

THE BOOK OF *SHMUEL*

LECTURE 41: CHAPTER 21 DAVID IN NOV

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I. DAVID AND ACHIMELEKH

David's first stop after he finally decides to run away from Shaul is the house of Achimelekh in Nov, the city of priests. Scripture describes the meeting as follows:

(2) Then came David to Nov¹[1] to Achimelekh²[2] the priest; and Achimelekh came to meet David trembling, and said unto him, "Why are you alone, and no man with you?" (3) And David said unto Achimelekh the priest, "The king has commanded me a business, and has said unto me, 'Let no man know any thing of the business whereabout I send you, and what I have commanded you;' and the young men have I appointed to such and such a place."³[3]

It is clear from Scripture that Achimelekh immediately understands that something is wrong, for David's sudden appearance by himself, without a retinue, is cause for astonishment. Achimelekh's question seems to have stemmed from his understanding that David and Shaul did not enjoy the best of relationships. It is reasonable to assume that Achimelekh is afraid of what actually happened in the end – that extending assistance to David would be construed as an act of treason against Shaul. Already at the beginning of the chapter, then, Scripture points attention to the fact that David is putting Achimelekh in danger.

It stands to reason that David understands that Achimelekh would not cooperate with him if he knew the truth, and he therefore lies to him. It is also possible that David thought that in this way he was protecting Achimelekh, if at some point he would have to explain why he had helped David. In any event, this exchange does not paint David in a favorable light.

A similar picture emerges from the continuation of the story:

(4) "Now therefore what is under your hand? Five loaves of bread? Give them in my hand, or whatsoever there is present."

These words are a little strange: Why does David mention "five loaves"? It is possible that the verse combines the words of David and Achimelekh, without noting the change in speaker, and that it should be read as follow: [David:] Now therefore what is under your hand? [Achimelekh:] Five loaves of bread. [David:] Give them in my hand, or [at least] whatsoever there is present [whatsoever is present in your hand that you are ready to give me]."⁴⁴

If this is correct, then it is possible that Scripture intentionally recorded the conversation in this manner in order to create the impression that David is acting rashly and under pressure, insisting that he immediately receive whatever is in Achimelekh's hand and barely giving him the opportunity to respond.

II. THE SHEW BREAD

This observation also sheds light on what happens later. Following David's request for bread, a discussion develops between him and Achimelekh, the contents of which are a bit obscure:

(5) And the priest answered David and said, "There is no common bread under my hand, but there is holy bread; if only the young men have kept themselves from women." (6) And David answered the priest and said unto him, "Of a truth, women have been kept from us about these three days; when I came out, the vessels of the young men were holy, though it was but a common journey; how much more then today, when there shall be holy bread in their vessels?" (7) So the priest gave him holy bread; for there was no bread there but the shew-bread, that was taken from before the Lord, to put hot bread in the day when it was taken away.

It seems from the verses that Achimelekh gave David of the shew-bread, which was ordinarily given to the priests after having been removed from the table (see *Vayikra* 24:5-9). Achimelekh mentions the requirement that the young men be ritually pure, and it seems that he has David himself in mind as well; he uses a euphemism, however, and relates only to the young men (Radak).

David seems to answer that the young men are indeed pure. As the Radak explains: "Even though we went out in the manner of [eating] common food, since we did not think that we would have to eat holy bread, nevertheless we purified ourselves in the manner of people setting out on a journey... All the more so⁵⁵ today when we will have holy bread, we will watch over it and be careful that it retain its sanctity in the vessel."

