

# David Returns to Yerushalayim

## Second Samuel 19: 8b-43

**DIG:** Why did David first choose the tribe of Judah to help him unify the people? What positive result came from David granting amnesty to the rebel army? How did David deal with Shim'i? Why? How and why did David rebuke Abishai? Why did David appoint Amasa to be his commanding general instead of Joab? What complicated situation did David face when Mephibosheth met with him? What was Mephibosheth's goal in the meeting? How did David reward Barzillai for his kindness? How did Barzillai respond? Why are the men of Yisra'el so upset? What was at stake for them?

**REFLECT:** How do you typically deal with conflict or potential conflict? Is the LORD's return of David to power based, at least in part, on David's favoring and forgiving others? Or is David now able to grant general amnesty only because YHVH has first forgiven him? Why do you think so? If King Yeshua were to grant amnesty to you for something as particular as what King David offered Shimei, Mephiboseth, Barzillai or Kimham, what would that amnesty cover in your case? This week, where will you be as forgiving as David? As repentant as Shimei? As generous as Barzillai? As sincere and grateful as Mephibosheth?

**976 BC**

The literary unit here describing the return of King David to Jerusalem, parallels his flight caused by Absalom's rebellion (see Dp - David Flees From Absalom). Since the earlier account included David's instructions to three of his supporters (Ittai, Zadok and Hushai), the present narrative contains meetings with three representatives of important constituencies with which David must come to terms (Shim'i, Mephibosheth and Barzillai). The resulting chiasmic outline focuses on Mephibosheth. These three are bracketed by a prologue and an epilogue, each of which deals with questions of who - Yisra'el or Y'hudah should escort the king on his triumphant return to the City.<sup>451</sup>

The civil war was more than a son challenging a father. Absalom, attractive figure that he was, became a magnet who evoked and mobilized a variety of forces and parties hostile to or weary of David. The elimination of Absalom and the end of the fighting did not cause the hostility to melt easily away. David was left with the problem of how to reclaim the loyalty of those who had opposed him. This section deals with the aftermath of that civil war.<sup>452</sup>

**A. Prologue - Yisra'el or Y'hudah:** These verses report on the confusion and conflict after the civil war. **Meanwhile, the Israelites had fled to their homes. Throughout all the tribes of Yisra'el, all the people were arguing among themselves, saying: King David delivered us from the hand of our enemies; he is the one who rescued us from the hand of the Philistines. But now he has fled the country to escape Absalom; and Absalom, whom we anointed to rule over us, has died in battle. So now why do you fellow Israelites say nothing about bringing the king back to his throne (Second Samuel 19:8b-10)?** The leaders from all twelve tribes should have united in sending a formal invitation to David to return and reign, but party squabbles and tribal friction kept this from happening.

Absalom's revolt had erupted in the heart of Judah - in Hebron. Therefore, David's first act was to consolidate his power and send a message to his old Hebron-based colleagues, **the elders of Judah, the ones who had supported Absalom's coup.** Moreover, Ahithophel, David's turn-coat advisor, was from Y'hudah, as was Amasa, the military commander of Absalom's revolt. Absalom had apparently won significant support within Judah and had every reason to believe that if David won the civil war he would take out his revenge on them. So no word had reached David from Judah; many of them likely feared David would return with a sword rather than a scepter. So David's appeal and reassurance was exactly what was needed.<sup>453</sup> King David sent his message to Zadok and Abiathar, the priests, "Ask the elders of Judah, 'Why should you be the last to bring the king back to this palace, since what is being said throughout Yisra'el has reached the ear of the king at his quarters?'" David could have easily returned to Jerusalem with his military strength, but he wanted to be asked back by his own tribe instead. **You are my relatives, my own flesh and blood. So why would you be the last to bring back the king?**

David not only scolded in order to win their loyalty, he also negotiated. Amazingly, David promoted Amasa, David's nephew and Joab's cousin, to be the new general of his army. **May God deal with me, be it ever so severely, if you are not the commander of my army for life in place of Joab (who had a nasty habit of killing anyone who got in his way). His ego seemed out of control. Joab had disobeyed the king's orders and killed his son. If he did this to the king's son, what might he do to the king himself?** This was a masterstroke of diplomacy. Not only did David punish Joab for killing his son, but he also united the army, won the support of the elders of Judah and offered an olive branch to those who supported Absalom. Amasa won over the hearts of the men of Y'hudah so that they were all of one mind. Then the elders of Y'hudah sent word to the king, "Return, you and all your men." Happy to comply with their request, the king returned from Mahanaim and went as far as the east bank of the Jordan River (2 Samuel 19:11-15a).

