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## A YIDDISH OPERA FROM WARSAW 1924

### Henoch Kon: *DOVID UN BAS SHEVA*

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*Male facere qui vult numquam non causam invenit.*  
(Those who mean to do ill never fail to find a reason.)  
— Publilius Syrus

*To'a'vat m'lakhim asot resha ki vitz'daka yikon ki'se.*  
(Wicked deeds are an abomination to kings,  
for the throne is established firmly by righteousness.)  
— PROVERBS 16:12

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Henoch Kon's opera *Dovid un Bas Sheva* was, insofar as we can know, the third Yiddish opera ever written, and one of only five as of 2024. It was composed in Warsaw and premiered there in 1924.

The life trajectory of Henoch Kon (1890–1972) has about it a kind of strange sadness, coupled in retrospect with an impenetrable mystique. As a composer of Yiddish theatrical scores and as an active figure among Yiddish literary circles, he was a highly visible celebrity in interwar Poland. But his limelight began its fade to near oblivion upon his timely exit from Poland. Despite the trauma of displacement—and even the murder of entire families by the Germans and their collaborators—many Jewish refugee composers, along with other artists and intellectuals who escaped the Third Reich and its occupied (or soon to be occupied) lands, managed to reestablish themselves in America. Kon, however, although still prolific for a while after immigration, even if on a less sophisticated level, was never able to reconstruct the fruitful career and recognition he had enjoyed in Warsaw and Łódź; and his years in New York followed a mostly downward spiral. By the time of his death, apparently impoverished and dispirited, he was recognizable by name only to a handful of Yiddishists.<sup>1</sup>

In interwar Poland, Kon wrote dozens of incidental scores for successful Yiddish plays as well as for two marionette theaters, in addition to many cabaret numbers—all in all about forty such pieces. He also wrote music for Yiddish films that were produced and shot in Poland in the 1930s, the most famous of which was *The Dybbuk* (1937), for which, however, he used the name Henry Kon. But insofar as we know (and, as of the third decade of the twenty-first century, there is still much research needed regarding other scores that may be found), his one serious large-scale classical music venture was his Yiddish opera, *Dovid un Bas Sheva* (David and Bathsheba)—to a libretto by the acclaimed poet, journalist, and theatre director Moshe Broderson and based on the troublesome biblical account in II Samuel.<sup>2</sup>

Despite what has been asserted erroneously in various sources, *Dovid un Bas Sheva* was not the first Yiddish opera, but most likely the third. It was preceded by Samuel Alman's *King Ahaz* (1911–12) in London—the first known grand

opera in Yiddish—and Moses Milner’s *Di himlen brenen* (premiered in Russia in 1923). But to our knowledge as of this writing, *Dovid un Bas Sheva* was the first Yiddish opera written and premiered in Poland, and followed by only two Yiddish operas in the twentieth century—both composed in America.

The biblical story of David and Bathsheba appears in chapters 11 and 12 of II Samuel. Israel is at war with the Ammonites, open-armed hostilities having resumed after a hiatus (in some views akin to a “spring offensive” following the rainy season). King David remains in his palace compound in Jerusalem, from where he is able to give orders and direct his officers. From the roof of the palace he notices (inadvertently, we are to assume) an extraordinarily beautiful woman bathing atop one of the surrounding abodes across the court and below the palace heights—probably nude, although not specifically stated. He is instantly smitten. Upon enquiring, he learns that she is Bathsheba, the wife of one of his elite soldiers: Uriah the Hittite.

Although some interpretations have pointed to the Hittite tag as a sign that Uriah may have been a foreign mercenary, traditional commentary—observing that his Hebrew name signifies “*Adonai* [the exclusive God] is light”—generally maintains that either he or his father adopted the religion and religious commitments of the Israelites. Any suggestion that his marriage to Bathsheba was less than Judaically valid according to the Israelites’ prescriptions of the time—thereby minimizing if not negating mutual adultery in the account from Judaic perspectives—is unfounded.

David sends for Bathsheba. She is escorted to him, and they make love. Nothing in the biblical narrative suggests her resistance, unwillingness, or even lack of enthusiasm. Resorting to modern or postmodern devices of literary criticism, some have seen in Bathsheba’s subsequent, ongoing consensual liaison with King David a calculated opportunistic motivation, even an agenda. But that reading into the story is far outside the mainstream of biblical exegeses.

Whether or not it may be relevant, many commentaries point out that in antiquity it was apparently a widespread desiderata, if not a general unwritten rule, that during wartime hostilities soldiers should refrain not only from sexual activity, but even from any contact with women—presumably even their wives during leaves from the battlefield. But we have no way of knowing from the biblical text whether, to what extent or for how long, Uriah might have been observing that convention. Assuming that Bathsheba had been faithful to him until meeting King David, we cannot know how long it had been since she had had any sexual satisfaction.

What *is* stated unambiguously in the text is that her bathing involved the monthly ritual immersion to conclude the required abstinence during her menstrual cycle (“She had just purified herself after her period . . .” II Samuel 11:4). So she would have had no sexual activity for at least the past several days or thereabouts. (The time period of twelve days is a postbiblical rabbinic extension.)

