

## THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

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### LECTURE 94: CHAPTER 17 (PART I)

#### CHUSHAI'S COUNSEL

##### I. Chushai's Wisdom

We ended the previous *shiur* at the height of tension. Achitofel had offered sound and logical advice: exploit the momentum, go out to battle with an efficient force that will mount an assault against David's camp, kill David, and bring the rebellion to its conclusion. Avshalom and his men first accepted this advice, but then Avshalom asked Chushai to present his position. We suggested that this request stemmed from Achitofel's emphasis of his own part in the action, which effectively put Avshalom in his shadow. Accordingly, Avshalom now turns to Chushai:

(6) And when Chushai came to Avshalom, Avshalom spoke to him, saying, " Achitofel has spoken after this manner; shall we act according to his words? If not, speak you.

Now everything hangs on Chushai: Will he succeed in exploiting Avshalom's weak point and convince him to choose another path? Chushai now delivers the speech of his lifetime. He opens with a single sentence:

(7) And Chushai said to Avshalom, " The counsel that Achitofel has given this time is not good."

Chushai's wisdom is already evident here. He does not open with an overall assault against Achitofel, nor does he treat him with scorn. He is well aware that "the counsel of Achitofel, which he counseled in those days, was as if a man inquired of the word of God; so was all the counsel of Achitofel both with David and with

Avshalom" (16:23). He therefore emphasizes that the counsel offered by Achitofel is not good "this time." That is to say, Achitofel is indeed an important and valued counselor, but in this instance, he has erred.

It seems that Chushai was waiting for some reaction on the part of Avshalom and his men. When no response followed, Chushai's confidence grew, and now he continues and addresses the substance of Achitofel's counsel:

(8) Chushai said moreover, " You know your father and his men, that they are mighty men, and they are embittered in their minds,<sup>1[1]</sup> as a bear robbed of her cubs<sup>2[2]</sup> in the field; and your father is a man of war, and will not lodge with the people. (9) Behold, he is hid now in some pit, or in some place; and it will come to pass, when they fall upon them at the first,<sup>3[3]</sup> and whosoever hears it shall say, ' There is a slaughter among the people that follow Avshalom;' (10) Then even he that is valiant, whose heart is as the heart of a lion, will utterly melt;<sup>4[4]</sup> for all Israel knows that your father is a mighty man,

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1 [1] The expression "*marei nefesh*" describes people who are filled with anger and bitterness, and are therefore liable to fight with cruelty and disproportionality, and it is not a good idea to go out against them. Compare with the words of the people of Dan to Mikha: "And the people of Dan said to him, ' Let not your voice be heard among us, lest embittered fellows fall upon you, and you lose your life, with the lives of your household' " ([Shoftim 18:25](#)).

2 [2] "A bear robbed of her cubs" is a wild animal in an agitated state that acts with special cruelty: "I will meet them as a bear that is bereaved of her cubs, and will rend the enclosure of their heart; and there will I devour them like a lioness; the wild beast shall tear them" ([Hoshea 13:8](#)). This is the basis for the ironic assertion in the book of [Mishlei \(17:12\)](#): "Let a bear robbed of her cubs meet a man, rather than a fool in his folly."

3 [3] That is to say, David is waiting to ambush Avshalom, and if they come to seize him, he will engage in a preemptive strike (referred to in Scripture as "*nefila*;" see [Yehoshua 11:7](#); [Iyov 1:15](#)), which will lead to reports about the rout of Avshalom's army.

4 [4] According to the simple understanding, this means that if someone hears of David's victory over the forces that Achitofel wishes to send at this time, his heart will melt, even if he is as mighty as a lion (see Rashi). The Radak, however, understands that the verse is referring to Achitofel, that even though he is valiant (and here Chushai purposely builds up the image of Achitofel), his heart will melt after the defeat. The Ralbag suggests that these words relate to David as a question: "For David is also a valiant man, whose heart is like the heart of a lion; how then do you think that his heart will melt, as

and they that are with him are valiant men. (11) But I counsel that all Israel be gathered together to you, from Dan even to Be'er-Sheva, as the sand that is by the sea for multitude; and that you go to battle in your own person. (12) So shall we come upon him in some place where he shall be found, and we will light upon him as the dew falls on the ground; and of him and of all the men that are with him we will not leave so much as one. (12) Moreover, if he withdraws himself into a city, then shall all Israel bring up ropes to that city, and we will draw him into the valley until there be not one small stone found there.

