

Babylonian Talmud Tractate Yoma 22b

R. Eleazar said: Whosoever counts Israel, transgresses a [biblical] prohibition, as it is said: Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured.⁶ R. Nahman b. Isaac said: He would transgress two prohibitions, for it is written: 'Which cannot be measured nor numbered'. R. Samuel b. Nahmani said: R. Jonathan raised an objection: It is written: 'Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea,' and it is also written: 'Which cannot be numbered?'⁷ This is no contradiction: Here⁸ it speaks of the time when Israel fulfils the will of the Lord, there of the time when they do not fulfil His will. Rabbi,⁹ on behalf of Abba Jose son of Dosthai, said: This is no contradiction: Here it speaks of [counting done] by human beings, there of counting by Heaven.¹⁰ R. Nehilai b. Idi said in the name of Samuel: As soon as a man is appointed administrator of a community, he becomes rich — First it was written: 'And he counted them by means of pebbles,' and, in the end, 'And he counted them by means of sheep'. But perhaps these sheep were of their own? — Then what is remarkable about it?¹¹

And he strove in the valley.¹² R. Mani said: Because of what happens 'in the valley': When the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Saul: Now go and smite Amalek,¹³ he said: If on account of one person the Torah said: Perform the ceremony of the heifer whose neck is to be broken,¹⁴ how much more [ought consideration to be given] to all these persons! And if human beings sinned, what has the cattle committed; and if the adults have sinned, what have the little ones done?¹⁵ A divine voice came forth and said: Be not righteous overmuch.¹⁶ And when Saul said to Doeg: Turn thou and fall upon the priests,¹⁷ a heavenly voice came forth to say: Be not overmuch wicked.¹⁸

R. Huna said: How little does he whom the Lord supports need to grieve or trouble himself! Saul sinned once and it brought [calamity] upon him, David sinned twice and it did not bring evil upon him — What was the one sin of Saul? The affair with Agag.¹⁹ But there was also the matter with Nob,²⁰ the city of the priests? — [Still] it was because of what happened with Agag that Scripture says: It repenteth Me that I have set up Saul to be king.²¹ What were the two sins of David? — The sin against Uriah²² and that [of counting the people to which] he was enticed.²³ But there was also the matter of Bathsheba?²⁴ — For that he was punished, as it is written, And he shall restore the lamb fourfold:²⁵ the child, Amnon, Tamar and Absalom.²⁶ But for the other sin he was also punished as it is written: So the Lord sent a pestilence upon Israel from the morning even to the time appointed?²⁷ — There his own body was not punished — But in the former case, too, his own body was not punished either?²⁸ Not indeed? He was punished on his own body, for Rab Judah said in the name of Rab: For six months David was smitten with leprosy, the Sanhedrin removed from him, and the Shechinah departed from him, as it is written: Let those that fear Thee return unto me, and they that know Thy testimonies,²⁹ and it is also written: Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation.³⁰ But Rab said that David also listened to evil talk?³¹ — We hold like Samuel [who says] that David did not do so. And even according to Rab, who says that

David listened to calumny, was he not punished for it? For Rab Judah said in the name of Rab. At the time when David said to Mephibosheth: I say: Thou and Ziba divide the land,³² a heavenly voice came forth to say to him: Rehoboam and Jeroboam will divide the Kingdom.

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R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in R. Jonathan's name: Whoever says that David sinned is merely erring, for it is said, And David behaved himself wisely in all his ways: and the Lord was with him.⁹ Is it possible that sin came to his hand, yet the Divine Presence was with him? Then how do I interpret, Wherefore hast thou despised the word of the Lord, to do that which is evil in his sight?¹⁰ He wished to do [evil], but did not. Rab observed: Rabbi, who is descended from David, seeks to defend him, and expounds [the verse] in David's favour. [Thus:] The 'evil' [mentioned] here is unlike every other 'evil' [mentioned] elsewhere in the Torah. For of every other evil [mentioned] in the Torah it is written, 'and he did,' whereas here it is written, 'to do': [this means] that he desired to do, but did not. Thou hast smitten Uriah the Hittite with the sword:¹¹ thou shouldst have had him tried by the Sanhedrin,¹² but didst not. And hast taken his wife to be thy wife: thou hast marriage rights in her.¹³ For R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in R. Jonathan's name: Every one who went out in the wars of the house of David wrote a bill of divorcement for his wife, for it is said, and bring these ten cheeses unto the captain of their thousand, and look how thy brethren fare, and take their pledge ['arubatham].¹⁴ What is meant by 'arubatham? R. Joseph learned: The things which pledge man and woman [to one another].¹⁵ And thou hast slain him with the sword of the children of Ammon:¹¹ just as thou art not [to be] punished for the sword of the Ammonites, so art thou not [to be] punished for [the death of] Uriah the Hittite. What is the reason? He was rebellious against royal authority, saying to him, and my lord Joab, and the servants of my lord, are encamped in the open field [etc].¹⁶

Rab said: When you examine [the life of] David, you find nought but 'save only in the matter of Uriah the Hittite.'¹⁷ Abaye the Elder pointed out a contradiction in Rab[us dicta]: Did Rab say thus? Surely Rab said, David paid heed to slander? The difficulty remains.

