

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

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LECTURE 99: CHAPTER 19 (PART II)

THE RETURN OF SHIM'I AND TZIVA

I. The Anointed one of God

In the previous *shiur*, we saw that it was specifically the men of Yehuda whom David asked to cross with him over the Jordan and accompany him on his return to Jerusalem. But even before he crossed the Jordan, David encountered two people whom he had met one after the other when he was fleeing from Jerusalem (above, chapter 15):

(17) And Shim'i the son of Gera, the Binyaminite, who was of Bachurim, made haste and came down with the men of Yehuda to meet king David. (18) And there were a thousand men of Binyamin with him, and Tziva the servant of the house of Shaul, and his fifteen sons and his twenty servants with him. And they rushed into the Jordan before the king. (19) And the ferryboat passed to and fro¹[1] to bring over the king's household, and to do what he thought good. And Shim'i the son of Gera fell down before the king, when he would go over the Jordan. (21) And he said to the king, " Let not my lord impute iniquity unto me, neither do you remember that which your servant did iniquitously the day that my lord the king went out of Jerusalem, that the king should take it to his heart.²[2] (21) For your servant does know

1 [1] "*Avara* – a boat by way of which one crosses (*over*) the width of a river" (Rashi). The verse makes use of a play on words.

2 [2] The words, "that the king should take to his heart," relate to the words "neither do you remember." He means to say: Let the king not remember the matter so that he should take it to heart.

that I have sinned; therefore, behold, I am come this day the first of all the house of Yosef to go down to meet my lord the king.”

The reason that Tziva is mentioned here will be addressed below; we will first deal with Shim'i ben Gera. Shim'i demonstrates here a developed political sense. He well understands which way the wind is blowing, and just as he was quick to curse David at the beginning of Avshalom's rebellion, he is similarly quick to apologize to him as David sets out on his return to Jerusalem. Shim'i is fully aware that there is no excuse for his actions, and he therefore admits that he had sinned and does not try to justify his behavior. He employs flattery and notes the fact that he is the first of all the tribes of Israel to greet the king. Nonetheless, Shim'i also brings with him a thousand Binyaminites, in order to show David that he is a man of influence, and that it would be wise to take him into account.

At this stage, Avishai ben Tzeruya intervenes and seeks to do what he had already suggested doing in chapter 16 – kill Shim'i.

(22) But Avishai the son of Tzeruya answered and said, “ Shall not Shim'i be put to death for this, because he cursed **the Lord's anointed?”**

It is not by chance that Avishai uses the term, "the Lord's anointed." It was precisely this expression that David had invoked when he barred Avishai from killing Shaul:

So David and Avishai came to the people by night; and, behold, Shaul lay sleeping within the barricade, with his spear stuck in the ground at his head; and Avner and the people lay round about him. Then said Avishai to David, “ God has delivered up your enemy into your hand this day; now therefore let me smite him, I pray you, with the spear to the earth at one stroke, and I will not smite him the second time.” And David said to Avishai, “ Destroy him not; for who can put forth his hand against **the Lord's anointed**, and be guiltless?” And David said, “ As the Lord lives, nay, but the Lord shall smite him; or his day shall come to die; or he shall go down into battle, and be swept away. The Lord forbid it me, that I should put forth my hand against **the Lord's anointed...**” ([1 Shmuel 16:7-11](#))

In his words to David, Avishai alludes to him as follows: Surely it was you who spoke about the severity of bringing harm upon the Lord's anointed, even when that same person who was anointed by the Lord pursued you in order to kill you for no reason. How, then, can you pass over Shim'i ben Gera's insult in silence, as you too are the Lord's anointed? At the time, I refrained from taking action because of the circumstances of the hour. But now that God has once again shined His light upon you – is it not the time to punish one who cursed the Lord's anointed?

David, however, refuses to be tempted by the offer:

(23) And David said, “ What have I to do with you, you sons of Tzeruya, that you should this day be adversaries to me? Shall any man be put to death this day in Israel? For do I not know that I am this day king over Israel?”

David once again rebukes Avishai with the words, "you sons of Tzeruya," just as he had rebuked him earlier, thus alluding to the hot and unbalanced temperament of Yoav and Avishai. David argues that this temperament is a serious problem for him,³[3] and that it expresses a lack of understanding of the greatness of the day. The day on which David is restored to his kingship over all of Israel is not the day on which to settle accounts with someone who had accused him of destroying the house of Shaul.⁴[4] Such a step is liable to harm the delicate relations that David had

3 [3] From here the sharp expression, "*liheyot le-satan*," as we find in the words of the Pelishti officers to Akhish about David's joining their camp: "But the princes of the Pelishtim were wroth with him; and the princes of the Pelishtim said to him, ' Make the man return, that he may go back to his place where you have appointed him, and let him not go down with us to battle, **lest in the battle he become an adversary to us** (*yiheyeh lanu le-satan*); for wherewith should this fellow reconcile himself unto his lord? Should it not be with the heads of these men?' " ([I Shmuel 29:4](#)).

