

# Batsheva

# בַּת-שֵׁבַע

Late one afternoon, David rose from his couch and strolled on the roof of the royal palace; and from the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and the King sent someone to make inquiries about the woman. He reported, “She is Batsheva daughter of Eliam [and] wife of Uriah the Hittite.” David sent messengers to fetch her; she came to him and he lay with her—she had just purified herself after her period—and she went back home. The woman conceived, and she sent word to David, “I am pregnant.”

*[King David then orders Batsheva’s husband to the front lines of battle where he is killed; David hopes to pass off the child as his own.]*

When Uriah’s wife heard that her husband Uriah was dead, she lamented over her husband. After the period of mourning was over, David sent and had her brought into his palace; she became his wife and she bore him a son. But Adonai was displeased with what David had done.

*[The Prophet Natan is sent to excoriate David for his careless and adulterous behavior, saying to him,]* “Why then have you flouted the command of Adonai and done what displeases God? You have put Uriah the Hittite to the sword; you took his wife and made her your wife and had him killed by the sword of the Ammonites. Therefore the sword shall never depart from your house—because you spurned Me by taking the wife of Uriah the Hittite and making her your wife.’ ....and Adonai afflicted the child that Uriah’s wife had borne to David, and it became critically ill....on the seventh day the child died. David’s servants were afraid to tell David that the child was dead....David consoled his wife Batsheva; he went to her and lay with her. She bore a son and she named him Solomon.

...

Then [the prophet] Nathan said to Batsheva, Solomon’s mother, “You must have heard that Adoniyah son of Haggit has assumed the kingship without the knowledge of our lord David. Now take my advice, so that you may save your life and the life of your son Solomon. Go immediately to King David and say to him, ‘Did not you, O lord King, swear to your maidservant: “Your son Solomon shall succeed me as King, and he shall sit upon my throne”? Then why has Adoniyah become King?’ While you are still there talking with the King, I will come in after you and confirm your words.” So Batsheva went to the King in his chamber.

The King was very old, and Avishag the Shunammite was waiting on the King. Batsheva bowed low in homage to the King; and the King asked, “What troubles you?” She answered him, “My lord, you yourself swore to your maidservant by Adonai your God: ‘Your son Solomon shall succeed me as King, and he shall sit upon my throne.’ He has prepared a sacrificial feast of a great many oxen, fatlings, and sheep, and he has invited all the King’s sons and Abiathar the priest and Joab commander of the army; but he has not invited your servant Solomon. And so the eyes of all Israel are upon you, O lord King, to tell them who shall succeed my lord the King on the throne. Otherwise, when my lord the King lies down with his fathers, my son Solomon and I will be regarded as traitors.”

She was still talking to the King when the prophet Nathan arrived....Bowling low to the King with his face to the ground, Nathan said, “O lord King, did you say that “Adoniyah shall succeed me as King and he shall sit upon my throne?” ....King David’s response was: “Summon Batsheva!” She entered the King’s presence and stood before the King.... Batsheva bowed low in homage to the King with her face to the ground, and she said, “May my lord King David live forever!”

King David said, “Summon to me the priest Tzadok, the prophet Nathan, and Benaiah son of Yehoyada.” When they came before the King, he said to them, “Take my loyal soldiers, and have my son Solomon ride on my mule and bring him down to Gihon. Let the priest Tzadok and the prophet Nathan anoint him there King over Israel, whereupon you shall sound the horn and shout, ‘Long live King Solomon!’ Then march up after him, and let him come in and sit on my throne. For he shall succeed me as King; him I designate to be ruler of Israel and Judah.” Yet now Adoniyah has become King now, and my lord the King, know nothing about it.

.....

And Solomon sat upon the throne of his father David, and his rule was firmly established.

