

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

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LECTURE #73: CHAPTER 7 (PART II)

NATAN'S VISION: THE EVERLASTING KINGDOM OF THE HOUSE OF DAVID

I. THE LORD SWORE UNTO DAVID

In the previous lecture, we discussed one of the two main themes of Natan's vision - why David didn't build the Temple. In this lecture, we will deal with the prophecy's second theme. Despite the disappointment that David surely feels when the building of the Temple was pushed off to the days of his son Shlomo, he receives a great promise – that the royal house of his descendants would be the everlasting royal house of the people of Israel:

(12) When your days are fulfilled, and you shall sleep with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, that shall proceed out of your body, and I will establish his kingdom. **(13)** He shall build a house for My name, **and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever (*ad olam*)**. **(14)** I will be to him for a father, and he shall be to Me for a son; if he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men and with the stripes of the children of men; **(15)** but My mercy shall not depart from him, as I took it from Shaul, whom I put away before you. **(16) And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever (*ad olam*) before you; your throne shall be established forever (*ad olam*)**.

The expression "*ad olam*" (forever) appears here three times, testifying to the importance of God's promise to David. But this itself is surprising. Why is such an important promise given almost incidentally, in a prophecy the main theme of which is not the kingdom of David, but the building of the Temple? Is there a connection between the two issues?

[Tehillim 132](#) seems to indicate that the two themes are indeed interconnected. The psalm stands two oaths one against the other – David's oath to God and God's oath to David:

A Song of Ascents. Lord, remember unto David all his affliction; how **he swore unto the Lord**, and vowed unto the Mighty One of Yaakov: Surely I will not come into the tent of my house, nor go up into the bed that is spread for me.

I will not give sleep to my eyes, nor slumber to my eyelids; until I find out a place for the Lord, a dwelling-place for the Mighty One of Yaakov. Lo, we heard of it as being in Efrata; we found it in the field of the wood;

The Lord swore unto David in truth; He will not turn back from it: Of the fruit of your body will I set upon your throne. If your children keep My covenant and My testimony that I shall teach them, their children also forever shall sit upon your throne. For the Lord has chosen Zion; He has desired it for His habitation: This is My resting-place forever; here will I dwell; for I have desired it. ([Tehillim 132:1-6](#), 11-14)

The parallelism between the two oaths is quite evident. David describes an oath that accompanied him all his life: that he would not give sleep to his eyes, nor slumber to his eyelids, until he finds out a place for the Lord. Corresponding to this oath, God swears to David that his descendants would also sit "forever" on his throne, and that God would establish His resting place "forever" in Jerusalem. The promise to David of an everlasting kingdom is then **reward** for his desire to build a house for God. God's refusal of David's request does not involve criticism of the very idea of building a Temple. On the contrary, this desire – which from this psalm appears to have been deeply implanted in David's personality – expresses his love for God, and deserves reward. Accordingly, alongside the refusal, there is also the great promise of the everlasting kingdom of the house of David.

II. –BUT MY MERCY SHALL NOT DEPART FROM HIM–

In another context, psalm 132 is part of a more complex picture. Was everlasting kingship promised to the house of David unconditionally? It would seem from our chapter that the kingship of the Davidic house is unconditional. If the king acts improperly, he will indeed be punished, but he will not be replaced by a king from another house, which is what happened to Shaul: "If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men and with the stripes of the children of men; but My mercy shall not depart from him, as I took it from Shaul, whom I put away before

you." The aforementioned psalm, however, gives an entirely different impression: "**If your children keep My covenant** and My testimony that I shall teach them, their children also forever shall sit upon your throne."

