

# OPAQUE INTENTIONS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

*Yonoson ben Evyasar came...and said to Adoniyahu..."Our master King Dovid has made Shlomo king!...Tzadok HaKohen and Noson HaNavi annointed him as king at Gichon....Shlomo has sat upon the royal throne, and the king's servants have come to bless our master, King Dovid"....All of Adoniyahu's guests were alarmed and arose..."<sup>[2]</sup>*

*It is permissible to say lashon hora about disputatious people. We can learn this from Noson HaNavi, who told BasSheva, "I will come after you and supplement your words."<sup>[3]</sup>*

Yonoson says too much. His goal, it would seem, was to impress Adoniyahu with the urgency of the situation, and to warn him to run for his life. He should have run in, out of breath, and acted panic-stricken. "Escape while you can, all of you who supported Adoniyahu! Shlomo has been anointed! We are undone!"

To be sure, the best way to deal with disputatious people is to say little. Usually, we should say nothing at all. Too many people drool over the public eye, even as they lack any real ability. They will say and do things, knowing full well that others will rake them over the coals. They don't mind – so long as people are talking about them. These sorts of people are especially prevalent among writers, and among people who have studied enough that people regard them as authorities – while their knowledge is thoroughly inadequate.

We are tempted to view Adoniyahu this way – as willing to risk all for his moment of fame. It would, however, be short-sighted to do so. Adoniyahu attracted some of the best and brightest, like Yoav and Evyasar. There had to be more to his rebellion than a foolish and futile exercise of his narcissism.

Chazal teach<sup>[4]</sup> about the Torah's promise to the king that "his days will be lengthened – his and his son's – in the midst of Israel." This means that his son will follow him to the throne, without any special ceremony. They say, however, that this only applies at times of peace and tranquility. Only then is there an orderly, automatic succession of the throne. At more turbulent times, the successor to the throne would have to be publicly anointed. Now, had Yonoson burst in to Adoniyahu's gathering with the brief formula we suggested, his words would have delighted the pretender to the throne, rather than frightened him. If Dovid found it necessary to anoint Shlomo, he had in effect declared that the affairs of his realm were far from settled. There would be no automatic succession. And if Tzadok and others had anointed Shlomo – so be it! Adoniyahu had significant followers of his

own – and they would anoint him!

Yonoson therefore spared no detail. He emphasized “our master the king,” stressing that Dovid's position was settled and popular. The times were not especially turbulent. The news of Dovid's choice had spread. Dovid praised Hashem for being privileged to see his son not just designated (“made king”), but installed upon the throne. The honor shown to Shlomo demonstrated his acceptance to the people.

If all went so smoothly for Shlomo, why, then, did Dovid find it necessary to anoint him, rather than allowing the Torah's blessing to result in an orderly succession? Because that *berachah* applies only after the death of the king. Dovid wanted Shlomo installed during his own lifetime, in order to avoid any future dispute. This was no ordinary succession, since Dovid was still alive. To be effective, it was necessary to actually anoint Shlomo.

Adoniyahu, in other words, was toast. He had been preempted by Dovid's anointing Shlomo, and he was in major trouble.

It is unlikely that Adoniyahu ever thought that he could directly seize the throne. It is even less likely that he would have attracted the support of those like Yoav and Evyasar. Adoniyahu, rather, sought for himself the position of temporary regent, of the one who would rule (i.e., make the decisions, while waiting for a child-king to grow into the role).

The realm could not afford the vulnerability of a child on the throne, he proposed. There were too many internal enemies. Many still longed for a return to the days of the *shoftim*, when there was no central government at all, just a federation of autonomous tribes. Others remembered Shaul, and wished to see a restoration of his progeny to the throne. For the good of the nation, a strong voice needed to speak from behind the throne, till Shlomo came of age. Adoniyahu's followers quite innocently thought they had their man.

Adoniyahu spoke in precisely those terms. But something very different lurked behind his words. The regency was only the first step. It was his unstated intention to strengthen his position so that he could ultimately take the throne.

Noson HaNavi realized that. He understood that more than the succession was at stake – that Adoniyahu would one day threaten the very lives of Shlomo and his mother. He therefore urged BasSheva to take her plea to the king. It was important, however, that she not exceed the facts. She could not know with confidence what Adoniyahu's intentions were. She would appear to be a hysterical woman, casting aspersions on another son of the king. She must not present anything more than verifiable facts – that Adoniyahu wished to become regent. He would follow, and as a *navi*, fill in what BasSheva could not prove: that Adoniyahu really wished to seize the throne for himself.

Chazal describe Noson's activity as permissible “*lashon hora*” against a “disputatious” person. Can we

find nothing worse to say about Adoniyahu than that he was disputatious? Was he not guilty of *lèse-majesté*, or treasonous rebellion against the king? Furthermore, if Adoniyahu were not guilty of being "disputatious," would it not have been permissible for Nisan to speak critically of him in order to protect BasSheva and Shlomo from harm? Isn't that the more robust license to speak *lashon hora*?

We are indeed permitted to prevent harm by speaking honesty about the misdeeds of others and how they might impact upon innocent people. Adoniyahu, however, had done nothing wrong. There was no evidence of any evil plot. While there might have been room to interpret his intentions as sinister, we are instructed to judge favorably, and give people the benefit of the doubt, so long as they retain a *chezkas kashrus*, status as law-abiding citizens.

That is the point. Those who are *baalei machlokes* forfeit any presumption of innocence! They can be assumed to be at least potentially dangerous; warning others about possible harm at the hands of Adoniyahu becomes permissible.

What would be *lashon hora* in regard to any other person becomes permissible speech in regard to the person who always finds himself at the center of conflict.

1. Based on HaMedrash V'HaMaaseh by R. Yechezkel Libshitz, on the haftorah to Chayei Soro.
2. Melachim1 1:42-49
3. Yerushalami Peah 1
4. Kerisus 5B