Adoniyah son of Haggit came to see Batsheva, Solomon’s mother. She said, “Do you come with friendly intent?” “Yes,” he replied; and he continued, “I would like to have a word with you.” “Speak up,” she said. Then he said, “You know that the kingship was rightly mine and that all Israel wanted me to reign. But the kingship passed on to my brother; it came to him by the will of Adonai. And now I have one request to make of you; do not refuse me.” She said, “Speak up.” He replied, “Please ask King Solomon—for he won’t refuse you—to give me Avishag the Shunammite as wife.” “Very well,” said Batsheva, “I will speak to the King in your behalf.”

So Batsheva went to King Solomon to speak to him about Adoniyah. The King rose to greet her and bowed down to her. He sat on his throne; and he had a throne placed for the queen mother, and she sat on his right.

She said, “I have one small request to make of you, do not refuse me.” He responded, “Ask, Mother; I shall not refuse you.”

The King replied to his mother, “Why request Avishag the Shunammite for Adoniyah? Request the kingship for him! For he is my older brother.”

Thereupon, King Solomon swore by Adonai, saying, ... “Now, as Adonai lives, who has established me and set me on the throne of my father David...Adoniyah shall be put to death this very day!” And Solomon instructed Benayah son of Yehoyada, who struck Adoniyah down; and so he died.

*2 Sam. 11:2-5, 26-27; 12:15-19, 24; 1 Kings 1:12; 2:12-22*

## Classical Midrash

If a man is working [as a hired worker] among cooking figs, he may not eat of white figs (*B’not Sheva* בְּנוֹת שֶׁבַע), and if among white figs, he may not eat of cooking figs, but he may restrain himself until he reaches the place where there are the better figs, and then he may eat.

*Mishna, Ma’asrot 2:8*

She makes covers for herself; [her clothing is linen and purple]” - this is Batsheva, that from her came Solomon, who was adorned with linen and purple and ruled from [one] end of the world to the [other] end. – *Midrash Mishlei 31 (Eshet Chayil)*

Batsheva was shampooing her head behind a beehive, which concealed her from sight. Satan came and appeared to David as a bird. David shot an arrow at the bird, the arrow severed the beehive, Batsheva was exposed, and David saw her.

Rava taught: What is the meaning of that which is written: “To the leader, of David. In the Lord I put my trust; how can you say to my soul: Flee like a bird to your mountain” (Psalms 11:1)? David said before the Holy Blessed One, “Master of the Universe, pardon me for that sin with Batsheva so that the wicked people will not say: The mountain that is among you, (*i.e., the luminary of the generation, David*), was driven from the world due to a bird that led to his transgression. – *Talmud, Sanhedrin 107a*

Batsheva, daughter of Eliam, was designated as fit for David from the six days of Creation. Rava interprets that the term *le'tzela* is referring to Eve, who was taken from the side [*tzela*] of Adam, the first man, and explains that she was destined for him, just as Eve was destined for Adam. But she came to him through pain. And likewise, the school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: Batsheva, daughter of Eliam, was designated as fit for David, but he partook of her unripe, before the appointed time. David would have ultimately married her in a permitted manner after the death of Uriah.

– *Talmud, Sanhedrin 107a*

Rabbi Yoḥanan says in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai: This teaches that when Solomon’s mother Batsheva saw Solomon engaged in excessive drinking, she bound him to a pillar to have him flogged. And she said to him: “What, my son? And what, son of my womb? And what, son of my vows?” (Proverbs 31:2). She meant: “What, my son?” Everyone knows that your father, David, was a God-fearing man, and now, when they see you sin, they will all say that his mother caused him to drink, *i.e., that you engage in these behaviors because you are my son.* “And what, son of my womb?” That is to say: With regard to all of the women of your father’s house, once they conceive they no longer see the face of the king, but I pushed myself in and entered the king’s chamber while I was pregnant, so that I might have a son who is strong and fair-skinned. There are times during a woman’s pregnancy when intercourse is beneficial for the development of the fetus. Batsheva was telling Solomon: I did my utmost to ensure that you have extra strength and beauty, and now you use that strength and appeal to pursue drink.

