

King David: The Cost of the King's Private Sins

Rosh Hashanah 5778

Rabbi Barry H. Block

In last Sunday's *Democrat-Gazette*, John Brummett, quoting his fictional "Bubba McCoy," wrote, "Trump's a sorry excuse for a human but a good president." Brummett concludes, "I'm doubting that's possible in the final analysis."ⁱ

Brummett is not the first to consider the public consequences of a national leader's sins.

Most infamous? King David. I'll tell his story as I learned it from Professor Orit Avneri at the Shalom Hartman Institute and Jerusalem this summer, exactly as it's written in the Book of Second Samuel. David sees an attractive woman, bathing near the palace. He inquires and learns that Bathsheba is married. Her husband, Uriah the Hittite, is away, fighting the battles of a king who remains in Jerusalem's comfort. David sends for Bathsheba and commits adultery with her. The Bible doesn't suggest rape, but if adultery isn't bad enough, the power disequilibrium between a king and a subject woman suggests sexual misconduct. Bathsheba becomes pregnant. Eager to shed suspicion that he is the father, David calls Uriah back from the front and invites him to spend some time at home. Uriah is onto the ruse, and he refuses even to enter his own house, let alone consort with his wife. David gets Uriah drunk, hoping that he will let down his guard and sleep with his wife. Still, Uriah declines, insisting on returning to his comrades at the front. David then writes to his general, instructing him: "Place Uriah in the front line where the fighting is fiercest; then fall back so that he may be killed." Uriah isn't the only soldier who loses his life in the misbegotten battle, but David is indifferent. When an envoy relates the battle's outcome, David sends a message back to his general: "'Do not be distressed about the matter. The sword always takes its toll.'" The disloyalty to his own fighting force, even indifference to the deaths of men fighting on his behalf, is appalling. Worse, David prioritizes his own impulses and pleasure over national interest, undermining the people's collective goals, a failure of leadership.ⁱⁱ

The consequences of David's evil endure for centuries, as prophesied by Nathan, who castigates the King, in God's name. The result of adultery will be that God "will make a calamity rise against you from within [David's] own house." As a consequence of disloyalty to the troops, "the sword shall never depart from [David's] House."ⁱⁱⁱ

Nathan's prophecy comes true. David's sons and wives kill one another in a bloody struggle over dynastic succession in David's old age. After the death of King Solomon, the son born to him and Bathsheba, David's grandsons divide the kingdom, which is greatly diminished and ultimately conquered by foreign armies. David's personal sins become national calamity.

While the Bible casts that disaster as divine punishment, we may see the catastrophe as the natural result of David's misdeeds. We are not surprised that David's older sons, born to him and his wife, resent his favoritism toward Solomon, born of the adulterous liaison. Moreover, none of us is surprised that the king's disloyalty to his troops might lead to low morale in the ranks – and, ultimately, military defeat.

The private sins of a national leader do indeed bring severe public consequences.

One could compare King David's tale to still-unfolding stories about President Trump's egregious sexual misconduct and the likely repercussions for our society at large. For now, though, I'm going to leave that to pundits and politicians.

Instead, I am going to ask us to consider the sexual misconduct of another President, much closer to home, and the disastrous consequences that continue to rock our nation. This conversation is much more difficult for me, and even more so for many others here today. But Rosh Hashanah is not supposed to be entirely celebratory and easy. This day is also called *Yom HaZikaron*, The Day of Remembrance – specifically, a day when we are charged to recall our misdeeds, vowing to do better in the future, pointing to our repentance on Yom Kippur.

Twenty years ago, we learned that the married President of the United States had an apparently-consensual sexual liaison with a 22-year old woman working as a White House intern. He lied about it – to his wife, to the nation, and in a court of law. President Clinton's supporters, myself included, however scandalized by his marital infidelity, spent much more energy resisting his impeachment than examining the corrosive impact his behavior might have on our society.

We were wrong when we determined that Clinton's presidential leadership on women's issues was more important and impactful than his personal conduct toward women. Sexual relations between a 45-year-old President and a 22-year-old intern constitute sexual misconduct resulting from an extreme power

disequilibrium. Like David with Bathsheba, the power disequilibrium raises a question of whether Clinton's relations with Lewinsky could truly be consensual. Failing to call out the President's wrongdoing, we not only facilitated the vilification of a young woman, and worse for Clinton's other victims, we conspired with President Clinton to drive the issue of powerful men's sexual misbehavior underground for nearly two decades. Only after Hillary Clinton was defeated in her own presidential election by a man who shamelessly bragged about sexual misconduct, American progressives finally opened our eyes to the widespread degradation of women and girls – and sometimes, boys and men – by powerful men who victimize those under their control. President Clinton's sexual misconduct and our averted attention enabled two decades of widespread sexual abuse. The perpetrators, we now know, are just as likely to support progressive priorities for women's rights in the public sphere as to oppose them. Had we insisted that President Clinton face the consequences of his actions, America might have held Harvey Weinstein, Matt Lauer, Kevin Spacey, Mario Batali, Louis C.K., and their likes accountable far earlier, sparing untold numbers of victims. And we might never have allowed for an atmosphere in which a man who bragged of grotesque sexual conquests could nevertheless be elected President of the United States.

Religious leaders, too, cause serious public damage when they take inappropriate liberties with those who venerate them. We know that most publicly from the Catholic Church, but no religious institution is immune. Perhaps because President Clinton's misbehavior was too close to home, Congregation B'nai Israel did not adopt a Harassment and Misconduct Policy until 2013.

Russ Douthat is a conservative columnist and devoted Catholic. Not long ago, he wrote, "The Catholic Church needs leaders who can purge corruption even among their own theological allies."^{iv} What Douthat says about theological allies goes for political and ideological partners as well. We who did not hold President Clinton to account are vulnerable to a charge of hypocrisy when we seek the ouster on similar grounds of a president whose policies we abhor. And vice versa.

We have reason for hope. When Sen. Al Franken and Rep. John Conyers were credibly accused of sexual misconduct, both were forced out of office by colleagues on their own side of the political aisle.

On this Rosh Hashanah, on this Day of Remembrance, let each of us dig deep into our souls and into our history to acknowledge our own wrongdoing. Let

us acknowledge what we have known since David ruled in Jerusalem some 3000 years ago: A leader's private sins can bring grave consequences to a nation. Many of us have been silent co-conspirators in the past. Others are today. Let us all shed our ideologies when we evaluate the costs of a leader's private sins. Let us hold all the powerful people in our society accountable – not only in politics and religion, but also in industry, media, entertainment, sports, education, and all places of employment. Then, may we, as individuals and as a nation, turn from sin, our virtue enabling us all to thrive.

Amen.

ⁱ John Brummett, "Bubba holds forth," *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, September 2, 2018, p. 5H.

ⁱⁱ II Samuel 11:1-25, as taught by Orit Avneri during her lecture, "Derech Eretz and Biblical Leadership," Rabbinic Torah Seminar, Shalom Hartman Institute, July 4, 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ II Samuel 12:7-12.

^{iv} Russ Douthat, "What Did Pope Francis Know?," *The New York Times*, August 28, 2018, accessed on September 2, 2018 at https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/28/opinion/pope-francis-catholic-church-resign.html?rref=%2Fbyline%2Fross-douthat&action=click&contentCollection=undefined®ion=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=2&pgtype=collection.