4 [4] As may be recalled, this is a recurring motif in the book of Shmuel: For this reason Shaul did not punish those who scoffed at him following his victory over Amon ([I Shmuel 11:12-13](#)); and for this reason the people prevented Shaul from putting Yonatan to death after he ate the honey at the time of the victory over the Pelishtim (ibid. 14:45). Under similar circumstances, Yonatan persuades Shaul not to harm David (ibid. 19). Now David adopts with respect to Shim'i ben Gera the same principle by means of which he had been saved by Yonatan – the very principle by means of which Yonatan himself had been saved earlier.

with the tribes of Israel, which are now at a very sensitive crossroads. Moreover, Shim'i ben Gera had brought with him a thousand men, and any step taken against him would be understood as a step taken against all of them. David therefore resolutely asserts:

(24) And the king said unto Shim'i, " You shall not die." And the king swore unto him.⁵[5]

David pardons Shim'i – for the time being. This step does not stem from the feeling that Shim'i's apology was genuine and that he is truly deserving of forgiveness for his serious offenses in the past, but merely from a problem of timing. Indeed, in his testament to Shelomo, David will leave explicit instructions regarding Shim'i:

" And, behold, there is with you Shim'i the son of Gera, the Binyaminite, of Bachurim, who cursed me with a grievous curse in the day when I went to Machanayim; but he came down to meet me at the Jordan, and I swore to him by the Lord, saying, ' I will not put you to death with the sword.' Now therefore hold him not guiltless, for you are a wise man; and you will know what you ought to do to him,⁶[6] and you shall bring his hoar head down to the grave with blood." ([I Melakhim 2:8-9](#))

II. Mefiboshet

Mention is made in verse 18 of another person who came quickly to greet David: "And Tziva the servant of the house of Shaul, and his fifteen sons and his twenty servants with him. And they rushed into the Jordan before the king." We already discussed the villainous personality of Tziva above in chapters 9 and 16. We saw that Tziva took control of the property of the house of Shaul, and that after David transferred the assets to the lame

5 [5] This verse may reflect two stages: First, David tells Shim'i that he will not die, and after Shim'i presses David, David takes an oath about the matter.

6 [6] In other words, since David obligated himself toward Shim'i, he can not bring harm to Shim'i without special cause, and therefore Shelomo must find other grounds for putting him to death. Shelomo in his wisdom found a way – see [I Melakhim 2:36-46](#).

Mefiboshet, Tziva waited for the opportunity to regain control over them. During Avshalom's rebellion, Tziva went to David and supplied him with food and equipment. He thereby won over David's heart and got back the property that had been given to Mefiboshet by slandering him with the claim that he had remained in Jerusalem in order to receive the kingdom.^{7[7]} We noted the illogic of this charge, and David's strange decision to transfer the assets to Tziva without even hearing the other side. We explained that it is possible that David directed towards Mefiboshet his mixed feelings about Yonatan, who had remained with his father and did not join David in his wanderings.

It stands to reason that Tziva quickly appeared before David in order to strengthen his support for him prior to the expected meeting between David and Mefiboshet, at which time David would hear Mefiboshet's logical and balanced version of the events. Indeed, the first thing that is mentioned after David returns to Jerusalem is his conversation with Mefiboshet:

(25) And Mefiboshet the son of Shaul came down to meet the king; and he had neither dressed his feet,^{8[8]} nor trimmed his beard,^{9[9]} nor washed his clothes, from the day the king departed until the day he came home in peace. (26) And it came to pass, when he was come to Jerusalem to meet the king, that the king said to him, " Why went you not with me, Mefiboshet?"

This encounter takes place in Jerusalem, after David comes home, and the reason that it is reported here will be explained at the end of this *shiur*. David immediately attacks Mefiboshet: "Why went you not with me Mefiboshet?" It would seem that these words conceal a deeper cry: Why went you not with me Yonatan? Why went you not with me Mefiboshet? Why are you never at my side precisely when more than anything else I need the support of trustworthy people? Why?

7 [7] Mentioning Tziva together with Shim'i ben Gera strengthens the negative assessment of him.

8 [8] It would seem that the reference here is to treatment of the toenails, as in: "And she shall pare her nails" ([Devarim 21:12](#)). This is the explanation of Ralbag; for alternative explanations, see Rashi and Radak.

9 [9] Similar to the law of the leper: "And he shall cover his upper lip" ([Vayikra 13:45](#)). See also [Yechezkel 24:17](#).

