

## THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

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### LECTURE 101: CHAPTER 20 (PART II)

#### THE REBELLION OF SHEVA BEN BIKHRI (CONTINUATION)

##### I. Amasa Ben Yeter's failure

David sends Amasa ben Yeter, his new commander-in-chief, to assemble the army of Yehuda in order to quickly suppress Sheva ben Bikhri's rebellion. But Amasa fails already in his first mission:

(4) Then said the king to Amasa, " Call me the men of Yehuda together within three days, and be you here present." 1[1] (5) So Amasa went to call the men of Yehuda together, but he tarried longer than the set time which he had appointed him.

Scripture does not explain why Amasa failed. Fundamentally, there are two possible reasons for his failure. It is possible that it stemmed from the circumstances – that is to say, from the confusion in the aftermath of Avshalom's rebellion. The people of Yehuda found themselves in an awkward situation. Until not long ago, many of them were included among those who had rebelled against David, and now, a short time afterwards, they are being called to go out to war against the rest of the tribes of Israel. This situation is likely to be the reason for their hesitation to respond to Amasa's call-up orders. On the other hand, even those who had supported David during the time of Avshalom's rebellion presumably found it difficult to stand behind Amasa ben Yeter, who was so identified with Avshalom's rebellion.

But it is also possible that the failure lay in Amasa himself. Whether because of the circumstances mentioned above, because of the lack of military capability at the level to which David had grown accustomed from Yoav ben Tzeruya, or because

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1 [1] In other words, "At the end of three days, make sure that you are present here before me" (Rashi).

of some other reason, it seems that the role was just too big for him. Thus far, Amasa had not demonstrated any special leadership qualities, and in the one military test that he had faced as Avshalom's commander-in-chief, he proved an utter failure.

In any event, it seems that Scripture hid the reason for Amasa's failure in order to emphasize the failure of someone else – that of David himself. In the previous chapter, we noted the unfairness of Yoav ben Tzeruya's dismissal precisely following a campaign that he had conducted in proper manner and of the appointment of the rebel Amasa ben Yeter in his place. Now David pays the price and his situation becomes progressively worse. The likelihood of nipping the rebellion in the bud diminishes, and the revolt is liable to gather momentum.

## II. The Killing of Amasa

The delay in Amasa's mustering of the people of Yehuda greatly concerns David, and seeing no alternative, he turns to the last senior army officer to whom he can turn – Yoav's brother, Avishai ben Tzeruya.

(6) And David said to Avishai, “ Now will Sheva the son of Bikhri do us more harm than did Avshalom; take your lord's servants, and pursue after him, lest he get him fortified cities, and escape out of our sight.” 2[2]

Who are "your lord's servants"? Rashi explains that the reference is to King David's servants. More persuasive is the understanding of the Radak that the reference is to the men of Yoav, who was Avishai's senior.<sup>3</sup>[3] This is also implied by the next verse:

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2 [2] The words, "*ve-hitzil eineinu*," are difficult. Rashi understands that the verse is abridged, and that it means: "and he will escape out of our sight." Ralbag explains that it means that "Sheva will draw people from us in those fortified cities and join them to his camp." See also Radak and *Da'at Mikra*.

3 [3] Compare with the words of Uriya the Hittite to David: "**And my lord Yoav, and the servants of my lord**, are encamped in the open field" (II *Shemuel* 11:11).

(7) And there went out after him **Yoav's men**, and the Keretites and the Peletites, and all the mighty men; and they went out of Jerusalem, to pursue after Sheva the son of Bikhri.

According to this, we understand the surprising turn of events in the continuation:

(8) When they were at the great stone which is in Giv'on,<sup>4</sup> Amasa came to meet them. And Yoav was girded with his apparel of war that he had put on...

When Avishai and his men arrive in Giv'on, it suddenly turns out that Yoav is also with them. It stands to reason that Yoav was still loyal to David, and that when he saw the king's distress, he overcame the insult of his dismissal and joined the other fighters in order to suppress the revolt. Once again, we encounter a positive aspect of Yoav's complicated personality and his great loyalty to David.

The most surprising thing in the verse, however, is the fact that Amasa was found in Giv'on. As may be recalled, Amasa was sent to recruit troops from among the men of Yehuda within three days, but he failed in his mission and was late. Amasa should have been in Yehuda, completing the slow recruitment process. Instead, we find him in Giv'on, in the very heart of Binyamin,<sup>5</sup> the tribal territory of Sheva ben Bikhri!