[To revert to] the main text: 'Rab said, David paid heed to slander,' for it is written, And the king said unto him, where is he? And Ziba said unto the king, Behold, he is in the house of Machir the son of Ammiel, belo da bar [in Lo-debar].¹⁸ And it is written, Then David sent, and fetched him out of the house of Machir the son of Ammiel, millo dabar [from Lo-debar].¹⁹ Now consider: he [David] saw that he [Ziba] was a liar; then when he slandered him a second time, why did he pay heed thereto? For it is written, And the king said, And where is thy master's son? And Ziba said unto the king, Behold, he abideth at Jerusalem [: for he said, To-day shall the house of Israel restore me the kingdom of my father].²⁰ And how do we know that he accepted it [the slander] from, him? Because it is written, Then

said the king to Ziba, Behold, thine is all that pertaineth unto Mephibosheth. And Ziba said, I do obeisance; let me find favour in thy sight, my lord, O king.²¹

But Samuel maintained: David did not pay heed to slander, [for] he saw self-evident things in him,²² For it is written, And Mephibosheth the son of Saul came down to meet the king; and he had neither dressed his feet, nor trimmed his beard, nor washed his clothes, etc.²³ While it is written, And it came to pass, when he was come to Jerusalem to meet the king, that the king said unto him, Wherefore wentest thou not with me, Mephibosheth? And he answered, My Lord, O king, my servant deceived me: for thy servant said, I will saddle me an ass, that I may ride thereon, and go with the king, because thy servant is lame,

And he hath slandered thy servant unto my lord the king; but my lord the king is as an angel of God: do therefore what is good in thine eyes. For all my father's house were but dead men before my lord the king: yet didst thou set thy servant among them that did eat at thine own table. What right therefore have I yet that I should cry and more unto the king? And the king said unto him, Why speakest thou any more of thy matters? I say, Thou and Ziba divide the land. And Mephibosheth said unto the king, Yea, let him take all, forasmuch as my lord the king is come in peace unto his own house.¹ He said [thus] to him: I prayed,² when wilt thou return in peace? Yet thou treatest me so. Not against thee have I resentment, but against Him who restored thee in peace!³ Hence it is written, And the son of Jonathan was Meribbaal:⁴ was then his name Merib-baal? Surely it was Mephibosheth? But because he raised a quarrel [meribah] with his Master,⁵ a Heavenly Echo went forth and rebuked him, Thou man of strife, [and] the son of a man of strife! Man of strife, as we have stated. Son of a man of strife, for it is written, And Saul came to the city of Amalek, and strove in the valley.⁶ R. Mani said: [That means,] concerning the matter of the valley.⁷

Rab Judah said in Rab's name: When David said to Mephibosheth, 'Thou and Ziba divide the land,' a Heavenly Echo came forth and declared to him, Rehoboam and Jeroboam shall divide the kingdom.⁸ Rab Judah said in Rab's name: Had not David paid heed to slander, the kingdom of the House of David would not have been divided, Israel had not engaged in idolatry,⁹ and we would not have been exiled from our country.¹⁰

R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in R. Jonathan's name: Whoever maintains that Solomon sinned is merely making an error, for it is said, and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father:¹¹ it was [merely] not as the heart of David his father, but neither did he sin. Then how do I interpret, For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart?¹² That is [to be explained] as R. Nathan. For R. Nathan opposed [two verses]: It is written, For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart,' whereas it is [also] written, and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father, [implying that]

it was [merely] not as the heart of David his father, but neither did he sin? This is its meaning: his wives turned away his heart to go after other gods, but he did not go.¹³ But it is written, Then would¹⁴ Solomon build a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab?¹⁵ — That means, he desired to build, but did not.¹⁶ If so, Then Joshua built [yibneh] an altar unto the Lord,¹⁷ [does this too mean,] he desired to build but did not! Hence it [surely means] that he [actually] built; so here too it means that he built? — Rather it¹⁸ is as was taught: R. Jose said, and the high places that were before Jerusalem, which were on the right hand of the mount of corruption, which Solomon the king of Israel had builded for Ashtoreth the abomination of Moab.¹⁹ Now, is it possible that Assa came and did not destroy them, then Jehoshaphat, and he did not destroy them, until Josiah came and destroyed them! But surely Assa and Jehoshaphat destroyed all the idolatrous cults in Palestine? Hence [the explanation is that] the earlier are assimilated to the later: just as the later did not do, yet it was ascribed to them, to their glory, so the earlier ones too did not do, yet it was ascribed to them, to their shame.²⁰ But it is written, And Solomon did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord?²¹ — But because he should have restrained his wives, but did not, the Writ regards him as though he sinned.

Rab Judah said in Samuel's name: Better had it been for that righteous man to be an acolyte to the unmentionable,²² only that it should not be written of him, 'and he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord'.