

LESSON 6

COULD THEY BE REUNITED AS A PEOPLE AFTER THEY HAD BEEN DIVIDED?

I. What is the aim of this lesson?

The aim of this lesson is to show that attempts to reunify a divided People of Israel did not last and ultimately resulted in their division into two kingdoms, the Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of Judah.

II. Why is this lesson important?

While this is a continuation of the theme of Jewish unity which is the subject of our previous lesson, this lesson allows the students to see one the dire consequences of tension and discord among the People of Israel – their division into two distinct and competing kingdoms – and enables them to understand the importance of making the unity of the people a top priority so that such situations do not recur in the future. It also shows us the enormous impact that Jewish leadership can have on promoting Jewish unity, on the one hand, and on planting the seeds of tension and divisiveness on the other.

III. Texts, questions and central ideas of the lesson:

Text 1 – II Samuel 5:1-7 and 6:1-5, 12-15 – The Reign of David

Background

As we mentioned at the end of the previous lesson, although the war between the factions continued, David was gaining the upper hand. But the real turning point occurred when Ish-bosheth criticized Abner for having slept with his father's (the former king Saul) concubine. Abner considered this criticism to be a reflection of Ish-bosheth's ingratitude and a sign of disrespect and he decided to switch loyalties and help establish the throne of David over all of Israel and Judah. David's popularity increased even further in his deft handling of an incident that could have threatened his position from the very start - the assassination of Abner by his military leader Joab. In order to dispel the fears of the people that he may have ordered the assassination, he assured them that he had nothing to do with it and he proceeded to curse Joab for his actions. He then ordered the entire nation - including Joab - to grieve for Abner and he delivered a moving eulogy in his memory. When Ish-bosheth himself was later assassinated by his own tribes-men there was no claimant to the throne to compete against David, thus paving the way for his acceptance as king over the entire nation (see I Samuel, chapters 1-4).

Why did the entire nation accept David as king according to this text?

1. "We are your flesh and blood" ("*atzmecha u-besarecha*"), i.e., despite their earlier feud all the tribes of Israel share common origins. But this terminology indicates more; in the story of creation, man refers to the woman as "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" ("*etzem me-atzamy u-basar mi-besari*", Genesis 2:23). Thus, they are suggesting that just as the man and the woman are joined together in a deep existential bond so too all the tribes of Israel.
2. The fact that he was a successful and popular military leader during the reign of Saul (see I Samuel 18:16) made David especially appealing given the omnipresent threat of the Philistines.
3. God has promised that David would one day become king over the People of Israel.

Although it would appear that the civil war came to an end with the acceptance of David by the entire nation around the year 1000 BCE, it is hard to imagine that the scars of war and the feelings of mutual hostility would disappear overnight.

Thus, the question is **what could be done to solidify the sense of unity among the people and to prevent the outbreak of violence in the future?**

Our text continues by telling us the first thing that David did once in power: he conquered Jerusalem and then turned it into his capital. But what is the importance of Jerusalem in the context of Jewish unity? A look at the map (map 71) shows that the city of Jebus – which was renamed Jerusalem - is on the border between Judah and Benjamin, or on the border between the tribes of the North (Israel) and the tribe of the South (Judah). Furthermore, the city did not originally belong to any of the tribes but rather to the Jebusites. By establishing his capital in a neutral city in a neutral location he wished to consolidate his monarchy and this helped foster feelings of brotherhood among the people.

Nevertheless, David did not stop there. He realized that if he really wanted to consolidate his control over the entire nation he would have to establish not just a political center but a religious and spiritual center as well. Now, as we mentioned in text 1 of our previous lesson, the spiritual and religious center of the people had been the city of Shiloh because that was where the Ark of the Lord resided. But when the Ark was removed from Shiloh in a failed effort to gain the upper hand in their war against the Philistines, the city was destroyed and the Ark was transported from place to place until it rested in Kiriath-Jearim, referred to in our text as Balaah (see I Samuel 4-7:2). David realized that the way to turn Jerusalem into a religious and spiritual center was to establish a permanent residence for the Ark in the confines of the city. Thus, David went with his troops to bring the Ark up to Jerusalem, an event which was greeted by the people with great fanfare and celebration: "David and all the House of Israel danced

before the Lord to [the sounds of] all kinds of cypress wood [instruments], with lyres, harps, timbrels, sistrums, and cymbals... with shouts and with blasts of the horn."

Thus, we see the people of Israel unified among themselves, with their king and with their God. Would this unity last?

