

## Battle Royale

Shemini 5783

The office in Showtime's show "Couples Therapy" is actually a stage, with cameras placed discreetly all around. The therapist, Dr. Orna Guralnik, and the couples she sees, are real, and the sessions are entirely unscripted. In season two, we are introduced to a couple, Michael and Michal Zoldan. The Zoldans were at an impasse in their marriage, which had become a battlefield of frustration, devoid of emotional connection and reduced to nothing more than banal conversation. One day, Michael suggested that they could see a world-class marriage counselor at no cost, if they'd be willing for their sessions to be televised.<sup>1</sup> Michal agreed (their in-person sessions went virtual as COVID began to spread), and things got raw, quickly. Michal felt enormous pressure to succeed in her career and raise their children, and she feels unsupported by her husband, who she feels should be earning more, carrying more of the burden and allowing her to step back from her career responsibilities a bit; she also wanted another child. Michael didn't know what to do with her rage, and her tears, often being portrayed as at a total loss. Michal wrote about her TV therapy experience, saying that it brought her and her husband closer together- they even had another child. I can't help but wonder what

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.newsweek.com/my-husband-i-had-therapy-tv-1585363>

would have happened, though, if Michal Zoldan's biblical namesake- Michal, the daughter of King Saul- had visited a marriage counselor with her husband, King David. We know that her story didn't have the same happy ending Michal Zoldan's did...

This week's Haftarah describes the ecstatic scene after the return of the Ark, following its captivity in the Philistine camp. The text in Shmuel Bet features King David, overcome with emotion, dancing in almost a trancelike state in front of the Ark- a display that made his wife Michal exceedingly uncomfortable, and indeed, contemptuous of her husband.

והִנֵּה אַרְוֹן יְהוָה בָּא עִיר דָּגָד וּמִיכַל בַּת־שָׂאוּל נִשְׁקָפָה | בְּעֵד הַחַלּוֹן וַתֵּרֶא אֶת־הַמֶּלֶךְ דָּוִד מִפְּנֵי וּמִכַּרְכַּר לִפְנֵי יְהוָה וַתִּבֹּז לוֹ בְּלִבָּהּ:

As the Ark of the LORD entered the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and whirling before the LORD; and she despised him for it.

וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶת־אַרְוֹן יְהוָה וַיֵּצְגוּ אֹתוֹ בְּמַקוֹמוֹ בְּתוֹךְ הָאֵהָל אֲשֶׁר נִטְהַלּוּ דָּוִד וַיַּעַל דָּוִד עֲלוֹת לִפְנֵי יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁלְמִים: =  
וַיֵּשֶׁב דָּוִד לְבַרְךְ אֶת־בֵּיתוֹ {ס}

וַתֵּצֵא מִיכַל בַּת־שָׂאוּל לִקְרֹאת דָּוִד וַתֹּאמֶר מַה־נִּכְבֵּד הַיּוֹם מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר נִגְלָה הַיּוֹם לְעֵינַי אֲמָהוֹת עֲבָדָיו כֹּהֲגֵלוֹת נִגְלוֹת אֲתָד הַרְקִים:

David went home to greet his household. And Michal daughter of Saul came out to meet David and said, “Didn’t the king of Israel do himself honor today—exposing himself today in the sight of the slavegirls of his subjects, as one of the riffraff might expose himself!”

David was not taking this lying down. Listen to his response:

וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל־מִיכָל לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר בָּחַר־בִּי מֵאֲבֹיָי וּמִכָּל־בֵּיתוֹ לְצִוּוֹת אֹתִי נָגִיד עַל־עַם יְהוָה עַל־יְשָׁרָאֵל וְשָׁחַקְתִּי לִפְנֵי יְהוָה:

David answered Michal, “It was before the LORD who chose me instead of your father and all his family and appointed me ruler over the LORD’s people Israel! I will dance before the LORD

וְנִקְלַתִּי עוֹד מִזֹּאת וְהִיָּיתִי שָׁפֵל בְּעֵינַי וְעַם־הָאָמָהוֹת אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתְּ עִמָּם אֲכַבְּדָהּ:

and dishonor myself even more, and be low in my own<sup>k</sup> esteem; but among the slavegirls that you speak of I will be honored.”

There is a lot to unpack in this acrimonious exchange, which clearly speaks to a thoroughly complex and dysfunctional marriage. I imagine it, alone, would get Couples Therapy a new season... What I would like to focus on this morning is what the text says in response:

וְלִמְיֹכָל בַּת־שָׁאוּל לֹא־הָיָה לָּהּ יָלֵד עַד יוֹם מוֹתָהּ: {פ}

So to her dying day Michal, daughter of Saul, had no children.

