

**Poetry, Anticipation, Weeping: King David's responses to grief in II Samuel**

During our study of Samuel this semester, I was really struck by the different ways in which David responds to loss in his life. These moments of loss give us significant insight into the character of King David and how he navigates the tension between his personal and political life.

Three powerful moments of grief that teach us more about David's personality are:

- The deaths of David and Jonathan
- The illness and death of David's first son with Bathsheba
- The death of Absalom

David responds differently to each of these deaths, reflecting the different relationships he shared with each of the dead, and reflecting the intensity of his own grief. In reading these stories, I couldn't help but think about the complex, personal nature of grief, and how each moment of grief is different from another.

David responds to these losses in his life differently each time. First, his dirge for Saul and Jonathan - eloquent, poetic, and politically motivated. After the death of his infant son with Bathsheba, David confronts his own mortality and powerlessness. As David responds to the news of Absalom's death, all the eloquence we have seen him possess until now completely disappears: he's left alone with his feelings, bereft of his son. He is reduced to a stammer of disbelief, a stammer of grief. At his lowest point, he has no words - for there are no words that could adequately speak to a loss such as this.

These three stories of loss offer us three different models of grief. I have labeled these as: poetry, anticipation and acceptance, and weeping. I believe that my own experience of loss drew me to

each of these moments. Since my father's death three and a half years ago, I have responded to my loss in each of these ways and more. In reflecting on what to prepare for this final assignment, I wanted to put together a resource that reflected my own experience and could speak to universal human experiences, too. I therefore put together a source sheet for use in a text study/class about grief and loss. These three stories from Samuel are the foundation of the source sheet, which offers three biblical models of grief. I think that this text study could be especially useful as we come out of Covid and confront the many losses we have experienced this past year. Below is my plan for the text study - thoughts and questions that I would share with my adult learners as we work through the texts together. Since the stories themselves are so long and complex, this would likely be a two or three part lesson, so we have enough time to discuss the texts and their contexts. The source sheet can be found here:

[www.sefaria.org/sheets/319122](http://www.sefaria.org/sheets/319122), and is included at the end of this document.

#### Plan for text study:

##### Intro:

Think back to a moment in your life when you experienced a loss. It doesn't have to be the loss of a loved one - it could be anything that you experienced as a loss. Take a few minutes to think about how you responded to, and processed that loss. If you are comfortable, please share with the group.

Loss and grief are inevitable aspects of the human experience. There is no one way to respond to grief, and each of us grieves in our own way(s). We also grieve different losses differently. The character of King David from the Books of Samuel offers us three different models of grief that

we can use to understand our own responses. I call these Poetry, Anticipation or Acceptance, and Weeping.

### **1. Poetry**

After the deaths of Jonathan and Saul, David's royal predecessor with whom he was often in conflict, David responds with a poetic lament. This lament is politically motivated, designed to win over trust and support from the people as David seeks to become king.

#### Questions:

1. What are some of the literary qualities of David's lament?
  - Envelope structure
  - Parallelism
  - Apostrophe (direct address of a person or object who cannot provide a response, therefore underscoring the actual absence of the person)
  - Move from plural to individual - creates a sense of communal loss
  - Metonymy (where the "gear of battle" refers to Jonathan and Saul themselves, "the warrior's shield" refers to Saul).
2. How are Jonathan and Saul described in the lament?
  - Warriors
  - Beloved and dear; not parted
  - "Swifter than eagles, stronger than lions"
  - Brother of David (does this serve as legitimating David's claim to the throne?)
3. Which parts of his lament move you the most? Why?
4. In what ways does David's lament fulfill the mitzvah to lament the dead fittingly?

## **2. Anticipation and acceptance**

David's response to the illness and death of his infant son reminds me of what psychologists call 'anticipatory grief,' which is when you engage in the process of grieving before a loved one dies. Often, this anticipatory grief means that when someone actually dies, the survivor does not mourn anymore. David's grief in this story is intimately connected to both his personal and political self, since the death of this child is a direct consequence of David's inappropriate moral/political actions. I was struck in this story by the reactions of David's servants to his grieving, particularly their question to David in 2 Samuel 12:2, "Why have you acted in this manner?" It's an important reminder about the personal nature of grief and the importance of not judging or questioning someone else's grief process.