It stands to reason then that Amasa ben Yeter betrayed David a second time. After failing in his mission, Avshalom's commander-in-chief in the first rebellion decides to desert and join the second rebellion as well. It may also be that Amasa was disappointed by the lack of enlistment on the part of the men of Yehuda, and

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4 [4] The phrase "great stone" serves in various other places in the sense of "*bama*," e.g., the great stone on which the people of Beit Shemesh offered the cows which the Pelishtim sent together with the ark (see I *Shemuel* 6:14), and the stone on which Shaul offered sacrifices after the people ate with the blood (ibid. 14:33-35); see also *Yehoshua* 24:26. It is possible that the "great stone which is in Giv'on" was the great *bama* in Giv'on (see I *Melakhim* 3:4).

5 [5] Giv'on's significance as part of the tribal territory of Binyamin, and especially as the place of residence of the house of Shaul, was discussed above, in chapter 2.

that he saw it as a sign of the weakness of the men of David. In any event, the fact that he was found in Binyamin seems to indicate that he had betrayed David.

As was mentioned, Yoav ben Tzeruya was also found there, so that there was now a meeting between two of David's generals – one who had been deposed, and another who now rebelled.

...and thereon was a girdle with a sword fastened upon his loins in the sheath thereof; and as he went forth it fell out.<sup>6[6]</sup> (9) And Yoav said to Amasa, "Is it well with you, my brother?" And Yoav took Amasa by the beard with his right hand to kiss him. (10) But Amasa took no heed to the sword that was in Yoav's hand; so he smote him therewith in the groin, and shed out his bowels to the ground, and struck him not again; and he died. And Yoav and Avishai his brother pursued after Sheva the son of Bikhri.

Yoav conducts himself with cunning. He fools Amasa into thinking that his intentions are peaceful, causing him to let down his guard, and then he strikes with a fatal blow. There is a clear similarity between the account of Amasa's murder and that of another general – Avner ben Ner – which we discussed at length in chapter 3:

1) In both cases, Yoav strikes at an enemy general who had joined David's ranks in the wake of the other side's defeat.

2) In both cases, Yoav fools his victim into thinking that his intentions were peaceful. In our story, Yoav turns to Amasa inquiring into his welfare and kisses him, and in chapter 3, he enters into a discussion with Avner.

3) In both cases, Yoav exploits the lack of caution on the part of his opponent and strikes him in the groin.

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6 [6] The words, "*ve-hu yatza va-tipol*," are difficult. Most of the commentators explain that when Yoav went out toward Amasa ben Yeter, the sword fell from its sheath, and Yoav bent down and grabbed it without Amasa ben Yeter noticing, and in this way he managed to kill Amasa, as is stated below in v. 10: "But Amasa took no heed to the sword that was in Yoav's hand."

4) Both stories have a connection to Giv'on: Amasa is killed in Giv'on and Avner is killed in revenge for the killing of Asa' el, brother of Yoav and Avishai, at the hands of Avner at the battle as the pool in Giv'on.

Indeed, even David connected the two cases, and in his testament to Shelomo he asks him to carry out the law against Yoav ben Tzeruya because of "what he did to the two captains of the hosts of Israel, to Avner the son of Ner and to Amasa the son of Yeter, whom he slew, and shed the blood of war in peace, and put the blood of war upon his girdle that was about his loins, and in his shoes that were on his feet"<sup>7[7]</sup> (1 *Melakhim* 2:5).

However, the similarity between the two accounts only emphasizes the essential difference between them, as well as the similarity between the formulation: "**And Yoav and Avishai** his brother pursued after Sheva the son of Bikhri" and what is stated following the killing of Avner: "**So Yoav and Avishai his brother** slew Avner, because he had killed their brother Asa'el at Giv'on in the battle" (3:30). At the killing of Avner, Yoav and Avishai acted out of personal interest, in retribution for the killing of Asa'el, and we already demonstrated at length in chapter 3 that this taking of revenge was not justified and that it caused great damage to David. Here, in contrast, Scripture attests that Yoav and Avishai acted not out of personal interest, but out of a desire to bring Sheva ben Bikhri's rebellion to a quick end. This may be seen as Scripture's justification for the killing of the treacherous general, Amasa ben Yeter.