An examination of this issue across Scripture shows that the picture painted by the books of *Melakhim* and *Divrei Ha-yamim* is the same as that painted in [Tehillim 132](#). Time after time, the point is reiterated that the continuation of the kingdom of the house of David is conditioned on his descendants walking in the ways of God. Already in his testament to his son Shlomo, David warns him about this condition: "And keep the charge of the Lord your God, to walk in His waysâ€¦ **so that** the Lord may establish His word which He spoke concerning me, saying, If your children take heed to their way, to walk before Me in truth with all their heart and with all their soul, **there shall not fail you, said He, a man on the throne of Israel**" (I *Melakhim* 2:3-4). And Shlomo repeats what David told him in his prayer before God at the time of the dedication of the Temple: "Now therefore, O Lord, the God of Israel, keep with Your servant David my father that which You have promised him saying, There shall not fail you a man in My sight to sit on the throne of Israel, **if** your children take heed to their way, to walk before Me as you have walked before Me" ([I Melakhim 8:25](#)). These verses might have been understood as David's words of encouragement to Shlomo - he should take heed to walk in God's path - and Shlomo cites them,^{1[1]} and one might similarly have argued this about [Tehillim 132](#). But in the continuation of the book of *Melakhim*, this condition is explicitly mentioned in God's words to Shlomo: "And as for you, if you will walk before Me, as David your father walked, in integrity of heart, and in uprightness, to do according to all that I have commanded you, and will keep My statutes and My ordinances, then I will establish the throne of your kingdom over Israel forever; as I promised to David your father, saying, There shall not fail you a man upon the throne of Israel" ([I Melakhim 9:4-5](#)).

The fact is that the contradiction is not only between Natan's vision and other chapters in Scripture, but also between Natan's vision and reality. As we all know, for thousands of years there has been no king from the house of David! How does this reality fit in with the promise received in Natan's vision?

This problem already troubled the author of [Tehillim 89](#), who expressed at great length his pain regarding the fact that the promise given in Natan's vision had

1 [1] This condition is also cited in David's parting words from the people in *Divrei Ha-yamim*: "And I will establish his kingdom forever, **if he be constant to do** My commandments and My ordinances, as at this day" (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 28:7).

not been realized. The psalmist opens with the argument that he had expected God's promise to David to stand forever:

(3) For I have said, Forever is mercy built;^{2[2]} in the very heavens You establish Your faithfulness. (4) I have made a covenant with My chosen, I have sworn unto David My servant: (5) Forever will I establish your seed, and build up your throne to all generations. Selah.

Afterwards, he praises God at great length (vv. 5-19),^{3[3]} apparently so that words of praise should precede the sharp things that he will say in the continuation of the psalm. Following the verses of praise, the psalmist mentions God's promise to David in words that are very reminiscent of the formulation found in Natan's vision,^{4[4]} and emphasize that it was unconditional:

(20) Then You spoke in vision^{5[5]} to Your godly ones, and said, I have laid help upon one that is mighty; I have exalted one chosen out of the people.^{6[6]} (21) I have found David My servant; with My holy oil have I anointed him; (22) With whom My hand shall be established; My arm also shall strengthen him. (23) The enemy shall not exact from him, nor the son of wickedness afflict him.^{7[7]} (24) And I will beat to pieces his

2 [2] The words "Forever is mercy built" ("*olam chesed yibaneh*") have turned into a common expression. In that expression, the word "*olam*" is used in the sense of "world," whereas the correct understanding (see Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Radak, and others) in the psalm is "forever." The psalmist means to say: I thought that the "mercy" – the promise made to David regarding everlasting kingship (which is called "mercy" (*chesed*) in Natan's vision in v. 15 of our chapter) – would last forever, and that the promise would go on eternally ("heavens," i.e., as long as the heavens stand).

3 [3] These verses are familiar to Ashkenazim as the fixed introduction to *Selichot*.

4 [4] As we shall note in the coming notes.

5 [5] Compare to our chapter, v. 17: "According to all these words, and according to all this **vision**, so did Natan speak unto David."

6 [6] Corresponding to what is stated in our chapter, v. 7: "I took you from the sheepecote, from following the sheep!"

7 [7] Compare to our chapter, v. 11: "And they shall be disquieted no more; neither shall the children of wickedness afflict them any more." From here on,

adversaries before him, and smite those that hate him. (25) But My faithfulness and My mercy shall be with him; and through My name shall his horn be exalted. (26) I will set his hand also on the sea, and his right hand on the rivers. (27) He shall call unto Me: You are my Father, my God, and the rock of my salvation. (28) I also will appoint him first-born, the highest of the kings of the earth.^{8[8]} (29) Forever will I keep for him My mercy, and My covenant shall stand fast with him. (30) His seed also will I make to endure forever, and his throne as the days of heaven. (31) If his children forsake My law, and walk not in My ordinances; (32) if they profane My statutes, and keep not My commandments;^{9[9]} (33) then will I visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with strokes.^{10[10]} (34) But My mercy will I not break off from him,^{11[11]} nor will I be false to My faithfulness. (35) My covenant will I not profane, nor alter that which is gone out of My lips. (36) Once have I sworn by My holiness: surely I will not be false unto David. (37) His seed shall endure for ever, and his throne as the sun before Me.^{12[12]} (38) It shall be established forever as the moon; and be steadfast as the witness in sky. Selah.