### Questions:

1. How does David grieve his son during the child's illness?
2. How would you characterise David's response after the child's death?
3. What can we learn from David's servants about how to respond to the grief experiences of others?

## **3. Weeping and the doubling of words**

After the death of his son, Absalom, David responds with a heart-breaking repetitive cry. For me, this passage really reveals the complexities of grief, especially as it reveals the complexities of the relationships we share with those whom we mourn. This passage raises the tensions David shields throughout his life between his personal life and his political life. Although Absalom had

threatened to usurp the king, in this moment, David responds not as a king who celebrates the death of his usurper, but as a father grieving the loss of his son. In this moment, the personal overrides the political.

Questions:

1. How does David's response to the death of Absalom differ from his previous responses to loss?
2. What is the effect of David's repetition of "my son"?
3. How do Joab's words influence our understanding of David's grief in this moment?
  - Highlights the tension David faces between the personal and the political
4. How does the Metzudat David commentary inform how we understand David's grief at this moment?

Wrapping up:

Which model of grief moves you the most and why?

What other models of grief would you add to this list?

# Poetry, anticipation, weeping: King David's responses to grief in II Samuel

## The Poetry of Grief

שמואל ב א':י"ז-כ"ז

II Samuel 1:17-27

And David intoned this dirge over Saul and his son Jonathan— He ordered the Judites to be taught [The Song of the] Bow. It is recorded in the Book of Jashar.

The splendor, O Israel, on your heights lies slain;

How have the warriors fallen!

Tell it not in Gath,

Do not proclaim it in the streets of Ashkelon,

Lest the Philistine daughters rejoice,

Lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult.

O hills of Gilboa— no dew!

and no rain upon you, O lofty fields.

For there the warriors' shield was besmirched,

The shield of Saul unburnished with oil.

From the blood of slain,

From the warriors' fat—

Jonathan's bow did not retreat;

And the sword of Saul never turned away empty.

Saul and Jonathan, Beloved and dear,

וַיִּקְנֵן דָּוִד אֶת־הַקִּינָה הַזֹּאת  
עַל־שָׂאוֹל וְעַל־יְהוֹנָתָן בְּנוֹ: וַיֹּאמֶר  
לְלַמֵּד בְּנֵי־יְהוּדָה קְנִישַׁת הַגֵּה  
כְּתוּבָה עַל־סֵפֶר הַיָּשָׁר:

הַצְּבִי יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל־בְּמוֹתַיָּךְ חָלָל  
אֵיךְ נָפְלוּ גִבּוֹרִים:  
אֶל־תִּגְיָדוּ בַּגֹּת

אֶל־תְּבַשְׂרוּ בְּחוּצַת אֲשָׁקְלוֹן  
פֶּן־תִּשְׂמַחְנָה בְּנוֹת פְּלִשְׁתִּים  
פֶּן־תִּעְלֶזְנָה בְּנוֹת הָעֵרְלִים:

הָרִי בְּגִלְבֹּעַ אֶל־טַל  
וְאֶל־מִטֶּר עֲלֵיכֶם וּשְׁדֵי תְרוּמַת  
כִּי שָׁם נִגְעַל מִגֵּן גִּבּוֹרִים

מִגֵּן שָׂאוֹל בְּלִי מִשִּׁיחַ בַּשָּׁמֶן:  
מִדָּם חָלָלִים

מִחֶלֶב גִּבּוֹרִים

קְנִישַׁת יְהוֹנָתָן לֹא נִשּׁוּג אַחֲרָיִךְ  
וְחֶרֶב שָׂאוֹל לֹא תִשׁוּב רִיקָם:

שָׂאוֹל וְיְהוֹנָתָן הִנְיָאֵהְבִים וְהִנְעִימָם  
בְּחַיֵּיהֶם וּבְמוֹתָם לֹא נִפְרְדּוּ

in their life and their death they were not parted.  
They were swifter than eagles,  
and stronger than lions!  
O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul,  
Who clothed you in scarlet and bangles,  
Who studded your garments with jewelry of gold.  
How have the warriors fallen  
In the midst of the battle.  
Jonathan, upon your heights slain!  
I grieve for you, My brother Jonathan.  
Very dear you were to me.  
More wondrous your love to me  
than the love of women.  
How have the warriors fallen,  
and the gear of battle is lost!  
(Translation: Robert Alter)