Scripture does not relate to one fundamental question – How could David have eaten of the shew-bread, about which the Torah states:

And it shall be Aharon's and his sons'; and they shall eat it in the holy place, for it is most holy to him of the offerings of the Lord made by fire by a perpetual due. (*Vayikra* 24:9)

Owing to this difficulty, the Radak explains in the name of his father that the reference here is to the loaves brought with a thanksgiving offering (see *Vayikra* 7:11-14). This explanation is, of course, very forced, as verse 7 explicitly states "shew-bread." Rashi's understanding is therefore more persuasive; he states that the reference here is indeed to shew-bread, and that the allowance stemmed from David's dire situation at the time, as is indirectly suggested by *Chazal*:

Since he found there nothing but shew-bread, David said to him: "Give me, so that we not die of hunger," for [even] a case of uncertain mortal danger sets aside Shabbat. How much did David eat at that time? Rav Huna said: David ate close to seven *se'as* to satisfy his hunger, for he was seized by ravenous hunger. (*Yalkut Shimoni*, I *Shmuel* 130)

It seems that with this statement, *Chazal* expressed their position on David's conduct in the entire story. David behaved as one who is overcome by ravenous hunger, that is, as one who acts out of irrational pressure. David's irrational behavior expressed itself not only in his request to eat of the shew-bread; the very fact that he was ready to put Achimelekh's life in jeopardy proves that David was not acting here with appropriate judgment.

III. GOLYAT'S SWORD

David is not satisfied with the bread, and he puts forward an additional request. However, before Scripture records David's next request, it mentions a certain detail that seems to interrupt the narrative:

(8) Now a certain man of the servants of Shaul was there that day, detained before the Lord; and his name was Doeg the Edomite,^{6[6]} the chiefest of the herdmen that belonged to Shaul.

Only after noting this fact, does Scripture bring David's additional request:

(9) And David said unto Achimelekh, "And is there^{7[7]} perhaps here under your hand spear or sword? For I have neither brought my sword nor my weapons with me, because the king's business required haste."

Without a doubt, it is at this point that Scripture's criticism of David's conduct reaches a climax. In addition to the ordinary caution necessitated by the present situation, surely the presence of a high official in Shaul's kingdom demanded double caution.^{8[8]} As we know, in the continuation of the story it is Doeg the Edomite who leaked to Shaul the information that Achimelekh had helped David. David's carelessness was a recipe for disaster.

In addition to the lack of caution, David deceives Achimelekh for a second time. David invents an excuse why he is not carrying any weaponry, and thus casts great responsibility upon Achimelekh, who is unaware that he is giving a weapon to someone who is being pursued by the king. David appears to have delayed making this request until he had already acquired Achimelekh's trust. Achimelekh answers David as follows:

(10) And the priest said, "The sword of Golyat the Pelishti, whom you slew in the vale of Ela, behold, it is here wrapped in a cloth behind the efod;^{9[9]} if you wish to take that, take it, for there is no other save that here." "There is none like that; give it to me."

The verse implies that Achimelekh is not very eager to hand the sword over to David. He does not clearly say to David that he can take it, but rather he speaks in a roundabout manner ("if you wish to take that, take it") and does not quickly hand the sword over. David, however, insists: "Give it to me."

The fact that David takes Golyat's sword is symbolic. It was David himself who stood before this sword and said: "And that all this assembly may know that the Lord saves not with sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's" (17:47). And now, David endangers Achimelekh in order to obtain that sword. This point summarizes the entire incident: David chooses a sword as a superficial instrument, rather than following the dictates of the Torah and ethics.

IV. THE CRIME AND ITS PUNISHMENT

In typical scriptural manner, following the criticism leveled at David's conduct comes the punishment for that conduct:

(11) And David arose, and fled that day for fear of Shaul, and went to Akhish the king of Gat. (12) And the servants of Akhish said unto him, "Is not this David, the king of the land? Did they not sing one to another of him in dances, saying, 'Shaul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands?'" (13) And David laid up these words in his heart, and was sore afraid of Akhish the king of Gat.