When Bathsheba then becomes pregnant, she comes in person to tell David (her only spoken words in the entire biblical account). It seems that David’s initial, chief, and most immediate concern—not necessarily precluding what we may assume is his undiminished infatuation—is to prevent Uriah from learning of his role. Perhaps he is also concerned about those within the court who may have become suspicious about Bathsheba’s comings and goings. He is thus at pains quickly to find a way to deceive Uriah, who will soon enough become aware of his wife’s condition, into believing that he—not David nor anyone else—is the biological father-to-be. Of course Uriah will know that Bathsheba cannot possibly have conceived *his* child without their having had sexual relations after her most recent menstrual cycle and her concluding ritual immersion. And they had continued to remain apart from each other. David’s best hope, therefore, is to try to induce Uriah to engage in sex with Bathsheba as soon as possible, so that her pregnancy will appear to be a consequence.

Time is of the essence for David, and he devises an ultimately unsuccessful scheme to accomplish the deception by offering Uriah strong drink to the point of inebriation (apparently unaware of the likely effect of too much to drink on a man’s ability to carry through). He summons Uriah on a pretext of learning how the war is going on the battlefield, makes sure that he is plied with drink, and then tries to persuade him to go home to his wife and “lie with her”—a

special leave Uriah is supposedly granted for valiance on the battlefield. But in his drunken stupor, whether out of conformity with the convention of refraining from contact with women (even one's wife) as a soldier in action, or, as some creative commentators have taken the liberty to surmise (albeit with little foundation), because Uriah had heard rumors of Bathsheba's conspicuous visits to the king, he refuses adamantly.

If Uriah could be put out of the way permanently, no one would know David and Bathsheba's secret for a fact. And David sees no other recourse. He issues written instructions ordering Joab, his commanding officer, to place Uriah in the front line of combat. He will almost certainly be killed in the initial advance of the enemy. And that is precisely what happens.

Compounding the treachery, although apparently not intended by David, Joab takes it upon himself to cover for the king by placing a contingent of other brave troops at the front line so that it will not appear that Uriah was singled out for likely battlefield death. Indeed, in the event, Uriah's death appears to have been merely one of many casualties of what can be viewed at most as a strategic military blunder. And Joab makes sure that the reports to David from the field simply include Uriah incidentally as "also" one of the fallen.<sup>3</sup> Thus, when word of the deadly strategic disaster becomes known, no one apart from Joab will suspect that the foolish and unnecessary troop shuffle had anything to do with Uriah specifically. But David knows that he is responsible not only for Uriah's death but also, albeit indirectly and unintentionally, for the pointless death of many other soldiers. His crime is now magnified.<sup>4</sup>

Joab prepares his messenger for David's predictable anger over the unauthorized frontline tactic that went awry. But David, realizing that Joab had acted for his benefit, consoles him via the messenger, reassuring him with an observation about the uncertainties of war—reminding him that, in effect, these things happen in battle ("the sword devours sometimes one way and sometimes another"). He urges Joab to put the incident behind him and fight on to victory with increased resolve and fierceness.

Bathsheba, learning of her husband's death, laments appropriately, as would be expected of her, even as she must feel relieved that her predicament is behind her. She and David are now free to marry. And indeed, following her mourning period, David sends for her. They are wed, and in due time she gives birth to a son. But the chapter closes with David's openly stated recognition that he has aroused God's ire.

Nathan the Prophet comes to David ("sent by God") to rebuke him by means of a parable, leaving it up to David to recognize himself in it. A rich man and a poor man live in the same town. The rich man has an abundance of sheep and cattle, whereas the poor man has but a single little ewe lamb that has been a family pet. When a traveler passes through town, he approaches the rich man in expectation of hospitality. But instead of taking and offering graciously one of his many animals for slaughter and then preparation of a meal for the traveler as his guest, the rich man—thinking it would be a pity to waste one of his own—seizes the poor man's ewe instead. When David expresses automatic outrage, even exclaiming that the rich man deserves death, Nathan points an accusatory finger at him and proclaims, "You are that man!"

For all the evil David has committed, despite God's generosity beginning with his appointment as king, Nathan now prophesizes that "the sword will never depart from your house." And he predicts that the son born to Bathsheba will not live. From that moment on, God will cast misfortune after misfortune upon David from throughout his house.

Indeed, David and Bathsheba's baby becomes gravely ill. Despite David's frantic supplications for its recovery, the baby dies. Eventually, Bathsheba gives birth to a second son, who is given the name Solomon—the future king.

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Archaeologists and historians of the modern and postmodern eras have argued amongst themselves about what reality or truth, if any, there may be to the story of King David as it has been told from biblical perspectives for more than

two millennia. In the biblical account, the land of Canaan is the final, achieved destination of the Israelites in their exodus from Egypt. Eventually, from about the year 1000 BCE, according to various and differing archaeological findings and viewpoints—some of which lean toward the time frame of the ninth century BCE—David established there a grand, splendid kingdom for his contemporaneous Israelites. In the biblical version, he and his son Solomon ruled over a united monarchy that included four defeated kingdoms: from north to the Euphrates River and southward to the Negev Desert—with Jerusalem, founded by David, as the capital.<sup>5</sup>

Enter revisionist archaeologists and historians, whose convictions naturally go against the grain of the biblical descriptions in one way or another or to one degree or another. Israel Finkelstein, for example, an eminent but radically controversial Israeli archaeologist, has dismissed outright not only the entirety of the biblical King David story, but the very identity of the contemporaneous Israelites—whom he has claimed were not descended from the Israelites of the Exodus from Egypt (which he also questions). Instead, he has maintained, the populace of the kingdoms of David and Solomon consisted of nomadic Bedouins who settled there on and off. In that construction, David was simply a small-time Bedouin sheikh.