מִנְשָׁרִים קָלוּ  
מֵאַרְיֹת גְּבֹרִים:  
בְּנוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־שָׁאוּל בְּכִינָה  
הַמְּלַבְּשֵׁכֶם שָׁנִי עִם־עֲדָנִים  
הַמְּעֵלָה עֲדֵי זָהָב עַל לְבוּשְׁכֶן:  
אֵיךְ נִפְּלוּ גְבֹרִים  
בְּתוֹךְ הַמְּלַחְמָה  
יְהוֹנָתָן עַל־בְּמוֹתָיִךְ חָלָל:  
צָר־לִי עָלֶיךָ אַחֵי יְהוֹנָתָן  
נִעְמָתָ לִי מְאֹד  
נִפְּלֵאתָה אֶהְבֵּתָךְ לִי מֵאֶהְבֵּת  
נְשִׁים:  
אֵיךְ נִפְּלוּ גְבֹרִים  
וַיֵּאבְדוּ כָּלֵי מְלַחְמָה: (פ)

**Shulchan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah 344:1**

It is an important religious duty to lament the dead fittingly;<sup>1</sup>*Shab. 105b.* and the religious duty [is fulfilled] when one raises his voice [in funereal lamentations] to utter over him [the dead] words which break the heart in order to cause much weeping, and to mention his praise.

**יורה דעה שמי"ד:א'**

חיוב ההספד וגודל שכרו וכיצד ועל מי מספידין. ובו כ' סעיפים:  
מצוה גדולה להספיד על המת כראוי ומצותו שירים קולו לומר עליו דברים המשברים את הלב כדי להרבות בכיה ולהזכיר שבחו

## The Anticipation of Grief... or acceptance?

### II Samuel 12:14-23

However, since you have spurned the enemies of the Eternal by this deed, even the child about to be born to you shall die.” Nathan went home, and the Eternal afflicted the child that Uriah’s wife had borne to David, and it became critically ill. David entreated God for the boy; David fasted, and he went in and spent the night lying on the ground. The senior servants of his household tried to induce him to get up from the ground; but he refused, nor would he partake of food with them. On the seventh day the child died. David’s servants were afraid to tell David that the child was dead; for they said, “We spoke to him when the child was alive and he wouldn’t listen to us; how can we tell him that the child is dead? He might do something terrible.” When David saw his servants talking in whispers, David understood that the child was dead; David asked his servants, “Is the child dead?” “Yes,” they replied. Thereupon David rose from the ground; he bathed and anointed himself, and he changed his clothes. He went into the House of the Eternal and prostrated himself. Then he went home and asked for food, which they set before him, and he ate. His courtiers asked him, “Why have you acted in this

