

AVIGAIL'S RIGHTEOUS CONDUCT WITHIN A BAD RELATIONSHIP - A MESSAGE FOR TODAY

by Rebbetzin Leah Kohn

We left Avigail, at the end of our previous class, preparing her appeal to David, in order to avert his imminent attack on her husband and their household. This class examines the details of Avigail's appeal, and follows the events that culminate in her marriage to David. In Avigail's interaction with the two diametrically opposing personalities of David and Naval we see the breadth and versatility of her truly righteous character.

Avigail intercedes with David, as an advocate for both herself and her undeserving husband. She moves forward programmatically - with wisdom, confidence and depth - addressing a complex of issues each as separate entity and as part of an integrated, problematic whole. Avigail first responds to David's initial request for food. This demonstrates her desire to correct her husband's wrongdoing immediately, before she addresses the other aspects of his transgression. Avigail is disturbed by the fact that she was not present when David's men had asked Naval for provisions.

The amount of food that Avigail presents to David upon their encounter is evidence of her enormous generosity and her commitment to replace wrongdoing with righteousness:

"... Avigail hurried and took two hundred breads, two containers of wine, five cooked sheep, five se'ahs of toasted grain, a hundred raisin clusters, and two hundred cakes of pressed figs, and she put them on the donkeys..." (I Samuel 25:18).

That Avigail is able to immediately assemble such a gift suggests the abundance she maintains in her home for her husband. In other words, regardless of her husband's baseness, Avigail holds herself to the highest standards of conduct. She behaves righteously for her own sake and not just for Naval's.

As she presents her gift to David, Avigail asks that he blame her and not her husband for the earlier affront. Avigail argues effectively - and truthfully - that since Naval's inhospitable attitude is a part of his poor character, David should not have expected anything more than the response he received. Avigail claims that David's men came because they knew of her own renowned generosity and, in this regard, it is she who fell short:

"With me myself, my lord, lies the sin...Let my lord not set his heart against this base man - against Naval - for he is as his name implies - Naval is his name and revulsion is his trait; and I, your

maidservant, did not see my lord's attendants whom you sent...And now, this homage that your maidservant has brought to my lord - let it be given to the attendants who are traveling with my lord" (I Samuel 25:23- 27).

With David's acceptance of her gift, Avigail moves on to resolve a more difficult set of issues. According to Torah, her husband is to incur the death penalty for having spoken disrespectfully towards and for questioning the royal lineage of David, who has been anointed the next king. Avigail urges David to reverse this mandate, pointing out to him that he is not officially the practicing king, because his predecessor, Shaul, still occupies the throne. For this reason, she concludes, the decision to kill Naval may not yet be within David's jurisdiction. Consequently he risks serious wrongdoing, and would best at this time leave Naval's fate to God:

"And may it be that when Hashem performs for my lord all the beneficence of which he has spoken regarding you, and appoints you as leader over Israel, that this not be for you a stumbling block and a moral hindrance for my lord to have shed innocent blood for my lord to have avenged himself" (I Samuel 25: 27-31).

David subsequently agrees not to attack Naval, and expresses his gratitude to Avigail for having prevented him from taking Naval's fate into his own hands. Avigail returns home, having saved her husband's life - and her own - to find Naval still celebrating his sheep-shearing. In spite of her important news Avigail waits until morning to speak with her husband, so as not to interrupt his party. In her choice, we see again Avigail's fixed commitment to doing the right thing, regardless of whether or not her husband deserves her courtesy.

As explained in our previous class, since the Torah does not examine Avigail's reasons for remaining with Naval, one may assume they are not a part of what the prophet Samuel intends to convey in this story. From a contemporary point of view, the fact that Avigail stays in her marriage might entitle her to treat her husband poorly, as compensation for tolerating him. To the contrary, Avigail seems aware that leaving Naval remains a viable option and she does not blame him for her decision not to leave. She discharges her domestic responsibilities as Naval's wife in the same way she would have, had she been married to a good man.

Naval dies soon after Avigail's meeting with David, and she subsequently becomes David's wife.

As Jews, we have inherited Avigail's dedication to doing the right thing regardless of circumstances, and we may use this gift as a guide for self-improvement within our relationships. We have the right to leave a relationship - whether marriage, friendship or professional. However, if we stay, we must commit to treat the "other" with respect, unless we need to resort to disrespect for self-protection. (Self-protection against David's onslaught, is Avigail's reason for speaking poorly about her husband to David. She mentions Naval's inherently bad character only because it is a part of her effort to save herself and her husband).

Why does Avigail maintain her own righteousness, when her husband is so inferior - and why is it

worthwhile for us to follow Avigail's example? Simply stated, our own poor behavior has a detrimental effect on us and derails our efforts to become better people. For today's Jewish woman in any relationship Avigail teaches that in most cases improper conduct is a bankrupt approach. Admittedly, the Torah sets forth in Avigail and Naval an extreme case of good married to bad which, on a practical level, might be impossible to endure. Nonetheless, we may apply Avigail's approach towards our own self-improvement within the context of our relationships and, in so doing, perfect ourselves to the greatest extent.

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