In Finkelstein's understanding of the traditional story, in Judaism David represents "territorial sovereignty, the legend of the empire." But in his understanding of Christian theology, David's chief importance lies in relation to his being an ancestor of Jesus of Nazareth, and thus the birth of Christianity; for Islam, in Finkelstein's view, David is a righteous prophet who preceded Muhammed. But neither of these perceptions necessarily excludes acknowledgment of the other two from the standpoint of their religious perspectives and contexts.

Finkelstein revised the dating of the King David story to the ninth century BCE and attributed this to the discovery of ruins of splendor that were supposedly part of the Omride kingdom of Northern Israel. Although Omri is a marginal king in the Bible, Finkelstein maintained that the archaeological evidence points to his kingdom as a major regional power, of which the House of David was basically a vassal state.

Finkelstein's extreme views on how to reconcile the Bible with history in this case are not without conflicting theories and detractors. (At some point, the *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* began rejecting his papers.) While Nadav Na'aman, for example, a colleague of Finkelstein's and a noted historian, described the King David story as "extraordinary fiction," he also proposed that it contains morsels of truth that have been perpetuated by the acceptance of the Bible in religious circles, by traditional Judaic commentaries, and by oral tradition in general. And indeed, in 1993, a fragment from the ninth century BCE was discovered with an Aramaic inscription referring to the "House of David." To no one's surprise, Finkelstein dismissed it as a forgery.

Meanwhile, Amihai Mazar, a well-known professor of archaeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, wrote that Finkelstein's conclusions were "premature and unacceptable." And Amnon Ben-Tor, also at the Hebrew University, saw Finkelstein's approach as utilizing a "double standard by referring to the Bible on the one hand" and, on the other, conveniently casting opprobrium on belief in its role in history.

About twenty years after a major international stir followed archaeologically based assertions in Israel that there is no evidence for the Bible—making headline news in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*—the Israeli archaeologist Erez ben-Yosef published a rebuttal, disputing that "conclusion" as too simplistically all-embracing. He maintained essentially that some ancient societies may simply be undetectable by archaeology. His assessment of King David lay somewhere between Finkelstein's radical, perhaps exaggerated Bedouin sheikh theory and belief in David and Solomon's glorious, opulent kingdom with its grand structures. So goes the continuing internal debate about King David, with many other theories.<sup>6</sup>

The important fruits of archaeological and historical research notwithstanding, the biblically based convictions or assumptions need not be discarded ipso facto, as the two mindsets are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The traditional viewpoints can be equally important for the sake of continuity in Western society, providing both significant foundations for the Judeo-Christian heritage and moral as well as ethical teachings.

Does any of this matter with regard to Kon's opera? One is tempted to say no. Except that it does, in terms of our appreciation of the opera as part biblical and part new poetic fiction. For the complexity of *Dovid un Bas Sheva* lies in its fusion of the biblical account with profound poetic imagination, brought to life with Kon's music.

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*Dovid un Bas Sheva* had its premiere at Warsaw's Kaminsky Theater in 1924. We know of no subsequent performances there or anywhere else until its revival in 2019, following its major reconstruction and new orchestration. At the premiere it was performed with piano, played by Kon—who also sang the bass role of King David as he sat at the piano. The manuscript score eventually made its way to America, presumably brought by Kon when he resettled in New York. At some point it was acquired by Chananya Goldman, of Antique Judaica Books and Manuscripts, who later put it up for auction, and it was purchased at that auction by Yale University for its Judaica collection at the Gilmore Music Library. Sixteen pages are missing from that manuscript, including some of the essential dramatic elements. But in his reconstruction, Joshua Horowitz—a highly accomplished Berkeley, California-based composer and instrumentalist who is known for his involvement in the secular musics of eastern European Jewry—created six new sections.

In 2017, Professor Diana Matut, a keen, dedicated German scholar of Jewishly related music, was pursuing research in New York at—among other libraries and institutions—the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. There, after finding Kon papers and music in its archives, she developed a particular interest in his life and work. When she perused his manuscript score of *Dovid un Bas Sheva* at Yale, she decided that the opera deserved a revival, which she would be able to organize in Germany in its original Yiddish. A major reconstruction was required, including not only composing and wording of the sixteen missing pages, but also a complete orchestration of the entire opera de novo, addressing other gaps, redoing the text underlay in Roman characters, and much other work.

Professor Matut prevailed upon Joshua Horowitz to undertake the task of reconstructing, restoring, orchestrating, and preparing a new score for revival. In turn, Horowitz engaged Michael Wex—an expert in Yiddish who had to his credit a major reconstruction of a Yiddish musical/opera for a New York performance—to reconstruct the text. This meant creating a text for the missing pages, to which Horowitz could compose the music and fashion the six new sections—interlacing the text into Broderson's libretto as seamlessly as possible. Wex's work also involved redoing the text underlay of the score syllabically, as well as addressing various flaws and uncertainties in the existing text underlay—and then creating English and German translations of the entire restored libretto for inclusion in program notes, website postings, and perhaps accompanying apparatus for a future recording.

When Horowitz received a copy of the manuscript score from Professor Matut, he was initially hesitant to commit to the project. But he soon realized the importance of the opportunity and threw himself into the task. "My initial reaction was a mixture of dread and joy," he has written. "Dread in that now I would have to compose a large section of the opera to make it work stylistically and proportionally, and joy because the missing sections could be as dramatic as I wanted them to be." He was particularly intrigued by the realization that the missing pages had included the emotional high point of the story—where the climax should be—leading up to the death of David and Bathsheba's first child. Also missing—viz., where the lost sections would have begun—is the scene in which Nosn (Nathan the Prophet) admonishes David for his horrible transgressions.

