Jehoiachin and the other exiles.

On the political front, Egypt fanned the flames of revolt against Babylonia. This led King Zedekiah to host an international summit in 593 bce to discuss the formation of an anti-Babylonian coalition. The religious and political establishments opposed Jeremiah's message of submission.

Jeremiah appeared at Zedekiah's summit wearing a yoke, symbolizing that all the nations should submit to the yoke of Babylonia:

> Thus said the Lord to me: Make for yourself thongs and bars of a yoke, and put them on your neck. And send them to the king of Edom, the king of Moab, the king of the Ammonites, the king of Tyre, and the king of Sidon, by envoys who have come to King Zedekiah of Judah in Jerusalem…The nation or kingdom that does not serve him—King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon—and does not put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, that nation I will visit—declares the Lord —with sword, famine, and pestilence, until I have destroyed it by his hands. As for you, give no heed to your prophets, augurs, dreamers, diviners, and sorcerers, who say to you, "Do not serve the king of Babylon." For they prophesy falsely to you—with the result that you shall be banished from your land; I will drive you out and you shall perish. But the nation that puts its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serves him, will be left by Me on its own soil—declares the Lord—to till it and dwell on it. (Jeremiah 27:2–11)

After Jeremiah’s dramatic presentation, the false prophet Hananiah son of Azzur publicly confronted Jeremiah, breaking his yoke and announcing that Babylonia would fall in two years (Jeremiah 28). Of course, we are privy to the course of history. Jeremiah was indeed the true prophet, and Hananiah was false.

However, in the real time of the story, one must ask: How were the people—even the most sincerely religious ones—to distinguish between true and false prophets? This question was not merely a matter of academic interest. Jeremiah’s forecast of 70 years of Babylonian rule (Jeremiah 25:10–11; 29:10) came with political ramifications: Remain faithful to Babylonia or they will destroy the country. By predicting the miraculous demise of Babylonia, the false prophets supported revolt against Babylonia. These debates were a matter of national policy and survival.

Some false prophets were easier to detect than others. Their flagrant disregard for the Torah discredited them as true prophets—at least for God-fearing individuals who were confused as to whom they should follow. However, Hananiah son of Azzur and Shemaiah the Nehelamite (Jeremiah 29:24–32) both sounded righteous. Neither preached idolatry or laxity in Torah observance, and both spoke in the name of God. After each prophet made his case, Jeremiah “went on his way” (Jeremiah 28:11). There was no way for the people to know who was right, and therefore the nation would have to wait to see whose prediction would be fulfilled. Waiting, however, was not a helpful option. The false prophets were calling for revolt now, and Jeremiah was calling for loyalty to Babylonia now.

Elsewhere, Jeremiah bemoaned the mockery he endured for the non-fulfillment of his own predictions: “See, they say to me: ‘Where is the prediction of the Lord? Let it come to pass!’” (Jeremiah 17:15). Although Jeremiah ultimately was vindicated by the destruction, the prediction test of prophetic veracity was difficult to apply.

To address these difficulties, Jeremiah presented alternative criteria by which to ascertain false prophets. He staked his argument in the Torah’s assertion that a wonder worker who preaches idolatry is a false prophet regardless of successful predictions or signs:

> As for that prophet or dream-diviner, he shall be put to death; for he urged disloyalty to the Lord your God (*ki dibber sarah al A-donai Elohekhem*)—who freed you from the land of Egypt and who redeemed you from the house of bondage—to make you stray from the path that the Lord your God commanded you to follow. Thus you will sweep out evil from your midst (Deuteronomy 13:6).