The fact that David fled to Achish the king of Gath is not surprising. Kings' opponents have always found refuge by enemy kings. For example, Yerov'am, who ran away from Shelomo, fled to Sheshak, the king of Egypt (I *Melakhim* 11:40).¹⁰[10] But contrary to David's expectations, Achish's servants do not like the idea that the Israelite hero, whose victory over the Philistines brought the daughters of Israel to sing and dance, should find refuge in the very house of Achish king of Gath. David finds himself in a very difficult situation – "And he was sore afraid." Why, according to the standards of biblical justice, does David fall into this mess?

It seems that this incident should be viewed as an immediate punishment for David's conduct in Nov. As stated above, by taking Goliath's sword, David expresses his trust in its power to save him, ignoring the fact that he had knowingly deceived Achish and put his life in danger. Thus, David loses the moral superiority over Shaul that he had acquired when he placed his trust in God during his confrontation with Goliath. Now, it is precisely David's victory over Goliath that causes him to stumble and puts his life in peril.¹¹[11]

It seems that already at this stage David understands his mistake, and this is what he means when he says: "And David laid up these words in his heart." David internalizes the message, and begins the path to explicit remorse at the end of the next chapter.

The seed of repentance having already been sown, deliverance arrives in an unexpected manner:

(14) And he changed his demeanor before them, and feigned himself mad in their hands, and scrabbled on the doors of the gate, and let his spittle fall down upon his beard. (15) Then said Achish unto his servants, "Lo, when you see a man that is mad, wherefore do you bring him to me? (16) Do I lack madmen, that you have brought this fellow to play the madman in my presence? Shall this fellow come into my house?"¹²[12]

In symbolic manner, the sword did not help David. What saved him was his humiliating himself and acting crazy. Perhaps this also served as partial atonement for his dealings with Achish.

Tehillim 34 opens with the words:

Of David, when he changed his demeanor before **Achish**; who drove him away, and he departed.

The commentators discuss why the psalm does not call the Pelishti king by his name, Akhish, if indeed we are dealing with the same incident. Rashi (ad loc.) explains that "Avimelekh" was the name of all the Pelishti kings (as in *Bereishit* 20 in the story involving Avraham and in *Bereishit* 26 in the story involving Yitzchak) – just as Pharaoh was the name of the kings of Egypt – and "Akhish" was this king's personal name. The Ibn Ezra and the Radak (ad loc.), on the other hand, understand that Akhish had two names. It might, however, be added that *Tehillim* intentionally refers to Akhish by the name Avimelekh – in order to allude to Achimelekh and to the connection, understood by David only later, between his conduct toward Achimelekh and his entanglement with Akhish/Avimelekh.13[13]

(Translated by David Strauss)

14[1] a. The city of Nov is situated to the north of Jerusalem, and in the book of *Nechemya* (11:32) it is included in the cities of Binyamin. Its proximity to Jerusalem is evident in the famous prophecy about the king of Ashur, who thinks that it is in his power to capture Jerusalem: "This very day he will halt at Nov: he will shake his hands against the mountain of the daughter of Zion, the hill of Jerusalem" (*Yeshayahu* 10:32).

b. It appears from this chapter that following the fall of Shilo the *Mishkan* moved to Nov, even though the ark itself remained in Kiryat Ye'arim until the reign of David.

15[2] As it was noted in chapter 2 (lecture no. 5), it is possible that Achimelekh, whose is called below "Achimelekh the son of Achituv" (22:11), can be identified as "Achiya the son of Achituv the brother of Ikhavod the son of Pinchas the son of Eli" mentioned above in 14:3 (so understood R. Yeshaya of Trani), or that he was his brother.

16[3] The expression, *peloni almoni*, "so-and-so," is common today, but its precise meaning is a bit obscure. Some suggest that the word *peloni* is derived from the root *peh-lamed-alef*, meaning covered and hidden. As for the word *almoni*, some derive it from the term *almon*, "without a name" (Rashi), or from *alef-lamed-mem*, "silence" (Radak); others understand that the *alef* substitutes for the letter *ayin*, as if the word were *almoni* (with an *ayin*), i.e., hidden (R. Yeshaya).