No restrictions were placed on Horowitz regarding style and content, and in fact Professor Matut encouraged him to do whatever he felt was necessary to make the finished product a "Kon-Horowitz" production. As they proceeded, Horowitz and Wex were confronted with a multitude of choices.

Horowitz has explained that the opera encompasses four "broad musical styles"—neobaroque, neoromantic, exotic primitivism, and the popular style of Yiddish musical theatre. But overall, a conventional approach prevails—already even outdated by the classical music and literary standards of 1924 in many respects. There is little if any influence, as

Horowitz has pointed out, of the “Young Poland” school of composers such as Ludomir Różycki, Grzegorz Fitelberg, Mieczysław Karłowicz, Karol Szymanowski, or Apolinary Szeluto, even though Kon must have been familiar with them and their music.

Kon’s piano-vocal manuscript score is vague in many respects, and it contains only a few notes regarding instrumentation. Thus Horowitz was left to his own devices in his orchestration. And although the opera is through-composed, he titled all the movements in the reconstructed score. Apart from the missing pages and his newly created six sections, he tried to avoid adding bars. But he did take a few liberties that he thought necessary and appropriate. For example, following many sections, Kon inserted concerted tremolos on a single stagnant harmony, without any attractive melodic line or ritornello. Thinking that Kon may have used those tremolos to allow time for scene changes while at the same time he was conducting, Horowitz decided to introduce a few melodic elements and gestures—for example, a woodwind cascade against a figuration in the strings. He also added a few things to the overture that he calls “sweeps.” For needed transitions and choral passages, he inserted a few bars into one of the songs Bathsheba sings, and he added a small motet to begin the portion of his reconstruction.

Meanwhile, Wex’s initial reaction to the text in the extant parts of the manuscript was, “It’s not Broderson’s best work,” which may be true. He and Horowitz found it to be a clumsy hybrid of narrative storytelling *about* David’s transgressions, which Horowitz saw as “breaking the first rule of theatre: *‘show, don’t tell.’*” Instead of beginning with Nosn (Nathan the Prophet) and the *sh’li’akh* (messenger) relating David’s crimes and then his difficulty in sleeping, Horowitz would have preferred the drama to be from Bas Sheva’s perspective, providing inner and outer conflict. Of course David and Bas Sheva do interact, but not until midway through the opera.

Most bothered by Bas Sheva’s first lullaby, which David asks her to sing to help him sleep, Horowitz characterized it as the most trite song or aria of the opera—à la popular Yiddish musical theatre. But Professor Matut suggested that it might contribute to a notion of David as a “child king” who could be comforted by Bas Sheva’s singing. Eventually, Horowitz came to consider the possibility of more than one level to the drama.

In setting musically Wex’s new texts, Horowitz decided to have certain words spoken rather than sung—for example, Nosn’s pronouncement spoken against an orchestral background, for which Horowitz chose to use the melody of one of Kon’s popular Yiddish songs, “*Yosl ber.*”

Kon’s choral parts were composed simply and homophonically. But Horowitz went further to fashion six different choral segments, which he interspersed throughout the reconstructed score.

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## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

BAS SHEVA.....	Soprano
NOSN (Nathan) THE PROPHET.....	Tenor
SH’LI’AKH (Messenger) .....	Tenor
KING DAVID (Dovid) .....	Bass
SATB Chorus	

### ORCHESTRA (in Horowitz’s orchestration):

2 flutes (both double on piccolo); oboe;  
clarinet in B-flat; English horn; bassoon;  
celeste (doubling on piano);

percussion (2 timpani, tenor drum, claves,  
gong, guiro, triangle); strings;  
“palm-size” rocks for movement 38:  
2 soprano, 2 alto, 2 tenor, 2 bass.

## THE ACTION

(in the Horowitz Reconstruction)

### ACT I

Unlike the biblical account, the opera begins by reversing events as a type of quasi flashback, with Nosn the Prophet having arrived at the palace to proclaim his rebuke and to predict the dire consequences for David and his House. Before David arrives on the scene, Nosn begins relating what David has done, so when the curtain rises on the first act, David has already had Uriah killed and wed Bas Sheva, who has given birth to their son who will soon die. In addition, David is internally tortured all the more so by the death of the other soldiers at the front, even though that was not his intention. But he knows he is responsible, even though Joab took it upon himself to cover for the king.

Following the overture, with Horowitz’s orchestral elaborations, the curtain rises to find the chorus singing what will in effect be its mantra of “blue, deep royal nights.” In this iteration, it then sings “fate weaves his ugly cloth.” David’s plight is hopeless, underscored by the chorus: “There is no rest for the king . . . he does not sleep a wink . . . a star falls and becomes desecrated . . . sin falls upon the heart.”

Nosn insists that his admonishment should have more impact than the punishment itself. The envoy enters to confirm that the king can’t sleep. “God’s wrath has gushed over the king’s shiny crown,” Nosn responds. “There will be payback for the sin.” And as Nosn proceeds to relate the chronology of David’s crime, the envoy reveals that he already knows much of this—even though, as merely an envoy, he shouldn’t. But he urges Nosn to go easy on the king with his scolding.

When David arrives, he acknowledges that his bad conscience prevents him from sleeping and that the “burden of the sin of stolen love weighs heavily” on him. He finds it difficult to recite the morning liturgy, which calls for joyful praise of God and singing. At first he doesn’t realize that it is Nosn who is speaking to him at midnight; but Nosn soon reveals himself as God’s servant.

