

David and Y'honatan

First Samuel 20: 1-42

It is sad to say, but from the moment that David killed Goliath, his days of peace in Isra'el were numbered. The reason was the insane jealousy of King Sha'ul, who saw David only as a threat, despite the young man's continual record of humble and faithful service. In the chapters that follow David's victory, we are inching toward his exile, with each chapter presenting a different character study during this time of crisis and trial. In Chapter 18, the key actor is David in his response to Sha'ul's sudden attempts to take his life. Chapter 19 focuses on Sha'ul, whose evil spirit drives him from one failed attempt against David to another. Chapter 20 returns our focus to Y'honatan, Sha'ul's son and David's covenantal friend. Y'honatan finds himself trapped in what many people would consider a terrible vise, with his faith and godliness competing against ambition and personal gain. Y'honatan shows us how a man of God approaches a situation which appears to be governed by anger, fear, and hatred, but in fact is governed by his faith and the bonds of covenant faithfulness.⁶⁹

The rabbis teach that this chapter raises problems that are quite baffling. Y'honatan had been urged by his father to kill David (First Samuel 19:1-2), yet here he seems ignorant of his father's intention (First Samuel 20:2). After his three escapes, as recorded in the previous chapter, why should David have ventured back to Gibeah for the New Moon festival? Still more surprising, why should he have taken it for granted that Sha'ul would expect to see him in his usual place at the king's table? And when Sha'ul realizes David's absence, why was he so forgetful of his murderous attempts on David's life as to think that the reason for David's absence was ritual uncleanness? And then to inquire of Y'honatan why David was not present? One of the best answers to these seemingly perplexing actions is found by understanding David's godly heart and attitude. David could have stayed in Naioth for however long it took Sha'ul to give up or to die. The Ruach HaKodesh protected David in Naioth in a powerful way. Yet David left for a good reason: He wanted to know if Sha'ul's heart had changed, and if there was still a chance to reconcile with him. David also wanted to know if Y'honatan had come to a place of agreement with his father Sha'ul. David's willingness to seek reconciliation, even in a situation of life and death, shows he was a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22).