

THE BOOK OF *SHMUEL*

LECTURE #50: CHAPTER 26 SHAUL IN DAVID'S HANDS – A SECOND TIME (PART I)

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I. THE REDUNDANCY

Chapter 26 describes another opportunity given to David to cause harm to Shaul. The account in our chapter is similar to the account in chapter 24 in many of its details; what is the need for a story that repeats itself? Let us first list the similarities between the two stories:

- 1) The two stories open in similar fashion – with the Ziffites informing Shaul about David's location:

And it came to pass, when Shaul was returned from following the Pelishtim, that it was told him,^{1[1]} saying, "Behold, David is in the wilderness of Ein-Gedi." (24:1)

And the Ziffites came unto Shaul to Giv'a, saying, "Does not David hide himself in the hill of Chakhila, which is before Yeshimon?" (26:1)

- 2) In both chapters, Shaul sets out in pursuit of David with an identical force, and his objective is described in parallel fashion:

Then Shaul took **three thousand chosen men out of all Israel, and went to seek David** and his men upon the rocks of the wild goats. (24:2)

Then Shaul arose, and went down to the wilderness of Zif, **having three thousand chosen men of Israel with him, to seek David** in the wilderness of Zif. (26:2)

- 3) In both cases a situation arises in which David has the opportunity to cause harm to Shaul, and Shaul is completely unaware that he is in danger:

And there was a cave; and Shaul went in to cover his feet. Now David and his men were sitting in the innermost parts of the cave... **Then David arose.** (24:3-4)

And David arose, and came to the place where Shaul had pitched. (26:5)

4) In both cases, David's men turn to him and say that God has afforded him the opportunity to strike at his enemy:

And the men of David said unto him, "Behold the day in which the Lord has said unto you, 'Behold, I will deliver **your enemy into your hand,**' and you shall do to him as it shall seem good unto you." (24:4)

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." (26:8)

5. In both cases, David vigorously rejects the proposal to strike Shaul, whom he describes as "God's anointed:"

And he said unto his men, "The Lord forbid it to me, that I should do this thing unto my lord, **the Lord's anointed, to put forth my hand against him,** seeing he is the Lord's anointed." (24:6)

And David said to Avishai, "Destroy him not; **for who can put forth his hand against the Lord's anointed,** and be guiltless? ... The Lord forbid it to me, **that I should put forth my hand against the Lord's anointed.**" (26:9-11)

6) In both stories, David takes something from Shaul:

And he cut off the skirt of Shaul's robe privily. (24:4)

So David took the spear and the cruse of water from Shaul's head. (26:12)

7) At this point, David turns to Shaul in both cases, and asks him why he is chasing after him. In both cases, David argues that what he took from Shaul proves that he has no intention of causing him any harm:

And David said to Shaul, "Why do you listen to men's words, saying, 'Behold, David seeks your hurt?' Behold, this day your eyes have seen how that the Lord had delivered you today into my hand in the cave; and some bade me kill you, but my eye spared you; and I said, I will not put forth my hand against my lord, for he is the Lord's anointed. Moreover, my father, see, yea, see the skirt of your robe in my hand; for in that I cut off the skirt of your robe, and killed you not, know you and see that there is neither evil nor transgression in my hand, and I have not sinned against you, though you lay wait for my soul to take it." (24:9-11)

And he said, "Why does my lord pursue after his servant? For what have I done? Or what evil is in my hand? Now therefore, I pray you, let my lord the king hear the words of his servant. If it be the Lord that has stirred you up against me, let Him accept an offering; but if it be the

children of men, cursed be they before the Lord..." And David answered and said, "Behold the king's spear!... And the Lord will render to every man his righteousness and his faithfulness; forasmuch as the Lord delivered you into my hand today, and I would not put forth my hand against the Lord's anointed." (26:18-23)

- 8) In the two cases, Shaul responds to David's words in similar fashion:

And it came to pass when David had made an end of speaking these words unto Shaul that Shaul said, "**Is this your voice, my son David?**" (24:16)

And Shaul knew David's voice, and said, "**Is this your voice, my son David?**" (26:17)

- 9) In both cases, David turns to Shaul and compares himself to a "flea:"

After whom **is the king of Israel come out?** after whom do you pursue? After a dead dog, **after a flea.** (24:14)

For **the king of Israel is come out to seek a single flea**, as when one hunts a partridge in the mountains. (26:20)

- 10) To conclude the parallels, note that in both chapters Shaul recognizes in the end that David is right:

And he said to David, "You are more righteous than I; for you have rendered unto me good, whereas I have rendered unto you evil. And you have declared this day how you have dealt well with me; forasmuch as when the Lord had delivered me up into your hand, you did not kill me." (24:17-18)