While expressing hope for God’s merciful forgiveness, David recounts how he first noticed Bas Sheva, and he admits that he sent for her even after he was told that she was Uriah’s wife.

The Yiddish here for what David is admitting is “*Ikh hob ahin geshikt sh’likhem un gelozt zi nemen*,” which means “So I sent envoys [messengers] to take her [to me].” This is, however, ambiguous, perhaps even deliberately so, and open to more than one interpretation. Matut translated it as “had her snatched away,” which fits with an assumption that David actually raped Bas Sheva at that first meeting. The Yiddish could mean “snatched away” or “seized,” but it can also mean simply “take”—in the sense of bringing or escorting Bas Sheva to David, with her agreeing to the invitation. He was, after all, the king, and Bas Sheva would have no reason to decline or resist, even without knowing why he wanted to meet her. And from contemporaneous sociocultural perspectives, a woman probably could not have ventured out alone, unescorted. Moreover, it is not clear that “messengers” would have engaged in physical force.

In the biblical account summarized here, there is nothing to indicate that Bas Sheva didn’t welcome the king’s invitation or that she did not come freely, of her own will. Similarly, her sexual, if not also genuinely romantic liaison with David appears entirely consensual and mutually enjoyed. After the initial encounter, she continued in subsequent days to come and go to be with David and continue their relationship. And one of the visits resulted in her pregnancy.

We must keep in mind, however, that Broderson's libretto was intended neither as an historical documentary nor a biblical reenactment, but rather as his own, original literary fiction *based* on the biblical story. And it is filled with mystery of its own. Still, there is nothing in his libretto to suggest either "seizure" or rape of Bas Sheva.

Nosn continues the story of Bas Sheva's pregnancy, David's unsuccessful scheme to try to persuade Uriah to have sex with her immediately or as soon as possible to cover for her impregnation by David, and then David's order to Joab to place Uriah in the front line of battle. David continues to admit to everything.

Bas Sheva enters (or David imagines this?) to report that she has dreamt about "her" Uriah having been put in the front line.

"Must he obliterate our sin with his blood?" she asks. At first David replies that it must have been a bad dream, but then he asks her to sing to him the lullaby she had sung by the cradle, which he thinks might help him sleep and give him some peace of mind. She obliges, with Broderson's poetic lyrics—about little white birds flying and knocking at windowpanes to ask the king to "come to wonderland," about golden flames and little golden lambs who leap in joy while asking the same of the king, and about children "of the sun" hurrying toward the sun as God commands them to do. The lyrics of the lullaby end by urging the king to comfort himself "with victories."

As the curtain descends on the first act, David sings that he hasn't wept—that "with tears you can only shatter stars." Bas Sheva, too, sings that she hasn't wept since their child was born: "I no longer feel in my heart the sin." Together David and Bas Sheva sing that the sin is more powerful than they are, and more powerful than God's will.

## ACT II

"A crown of thorns is being braided," sings the chorus as the curtain rises, "in blue, deep royal nights a north wind arrives." The messenger comes with news, but he suddenly forgets what it is. At David's urging him to remember, he reports that the child was crying alone in his cradle. David tells Bas Sheva to go—which she does, but at the same time the chorus is singing its hails to the king and his victories: "People and peoples recognize King David lives and endures." The connection between those words of the chorus and the "news" that the baby is crying is strange, and it could be interpreted in various ways.

Nosn begins to relate the parable—slightly differently from the biblical wording—urging David to listen. "You have brought the judgment upon yourself," Nosn declares, "and the God of Israel says: 'You killed Uriah . . . you have taken his wife as your wife; therefore will the sword never depart from your house!'" And again the chorus repeats its hails to King David.<sup>7</sup>

Beginning with Wex's words for the missing pages, Nosn repeats that God is raising a calamity on David and his House—that David's hidden deed(s) will soon be revealed and he will be "paid back"; God will deliver his wives "unto the hands of another, who will lie with them in front of the people, your good name will be dishonored." And, most poignantly, "The child born to you will not survive for long—you will live out the whole of your lifespan; his [the child's] lifespan is the size of a poppy seed." Yet again, Horowitz has the chorus sing its hails to the victories of the king, who "lives and endures"—which makes no sense taken at face value. One would expect an expression from David of shock combined with grief, or at least, in the choral comments upon the announced certainty of the child's imminent death, a sudden change of mood to an aura of sadness. Horowitz has explained, however, that his choral setting at this point doesn't have what he calls the "same victorious harmonic treatment, but is, rather, treated as a modal motet." He has speculated that the meaning of the choral response may be that "the greatest punishment levied upon David would be to outlive his firstborn." Nonetheless, the choral response remains both ironic and perhaps in some ways sarcastic.

David can get no rest. His head, he says, is spinning. He sees that Uriah has come—obviously a ghost. At first David protests to Uriah that he was not responsible for his death, that he had been killed in battle as a result of his



commanding officer's orders, viz., to move to the front line. But David soon changes his tune, confessing that that was upon *his* orders to Joab, with the absurd justification that arranging to have Uriah killed was done “out of pity”—as a favor, so that Uriah wouldn't come home to “shame and derision, wearing the shameful horns with which your wife crowned you.”