And then the psalmist continues, the enormity of his disappointment being equal to that of his expectations:

(39) But You have cast off and rejected, You have been wroth with Your anointed. (40) You have abhorred the covenant of Your servant; You have profaned his crown even to the ground. (41) You have broken down all his fences; You have brought his

the psalmist relates to promises made to Shelomo. He is not careful about distinguishing between what was said to David and what was said to Shelomo; with respect to the psalm's primary argument, this is irrelevant.

8 [8] Compare to our chapter, v. 14: "I will be to him for a father, and he shall be to Me for a son."

9 [9] Verses 31-32 are an expansion upon the terse formulation in our chapter: "If he commit iniquity" (v. 14).

10 [10] Paralleling what is stated in our chapter: "I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men" (ibid.)

11 [11] Paralleling what is stated in our chapter: "But My mercy shall not depart from him" (v. 15).

12 [12] Paralleling what is stated in our chapter: "Your throne shall be established forever" (v. 16).

strongholds to ruin. (42) All that pass by the way spoil him; he is become a taunt to his neighbors. (43) You have exalted the right hand of his adversaries; You have made all his enemies to rejoice. (44) Yea, You turned back the edge of his sword, and have not made him to stand in the battle. (45) You have made his brightness to cease, and cast his throne down to the ground. (46) The days of his youth have You shortened; You have covered him with shame. Selah.

Many have been astonished by these sharp words that the psalmist¹³[13] casts at God. Already the Ibn Ezra commented: "There was a great and pious Sage in Spain, for whom this psalm was difficult, and he would not read it nor could he hear it, because this psalmist uttered harsh words against the revered God."

The Radak also noted: "Many have wondered about this psalmist, how could he have spoken such words against God, as a person says to his fellow: You swore, but you did not keep your oath."

For our purposes, however, what is even more difficult to understand is the real answer to the psalmist's argument. How can we explain why there is no longer a king from the house of David?

It seems that the answer to this question is that the word "*olam*" in the sense of eternity does not necessarily mean "always." That is to say, even if David was promised the kingdom forever, he is not promised constant kingship (see Radak, ad loc.). The kingdom of the house of David will indeed be forever, and it will not be replaced by the kingdom of another house,¹⁴[14] but this does not mean that there

13 [13] It would seem from these verses that the psalmist lived after the destruction of the Temple, for the reality that they describe match that period. The heading of this psalm is: "Maskil of Etan the Ezrachite." The name Etan the Ezrachite is mentioned in the book of *Melakhim*: "And Shelomo's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men: than Etan the Ezrachite" (I [Melakhim 5:10-11](#)). The reference in *Tehillim* is clearly not to this person, who lived before Shelomo, but the psalmist may have been one of his descendants. And perhaps the Eitan the Ezrachite mentioned in *Melakhim* is the one who composed the verses of praise appearing in this psalm (vv. 6-19).

14 [14] As for the kingdom of the Hasmoneans, the words of the Ramban in his commentary to [Bereishit 49:10](#) are well-known: "But all of the descendants

will always be a king from the house of David. Similarly, we find regarding the promise to inherit the Land of Israel: "To you shall I give it, and to your seed forever" ([Bereishit 13:15](#); and see there 17:8; and elsewhere). *Eretz Yisrael* always belongs to the people of Israel, but this does not mean that the people of Israel will always dwell in it; dwelling in Israel depends on the people's conduct, as the Torah warns in numerous places. The vision of Natan focuses on the positive side â€” the house of David will not be replaced by another royal house. The book of *Melakhim*, which was written from the perspective of destruction, places greater emphasis on the conditions for maintaining the kingdom â€” similar to the conditions for the standing of the Temple, which is the central theme in the book.

