

Shiur 4 - Berachot 3b - David's Kingship and the Division of Time

The Fundamental Question of Night's Structure

The sugya opens with a machloket between Rabbi and Rabbi Natan concerning the division of night into either four or three watches (ashmurot). This isn't merely a technical dispute about astronomical calculation—it represents competing visions of how to read biblical sources and perhaps reflects different cultural frameworks. Rabbi argues for four divisions based on reconciling two pesukim in Tehillim 119: David states "chatzot layla akum" (at midnight I rise) and "kidmu einai ashmurot" (my eyes preceded two watches). If night has four divisions, midnight occurs precisely before two watches remain. Rabbi Natan derives three divisions from Gidon's night attack at "rosh ha'ashmoret ha'tichona" (the beginning of the middle watch)—the term "tichona" implying something with elements both before and after it, thus necessarily yielding three total divisions.

Louis Ginzberg's observation proves illuminating here: Eastern/Near Eastern cultures traditionally divided night into three watches, while Roman culture employed four. Rabbi, living in Roman-era Eretz Yisrael, may reflect this Greco-Roman influence. Yet characteristically, the rabbis don't simply acknowledge cultural change—they reread earlier biblical texts to accommodate their contemporary understanding, making Tanach speak in their own idiom.

Moshe and David: Prophecy versus Inspiration

A striking contrast emerges between Moshe's relationship to midnight and David's. When warning Pharaoh of makat bechorot, Moshe said "kachatzot" (approximately midnight) rather than stating definitively "bachatzot." The Gemara initially suggests Moshe didn't know the precise moment—but this seems impossible given his prophetic stature. Multiple explanations surface: Perhaps David possessed a "clock" (his kinor, played by the north wind at midnight) while Moshe lacked such a device. More profoundly, Moshe spoke cautiously because his audience was Pharaoh, whose astrologers might calculate differently and then accuse Moshe of lying. The principle emerges: "lameid leshoncha lomar eini

yodei, shema titbadeh v'te'achoz"—train yourself to express uncertainty, lest you be proven wrong and trapped.

The kinor David operates on multiple registers. Functionally, it serves as an alarm clock, waking David at midnight. But symbolically, it represents divine inspiration—ruach hakodesh rather than direct prophecy. The north wind (ruach tzfonit) playing the strings suggests David's poetry and spiritual life emerge from a mysterious confluence of natural forces and divine presence. Unlike Moshe, to whom God speaks "panim el panim," David receives no direct prophetic communication. He writes Tehillim, composes prayers, but remains fundamentally inspired rather than commanded.

The Problem of Shalosh Sha'ot

An explosive difficulty emerges regarding the end time for Kriat Shema. The sugya quotes Rabbi Yehoshua's opinion that one may recite Shema "ad shalosh sha'ot" (until the third hour), defined as the time when "bnei melachim" (those who don't work) typically wake. Rabbi Natan's calculation counts "shit d'laila v'tartei d'yemama"—six hours from midnight plus two hours of day, totaling eight hours, described as "shtei ashmurot." This implies "shalosh sha'ot" means the *beginning* of the third hour, not its conclusion—a difference of approximately one sha'ah zmanit (seasonal hour).

The practical ramifications prove dramatic. It moves sof zman Kriat Shema an hour earlier—requiring far earlier minyanim to accommodate. Rav Ashi offers an alternative reading that may preserve the later time/

Conduct Before the Dead: Speech and Silence

The sugya transitions through a statement by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi: "Ein omrim bifnei hamet ela divrei hamet"—one speaks before a corpse only words the deceased himself said. The rationale concerns loeg larash (mocking the helpless): when Torah words are spoken, a living person should respond, study, engage; the dead person's inability to participate highlights his mortality. However, two contradictory versions exist—one permitting even Torah study (since only the deceased's own Torah doesn't mock him), another forbidding all speech, even Torah, except echoing the deceased's own statements.

The Rambam in Hilchot Avel extends this to the house of mourners: not only may one not speak divrei Torah (lest the avel be expected to engage when unable), but *kal vachomer* one cannot speak mundane matters. The *beit avel* demands silence—*vayidom Aharon*, Aaron's speechlessness after his sons' deaths, becomes paradigmatic. This represents one opinion in the *sugya*: confronting mortality demands contemplative silence, not casual discourse. [The connection to David's nighttime study becomes apparent: night itself resembles a small death, a withdrawal from normal human activity into a liminal space where different rules apply.]