Briefly trying another tactic out of desperation in his hallucinatory state, David tries to make Uriah (Uriah's ghost) believe (“remember”) that he had given Bas Sheva a *get b'itnai* (conditional divorce), so that she “no longer belonged to you”—and thus there could have been no adultery involved. Of course this has no basis in either the libretto or the biblical account, but it isn't clear whether just for a moment Uriah (Uriah's ghost) believes it, although the conditions upon which a *get b'itnai* rest didn't apply in this case anyway—nor could they have applied. Knowing full well that Uriah had done no such thing (i.e., give or even attempt to give Bas Sheva a *get b'itnai*, let alone obtain her acceptance), David quickly drops that absurd defense and points out instead that the necessity for maneuvering Uriah's death via the orders to Joab was his own—Uriah's—fault. Had he obeyed David's urging him to go home to his wife (i.e., and “lie with her”) straightaway, her pregnancy would have appeared as the result of Uriah's impregnation, and David would have had no need to arrange to put Uriah out of the way. David is blaming the victim for leaving him no choice. “I wouldn't have told you to do so (go home immediately to Bas Sheva),” David claims, “if you hadn't still been her husband.” Viz., had there actually been a divorce, or David had assumed as much.

A *get b'itnai* is a provisional decree of divorce given in advance to a wife and accepted by her, which becomes valid only under its stated conditions—often in connection with the husband about to put himself in harm's way, from which he might not return but where there would be no proof of his death. Historically, this provision has applied in particular to a husband going off to war, in the event he should not return but be listed as “missing in action” or “lost at sea” or be captured and never released, and so on, with no one to testify to his actual death. In such cases, the *get b'itnai* would take effect so that the wife, as a bona fide divorcée, could remarry. Without that instrument, she could not be considered a widow. Not only could she not remarry, but any sexual encounters would be considered adulterous—in which case any resulting children of hers would be *mamzerim*—children of a forbidden union.<sup>8</sup>

As David's hallucinatory vision of Uriah is about to evaporate, David pleads for his forgiveness from beyond the grave—which would be Judaically meaningless. But the vision of Uriah disappears. There follows a duo, with Bas Sheva singing a lullaby to the baby and David singing a different melody with different lyrics in counterpoint. Having just completed his delusional encounter with Uriah, David sings from the foreground, upstage, while Bas Sheva sings from another part of the stage—as if the two are in separate rooms.

For the lullaby, Horowitz combined two well-known Yiddish cradle song melodies as the basis for development in an AB structure, while David sings contrapuntally about how he has wasted the years of God's gift of a lifespan on evil deeds that “cannot be expunged.” At the same time, he pleads with God to allow him to make amends: “Strike me, torment me, blind me, but spare Bas Sheva's child.”

One of the cradle song melodies Horowitz employed for Bas Sheva's lullaby at this point is known as “*Shlof mayn kind, ikh vel dikh vign*” (Sleep, my child, I will rock you to sleep), with a paraphrase of the traditional lyrics. The other one is “*Untern kinds vigele*” (Under the/a child's little cradle), which was known at one time by many text variants, such as “*Unter soreles vigele*” (Under Sara's little cradle) and “*Unter yankeles vigele*,” among many other similar incipits. Some of these variants appeared in print in the landmark 1901 volume of Yiddish folksong texts compiled and edited by Pesakh Marek and Saul Ginzburg and published in Russia. Others were discovered during the famous watershed Jewish Ethnographic Expedition (1911/12–1914), also known as the An-Ski Expedition, which was conducted throughout parts of the Pale of Settlement of the Tsarist Empire. Horowitz set the combination of the two melodic sources with woodwind accompaniment, using a simple triple meter juxtaposed against the duple-metered melodies, and with two piccolos a minor second apart. Those dissonances were intended to signify the imminence of something terrible.

For the choral response here, Wex created a text in which God, as the “compassionate Father,” is asked to draw His servant to His will so that he may bow before His majesty: “Majestic, beautiful radiance of the universe, my soul pines, it is sick for Your love. Please, Oh God, heal her now.”

For the choral response here, Horowitz used a now fairly obscure thirteenth-century Moroccan-Algerian tune version of a well-known Hebrew liturgical poem, “*Y’did nefesh*,” which speaks of being “sick with love for God.” He said that he felt free to set the melody with lush, quasi-impressionistic harmonies, explaining that although the text and the harmonization “deceptively lull the audience into believing that David’s plea may be rewarded by a reprieve,” the intention was to be a sort of “ironic henchman’s last rite offered to the condemned.”<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, in the other cradle song to which Horowitz turned for Bas Sheva’s lullaby, “*Untern kinds vigele*,” anyone attuned to Yiddish folksong will recognize immediately the image of the goat under a baby’s cradle. Horowitz brought this to the fore in his reprise of the lullaby after the choral commentary set to the “*Y’did nefesh*” tune. Still in a separate room, Bas Sheva continues her lullaby, singing optimistically and ironically to a child about to die.

The image of a goat under a baby’s cradle has a long, complicated history. In many constructions the goat has been interpreted as representing the father, who, on one level, is necessarily away earning a livelihood for his family by trading in the confection of raisins with almonds. On another, metaphorical plane, he has been understood as seeking to earn not only a “sweet future” for his child but also a better world in terms of national or spiritual redemption—or both—symbolized by that confection. In many variants, the mother goes on to express the prototypical hope that the baby will grow up to be Judaically learned and pious, even a scholar of renown, reflecting an emphasis on traditional Judaic values.

The goat image may have been derived from earlier Jewish sources, predating Yiddish folklore, in which the kid symbolizes the Jewish people in its determination for, and faith in, redemption and survival. In the cumulative Aramaic-Hebrew Passover seder song “*Had gadya*” (a single or only kid), for example, the story of the goat has been viewed as an allegory for divine retribution for the persecutions of the Jewish people, although some literary critics insist that the song began as children’s verse based on a once-popular French ballad. The refrain of “*Had gadya*” has also been interpreted as God having taken the people Israel as “His own” through the Decalogue of the Sinaitic Covenant. In any case, the song was appended to the Passover Haggada (fixed narrative) by the late sixteenth century.