Chushai's words are clearly divided into two sections: In verses 8-10, he explains why in his opinion Achitofel has erred this time, and in verses 11-13, he proposes his own plan how to deal with David and his men. Substantively, Chushai's words focus upon the same thing upon which Achitofel's words had focused, and the disagreement centers on one point – the momentum. Achitofel's counsel was to exploit the momentum, whereas Chushai argues that it is precisely this counsel that will lead to a loss of momentum. The disagreement stems from a dispute about how to assess the situation. Achitofel assumes that David is tired and weary, and it therefore would be easy to exploit this weakness and defeat him, whereas Chushai argues that David is ready for battle. If Achitofel and his army go out now to fight David, they will suffer defeat, for David is prepared for such a step, and this defeat, argues Chushai, will lead to a total loss of momentum and to fear of David. Instead, Chushai proposes that Avshalom should prepare himself for a much larger battle; he should gather a huge army from all of Israel, and in that way he will enjoy incontrovertible victory.

Chushai's true goal was, of course, to buy time: He agreed with Achitofel that the key question was that of the momentum, and it was his assessment that if the momentum is not now exploited, the rebellion would crumble. His major concern at this time was to prevent the execution of Achitofel's plan to strike an immediate blow against David.

## II. Rhetorical Devices

In addition to the substance of his words, Chushai makes use of various rhetorical devices, the goal of which was to persuade Avshalom to accept his position:

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Achitofel had said: 'And I will make him afraid; and all the people that are with him shall flee' ?"

1) First and foremost, Chushai's words address what he understood had troubled Avshalom with respect to Achitofel's counsel – that is to say, the place that Achitofel had assigned himself in his plan. Chushai's advice assigns Avshalom a central role: "I counsel that all Israel be gathered together **to you...**and that you go to battle **in your own person** (*panekha*)." This wording is reminiscent of Moshe's words to God: " And he said to Him: ' If **Your presence** (*panekha*) go not with me, carry us not up hence' " ([Shemot 33:15](#)). Chushai thus shows Avshalom great respect, comparing him to God Himself, who leads the people of Israel through the wilderness.<sup>5[5]</sup> On the other hand, the sole mention of Avshalom by name is made in a warning about the possibility of a rout that would be called by his name: "And whosoever hears it shall say, ' There is a slaughter among the people that follow **Avshalom.**' " "

Chushai also refrains from making mention of himself, but rather always speaks in the plural: "So shall we come upon him...and we will light upon him...and we will draw him..." In this way, Chushai expresses the idea that while he is part of the camp, he enjoys no special standing, and therefore he does not constitute a threat to Avshalom's position.

2) As stated, the disagreement revolved around the question of what David was presently doing. In order to convince Avshalom that he was right, Chushai emphasizes that everybody knows – Avshalom included – that David is a mighty man, and therefore it is clear to all that Chushai is right: "**You know** your father and his men, that they are mighty men...**for all Israel knows** that your father is a mighty man..." Chushai repeats the words "your father" three times (twice in v. 8 and again in v. 10) in order to emphasize that Avshalom knows his father well.<sup>6[6]</sup>

3) Nevertheless, when Chushai moves on to describe the blow that will be landed upon David, he is careful not to mention him by name or by title, "the king," but rather to speak of him in third person, without specifying to whom he is referring: "So shall we come upon him...and we will light upon him...and of him and of all the men that are with him we will not leave so much as one...if he withdraws himself into a city...and we will draw him..." Chushai seems to have sensed that even the rebellious Avshalom is liable to be put off by the image of the blow that will land on

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5 [5] See Radak, who notes this correspondence.

6 [6] This, too, is in contrast to Achitofel, who referred to Avshalom's father as "David" (v. 1) or "the king" (v. 2).

his father presented in such a personal manner, and that such a feeling is liable to turn his heart away from Chushai's counsel.

4) In order to add weight to his argument, Chushai uses many expressions that recall David's military past, the purpose of which is to create a connection to David's history in general and to his extensive experience in fleeing a king in the Judean wilderness in particular. The expressions that create these connections include:

a) Chushai mentions two animals: "As a **bear** robbed of her cubs in the field... whose heart is as the heart of a **lion**." It is reasonable to assume that he wishes to allude to David's own words when he tried to convince Shaul to send him to fight Golyat: "Your servant kept his father's sheep; and when there came a **lion** or a **bear** who took a lamb out of the flock, I went out after him, and smote him, and delivered it out of his mouth; and when he arose against me, I caught him by his beard, and smote him, and slew him. Your servant smote both the **lion** and the **bear**" ([1 Shemuel 17:34-36](#)).

b) Chushai describes David with the words: "And your father is a **man of war**...your father is a **mighty man**." These expressions bring to mind the descriptions that were used to describe David when it was first suggested that he play music in the house of Shaul: "Then answered one of the young men, and said: ' Behold, I have seen a son of Yishai the Bethlehemite, who is skillful in playing, and a **mighty man** of valor, and a **man of war**, and prudent in affairs, and a comely person, and the Lord is with him" (ibid. 16:18).

c) Chushai notes David's ability to hide: "Behold, he is **hid** now in some pit, or in some **place**." Shaul used similar wording when he warned about these capabilities of David: "Go, I pray you, make yet more sure, and know and see his **place** where his haunt is, and who has seen him there; for it is told me that he deals very subtly. See, therefore, and take knowledge of all the **lurking-places where he hides himself**, and come back to me" (ibid. 23:22-23). In this way, Chushai also alludes that just as David evaded Shaul's pursuits, and in the end ruled as king in his place, so is he liable to do so to Avshalom as well.

d) Chushai says about David's men that "they are mighty men, and they are **embittered in their minds**." We also know this from the period of David's wanderings: "And every one that was in distress, and every one that

was in debt, and every one that was **embittered in his mind**" (ibid. 22:2).