This understanding is supported by the prophecy of consolation in chapter 33 of the book of *Yirmiyahu*, which connects the eternity of the selection of the kingdom of the house of David to the eternity of the selection of the priests:

For thus says the Lord: There shall not be cut off unto David a man to sit upon the throne of the house of Israel; neither shall there be cut off unto the priests the Levites a man before Me to offer burnt-offerings, and to burn meal-offerings, and to do sacrifice continually. And the word of the Lord came unto Yirmiyahu, saying: Thus says the Lord: If you can break My covenant with the day, and My covenant with the night, so that there should not be day and night in their season; then may also My covenant be broken with David My servant, that he should not have a son to reign upon his throne; and with the Levites the priests, My ministers. As the host of heaven cannot be numbered, neither the sand of the sea measured; so will I multiply the seed of David My servant, and the Levites that minister unto Me. ([Yirmiyahu 33:17-22](#))

It follows, then, that just as the selection of the priests is forever, even though the priests will not stand at all times before God, the house of David is similar. In the verses that follow, Yirmiyahu adds a third selection â€” God's selection of Israel â€” and he once again emphasizes that while it may seem at times that these selections were nullified, the truth is that they stand forever:

of the righteous Matitya the Chashmonai transgressed by ruling as king when they were not of the seed of Yehuda or of the house of David, and they entirely removed the rod and the lawmaker, and their punishment, measure for measure, was that the Holy One, blessed be He, set their servants above them, and they destroyed them." And see the continuation of his words there.

And the word of the Lord came to Yirmiyahu, saying: Consider you not what this people have spoken, saying: The two families which the Lord did choose, He has cast them off, and they condemn My people, that they should be no more a nation before them. Thus says the Lord: If My covenant be not with day and night, if I have not appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth; then will I also cast away the seed of Yaakov, and of David My servant, so that I will not take of his seed to be rulers over the seed of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov; for I will cause their captivity to return, and will have compassion on them. (ibid. 23-26)

III. DAVID'S PRAYER

In response to Natan's vision, David turns to pray to God. His prayer is filled with terms that are difficult to understand, and in the footnotes we will comment on these expressions, as well as on the different readings found in the parallel chapter in *Divrei Ha-yamim*:

(18) Then David the king went in and sat before the Lord, and he said, "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that You have brought me thus far?"¹⁵[15] (19) And this was yet a small thing in Your eyes, O Lord God; but You have spoken also of Your servant's house for a great while to come;¹⁶[16] and this too after the manner of great men, O Lord God. (21) And what can David say more unto You? For You know Your servant, O Lord God. (21) For Your word's sake, and according to Your own heart, have You wrought all this greatness, to make Your servant know it. (22) Therefore, You are great, O Lord God; for there is none like You, neither is there any God beside You, according to all that we have heard with our ears. (23) And who is like Your people, like Israel, a nation one in the earth, whom God

15 [15] Here, David agrees with God's words in Natan's vision: "I took you from the sheepcote, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over My people, over Israel. And I have been with you wherever you went" (vv. 8-9).

16 [16] The Radak explains: "For I was far away and I came close." But it is more likely that the reference is to the future, as in [Yechezkel 12:27](#): "The vision that he sees is for many days to come, and he prophesies of times **that are far off.**"

went¹⁷[17] to redeem unto Himself for a people, and to make Him a name, and to do for Your land great things and tremendous, even for you, [in driving out] from before Your people, whom You did redeem to You out of Egypt, the nations and their gods? (24) And You did establish to Yourself Your people Israel to be a people unto You forever; and You, Lord, became their God. (25) And now, O Lord God, the word that You have spoken concerning Your servant, and concerning his house, confirm You it forever, and do as You have spoken. (26) And let Your name be magnified for ever, that it may be said, The Lord of hosts is God over Israel; and the house of Your servant David shall be established before You. (27) For You, O Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, have revealed to Your servant, saying, I will build you a house; therefore has Your servant taken heart to pray this prayer unto You. (28) And now, O Lord God, You alone are God, and Your words are truth, and You have promised this good thing unto Your servant. (29) Now therefore let it please You to bless the house of Your servant, that it may continue forever before You; for You, O Lord God, have spoken it; and through Your blessing let the house of Your servant be blessed forever.

David could have reacted with disappointment over the rejection of his request to build a house for God. His prayer, however, is not one of a person who suffered disappointment, but rather a moving prayer of thanksgiving over the great promise that he had received. David emphasizes his smallness vis-À-vis the greatness of God and the kindness that he merited, and he mentions not at all that God had refused his request.