If this is correct, it was not right of David to lump the two actions together. The killing of Avner was an act of murder, whereas the killing of Amasa was a justified killing. One again, we are witness to a phenomenon that we have noted several times in the past, that Scripture sets up a contrast between David and Yoav. When David acts properly, Yoav is the negative figure, and vice versa. In our context, in chapter 3 it was David who acted in proper manner, in an attempt to unite all the tribes of Israel under his rule, and it was Yoav who almost destroyed this process of unification when he killed Avner out of personal (and unjustified) interest, stirring up the people's suspicions that David stood behind the action. In our chapter, the picture is just the opposite. It is David who divided the people with the preferential treatment

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<sup>7 [7]</sup> The words: "And put the blood of war **upon his girdle** that was **about his loins** and in his shoes that were on his feet" seem to allude to the words in our chapter: "And thereon was **a girdle** with a sword fastened **upon his loins** in the sheath thereof; and as he went forth it fell out."

that he gave the tribe of Yehuda, which included the dismissal of Yoav and the appointment of Amasa ben Yeter in his place. But Yoav, despite the insult, did not hesitate to come to David's help in his time of distress, and in the end, Sheva ben Bikhri's rebellion was put down because of him.<sup>8[8]</sup>

Following the killing of Amasa, things return to their previous course:

(11) And there stood by him one of Yoav's young men, and said, " He that favors Yoav and he that is for David let him follow Yoav." (12) And Amasa lay wallowing in his blood in the midst of the highway. And when the man saw that all the people stood still, he carried Amasa out of the highway into the field, and cast a garment over him, when he saw that everyone that came by him stood still. (13) When he was removed out of the highway, all the people went on after Yoav to pursue after Sheva the son of Bikhri. (14) And he went<sup>9[9]</sup> through all the tribes of Israel unto Avel, and to Beit-Ma'akha,<sup>10[10]</sup> and all the Berites;<sup>11[11]</sup> and they were gathered together, and went in also after him.

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8 [8] Indeed, the words, "**And Yoav and Avishai** his brother **pursued** after Sheva the son of Bikhri," imply that Yoav had become the dominant figure, and that Avishai was subordinate to him (compare with: "**And Rachel and Lea answered** and said to him" (*Bereishit* 31:14) – unlike David, who turned to Avishai alone.

9 [9] The entire verse can be understood in reference to Sheva ben Bikhri (following Rashi), who passed through all of Israel in order to recruit troops, or in reference to Yoav ben Tzeruya (following *Metzudat David*), who passed through all the tribes of Israel in order to restore them to David's kingdom and to recruit them against Sheva ben Bikhri.

10 [10] The reference is to a city named Avel-Beit-Ma'akha (see I *Melakhim* 15:20) – to distinguish it from other cities called Avel, e.g. Avel-Mechola (*Shofetim* 7:22) and Avel-ha-Shittim (*Bemidbar* 33:49). Avel-Beit-Ma'akha is located in the northeastern part of *Eretz Israel*, and it is commonly identified with today's Tel-Avil, between Metulla and Kefar-Gil'adi. Some draw a connection between Ma'akha and the tribe of Binyamin (from which Sheva ben Bikhri came) based on I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 7:6-17, which implies that Makhir the son of Menashe was married to Ma'akha, who seems to have come from Binyamin. Ma'akha was also the name of the wife of the head of the family from which the house of Shaul descended (see *ibid.* 8:29). It should be noted, however, that these verses in *Divrei Ha-yamim* are difficult to understand.

11 [11] What are or who are "the Berites"? Rashi writes: "I do not know what they are." *Metzudat David* writes that the reference is to a district, which

Yoav's young man proclaimed in the ears of David's men that from now on there would be no opposition between Yoav and David, and therefore: "He that is for David let him follow Yoav!" In the next scene, we find a clear literary expression of Scripture's attitude toward Amasa ben Yeter. Amasa's corpse, wallowing in its blood, stood in the way of the troops that went out to suppress the rebellion; only after it was moved in humiliating manner into the field alongside the road and a garment was cast over it did the troops continue in their pursuit of Sheva ben Bikhri. In this way, Scripture wishes to say that even in his death, Amasa ben Yeter blocked the mission in which he had failed, until his body was removed from the road<sup>12</sup>[12] and the soldiers continued in the footsteps of Yoav ben Tzeruya.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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includes many places and people. Ralbag suggests that the reference is to Be'erotayim, on the assumption that the verse deals with Sheva ben Bikhri (see above, note 9), for Be'erot was counted among the cities of Binyamin (see *Yehoshua* 18:25; and see what we wrote in chapter 4 on the status of the city of Be'erot), and therefore it is reasonable that they would follow Sheva ben Bikhri. Some suggest that the reference is to the descendants of Beir ben Tzofach from the tribe of Asher, mentioned in I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 7:36.

12 [12] Compare with: "Clear you the way of the people; cast up, cast up the highway, gather out the stones" (*Yeshayahu* 62:10). This verse as well refers to the clearing away of obstacles found on a road.