Strikingly, Jeremiah extended the Torah's example of idolatry to include anyone who did not actively promote repentance. Since the false prophets predicted the unconditional downfall of Babylonia irrespective of any repentance on Israel's part, they must be fraudulent:

> In the prophets of Samaria I saw a repulsive thing (*tiflah*): They prophesied by Baal and led My people Israel astray. But what I see in the prophets of Jerusalem is something horrifying (*sha'arurah*): adultery and false dealing. They encourage evildoers, so that no one turns back from his wickedness. To Me they are all like Sodom, and [all] its inhabitants like Gomorrah. (Jeremiah 23:13–14)

More subtly, the Torah uses the expression, "for he urged disloyalty to the Lord your God" (*ki dibber sarah al A-donai Elohekhem*). This phraseology is used to refer to specific prophets only twice in Tanakh—when Jeremiah censured Hananiah and Shemaiah, the two false prophets who appeared the most righteous:

> Assuredly, thus said the Lord: I am going to banish you from off the earth. This year you shall die, for you have urged disloyalty to the Lord (*ki sarah dibbarta el A-donai*). (Jeremiah 28:16)

> Assuredly, thus said the Lord: I am going to punish Shemaiah the Nehelamite and his offspring. There shall be no man of his line dwelling among this people or seeing the good things I am going to do for My people—declares the Lord—for he has urged disloyalty toward

the Lord (*ki sarah dibber al A-donai*). (Jeremiah 29:32)

Thus Jeremiah singled out the most undetectable false prophets so that those who genuinely wanted to follow God's word would understand that they were as good as idolaters as they led the nation away from God by predicting unconditional salvation for undeserving people.

Hananiah and Shemaiah may have been sincere dreamers who loved Israel. However, they were not driven to improve their society, and therefore necessarily were false prophets. In the end, their feel-good predictions contributed directly to the nation's doom. King Zedekiah eventually capitulated to his nobles' demands and revolted against the Babylonians, bringing about the destruction of the Temple and exile of the nation. During the final siege of Jerusalem, Jeremiah scolded Zedekiah for having ignored his counsel:

> And Jeremiah said to King Zedekiah, "What wrong have I done to you, to your courtiers, and to this people, that you have put me in jail? And where are those prophets of yours who prophesied to you that the king of Babylon would never move against you and against this land?" (Jeremiah 37:18–19)

Although some false prophets may have been sincere, there possibly also was some deficiency in that sincerity. While condemning false prophets, Jeremiah urged the Jews not to listen to them:

> For thus said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: Let not the prophets and diviners in your midst deceive you, and pay no heed to the dreams they [Heb. "you"] dream (*ve-al tishme'u el halomotekhem asher attem mahlemim*). (Jeremiah 29:8)

The expression at the end of the verse is difficult to interpret, as is evidenced in the NJPS translation above. Radak submits the following:

> *Mahlemim*: this means that they cause them to dream … i.e., you [the people] cause [the false prophets] to dream, for if you did not listen to their dreams, they would not dream these things. (Radak on Jeremiah 29:8)

Following Radak's interpretation, Jeremiah's critique of the false prophets includes an accusation of their being at least partially driven by a desire to please the people. A vicious cycle was created between the false prophets, the political leadership, and the masses. In contrast, Jeremiah was committed to God's word no matter how unpopular that made him.

Tragically, the Judeans failed to listen to Jeremiah, did not improve their religious behavior, and rebelled against Babylonia. Although he failed during his lifetime, Jeremiah's staggering prophetic integrity, pitted against every echelon of society, remains immortalized in Tanakh as a shining model of standing against immorality and tyranny. Thousands of years later, we continue to be inspired and animated by his immortal words.

David and Mephibosheth: 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 that had bullied Israel for centuries. When we think of his sins, the episode of Uriah and Bathsheba quickly comes to mind. In this section, 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, enjoyed a singular friendship. Beyond 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 15

children and 20 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 15 and 20 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 patiently for an opportunity to regain 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, feeling 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 grants 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, 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 1,000 fellow tribesmen to apologize. Among them were Ziba and his 15 sons and 20 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 with David, but Ziba rode off with the donkey, leaving the crippled 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 respective "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 falsely accused me of treason. 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 following Absalom's rebellion.

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 outrage 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.