David as Anti-King: The Shepherd Model

The Gemara's portrayal of David emerges as deliberately counter-cultural, almost subversive. David calls himself a *chasid*, but what does this mean? Two explanations: First, while other kings sleep late (*ad shalosh sha'ot*—until the third hour), David rises at midnight. Second, while kings of east and west "*yshivim agudot agudot bichvodam*" (sit in groups concerned with their honor), David has "*yadayim meluchlachot b'dam shafir v'shilya*" (hands dirtied with blood of fetus and placenta)—meaning he rules on *taharot hamishpacha*, serving people's needs rather than pursuing *kavod*.

This portrait radically inverts royal expectations. Kings in antiquity existed as centers of honor, objects of veneration, sources of law unto themselves. David instead positions himself as servant: of God, of Torah, and of Israel. When morning comes and "*chachmei Yisrael*" request economic intervention ("*amcha Yisrael tzrichim parnasa*"), David initially deflects—"hitparnsu zeh mizeh" (support yourselves from each other). Only when pressed does he suggest military expansion. But even then, David himself doesn't lead—he consults Achitofel (advisor), the Sanhedrin, and *Urim v'Tumim* before any action. The biblical warrior-king becomes recast as a *talmid chacham* consulting his teachers.

Mefiboshet as Teacher: The Paradox of Royal Learning

Most striking: David's primary teacher is Mefiboshet, grandson of Shaul. Every king in antiquity would eliminate his predecessor's family upon taking power. David not only spares Mefiboshet but studies under him—"kol ma she'ani oseh

nimlach b'Mefiboshet." The name itself proves significant: not his real name (which was Ish-Bosheth or Ish-Ba'al), but rather a literary designation.

"Mefiboshet" derives from "mevayesh pnei David b'halacha"—he would embarrass David in legal discussions. David's son Kilav (actually named Daniel) would then "machlim pnei Mefiboshet"—refute Mefiboshet, vindicating his father.

Shlomo's wisdom gets quoted: "Bni, im chacham libecha, yismach libi gam ani"—if my son is wise, my heart rejoices. A king secure enough to learn from his predecessor's grandson, humble enough to accept correction, proud when his son surpasses both him and his teacher—this inverts every royal norm. The pasuk "adabra b'edvotcha neged melachim v'lo evosh" crystallizes this: other kings pursue honor, David speaks Torah before them unashamed.

The Shadow of Sin: Garam HaChet

Yet David cannot fully embrace his chasidut. He says "lulei he'emanti lir'ot b'tuv Hashem b'erezt chayim"—were it not for my faith, implying doubt about reaching Olam Haba. The dots over "lulei" permit reading without it: David expresses certainty that tzadikim receive reward, but uncertainty whether he belongs among them—"shema yigrom hachet" (lest sin disqualify me). This echoes Yaakov's fear despite God's promise of protection: promises may become void through subsequent sin.

The Rambam's analysis proves subtle: Generally, good prophecies must be fulfilled (to validate the prophet's credibility), while evil prophecies can be averted through teshuva. But for the prophet himself, even good promises remain conditional—he knows independently that he's a prophet, so his personal promises can be voided by sin. Only Yaakov (and David, who reached prophetic levels) would fear "garam hachet" regarding positive divine promises.

The sugya weaves together cosmology (night's division), psychology (sleep patterns), political theology (kingship), and spiritual anxiety (unworthiness) into a unified portrait. David becomes the anti-king who rises when others sleep, serves when others rule, learns when others command, and doubts when others presume. The machloket about night's structure reflects deeper uncertainty about how humans mark sacred time and whether our frameworks capture or construct

divine reality. David embodies Kriat Shema's core message—recognizing God's sovereignty requires abandoning human pretensions to power, remaining awake when the world sleeps, and accepting correction even from one's enemy's grandson. Yet even this chasid fears judgment, knowing that divine promises operate under a moral calculus where past righteousness cannot guarantee future mercy when sullied by sin.