### שמואל ב י"ב:י"ד-כ"ג

אָפֶס כִּי־נִאָּץ נִאֲצַתְּ אֶת־אֵיבֵי  
יְהוָה בַּדְּבָר הַזֶּה גַּם הַבֵּן הַיֵּלֹד  
לָהּ מוֹת יָמוּת׃ וַיֵּלֶךְ נָתָן אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ  
וַיִּגַּף יְהוָה אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָהּ  
אִשְׁת־אֹרִיָּה לְדָוִד וַיֵּאֲנָשׁ׃ וַיִּבְקֶשׁ  
דָּוִד אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים בְּעַד הַנְּעָר וַיִּצְם  
דָּוִד צוֹם וַבָּא וּלְגַן וּשְׁכַב אַרְצָה׃  
וַיִּקְמוּ זְקֵנֵי בֵיתוֹ עָלָיו לְהַקְיִמוֹ  
מִזֶּה־הָאָרֶץ וְלֹא אָבָה וְלֹא־בָרָא  
אִתָּם לֶחֶם׃ וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי  
וַיָּמָת הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּרְאוּ עֲבָדֵי דָוִד לְהַגִּיד  
לוֹ׃ כִּי־מָת הַיֶּלֶד כִּי אָמְרוּ הִנֵּה  
בְּהִיּוֹת הַיֶּלֶד חַי דִּבַּרְנוּ אֵלָיו  
וְלֹא־שָׁמַע בְּקוֹלֵנוּ וְאִיךָ נֹאמֵר  
אֵלָיו מָת הַיֶּלֶד וְעָשָׂה רָעָה׃ וַיִּרְא  
דָּוִד כִּי עֲבָדָיו מְתַלְחָשִׁים וַיָּבֹן דָּוִד  
כִּי מָת הַיֶּלֶד וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד  
אֶל־עֲבָדָיו הַמָּת הַיֶּלֶד וַיֹּאמְרוּ  
מָת׃ וַיָּקָם דָּוִד מִהָאָרֶץ וַיִּרְחַץ  
וַיְסֹךְ וַיַּחֲלֶף שִׁמְלָתוֹ [שְׁמֹלְתָיו]  
וַיָּבֵא בֵית־יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וַיָּבֵא  
אֶל־בֵּיתוֹ וַיִּשְׁאַל וַיִּשְׁמְרוּ לוֹ לֶחֶם  
וַיֹּאכֵל׃ וַיֹּאמְרוּ עֲבָדָיו אֵלָיו  
מִה־הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ  
בְּעַבְרַת הַיֶּלֶד חַי צָמַת וַתִּבֶּךְ



manner? While the child was alive, you fasted and wept; but now that the child is dead, you rise and take food!" He replied, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept because I thought: 'Who knows? The Eternal may have pity on me, and the child may live.' But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will never come back to me."

וּכְאֲשֶׁר מֵת הַיֶּלֶד קָמַת וַתֹּאכַל  
לֶחֶם: וַיֹּאמֶר בְּעוֹד הַיֶּלֶד חַי צָמַתִּי  
וְאָבְכָה כִּי אֶמְרֹתִי מִי יוֹדֵעַ יַחַנְנִי  
[וַיַּחְנְנִי] יְהוָה וְתִי הַיֶּלֶד: וְעַתָּה ו  
מֵת לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי צֹם הַאוֹכֵל  
לְהַשְׁיִבוּ עוֹד אֲנִי הַלֵּל אֱלֹהֵי וְהוּא  
לֹא יָשׁוּב אֵלָי:

### **Anticipatory Grief:**

Unlike bereavement, the grieving that follows loss, anticipatory grief lacks a sense of finality.

"With anticipatory grief, we're not anticipating that we're going to be grieving," Dr. Koeppe says. "We're in the process of grieving before we actually lose the thing."

Pioneering psychiatrist Erich Lindemann first identified anticipatory grief in the 1940s while studying wives of World War II soldiers who were so certain their husbands would die in combat that they mourned them and moved on while they still lived and no longer loved the men who did return home. Anticipatory grief is common among people whose loved ones have, or who themselves have, a terminal illness, but that's not the only context in which it's felt.

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<https://www.fatherly.com/health-science/covid-19-coronavirus-anxiety-anticipatory-grief/>

## Weeping and the doubling of words

### II Samuel 18:32-19:7

The king asked the Cushite, "Is my boy Absalom safe?" And the Cushite replied, "May the enemies of my lord the king and all who rose against you to do you harm fare like that young man!" **The king was shaken. He went up to the upper chamber of the gateway and wept, moaning these words as he went, "My son Absalom! O my son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you! O Absalom, my son, my son!"** Joab was told that the king was weeping and mourning over Absalom. And the victory that day was turned into mourning for all the troops, for that day the troops heard that the king was grieving over his son. The troops stole into town that day like troops ashamed after running away in battle. **The king covered his face and the king kept crying aloud, "O my son Absalom! O Absalom, my son, my son!"** Joab came to the king in his quarters and said, "Today you have humiliated all your followers, who this day saved your life, and the lives of your sons and daughters, and the lives of your wives and concubines, by showing love for those who hate you and hate for