The goat-and-raisins-with-almonds motif found new expression in the famous Yiddish theatrical song “*Rozhenkes mit mandlen*” (Raisins with Almonds), which Avraham Goldfaden apparently stitched together from various folk sources for his operetta *Shulamis*. It became one of the most familiar Yiddish songs and is most commonly but erroneously assumed to be a folksong rather than a theatrical number. The melody, however, has no relation to any of the “*Untern kinds vigele*” variants.

The goat is nearly always white. But Horowitz chose to refer to it as golden, which, as it happens, reflects the guest “adorned in gold” in Nosn’s parable. (Also worth noting is that the famous Yiddish poet Peretz Markish provided a fresh twist to the image, and to the situation in which the mother sings to an empty cradle while the child, speaking in the first person, explains that the “snowy white goat” is leading him from his golden cradle to trade in raisins and almonds.)

Neither of the two lullabies separated by the choral commentary is identical to the folk song sources. But their incipits and modal contours echo the skeletons of each, while Horowitz then indulged in free compositional development.

Against the second of these two lullabies (essentially a continuation), David, Nosn, and the *sh’li’akh* engage in a brief contrapuntal exchange from another room. David, knowing that he is about to receive news of the baby’s condition, voices hope that it will be good news. The melodic fragment Horowitz used for this moment is from the beginning of a popular Hassidic song, “*Moyshe emes*.”

Although Nosn predicts that God has forgiven David, and just as David has asked to be told “something happy,” the *sh’li’akh* arrives with the sad news that the child is dead. Bas Sheva had cradled him until his last breath. This is of course the peak emotional moment in the opera, for which Horowitz’s music resorts to stillness, at what he has called an “anti-climax climax.” And instead of expressing initial horror, David responds simply that God didn’t listen to his

prayer: “Your will is just, this way, oh God!” That reflects the traditional Jewish acknowledgment, on learning of one’s death, that we accept God’s judgment: *Barukh dayan ha’emet* (Worshipped is the True Judge).

Bas Sheva, together with the chorus, follows with a sort of aria about the “bird of grief.” Horowitz found Kon’s melody “jarring in its frivolity” but “consistent with the lyrical temperament Kon had chosen for Bas Sheva from the outset.” Horowitz even heard it as “audience pandering” in its lighthearted mood. Bas Sheva sings that the bird of grief “flies and flatters,” and she asks that it not fly with her. “Either wait in the tree,” she sings, “and don’t move, and wait until morning . . . and perish while singing songs.”

The opera concludes with a reprise of the opening chorus: “In blue, deep royal nights the servant fights an evil battle against servant . . . for the eternal privilege of the Lord.” What that means or was intended by Broderson to mean is anything but clear. It seemed strange to Horowitz, too, the more so since Kon has the opera end jubilantly and even triumphantly. Unless, as Horowitz has commented, “we may construe this as an ironic interpretation of the entire opera in retrospect”—leaving us “straining to find irony on a plane of one dimensionality.”

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The first two performances of the reconstructed and orchestrated *Dovid un Bas Sheva* were given in August 2019 in Weimar and Łódź.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 For a biographical sketch of Kon, see my essay about him on the Milken Archive of Jewish Music website (under Volume 9, which also includes a few of his Yiddish lieder). It may, however, contain an error concerning Samuel Alman’s *King Ahaz*, the first known Yiddish opera, which was premiered at the opening of the Feinman Yiddish People’s Theater–Temple of Art in London in 1912, not at the Pavilion Theatre there. See Chapter One.
- 2 An esteemed Yiddish poet, playwright, and theatrical director—considered by some an avant-garde artist—Moshe Broderson (1890–1956) was a major figure in the Jewish cultural milieu in interwar Poland. He was born in Moscow, but his family was expelled within the following year and reunited in Łódź in 1900. He published his first volume of poetry in 1913 and was extraordinarily prolific thereafter in both poetry and drama. He returned to Moscow for a time, where he was among those who founded the Moscow Circle of Jewish Writers and Artists. Returning to Łódź in 1918, he founded a group of artists and writers known as *YUNG-YIDDISH*, became involved in popular theatre as well, and, together with others (including Kon), founded the Yiddish puppet theater, *KHAD-GADYE*—which also presented standard operas in Yiddish translations. After the German invasion of Poland, in 1939, he was eventually evacuated from Bialystok to a small town in Central Asia, where he taught at the drama school. Back in Moscow by 1944, he taught at the state Yiddish theater, *GOSET*, until, in the postwar renewal of open terror against the Jews and Jewish culture, he was arrested in 1950 and sentenced to ten years in a labor camp. In 1955, about two years after Stalin’s fortunate death, he was “rehabilitated,” freed, and returned to Poland, where he died only a year later.
- 3 *Vayamutu me’avdei hamelekh v’gam avd’kha uriya haḥiti met* (and some of the king’s servants died, and your servant Uriah the Hitite is also dead). II Samuel 11:24.