Text 2 – II Samuel 19:10-16, 41-44 and 20:1-2 – Disunity and Revolt

Background

Although David enjoyed immense popularity in the early part of his reign, he introduced a new administrative system that was unable to become quickly and deeply rooted in the national life of the people. His creation of a class of "royal ministers and servants" diminished the status of the tribal elders who had governed the people during the period of the Judges. This led to a growing dissatisfaction with his regime and, later, to an open revolt led by his own son - Absalom - and by members of his own tribe - Judah. David saw that virtually the entire country was against him, and he fled to Transjordan. Although David and his loyalists managed to overcome Absalom and the Israelite rebels, he made a critical decision that would have a profound impact on the unity of the people.

What did David do to try to guarantee his return to the throne? Why would this likely cause resentment and tension among the tribes of Israel?

Although David had defeated the rebel forces, there was no guarantee that the people would be interested in allowing him to reclaim the throne. Nevertheless, momentum was building among the People of Israel in his favor. Most people understood that since David was responsible for delivering them from their enemy - the Philistines - he had earned his right to the throne.

David, however, did not sit idly by and wait for the people to control his fate; he decided to solidify his power base by turning to members of his own tribe in an effort to gain their support. Aware that the tide was turning in his favor among the tribes of Israel, he turned to the tribe of Judah and said: "Why should you be the last to bring the king back to his palace?" And in an effort to convince them to reply favorably he emphasized his special bond with them: "You are my kinsmen, *my own flesh and blood*".

Now the significance of this statement cannot be underestimated. In text 1 we saw that the tribes of the North were willing to accept a king from the tribe of Judah because they felt "We are your flesh and blood". Now David is employing the *same* terminology in showing preference for his *own* tribe over the tribes of the North. But this is not all that David did to gain the support of his tribe. He turned to Amasa - a member of the tribe of Judah and the military leader of the rebels (see II Samuel 17:25) - and

appointed him as permanent army commander in place of his longstanding commander Joab. Finally, David apparently singled out the men of Judah and allowed (encouraged? ordered?) them to escort him back across the Jordan in his return to Jerusalem which generated an angry response from the other tribes: "Why did our kinsmen, the men of Judah, steal you away and escort the king across the Jordan...?"

From this point onwards relations between the tribe of Judah and the tribes of Israel quickly descend into bitter acrimony and mutual hostilities. The men of Judah intervene in David's behalf by affirming the legitimacy of his preferential treatment: "the king is our relative! Why should this upset you? Have we consumed anything that belongs to the king? Has he given us any gifts?" To this the men of Israel reply that David's authority as king derives from all the people of Israel – not just Judah – and, they should, therefore, have a ten times (i.e., ten tribes) greater share in the king than the tribe of Judah. While the text tells us that the tribe of Judah prevailed in this dispute, the entire people suffered the consequences.

Capitalizing on the tensions between the two groups, a man (described as a "scoundrel") by the name of Sheba from the tribe of Benjamin sounded the horn and gave public expression to a sentiment that had been lingering under the surface for some time: "We have no portion in David, No share in Jesse's son! Every man to his tent, O Israel!" Thus, a new revolt erupted in which the men of Israel followed Sheba while the men of Judah followed David. Unlike the previous revolt, however, this revolt didn't just threaten the position of the king; it threatened the entire kingdom and the unity of the people within it.

Thus, we see that although David successfully united the people after a bitter civil war when he first assumed the throne, he was later responsible for planting the seeds of another split when he abandoned the interests of the nation and favored his own tribe in order to maintain his grip on power. The tension between the interests of the king and the interests of the nation is even more pronounced in the kingdom of David's son Solomon.

Text 3 – I Kings 12:1-17 – The Division of the Kingdom

Background

Sheba's revolt was suppressed in its early stages and internal peace was soon restored. David returned to Jerusalem and re-established his kingdom, but not for long. At the end of David's life, his son Adonijah attempted to win popular support and establish a party of his own. In order to ensure the

continuity of his dynasty, David elevated his other son Solomon who had all his opponents killed, enabling him to firmly establish himself as the undisputed king of Israel and Judah.

During the long and peaceful reign of Solomon (965-928 BCE), united Israel became a great and wealthy kingdom with widespread influence and was regarded as the most important state between Egypt and Asia Minor (roughly equivalent to modern day Turkey). One of the central manifestations of the wealth of his kingdom was Solomon's building projects throughout the land and in Jerusalem - "the royal city" - in particular. There he built the Temple and the royal palace, thus reinforcing Jerusalem as the center of the kingdom, a process first initiated by his father David.