**B. Shim'i:** As the other tribes debated and delayed, the men of Y'hudah had come to Gilgal on the eastern bank of the Jordan River to go out and meet the king and bring him across the Jordan. Gilgal meaning *circle*, was less than twenty miles from Tziyon and a key city in Jewish history. It was where Sha'ul was consecrated as king (First Samuel 11:14-15), where Joshua led the Israelites into the Land (Joshua 4:19-20) It was where all the males of the new generation were circumcised (Joshua 5:2), recommitting their dedication to the covenant (see the commentary on **Genesis E1 - God's Covenant of Circumcision with Abraham**). And it was where the Israelites celebrated the Passover (Joshua 5:10). It was only the third Passover the nation had observed. The first was observed in Egypt the night before their deliverance from bondage (see the commentary on **Exodus Bv - The Egyptian Passover**). The second was observed at Mount Sinai just before the people broke camp and moved on toward Canaan (Num 9:1-5).<sup>454</sup> The text doesn't state it, but perhaps David also renewed the covenant at Gilgal; for throughout the rest of the book, we see David very much in charge.

Shim'i son of Gera, the Benjamite from Bahurim, hurried down with the men of Judah to meet the King because he feared David's vengeance (see Dt - **Shim'i Curses David**). With him were a thousand Benjamites, along with Ziba, the steward of Sha'ul's household, and his fifteen sons and twenty servants. He also had reason to be concerned about his future (see Ds - **David and Ziba**). They rushed into the Jordan, where the king was on the eastern bank. They arrived at the ford when David's servants were crossing over to take the king's household belongings over and to whatever he wished. When Shim'i crossed the Jordan, he fell prostrate before the king and said to him, "May my lord not hold me guilty. Do not remember how your servant did wrong on the day my lord the king left Yerushalayim. May the king put it out of his mind. For I, your servant, know that I have sinned. He did not try to make excuses for himself. But today, I have come here as the first from the tribes of Joseph to come down and meet my lord the king (2 Samuel 19:15b-20).

Then Abishai said: Shouldn't Shim'i be put to death for this? He cursed the LORD's anointed. David replied: What does this have to do with you, you sons of Zeruah? Shim'i deserved to die and Abishai was only too willing to oblige. What right do you have to interfere? He was trying to get David to do something that was against his better judgment. Should anyone be put to death in Yisra'el today? No, David would not use this occasion to get back at anyone. Don't I know that today I am king over Isra'el? The joy of that day should not be marred by vengeance and bloodshed. So the king said to Shim'i, "You shall not die," and the king promised him on oath (2 Sam 19:21-23). By pardoning Shim'i, David was offering a general amnesty to all who had opposed him.

**C. Mephiboseth:** Another person who was anxious to set the record straight was **Mephiboseth**. David had made him permanent member of his household (see **Da - David and Mephiboseth**) to honor the commitment that he had made to his father **Y'honatan** (**First Samuel 20:41-42**). **Mephiboseth** knew that **Ziba** had slandered him (see **Dr - David and Ziba**), so he had an opportunity to speak to **David** personally. So he went down to meet the king, presumably at the Jordan River. It would have been difficult for the crippled prince to travel the twenty miles or so from **Tziyon**, but he did it anyway. He had obvious signs of mourning. He had not taken care of his feet or trimmed his mustache or washed his clothes from the day the king left until the day he returned safely, sharing in **David's** exile. But because of what **Ziba** had said earlier, **David** asked **Mephiboseth**, "Why didn't you go with me when I was forced to flee from **Jerusalem**?"

**Mephiboseth** was eloquent and persuasive in his response: **My lord and king**, since I your servant am lame, I said, 'I will have my donkey saddled and will ride on it, so I can go with the king.' But **Ziba** my servant left without me and betrayed me, and he has slandered your servant to my lord the king. Nevertheless, **Mephiboseth** submitted himself to **David's** decision: **My lord the king** is like an angel of **God**; so do whatever you wish. He was very grateful. All my grandfather's descendants deserved nothing but death from my lord the king, but you gave your servant a place among those who eat at your table. So what right do I have to make any more appeals to the king (**Second Samuel 19:24-28**)?

The king was impatient and said to him, "Why say more? He was still not convinced that **Mephiboseth** was telling the truth, but would not investigate the matter any further. So he declared: I order you and **Ziba** to divide the land. As **David's** son **Solomon** would later threaten to divide a living baby in order to discern which of the two mothers was telling the truth (**First Kings 3:24-25**), here, **David** demands the division of the land in order to discern whether **Mephiboseth** or **Ziba** was the liar. And just as the real mother of the living baby offered her child to the liar in order to preserve its life, so also **Mephiboseth** offered the entire estate to **Ziba**, saying: Let him take everything, now that my lord the king has returned home safely (**Second Samuel 19:29-30**).<sup>455</sup> If **David** acted with clemency in **Shim'i's** case, he acted with expediency in **Mephiboseth's** case. Pragmatism rather than justice prevailed.<sup>456</sup> The one who came out of the incident unscathed was the crippled **Mephiboseth**, who raised above the financial considerations and took genuine pleasure in the return of his lord and king safely.<sup>457</sup>

**B. Barzillai:** The third and last of the three representatives to meet David at the eastern side of the Jordan River was Barzillai the Gileadite from Rogelim. The three encounters form a progressive series on the scale of loyalty: first Shim'i, who had heaped insults on David and then pleaded for forgiveness; then Mephibosheth, whose loyalty, though probably genuine, had been called into question by Ziba; and then the unswervingly devoted old man Barzillai.<sup>458</sup> He came to cross the Jordan with the king and to send him on his way from there. The tradition of that day was that a departing guest should be escorted on the first leg of his journey. Now Barzillai was very old, eighty years of age. He had provided for the king during his stay in Mahanaim, for he was a very wealthy man. The king said to Barzillai, "Cross over with me and stay with me in Jerusalem, be a member of my royal court, and I will provide for you" (Second Samuel 19:31-33).