Mefiboshet does not panic; he responds with a heartfelt answer:

(27) And he answered, “ My lord, O king, my servant deceived me; for your servant said, ‘ I will saddle me an ass that I may ride thereon and go with the king;’ because your servant is lame. (28) And he has slandered your servant¹⁰[10] to my lord the king; but my lord the king is as an angel of God; do therefore what is good in your eyes. (29) For all my father's house were deserving of death at the hand of my lord the king; yet you set your servant among those that eat at your own table. What right therefore have I yet? **Or why should I cry any more unto the king?**” ¹¹[11]

It clearly appears from these verses that justice lay with Mefiboshet. Mefiboshet endangered himself and practiced rites of mourning during the time of the rebellion. Without a doubt, this is not the way that a person acts if he is expecting that "today will the house of Israel restore me the kingdom of my father" (16:3), as Tziva had slandered him. Mefiboshet's emotional words about David's generosity, who related to him with lovingkindness despite the circumstances, reinforce this feeling.

But David does not consider any of this:

(30) And the king said to him, “ Why speak you any more of your matters? I say, You and Tziva divide the land.”

David responds with impatience. He acts as if he is unable to decide who is right and divides the land between Tziva and Mefiboshet. Here, David

¹⁰ [10] The word "*va-yerage*" is used here in the sense of "*va-yerakhe*" (and he slandered), as in the verse: "That has no slander (*raga*) upon his tongue" ([Tehillim 15:3](#)). The palatal letters (*gimmel*, *khaf*, *kuf*) often interchange. See Rashi, [Vayikra 19:16](#).

¹¹ [11] It is possible that this expression alludes to the words of Shmuel regarding the law of the king: "And he will take your fields, and your vineyards, and your oliveyards, even the best of them...And you shall cry out in that day because of your king whom you shall have chosen for yourselves" ([I Shmuel 8:14-18](#)). By taking the field from Mefiboshet, David actualizes Shmuel's warning.

was no longer in distress, fleeing into the desert, but at rest in his home. Why then did he not get involved in this quarrel? It stands to reason that this decision that the two should divide the land did not stem from a real doubt about how to understand the case.¹²[12] This decision expresses a different uncertainty, which was much more significant in David's life: What was the true nature of Yonatan's relationship with him? David did not free himself of this uncertainty, and he chose to express it at the expense of poor Mefiboshet.

The Abravanel correctly points out that at the beginning of this story Mefiboshet is called "the son of Shaul" (v. 25) – "Scripture traced him to Shaul to allude that David did not treat him as the son of Yonatan, whom he loved with all his soul, but rather as the son of Shaul." Based on this we can add that Scripture wishes to allude that in his conduct in this affair, David lumped Mefiboshet and his father with Shaul.

Mefiboshet's reaction to David's decision is also interesting:

(31) And Mefiboshet said to the king, "Yea, let him take all, forasmuch as my lord the king is come in peace unto his own house."

This reaction brings to mind Shlomo's judgment ([1 Melakhim 3](#)), which is similar to the story before us in several ways. In both cases the king is supposed to judge which of two parties is speaking the truth; in both cases he rules that the matter in dispute should be split between the two parties; and in both cases one of the parties expresses readiness to waive his or her portion. Mefiboshet's response reminds us of the mother's words in Shlomo's judgment: "Oh, my lord, give her the living child, and in no wise slay it" (ibid. v. 26). In his wisdom, however, Shlomo understood that the party who was ready to waive her portion was telling the truth, whereas David does not react to Mefiboshet's words and leaves his decision in place.

¹² [12] David also erred from a halakhic perspective. The rule of splitting is only applied to a monetary doubt when neither party enjoys presumptive rights in the property. In our case, Mefiboshet enjoyed presumptive rights in the property, and even if David was in doubt, he therefore should not have removed the property from Mefiboshet's possession. But as stated, according to the plain sense of the story, the problem lay in David's very doubts regarding Mefiboshet.

Chazal are strongly critical of David's decision:

R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav: When David said to Mefiboshet, "You and Tziva divide the land," a heavenly voice came forth and declared to him: "Rechav'am and Yerav'am shall divide the kingdom."
R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav: Had not David paid heed to slander, the kingdom of the house of David would not have been divided, Israel would not have engaged in idolatry, and we would not have been exiled from our country. ([Shabbat 56b](#))

The correctness of this argument that connects David's mistake here to the splitting of the kingdom between Yerav'am and Rechav'am will be examined later in the story. In any event, *Chazal* had a harsh assessment of David's action, and viewed it as the root of many troubles that later befell the people of Israel.

In conclusion, let us go back to the question raised above: Why was this incident, which took place when David returned to Jerusalem, written here, even before the account of his crossing the Jordan? We can now say that the story was reported here for substantive reasons – in order to join the story of Tziva and Mefiboshet to the story of Shim'i ben Gera, like in chapter 16. Furthermore, this placement joins David's failure with respect to Mefiboshet to another mistake that he made – giving special precedence to the tribe of Yehuda, as we saw in the previous *shiur*. For these two mistakes, David will quickly pay a heavy price.

(Translated by David Strauss)