5) And finally, Chushai uses a series of similes in a concentration that is unparalleled in the Early Prophets: "As a bear robbed of her cubs in the field...whose heart is as the heart of a lion...as the sand that is by the sea for multitude...as the dew falls on the ground..." This style reaches its climax in the closing verse: "Moreover, if he withdraws himself into a city, then shall all Israel bring up ropes to that city, and we will draw him into the valley until there be not one small stone found there." This flowery style, which brings to mind the speeches of contemporary Middle Eastern rulers, seems to speak to Avshalom's heart and accord with his personality.

### III. The double causality

After presenting Chushai's words, Scripture adds an interesting note:

(14) And Avshalom and all the men of Israel said, " The counsel of Chushai the Arkhite is better than the counsel of Achitofel." For the Lord had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Achitofel, to the intent that the Lord might bring evil upon Avshalom.

Once again, we encounter the principle of "double causality." We already noted this principle in the previous *shiur*, but here the matter is stated explicitly. On the one hand, we can surely understand how Chushai, using his great wisdom and glowing speech, was able to thwart the counsel of Achitofel and persuade Avshalom to accept his own proposal. On the other hand, Scripture testifies that Avshalom's decision was not based exclusively on natural factors, but that rather there was direct Divine intervention. Thus, there is closure to the circle that had begun with David's prayer at the beginning of the story: "O Lord, I pray You, turn the counsel of Achitofel into foolishness" (15:31). As we saw there, Chushai appeared in the immediate aftermath of this prayer. It now becomes clear that God had indeed heard David's prayer and that His response came in the form of Chushai's help.

Scripture emphasizes that from an objective perspective, Achitofel's counsel was sound. Indeed, the substance of the disagreement (as it were) between Achitofel and Chushai was in the assessment of David's present situation: tired and weary or ready for battle. The actual answer to this question was already provided at the end

of the previous chapter: "And the king, and all the people that were with him, came weary; and he refreshed himself there" (16:14). Nevertheless, Chushai's counsel was accepted, by virtue of the two plains that we saw above.

It should be noted that regarding Achitofel's counsel, the verse says, "And the saying pleased Avshalom well, **and all the elders of Israel**" (v. 4), whereas Chushai's counsel was pleasing to "all the men of Israel."<sup>7[7]</sup> In this, there is a clear similarity to another Scriptural story, where a certain king sought advice from two groups and he preferred the counsel of young men to the better counsel of the elders. The reference is, of course, to Rechav'am the son of Shelomo, who had difficulty deciding how to react to the people's request: "Your father made our yoke grievous; now therefore make you the grievous service of your father, and his heavy yoke which he put upon us, lighter, and we will serve you" (I *Melakhim* 12:7). The better advice was that which he received from the elders – to answer them with "good words" (v. 7) – but this counsel did not put Rechav'am in the center and did not satisfy his desire for honor. Instead, Rechav'am preferred the counsel of the young men who had grown up with him, for they too, like Chushai in his time, offered flattering advice that catered to Rechav'am's lust for honor and was filled with exaggerated images: "Thus shall you say to this people that spoke to you, saying, 'Your father made our yoke heavy, but make you it lighter to us;' thus shall you speak to them, 'My little finger is thicker than my father's loins. And now whereas my father did burden you with a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke; my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions' " (ibid. vv. 10-11). And, indeed, Rechav'am answered the people using such language (ibid. vv. 12-14).

It stands to reason that there, too, human logic supported the advice of the young men: When a new leader assumes power, and especially after many long years of the rule of a strong king, he tries to demonstrate strength and show that he is not inferior in any way to his predecessor, lest they treat him lightly. There, too, Scripture emphasizes: "So the king hearkened not to the people; for it was a thing brought about of the Lord, that He might establish His word, which the Lord spoke by the hand of Achiya the Shilonite to Yerov'am the son of Nevat" (ibid. v. 15).

In the end, the two stories teach the same lesson. Even if a king thinks that he is determining the course of events in this world, he must understand that it is God above who is in control. As the wisest of men said: "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord as the watercourses: He turns it wherever He wishes" ([Mishlei 21:1](#)).

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7 [7] As the Ralbag says: "This shows that the elders of Israel did not agree with this second counsel."

(Translated by David Strauss)

