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Meir Malul, L'edabbër baššelî (2 Sam. 3: 27) “to Talk Peace”
1. The expression ***Lêdabbêr baššelî*** occurs in the famous episode in 2 Samuel 3 when Joab cunningly traps Abner and kills him cold-bloodedly (v. 27). It is the single occurrence of this expression in the Hebrew Bible, and the word ***ššelî*** itself is a **hapax** the meaning and etymology of which are not definitely certain, although it has generally been related to the Hebrew root ***šlh*** (see further below).

2. Basically two interpretations for this expression, based on the general understanding of the context and its basic theme, are to be found in the various commentaries, both old and new:

1) Most commentators understand the form ***baššelî*** in the sense “in peace, in quietude, privately”, meaning that Joab proposed that he and Abner move aside to some quiet place to discuss matters with no disturbance.¹ Scholars usually adduce here the usage of the verb ***šlh***, of which ***ššelî*** is believed to be a derivative, in such verses as Ps 122:6-7; and cf. also Jer 12:1; Job 12:6; etc.

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2) Other scholars take their hint from the atmosphere of trickery and misleading that underlies Joab’s move and suggest to interpret baššelî in the sense “by trickery, misleadingly”, like the use of šlh in 2 Kgs 4:28 lô’ tašleh ṭofî “Don’t mislead me.”

Some of the Jewish commentators (e.g., Rashi and others cited by Segal) make use of another meaning of the verb šlh in Aramaic and translate “through ignorance, inadvertently”, referring to Abner who was careless regarding Joab’s intentions. Still others (M’šudat David, M’šudat Zion ad verse) understand it in the sense of forgetfulness: Joab wanted to talk with Abner regarding those matters about which the king had forgotten to talk with him.

3. The focus has thus exclusively been placed on the hapax šlî and on the form baššelî. No commentator has considered the possibility to look into the whole expression ʾdabbēr baššelî and to weigh the possibility that we perhaps have here an idiomatic expression whose components are not to be separated. It is therefore the purpose of this short note to look into the hypothesis that ʾdabbēr baššelî is such an idiomatic expression that means “to talk peace”, in the sense of formally negotiating and sealing a peace treaty. It is either comparable in meaning and function to the more familiar biblical expression ʾdabbēr šālôm “talk peace”, or it is a corruption of the latter. In

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2 And cf. b. Sanh. 49:1; see Segal, *op.cit.* for references.

3 Segal, *loc. cit.*

4 For this expression see the following verses: Jer 9:7; Zech 9:10; Ps 35:20; 85:9; 122:8. And compare the Akkadian equivalent phrase dibbî kînûtu ša sulûmmê dabâbu “to talk true words of peace” (see *CAD S* 372b). Cf. also the following expressions that convey the same or similar idea: ʾāšâ šālôm “make peace” (∥ kârat b’rît “seal a treaty” Josh 9:15), qârâ’ ʾšālôm “propose peace” (Deut 20:10), as well as dibrê šālôm “words of peace” (Deut 2:26; Esth 9:30) and b’rît šālôm “a peace pact/treaty” (Num 25:12; Isa 54:10; Ezek 34:25; 37:26). Finally, note also the expression ʾdabbēr
the first case, one has to postulate the existence in biblical Hebrew of the word ššēlî with the meaning “peace” and the like; and in the second case one should see in it a corrupt form of the word šālôm. In what follows I shall address the expression ḻ̄dabbēr baššēlî as it appears in the MT, attempting to explain its meaning in its context, without engaging in any text emendation options.

II

1. The hypothesis entertained here, that ḻ̄dabbēr baššēlî is an expression equivalent to the expression ḻ̄dabbēr šālôm in the sense of negotiating and sealing a peace agreement rests on the following observations:

1) The whole story of the meeting of Abner with David in 2 Samuel 3 is about an agreement negotiated between the two leaders, which culminated in a peace treaty between them. Most probably, and this claim will be substantiated below, one of the various expressions cited in n. 4 above. See HALAT 1395ff., esp. 1397f. sub “5. Frieden”; see Weinfeld, JAOS 93, pp. 191f. and passim.

main conditions or concessions on the part of David in his treaty with Abner was to appoint the latter to the post of the head of the army (šar haššāḇā’) in place of Joab.

2) An almost complete parallel to the episode in 2 Samuel 3 regarding the agreement between David and Abner occurs in 2 Sam 19:12ff., esp. v. 14, and 20:4-10, where David negotiates a treaty with Amasa son of Jether, the former general of Absalom (2 Sam 17:25). Here David promises Amasa in clear and loud voice to be his general in place of Joab (19:14). Amasa too, like Abner before him, was treacherously murdered by Joab who seems thus to have been worried about his post (20:9-10).

3) In both episodes Joab succeeds in misleading his victims and in putting their alertness to sleep. Since we are talking here of two tough and experienced war leaders, one must assume that there were very good reasons for them to bring down their shield and to be duped by Joab into their doom. It is my impression that both leaders, having already concluded a peace treaty with David, understood Joab’s approach as broadcasting his intention to ratify that treaty — during which ceremony, it is to be noted, Joab had not been present — and to show his largesse toward his supplanters by settling their differences in concluding a peace pact between them.