After having said this, we can try to understand the linguistic difficulties in this prayer. How can we explain the abundance of difficult expressions in the chapter? And especially, how can we explain the verse, "And who is like Your people, like Israel, a nation one in the earth, whom God went to redeem unto Himself for a people, and to make Him a name, and to do for Your land great things and tremendous, even for you, [in driving out] from before Your people, whom You did redeem to You out of Egypt, the nations and their gods"? The addressee in the verse keeps changing: At first it seems that David is addressing God ("Your people"), then it seems that he is talking to the people of Israel ("for you"), and in the end it seems that once again he is addressing God ("Your land" "Your people" "You"). The phrases "whom God went to redeem" and "to do for Your land great things and

17 [17] The Radak notes that in several places in Scripture (e.g., [Bereishit 20:13](#); [Yehoshua 24:19](#)), *Elokim* is spoken about in the plural. This verse, however, is difficult for other reasons, as we shall see below.

tremendous, even for you" are puzzling, and even more so the strange conclusion, "whom You did redeem to You out of Egypt, the nations and their gods"18[18]!

It seems that we are dealing here with a phenomenon similar to what we saw in Shaul's parting speech from the people ([I Shmuel 12](#); see lecture 21 in *I Shmuel*). Confused speech often appears when a person is especially excited. Scripture here (and in other places; see the aforementioned lecture) uses a unique device to describe David's mental state at the time of his prayer: It preserves David's original and unusual formulation in order to deepen the reader's understanding that we are dealing here with an especially exciting moment. In this way, Scripture brings in direct and unmediated fashion not only the speaker's wording, but his feelings as well.

IV. —AND DO AS YOU HAVE SPOKEN—

In conclusion, let it be noted that David asks God several times that His promise should be fulfilled: "And now, O Lord God, the word that You have spoken concerning Your servant and concerning his house, confirm You it forever, and do as You have spoken— And now, O Lord God, You alone are God, and Your words are truth, and You have promised this good thing unto your servant; now therefore let it please You to bless the house of Your servant, that it may continue forever before

18 [18] In *Divrei Ha-yamim*, the verse appears in a slightly more understandable form: "And who is like Your people Israel, a nation one in the earth, whom God went to redeem unto Himself for a people, to make You a name by great and tremendous things, in driving out nations from before Your people, whom You did redeem out of Egypt" (*ibid.* v. 21). Regarding the difficult phrase in our chapter, "the nations and their gods," the Radak writes: "This means: 'From the nations and from their gods,' and the letter *mem* in '*mi-Mitzrayim*' ('from Egypt') applies two or three times; or it means: 'And you shall smite the nations and their gods,' as it is written: 'And against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments' ([Shemot 12:12](#)); or 'the nations' refers to Israel, that is to say: 'Whom You did redeem out of Egypt, the nation, its elders and its great ones.' And it says 'nations' in the plural, that is to say, the families of Israel, like 'Binyamin in your nations' (*Shofetim* 5:14). And *Elokim*, as in 'You shall not revile *Elokim*' ([Shemot 22:27](#)), which means 'judges.' And Yehonatan did not translate 'the nations and their gods [i.e., the word '*ve-elokav*' is not translated, but rather is brought in Hebrew — A.B.]. **It is possible that he understood as did some of our Rabbis, who explained the word as referring to God, as in: 'In all their affliction He was afflicted' (*Yeshayahu* 63:9), and 'the nations and their God,' as it were, God was redeemed with them. For this reason, he did not translate it."**

You" (vv. 25-29). Why must David repeat this? Does this follow from a lack of faith in God's promise?

First of all, David might indeed have thought, as he explicitly stated, that he was not worthy of the fulfillment of this promise, and so his prayer stems not from any doubts about God, but from his humility and his feeling that he did not deserve what was promised him.

It seems, however, that there is something else here. God's promise to David may be understood in several ways. In its ideal form, it is a promise of continuous, everlasting, and unified kingship over all of Israel. As we know, however, this was never realized: as was stated earlier, the kingdom of the house of David was not continuous; and it was also not unified, for it split already in the days of his grandson, Rechav'am. It seems then that David prayed precisely for this - that God's promise should be fulfilled in ideal manner. This prayer was not realized, and the promise was only fulfilled in minimal form. But even so, David was still filled with praise and thanksgiving to God, who brought him thus far, and made Him an unprecedented promise that no other person had ever received.

(Translated by David Strauss)