### שמואל ב י"ח:ל"ב-י"ט:ז

וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל־הַכּוּשִׁי הַשָּׁלוֹם  
לְנַעַר לְאַבְשָׁלוֹם וַיֹּאמֶר הַכּוּשִׁי  
יְהִי כַנְעֹר־אֵיבִי אֲדֹנָי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְכָל  
אֲשֶׁר־קָמוּ עָלָיָה לְרָעָה: (ס) וַיִּרְגַּז  
הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיַּעַל עַל־עֲלִית הַשַּׁעַר  
וַיִּבֶה וַיִּכָּה ׀ אָמַר בְּלָכְתּוּ בְנֵי  
אַבְשָׁלוֹם בְּנֵי בְנֵי אַבְשָׁלוֹם  
מִי־יִתֵּן מוֹתִי אֲנִי תַחַתֶּיהָ  
אַבְשָׁלוֹם בְּנֵי בְנֵי: וַיִּגַּד לְיוֹאָב  
הַנֵּה הַמֶּלֶךְ בִּכְהָה וַיִּתְאַבֵּל  
עַל־אַבְשָׁלוֹם: וַתְּהִי הַתְּשׁוּעָה בַּיּוֹם  
הַהוּא לְאַבְל לְכָל־הָעָם כִּי־שָׁמַע  
הָעָם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לְאֹמֶר נַעֲצָב  
הַמֶּלֶךְ עַל־בְּנוֹ: וַיִּתְגַּנֵּב הָעָם בַּיּוֹם  
הַהוּא לְבּוֹא הָעִיר כַּאֲשֶׁר יִתְגַּנֵּב  
הָעָם הַנִּכְלָמִים בְּנוֹסִם בַּמִּלְחָמָה:  
וְהַמֶּלֶךְ לָאֵט אֶת־פָּנָיו וַיִּזְעַק  
הַמֶּלֶךְ קוֹל גָּדוֹל בְּנֵי אַבְשָׁלוֹם  
אַבְשָׁלוֹם בְּנֵי בְנֵי: (ס) וַיָּבֹא יוֹאָב  
אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ הַבָּיִת וַיֹּאמֶר הַבִּשְׂתָּה  
הַיּוֹם אֶת־פָּנָי כָּל־עַבְדֶּיהָ  
הַמְּמַלְטִים אֶת־נַפְשָׁהּ הַיּוֹם וְאֵת  
נַפְשׁ בְּנֵיהָ וּבְנֹתֶיהָ וְנַפְשׁ נָשֶׁיהָ  
וְנַפְשׁ פְּלִגְשֵׁיהָ: לְאַהֲבָהּ

those who love you. For you have made clear today that the officers and men mean nothing to you. I am sure that if Absalom were alive today and the rest of us dead, you would have preferred it.

אֶת־שִׁנְאֵיָךְ וְלִשְׂנֵא אֶת־אֲהַבֶּיךָ כִּי  
וְהַגִּדְתָּ הַיּוֹם כִּי אֵין לְךָ שָׂרִים  
וְעַבְדִּים כִּי וְיָדַעְתִּי הַיּוֹם כִּי לֹא  
[לִן] אֲבַשְׁלוֹם חַי וְכֹלְנוּ הַיּוֹם  
מֵתִים כִּי־אַן יִשָּׁר בְּעֵינֶיךָ:

**Metzudat David (18th c.) on II Samuel  
19:1:1**

Our sages of blessed memory said (Sotah 10b) that he (David) said "My Son" eight times - seven times to lift him out of the seven levels of Gehennom, and the eighth time to bring him into the Garden of Eden. According to the *peshat*, this is the way of the lamenters, to double their words/language, like (Jeremiah 4:19): "My bowels, my bowels, I writhe in pain!"

**מצודת דוד על שמואל ב י"ט:א:א'**

בני אבשלום וגוי'. אמרו רבותינו  
ז"ל (סוטה יב) שאמר שמונה  
פעמים בני, שבעה להעלותו  
משבעה מדורי גיהנם, והשמיני  
להביאו לגן עדן ולפי פשוטו: כן  
דרך המיללים לכפול דבריהם,  
כמו (ירמיהו ד יט): מעי מעי  
אוחילה: