

DAVID DANCES – MICHAL SCOFFS

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. . . And David danced before the Lord with all his might . . . Michal the daughter of Saul looked out at the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord, and she despised him in her heart . . . And Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David and said, 'How did the King of Israel get him honor today, who uncovered himself today in the eyes of the handmaidens of his servants, as one of the vain fellows who shamelessly uncovers himself' . . . And Michal the daughter of Saul had no child unto the day of her death (II Sam. 6:14, 16, 20, 23).

Four verses: Apparently merely a marginal note, an anecdote; at most only another example of David's complex personality. Yet, as often happens in Scripture, there is an entire story behind scarce information. Indeed, in this case the story is a whole drama with three actors, David, Michal, and the Holy Ark itself. Let us introduce each, one by one, commencing with the Holy Ark.

At the revelation at Sinai, Moses had brought down two tablets bearing the text of the Decalogue. The Lord ordered that an Ark be made of acacia wood overlaid with pure gold, and a cover of pure gold placed on top with two gold cherubim standing upon it. Both tablets had to be placed inside the Ark. The Ark had to be kept inside the Tabernacle, in a separate room, behind a curtain, out of sight of the priests. The only one having access to this room was Moses, and there, when summoned, he would communicate with God (Ex. 25-27).

This was the arrangement during the 40 years in the desert. At the beginning of the takeover of the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua, the Ark remained in the custody of the sacerdotal tribe of Levi. In case of necessity, it was carried along to battle, as described in Joshua 6. After the battles, victories and defeats that marked the takeover of Canaan by the tribes of Israel, narrated in the books of Joshua and Judges, the Ark finally came to rest in the vicinity of Shilo (Josh. 18:1; I Sam. 4:4).

Of all the peoples whom the Israelite tribes had to fight, the strongest and most technologically advanced were the Philistines. In one of the continual confrontations, the Philistines defeated the children of Israel and the Hebrew elders attempted to take refuge with the Ark, but the Philistines seized it and took it away to Ashdod (I Sam. 5:1). However, its presence brought misfortune and disease upon them, so they moved it from Ashdod, to Gat, then from Gat to Ekron. The fortunes of the Philistines did not

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improve, and after seven months they returned the Ark to the children of Israel. It was brought first to Beth Shemesh, and from there to the house of a man named Abinadab in Kiryat Yearim (I Sam. 7:1). There it rested during the reign of Saul.

And now David comes on the stage with his dance. When he became King of Israel, he built up a town on a hill which he had wrenched away from the Jebusites. (The Hebrew root "z^yn" has the meaning of "standing out," and from this comes the hill's name Zion.) This town he transformed into his new capital. He determined to enrich and grace his new capital with the Ark of the Tablets, transporting it from the house of Abinadab in ceremony, style, and joy.

Now, we must remember that the Ark was mysterious and even lethal. Already, on the occasion of the inauguration of the Tabernacle, back in the desert, Nadab and Avihu, sons of Aaron the High Priest, both died because of their error of bringing "strange fire" near to it. During the conquest of Canaan, as we have seen, it may have brought victory to the tribes of Israel, but it caused disaster, death, and destruction among the Philistines who thought to take control of its powers. It was considered the Footstool of the Invisible Eternal Invincible God of the Hebrews, and it was necessary to deal with it with extreme reverential fear.

So, David had a new cart made to carry it. But precisely this procedure caused a tragic accident: One of the beasts stumbled, one of the escort reached out his hand to steady the Ark and he died doing so. So fearful did David become that he did not bring the Ark to his city, but diverted it to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite where it lay for three months. Obed-edom's house prospered and David decided to try again to bring it up to the new capital city. He set aside cart and oxen and returned to the old proven means of transporting it, the way it had been done in the desert, by men carrying it upon their shoulders. Sacrifices were increased to a bullock and a calf at each six steps. King David and thousands with him accompanied the Ark with music and dancing.

What kind of dance did David perform before the Ark that outraged his wife Michal? We do not know, but we can conjecture from the Hebrew word *m'karker* (II Sam. 5:14,16), which carries the meaning of "to turn on itself" – "whirling," in the New Jewish Publication Society translation. It may have been a ritual invocation dance, of a type that some tribes still use today in performing spells or enchantments, in which dancers (such as the dervishes) fall into trance or ecstasy. To this class of dances probably also belong the dance of Saul with the "inspired [*ruah Elohim*] ones" (I Sam.

10:5-6), and of the prophets of the Baal facing the challenge of Elijah on Mt. Carmel (I Kg. 18:28-9).

So David danced. He did not do so in his august, commanding role as King, but as the unique valid representative of the people before the Eternal. Perhaps the physical contortions of his dance may seem to be debasing himself before the Invisible, but only to demonstrate that he recognized Him as the real King.

And, finally, we have Michal, the third figure in this drama – a troubled character torn by inner conflicts. She was King Saul's daughter, and she had fallen in love with David, at a time when her father was already jealous of this young man who was beloved by everybody and who seemed to the King a potential threat to him and his position. He would have liked to eliminate David straightway, but even he did not dare to do so. Instead, he assigned him extremely dangerous missions, hoping that he would be killed by the enemy. To motivate him to undertake a particularly dangerous operation, Saul promised to give him his daughter in marriage if he would bring him the foreskins of 100 Philistines. But the plan backfired: David brought him 200! So Saul had no alternative but to give Michal to David as wife (I Sam. 18:20-27). But Saul's mental aberrations worsened. Several times he himself tried to kill David. On one occasion, Michal saved David's life by helping him to escape from her father (I Sam. 19:11ff).

Later on, because of the ups and downs of the fights against the Philistines, and also because of the persecution that his father-in-law the King inflicted upon him, David remained for long periods away from home, a situation of which Saul took advantage. Actually, he never had wanted to have him as his son-in-law, and gave his (already married!) daughter Michal to a certain Palti (I Sam. 25:44).

In the course of events, David gained more and more adherents, while Saul eventually perished in battle against the Philistines. Abner, the commander of Saul's army, made Saul's son Ishbaal king over the northern tribes while David became king of his own tribe of Judah. Thereafter, Abner went over to David with an offer to make him king over all Israel. David accepted, adding a demand that Abner should return his wife Michal to him, a condition that he did fulfill.

In this way, and on a strictly personal level, Michal must have been torn by conflicts and dilemmas. She held natural affective links with her father who, however, had used her as an object of policy and was the lethal enemy of her beloved husband. On the other hand, David did not welcome her as a person, nor as his beloved wife, but as a sort of title or symbol of nobility, an adornment. When he demanded that Abner return

her to him, it was not for reasons of sentiment. Palti, who was deeply in love with her, had different feelings. Therefore, Michal was facing a serious emotional dilemma in regard to these three men, a dilemma which reached a crisis when she saw David dancing in the way he did.

But apart from the conflict she suffered on this personal level, she also had another one, this one on a tribal plane. Her father Saul belonged to the tribe of Benjamin, the smallest of the tribes of Israel, while David was a scion of the tribe of Judah, traditionally of greater prestige. Although the 12 tribes of Israel formed a kind of union based on relationship and common tradition, they kept distinct identities at a tribal level. This explains why the steps and pirouettes, which for David were part of a very serious ceremony, were in Michal's eyes ridiculous, to such an extent her anger overcame her and she expressed it in a loud voice.

How did the drama of David, Michal, and the dance end?

First of all, the restitution of Michal legitimized David as the king and confirmed him as the legal successor of Saul, who had been anointed by the Prophet Samuel on behalf of the Lord. On the other hand, Michal's complaint, the cause of her sterility according to the Bible's laconic comment, extinguished any hope of an heir with an affinity to Saul and the tribe of Benjamin. It established David's Judean dynasty and smoothed the way for Solomon as his successor.