The Talmud<sup>2</sup> notes, however, that Michal *does* have children, but that she died in childbirth.

ולמיכל בת שאול לא היה לה ולד עד יום מותה אמר רב חסדא עד יום מותה לא היה לה ביום מותה  
היה לה

This is a horrible, unspeakable punishment. If, as the text seems to imply, there is a causal relationship between what she said and what happened to her, where is the proportionality (מדה כנגד מדה)? This sounds like a vicious marital fight- and she got as good as she gave!

I think the answer lies in a Medrash, in Bemidbar Rabba:

במדבר רבה ו:כ  
ועם האמהות אשר אמרת עמם אפבדה, אמר לה אותן בנות ישראל שצווקת אותן אמהות, אינן אמהות אלא  
אמהות, לואי יקא לי חלק עמקם לעתיד לבוא, הקדא הוא דכתיב: ועם האמהות אשר אמרת, לואי עמם אפבדה.  
ולפי שאמרה מיכל כן נענשה, שפן כתיב אחריו (שמואל ב ו, כג): ולמיכל בת שאול לא היה לה ילד עד יום  
מותה

---

<sup>2</sup> Sanhedrin 21a

The Medrash plays on the word אֲמָהוֹת, meaning maidservants, and rendered it אֲמָהוֹת, or mothers. David said, “These are not just maidservants you can look down on. They are mothers and I would be honored to link my lot with theirs.” Michal’s character failing was that she was classist- the daughter of royalty who refused to mingle with “the help.” David comes from more humble roots and is never too proud to see the maidservants for who they are, and to be authentic in front of them.

It would be easy to write off Michal as a snooty woman, but she was not. She was a remarkable person, a righteous woman who has had many other righteous women bear her name. But her actions are worthy of analysis and of reflection and I think that, as much as we would like to think otherwise, we sometimes fall prey to her behavior as well. In other communities, I saw it with people who referred to their household help as “my girl,” or “the shiksa.” Thank God, I don’t think we talk this way in our community. But think about how we relate to community members who play vital roles in various service industries. This week’s Parsha is the parsha of Kashrus, and if there is any industry where the service professionals are looked down upon, it’s this one. Mashgichim or mashgichot are often invisible at events, and not because you can’t see them; in fact, they should receive standing ovations at every event and program they work! David and Michal were both royalty; Michal saw the division of classes as essential to royalty, and David saw the key ingredient as being

the way you treat everyone. This might be why Michal was denied the ability to raise her child; she denigrated “the help,” the very people most likely now to raise her children.

I'd like to share another approach, this one from Rav Eliyahu Baruch Finkel, an influential Maggid Shiur in the Mir Yeshiva in Yerushalaim. Michal denigrated the value of motherhood, and essential aspects of it. In the reading of the Medrash, David's correction spoke to a deeper flaw in Michal. There are certain things we just don't do in front of others, and we do try to present a dignified public persona. I recall advice that former YU President Richard Joel gave to Rabbis. “Learn to drop your *kavod*, but make sure to catch it before it hits the ground.” Likewise, a parent has to get comfortable with sacrificing public appearances and public opinion for the sake of raising a child. Rav Elya Baruch was saying, “don't confuse being a mother with being a maidservant.” David was experiencing real joy, and to say that he needed to reign himself in, to ignore an essential aspect of who he was, just to comport himself a certain way is the exact opposite of parenthood. Ask anyone whose child has had a meltdown in public, or whose children have been sources of other embarrassing moments. I recall when Shevy was an infant and we had a few couples over for Shabbos lunch- you know who you are. I was holding her, and she had a massive accident that necessitated my excusing myself and change mine and her clothes completely. But everyone around the table made it so comfortable,

reminding me that I was a parent first, and that this did not compromise me in any way. If we just think of our children as representations of our accomplishments, as billboards for our parenting skills and values, as vehicles for our honor, as a display case for our excellence, we become like Michal, compromising the essence of parenthood. Rav Finkel argues that Michal was punished in the way she was because there is a difference between someone who bears a child and someone who raises one. Michal would never have deigned to get down on her knees, to wipe off spittle or walk a child back from a temper tantrum. Michal's punishment challenges us in the way we view our children- in our families and in our communities.

David's undignified behavior was actually the height of class and the very model of royal behavior. The way in which we treat others, no matter their profession and station in life, and our attitude toward parenthood- these are two of the vital ingredients in becoming בני מלכים, children of kings. Let us live up to that description.