17[4] This is not an unusual phenomenon in Scripture. It seems that this is the way to understand what is stated in I *Melakhim* 20:34, in the words of Ben-Hadad to Achav after the latter refrained from killing him: "And he [Ben-Hadad] said to him, 'The cities, which my father took from your father, I will restore; and you shall make streets for yourself in Damesek, as my father made in Shomron. I will send you away with this covenant.' So he made a covenant with him and sent him away"; it seems that the words, "I will send you away with this covenant" are Achav's words to Ben-Hadad (see commentators, ad loc.). Similarly, it would seem we are to understand what is stated in *Bereishit* 21:26: "And Avimelekh said, I know not who has done this thing; neither did you tell me, neither yet heard I of it, but today" as "And Avimelekh said [to Avraham], I know not who has done this thing; [He turns to Fikhol and says to him:] Neither did you tell me; [And Fikhol answers him:] Neither yet heard I of it, but today."

Of course, in all these places we must explain why the verse was written in this manner, but this is not the forum to go into the matter at length.

18[5] It was already noted in chap. 14 (lecture no. 26) that the expression "*af ki*" is often used in the sense of *kal va-chomer*, "all the more so."

19[6] The designation *ha-Edomi* suggests that Doeg was a non-Jew, but if this is the case, we must ask what he was doing in the *Mishkan*. The commentators, therefore, preferred to understand that Doeg was a Jew who lived in the land of Edom (Radak). Alternatively, he was a convert, which would explain his readiness to kill the priests of Nov.

20[7] The commentators disagree about the meaning of the unusual expression, "*in yesh*." Rashi understands that it is equivalent to *im yesh*, a *nun* substituting for a *mem*, whereas the Radak explains it like "Nor is there (*ein yesh*) any breath in their mouths" (*Tehilim* 135:17).

21[8] In hindsight, David showed remorse for his wrongdoing in light of the serious consequences of the story, as they will be described below, 22:21-22: "And Evyatar told David that Shaul had slain the Lord's priests. And David said unto Evyatar, 'I knew on that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Shaul; I have brought about the death of all the persons of your father's house.'"

22[9] It was already noted in chap. 5 (lecture no. 9) that it was customary practice to place the important spoils of war in a holy place, a custom in the framework of which Golyat's sword was brought to the *Mishkan*. It seems that the sword was "wrapped in a cloth" in accordance with the principle emerging from the verse: "And if you will make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stone: for it you lift up your tool upon it, you have defiled it" (*Shemot* 20:22).

23[10] It seems that this is the way to understand the strange story in II *Shmuel* 10 in which David sends comforters to Chanun the son of Nachash following the death of his father, Nachash the Amonite, saying: "I will show kindness to Chanun the son of Nachash, as his father showed kindness to me." What kindness is David referring to with respect to a person who was ready to gauge out the right eye of every inhabitant of Yavesh-Gil'ad (above, chap. 11)? It seems that at a certain point, David ran away to Amon and Nachash granted him refuge.

24[11] It is not impossible that it was David's running away with Golyat's sword that especially angered Akhish's servants. If this is true, then the problematic taking of the sword led directly to the intensification of David's punishment.

25[12] It is reasonable to assume that Akhish did not truly "buy" David's performance, but accepted it as grounds to free himself from killing him, as his servants had apparently wanted. In the continuation as well (chapter 29), Akhish displays a sympathetic attitude toward David, as opposed to the rest of the Pelishti officers.

26[13] It is interesting that we find in Scripture that the names "Avimelekh" and "Achimelekh" substitute for each other. In I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 18:15, it says: "And Tzadok the son of Achituv

and **Avimelekh** the son of Evyatar the priests," whereas in the parallel verse in II *Shmuel* 8:17, it says: "And Tzadok the son of Ahituv and **Achimelekh** the son of Evyater the priests."