- 4 The biblical scholar Robert Alter (*The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*: NY, 2009) has explored the issue of the degree of secrecy in David's written instructions. In the biblical account, strangely enough, David sends his instructions for Uriah's death via Uriah himself. But Alter points out that the letter would have been a type of small scroll with either a seal or small threads tied around it. Unaware of his wife's adultery with David, thus having no suspicion concerning the purpose of the letter, Uriah would have had no reason to open and read it—unless, as Alter also conjectures, Uriah already knew about it from rumors or gossip within the court. In the latter case, Alter suspects, Uriah might have seen no choice but to resign himself to his fate—the more so since accusing and contending with the king would have been pointless and perhaps dangerous. In any case, there is no suggestion that the messenger opened and read the letter before handing it to Joab, although, to follow Alter's reasoning, that could or might have been part of an overall breach of confidentiality.

Alter does offer the likelihood that Joab's initiative—to cover for David without his knowledge by surrounding Uriah with a contingent at the front—was less than a judicious strategy vis-à-vis its transparency. For, upon realizing the enemy's diversionary trick to cause Joab to bring forward his company within range for a potential rout, Joab's withdrawal of his forces there would have been the typical field maneuver in response. That of course would not have contradicted David's instructions. But withdrawing all except Uriah in order to obey the king's order could easily have disclosed David's scheme. Providing David instead with fuel for an initial outburst of fury over what would appear to be “only” a costly military blunder amounted to a means for him (Joab) to save face.

Alter refers to all of this as a “repeated alteration of instructions by those who carry them out . . . the ambiguous effect of ends through the agency of others,” which, for him, is one of the story's principal political themes.

- 5 There are, however, archaeologists and historians who claim that the “united monarchy,” if it existed as such, probably lasted no more than one or two generations.
- 6 See Ruth Margalit, “Built on Sand,” in *The New Yorker*, June 29, 2020. Her overall tone, however, betrays a basic anti-biblical and anti-religious bias.
- 7 It is astonishing that Kon's text underlay at this point in his manuscript score contains the sacred but Judaically proscribed tetragram or tetragrammaton of God's sacred, exclusive proper name, the pronunciation or attempted pronunciation (or writing) of which is Judaically prohibited. Even though the actual vocalization of the letters is unknown, Kon has employed one of the common “guesses,” assumptions, or attempts sometimes used outside Judaism, although non-Jews who are aware of the prohibition—especially sensitive Christians—generally avoid this, too, out of respect for Judaic sensibilities (a particular American so-called but not really Christian sect's name notwithstanding). The only exception to this absolute prohibition was in antiquity, when the *kohen gadol* (high priest), in his plea for God's blessings of the people, pronounced the vocalized tetragram annually on Yom Kippur in the inner sanctum of the Temple known as the “Holy of Holies.” Even then, however, we are told that the correctly vocalized tetragram was deliberately mumbled with a degree of unclear audibility, just in case anyone within hearing might unintentionally discover the actual vocalization and at some point in future inadvertently pronounce it—so all-embracing was and is this proscription. Consequently, an arbitrarily devised substitution for God's name, consisting of one or another combination of meaningless, nonphonetic Hebrew letters and pronounced “*adonai*” (“*adonoy*” in Ashkenazi pronunciation), is used in prayer, biblical readings, or Psalm recitations; and inasmuch as it is a substitute, and not God's actual name, there is no reason it cannot be used in reference to God in conversation or writing.
- 8 *Mamzer* (f. *mamzeret*, pl. *mamzerim*) is commonly but erroneously mistranslated and misunderstood as “bastard” in the sense of one born out of wedlock—in addition to its nonspecific pejorative use in name-calling as a

negative epithet directed at or describing a perceived scoundrel, rascal, villain, or the like. Neither of those two usages has anything to do with the actual, correct Judaic meaning of the term. Rather, a *mamzer* is one born of one of the Judaically forbidden unions, which do not necessarily include an unwed couple, providing adultery is not involved—although the status *could* apply even in the case of a marital union formalized legally and exclusively by a civil ceremony, but only if the union happens to be one of the Judaically forbidden ones. (Similarly, the offspring of a couple in which only one partner is Jewish—although not recognized as a marriage Judaically—would not necessarily be a *mamzer* or *mamzeret*, unless, again, the union was otherwise one of the forbidden ones, such as a man with his aunt, any incestuous unions, a divorced woman with her former husband *IF* he has remarried and then been divorced from the second wife, among others.) A child born to an undivorced mother whose husband has disappeared (in war, for example, or perhaps “by choice”) but whose death cannot be confirmed is a *mamzer* or *mamzeret*, because the mother cannot be considered a widow in such circumstances. Her impregnation by any other man is still therefore considered adulterous and a forbidden union—unless or until her husband might be declared dead by a rabbinical court *before* she conceived the child by another man, or if he resurfaced and gave her a divorce before that. Otherwise, the union with another man is forbidden.

Fair or not by Western societal mores, a *mamzer* or *mamzeret* can marry only another *mamzer* or *mamzeret*. And of course the mother would be ostracized as an adultress. The procedure of a *get b'itnai* was designed for the benefit of the wife as well as any children of a union based on the unprovable assumption of the husband's death, in which case she would be a divorced woman, as the conditions of the conditional divorce would have been met.

Even if Uriah had given Bas Sheva a *get b'itnai* that she accepted, the conditions would not have been met, as he was alive, his whereabouts known, when she first began her sexual liaison (or love affair) with David and became impregnated. Of course David knew this. But it seems that, in his hallucinatory state, he thought for a moment that he could play with Uriah's memory.

- 9 Horowitz found this version notated by Omer Avital in the booklet, *Invitation to Piyut North America* (NY, 2010), attributed to R. Elezar Azkari (Morocco-Algeria).