These large-scale building projects were implemented through two types of taxes: the corvee (*ha-mas*) - various types of forced labor and the levy (*sebel*) - the provision of supplies for the royal court and the army. In order to simplify the tax collection Solomon divided the kingdom into twelve districts and each would be responsible for labor and provisions one month per year. Solomon apparently continued to show favoritism to the tribe of Judah by exempting (or partly exempting) them from these taxes (I Kings 4-5). This tax burden was tolerated as long as the wealth of the kingdom was shared by the masses. However, towards the end of his reign, when his kingdom experienced a political and economic crisis, feelings of resentment and anger became increasingly widespread. Solomon's death was seen by some as an opportunity to be freed of the intolerable burden.

What did the people demand of Solomon's son Rehoboam? What was his reply?

When Solomon died in 928 BCE, his son Rehoboam expected to be his successor. However, he realized that a revolt by the Northern tribes had been fomenting already during his father's lifetime under the leadership of Jeroboam son of Nebat (see I Kings 11:26-40) and he was forced to travel to Shechem (and not Jerusalem) - the capital city of the North - where the coronation ceremony was to take place. There, however, things didn't go so smoothly. The "assembly of Israel" - referring here specifically to the tribes of the North - used this opportunity to demand the easing of their tax burden. He told them he would take 3 days to think the matter over.

During this time, Rehoboam decided to begin by consulting the older and more established statesmen who advised him to adopt the principles of compromise and appeasement in the belief that this will help him in the long run. Unhappy with this advice, he approached the ministers of the new generation, his contemporaries who apparently understood little in the way of diplomacy. They advised taking a hard line and being provocative: "Say to them (the people), 'My father imposed a heavy yoke on you, and I will add to your yoke; my father flogged you with whips, but I will flog you with scorpions.'" It was this advice that he accepted.

What happened as a result of Rehoboam's reply to the people?

Quite predictably, his uncompromising position and his threat to make their burden even more unbearable led to his unanimous rejection. They invoked the same phrase as had Sheba in his revolt against David (see text 2) and they decided to make Jeroboam - the leader of the revolt - king over all Israel. But unlike the revolt of Sheba which ended quickly and was followed by the reunification of the people, this revolt caused a permanent split. From this point onwards, two separate kingdoms - Israel and Judah - continued to exist side by side until the fall of the North at the hands of Assyria in 720 BCE. Although they continued to share common religious, national and historical cultural bonds, they existed as separate and competing – including, at times, fighting – political entities. The dramatic separation of the People of Israel into two distinct kingdoms is reflected in the biblical Book of Kings which alternates between two parallel histories, the history of the Kingdom of Israel and the history of the Kingdom of Judah.

IV. Suggested Lesson Plan

Step 1

It may be helpful to begin this lesson with the same analogy from contemporary politics with which we ended the last lesson. Why couldn't the national unity government in Israel last? It appears that once the external threat diminished, i.e., the intifada, the political parties returned to their usual bickering and divisiveness. What are the difficulties in creating another national unity government? As a rule, people tend to put their particular needs or the needs of their particular constituency ahead of the needs of the nation. Is it harder to create a national unity government or to recreate it after it has failed?

Returning to our story, what were the circumstances that led to the reunification of the people? What did David do to solidify the sense of unity and to try and prevent civil war in the future? Study and analyze text 1.

Step 2

What are some of the dangers of power, especially power that is concentrated in the hands of one man? To what extent do leaders today serve the people and to what extent do they serve themselves at the expense of the people? Returning to our story, what did David do in order to maintain his position as king? To what extent was this at the expense of the people? What were the consequences? Study and analyze text 2.

Step 3

How do people feel about taxes? When are people more likely to resist paying taxes? What was Solomon's system of taxation? Were the taxes aimed at serving the king or the people? When did the taxes cause resentment among the people? How did they try to alleviate their tax burden? What was the result?

Step 4

Summary and questions for thought. The following are some sample questions: What lessons can we learn from the tragic split of the people at the time into two separate kingdoms? Is Jewish unity possible today? What might be the consequences for the Jewish people today if there were two Jewish states, with one state serving one segment of the population and the other state serving the other? What are the issues that threaten to divide the Jews in the State of Israel? There are those today who suggest that Israel should be divided into two states: one a Jewish state and the other a state for Jews. What do you think?

V. Questions for Further Study

1. Read I Kings 11:11-13. What is the reason given in this text for the division of the people into two kingdoms? Read I Kings 11:1-10. What sins did Solomon commit according to this text?
2. Read I Kings 12:25-33. What religious changes did Jeroboam introduce in the North? How does the author of the Book of Kings view these changes? Read pages 115-116 in *A History of the Jewish People*, edited by Ben-Sasson. How does he explain these changes?

VI. Literature for Further Reading

Ben Sasson, H.H. (ed.), *A History of the Jewish People*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 96-123