4) This assumed proposed peace pact between Joab and his victims is clearly reflected in the Amasa episode in 2 Sam 20:9, in the words šālôm “peace” and ʿah “treaty-partner (lit. brother)” addressed to Amasa — two clear technical treaty terms. It is also reflected in a third element in this encounter between Joab and Amasa, the ritual

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6 For šālôm see n. 4 above; for ʿah “brother” as a term expressing parity treaty relationships, see Num 20:14; 1 Kgs 9:13; 20:32; Amos 1:9 (beřît ʿahîm “covenant of brotherhood”); and Zech 11:14 (ʿahâwâ “brotherhood”) (cf. v. 10); and see for all Weinfeld, op. cit., pp. 191ff. passim.
of kissing which Joab was allegedly about to perform. I discuss the kiss in the OT and I suggest that it functions in several of its occurrences in a formal and legal-technical, rather than emotional, sense. That is, the kiss in the mentioned episodes was a symbolic-formal act with some legal dispositive meaning, intended to bring about some legal change in the situation. Such is, for example, the case when Samuel kisses Saul on the occasion of anointing him as king (1 Sam 10:1):

7 “...Joab took hold of Amasa’s beard as if to kiss him” (2 Sam 20:9).


9 See Gen 48:10; 27: 26-27; 1 Sam 10:1; 2 Sam 14:33; and perhaps also Exod 18:7; 1 Sam 20:41. See for a full discussion Malul in the studies mentioned in the previous note.


11 For this definition of legal symbolic acts in the sources of the ANE, see M. Malul, Studies in Mesopotamian Legal Symbolism (AOAT 221; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1988) 20-29.
“Samuel took a flask of oil and poured some on Saul’s head and kissed him, and said, ‘The Lord herewith anoints you ruler over his own people’”. The situation is manifestly formal and solemn. Samuel performs two acts: he kisses Saul and anoints him; and he recites a formula - a sort of verba solemnia that usually accompany such symbolic and formal rituals. One should note that Saul is no relative of Samuel, and if kisses in the Bible are usually exchanged between close mates and relatives, one must conclude that in this case the kiss does not express affection or some other emotional sense, but rather it is part of the formal and solemn ceremony.

Joab then approaches Amasa with the accepted and known formalities of treaty-making, allegedly proposing to settle their differences by sealing a pact between them.

On the basis of this clear thematic parallelism between this episode and the former one with Abner, it is eminently probably that there too Joab applied the same tactic of misleading his victim by masquerading as a prospective treaty partner. In this episode may then very well reflect or hint somehow at some formal and solemn words and other treaty formalities on the part of Joab which were interpreted as such by unwary Abner.

5) One final observation might add further support to the treaty setting suggested for this episode. Since tōk hašššašar “the midst of the gate” into which Joab leads Abner perhaps refers to the open space between the city gates, the piazza where the assembly

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12 See for this Malul, op. cit., passim.

13 The words šālôm “peace” and ʾāḥî “my brother”, declared probably as part of the verba solemnia, and the symbolic act of kissing.

14 2 Sam 3:27; cf. also Jer 39:3 šaʾar hattāwek “the middle gate”.
and the town elders convene, and where all the legal and other transactions take place,\textsuperscript{15} I wonder whether its mention in this context also hints at the formal setting of treaty-making envisaged behind the episode. Joab then would have conducted unsuspecting Abner to the place where their formal pact would have allegedly been sealed. It is to be mentioned that the LXX translates this phrase to mean something like “to the \textit{side} of the gate” (lit. “to the hip of the gate”), in accordance with its understanding that the midst of the gate could hardly have been the right place where the treacherous deed of Joab was about to take place.\textsuperscript{16} But if we follow the understanding that Joab used masquerading tactics to dupe his victim, “the midst of the gate” would fit perfectly his intention of putting Abner’s alertness to sleep. This, however, is not certain at all.

2. In sum, the phrase \textit{līdabbēr baššēlī} in 2 Sam 3:27 seems to be equivalent in its underlying meaning to such a technical expression from the vocabulary of treaty-making as \textit{līdabbēr šālôm}, and thus it too is to be identified as such a technical expression denoting “to talk peace” in the sense “to negotiate and seal a peace treaty”. These two expressions may then be either synonyms, in which case the \textit{hapax} šēlī would be another word in biblical Hebrew denoting peace; or the word šēlī should be emended to šālôm. Since there is in biblical Hebrew the root šl̄h with its various derivatives,\textsuperscript{17} all denoting meanings from the semantic field of peace, quietude and the

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\textsuperscript{15} See especially the vivid picture described in Ruth 4:ff.; cf. 2 Sam 15:ff.; Gen 23:10, 18; 34:20, 24; see Segal, \textit{loc. cit.} (n. 1 above). In \textit{b. Sanh.} 49:1 quoted above the Rabbis interpret Joab’s leading Abner “to the midst of the gate” as summoning him to court for a trial before the elders of the Sanhedrin for his murder of Asahel, Joab’s brother (2 Sam 2:18-23).

\textsuperscript{16} Cf. Driver, \textit{loc. cit.} (n. 1 above).

\textsuperscript{17} šālēw, *šālu, šalwā, šēlī; see \textit{HALAT} 1393a.
like, no emendation of the word Šōfî is needed. It seems then that the common derivation of this word by most commentators from the root Šīh is eminently possible.