But Barzillai answered the king, "How many more years will I live, that I should go up to Jerusalem with the king? I am now eighty years old. Can I tell the difference between what is enjoyable and what is not? Can your servant taste what he eats and drinks? Can I still hear the voices of male and female singers? Why should your servant be an added burden to my lord the king? Your servant will cross over the Jordan with the king for a short distance, but why should the king reward me in this way? Let your servant return, that I may die in my own town near the tomb of my father and mother (2 Samuel 19:34-37a). That's all Barzillai asked. That is enough.

However, Barzillai was willing to let his son Khimham take his place: Here is your servant Kimham. For David's general strategy of recovery, Khimham is as valuable as Barzillai, because either will embody the same assertion of power and support. Khimham returned to Yerhsuahalyim with David as a sign of a powerful political force firmly allied with David. It was little wonder that at the end of his life, David remembered Barzillai with graciousness and gratitude (1 Kings 2:7).<sup>459</sup> Let him cross over with my lord the king. Do for him whatever you wish. The king said: Khimham shall cross over with me, and I will do for him whatever you wish. And anything you desire from me I will do for you. So all the people crossed the Jordan, and then the king crossed over. The king kissed Barzillai and bid him farewell, and Barzillai returned to his home (2 Samuel 19:37b-39). But David's troubles weren't over yet, for the long-simmering feud between Isra'el and Judah would surface again and almost start another civil war.



**A. Epilogue - Y'hudah or Yisra'el:** David had been promised the throne by YHVH and had received it. It was, however, a fragile crown. The representatives of the tribes were gathered at **Gilgal** to escort the king back to **Yerushalayim**. But instead of rejoicing they fought among themselves. When the king crossed over to **Gilgal**, **Khimham** crossed with him. All the troops of **Y'hudah** and half the troops of **Yisra'el** had taken the king over. Soon all the men of **Yisra'el** were coming to the king and saying to him, "Why did our brothers, the men of **Y'hudah**, steal the king away and bring him and his household across the **Jordan**, together with all his men?" The men of **Isra'el** represented the ten northern tribes, and they were angry with the southern tribe of **Judah**, which had also absorbed the tribe of **Simeon**. Tempers rose when the men of **Isra'el** became angry because they felt left out at the gathering at **Gilgal**. They didn't think that **Judah** had waited for them to arrive on the scene to help take **David** home. **David's** preference for his own tribe caused a division that would lead to a second revolt (see **Ed - Sheba Rebels Against David**). All the men of **Y'hudah** answered the men of **Yisra'el**, "We did this because the king is closely related to us. They felt they had a greater responsibility to care for him. Why are you angry about it? He did not bribe us! Have we eaten any of the king's provisions? Have we taken anything for ourselves" (**Second Samuel 19:40-42**)?

Then the men of **Yisra'el** answered the men of **Y'hudah**, "We have ten shares in the king (because of the ten tribes) and you have only two, as if the king were some kind of security on the stock market. So we have a greater claim on **David** than you have. Why then do you treat us with contempt? Weren't we the first to speak of bringing back our king?" Yes they were. But the men of **Y'hudah** pressed their claims even more forcefully than the men of **Yisra'el** (**Second Samuel 19:43**). The men of **Yisra'el** had the better case, but the men of **Y'hudah** merely shouted them down. Apparently nobody thought of calling on **ADONAI** for His help to remember the importance of **Gilgal** (see **Shim'i** above).

The conflict between **Judah** and **Isra'el** had deep roots, just like the political conflicts that divide many nations today. When King **Sha'ul** assembled his first army, it was divided between **Isra'el** and **Judah** (**First Samuel 11:8**), and this division continued throughout his reign (**First Samuel 15:4, 17:52, 18:16**). After the death of **Sha'ul**, the ten tribes of **Isra'el** followed **Sha'ul's** son **Ish-Bosheth** (see **Cg - War Between the Houses of David and Sha'ul**), while **Judah** followed **David** (**Second Samuel 2:10-11**). **Judah**, of course, was obeying the will of **God**, for **Ha'Shem** had named **David** as the nation's next king (see **Ah - Samuel Anoints David**). This tribal rivalry existed to **David's** day. When **Rehoboam** became king after the death of **Solomon**, his father, the rift widened, and the Kingdom divided into the northern kingdom of **Isra'el** and the southern kingdom of **Judah** (**First Kings 12**).<sup>460</sup>