“And what, son of my vows?” That is to say: With regard to all of the women of your father’s house, they would take vows while they were pregnant, saying: Let me have a son who is fit to be king. But I, by contrast, took a vow and said: Let me have a son who is diligent and filled with knowledge of the Torah and fit for prophecy.

– *Talmud Sanhedrin 70b*

## Contemporary Midrash

**He saw a woman bathing- the woman was very beautiful.**

We join [David] in this classic male gaze, just as we have shared the male gaze at countless odalisques in the history of art. Nothing has happened, but our attention has been arrested: we too look at this woman...Batsheva is enjoying a private moment – she thinks – and we violate it the moment we stop to contemplate her beauty.

...The story is conspicuous for what does *not* say. Nowhere do we read “David loved her.” David [learns that this woman is] Batsheva, a married woman, which should be enough to end the story before it begins...but David is not stopped by the knowledge that Batsheva is married, and does not leave her alone. There have always been kings who considered themselves exempt from strictures against adultery. After all, even though according to ancient patriarchal conceptions the woman might belong to her husband, all subjects belonged to the king!

The challenge is there: is there anything a king cannot do? And David the imperial king may be testing the limits, but we do not know for sure. Motives and intentions of the story are left to the readers who have come up with many versions of this story over the years. The narrator tells only what happened: he sent, he took, he came, he lay with her. The action of the story speeds up. The reader does not learn why David acted in this manner to the story, it is irrelevant. Nor are we told of Batsheva’s reactions. Was she flattered or frightened? Attracted to David’s fame and power, or terrorized by them? By the rules of Israelite society, she had no right to consent, but in this new world of powerful kingship, did she have a right to refuse? For whatever reason, the deed was done.

– Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* pp. 145-146

If Batsheva were simply an agent, she would have used the exact words that Nathan had given her period she would have humbly been Nathan's mouthpiece. Instead, she changes the language slightly, and the subtle change reveals her power and character... What do we learn from this? On the simplest level, Batsheva is a powerful woman. Although she does not speak often in the Bible, if we look critically at the words she does say, we see that she is an important character in the story of King David. She truly influences the course of Jewish history. On a deeper level, we also see an egalitarian model for leadership. We tend to assume that political systems from thousands of years ago follow a strict form of hierarchy. We might assume that King David, as the person with control, would have ruled within this structure of power. But the text reveals that David did not rule alone. It would be easy to dismiss this story as the exception to the years of king David's rule, because he is ailing and old. Perhaps he only needed to help at this point, near the end of his days. But this story can also suggest a long-term relationship between Batsheva and David, as political leaders sharing power. Nathan, Batsheva, and David all referred to an earlier promise David made to Batsheva regarding Solomon’s future kingship. This points to just one discussion between David and Batsheva about crucial political decisions, while there may have been many.

– Rabbi Beth Janus, *The Women’s Haftarah Commentary* pp. 25-26

## Somewhere (excerpt)

Somewhere in secret they rest,  
Women of grace, splendor, bravery.  
On Batsheva's head, a crown,  
In Deborah's hand, a staff.

– Shulamit Kaulgai (1891-1972, Israel)

## Hebrew (excerpt)

About pronouns and sex English leaves its options open  
in practice each I  
has all the options  
you is he or she  
I is sexless  
there's no difference  
and all things are it – not man not woman  
no need to think before relating to sex  
Hebrew is a sex maniac  
Hebrew discriminates for and against  
is forgiving, gives privileges  
with a big gripe from the exile  
in plural men have the right of way  
it's a thin line it's a big secret  
in the singular chances are equal  
who says it's a lost case  
Hebrew is a sex maniac  
wants to know who's talking  
almost a mirror almost a picture  
forbidden by the Torah  
...  
Hebrew is a woman bathing  
Hebrew is Batsheva clean  
a graven image not forbidden,  
with tiny beauty marks and birth marks  
the older she gets the more beautiful she is  
her judgment is sometimes prehistoric

– Yona Wallach (1944-1985, Israel)

Rembrandt van Rijn  
“Bathsheba with King David's Letter”  
1654