Then said Shaul, "I have sinned; return, my son David, for I will no more do you harm, because my life was precious in your eyes this day; behold, I have played the fool and erred exceedingly." (26:21)

As was stated above, these parallels lead to our questioning the need for the two-fold account.^{2[2]} The *midrash* notes the redundancy and suggests an explanation, based on a point that does appear in the scriptural text:

When Shaul went off, his warriors said to him: Was it out of righteousness that he did not kill you in the cave? He knew that if he did anything to you, we would immediately have gone in and consumed him; he saw this and was afraid. When he heard this, "Shaul arose, and went down to the wilderness of Zif"... "And David cried to the people and to Avner the son of Ner, saying, 'Answer you not, Avner?'" He said to him: What do you have now to answer me? Surely you said last night to Shaul regarding the cave, that had he done anything to

you, we would have immediately gone in and consumed him. Now, here is the spear and the cruse – what do you have to answer? "Answer you not, Avner?" But he could not answer him and he was dumbstruck and he did not admit David's righteousness. (*Midrash Tehillim* 58)

According to the *midrash*, following the first incident, Shaul's warriors argued that it was not out of righteousness that David refrained from striking at Shaul, but rather out of fear of Shaul's men; for this reason, Shaul resumed his pursuit of David. Following the second incident, in which David managed to reach Shaul's spear and cruse of water in the heart of his camp without anyone noticing him, it was no longer possible to argue that he had not acted with righteousness. The problem is that, according to its plain meaning, this argument of Shaul's men is nowhere mentioned in the text.

II. DAVID AFTER AVIGAYIL

Upon closer examination, we see that it is precisely the parallel points in the two stories that sharpen the essential difference between them, making the two stories necessary. We noted earlier (in lecture no. 46) that the story related in chapter 24 expresses a certain failing on the part of David, who initially failed to respond to his men's call for action against Shaul; it was only after he rose up and cut off the skirt of Shaul's robe,^{3[3]} a step involving scorn and violation of the king,^{4[4]} that he went back to rebuke his men.

In chapter 26, the picture is totally different. From the very outset, David goes down to Shaul's camp with no intention of causing him any harm. On the contrary, as opposed to the previous encounter, the present counter is not accidental; it takes place on David's initiative, stemming from his desire to prove to Shaul that he has no intention of hurting him. It is only Avishai who proposes that he – and not David! – is ready to strike at Shaul, and David unhesitatingly rejects his proposal. As opposed to chapter 24, where David cuts off the skirt of Shaul's robe – an irreversible and humiliating step – in chapter 26 David takes the spear and the cruse of water and then later returns them to Shaul. It stands to reason that the taking of the spear, which Shaul had several times in the past cast at David, serves to delicately allude to Shaul that he does not need it.^{5[5]}

We see then that chapter 26 is not **similar** to chapter 24; on the contrary, chapter 26 is a **repair** of chapter 24 – David repairs the shortcomings that manifested themselves in the first account. All that David wishes to do is once again to prove his righteousness to Shaul, but this time without any vacillation and without allowing any negative voices to be sounded. Indeed, chapter 26 gives expression to the fact that David is

mending his ways; in this story help arrives from God, something that is not mentioned in chapter 24:

(12) So David took the spear and the cruse of water from Shaul's head, and they got them away, and no man saw it, nor knew it, neither did any awake; for they were all asleep, because a deep sleep from the Lord⁶[6] was fallen upon them.

All of Shaul's bodyguards had fallen asleep, because a deep sleep from God had fallen upon them. According to our approach, we can say that it was precisely because of the repair that David tried to achieve that he merited Divine help, and his plan to prove his righteousness to Shaul succeeded.

What brought about the change in David? It seems that we can sum it up in one word: Avigayil. In chapter 25, we saw Avigayil's influence upon David and her success in preventing David from killing Nabal for no justifiable reason. Following David's marriage to Avigayil, her influence upon him is evident, and a more tempered spirit now accompanies him.⁷[7] Chapter 25's location, between the two similar accounts in chapters 24 and 26, is not coincidental; this chapter is the key to understanding the differences between the two accounts.

The relationship between chapter 26 and chapter 25 is also evident from a linguistic and substantive perspective: David's words to Avishai, "As the Lord lives, nay, **but the Lord shall smite him**; or his day shall come to die;" (26:10) parallels what was said about Nabal – "**The Lord smote** Nabal, so that he died" (25:38). David understood that one who wishes to cause him harm will be smitten by God, and not by David himself.

III. ACHKIMELEKH THE CHITTITE

Now we can return to our chapter and examine more closely the details mentioned therein. Let us open with the following point. Before David goes down to Shaul's camp, it is related:

Then answered David and said to Achimelekh the Chittite and to Avishai the son of Tzeruya, brother to Yoav, saying, "Who will go down with me to Shaul to the camp?" And Avishai said, "I will go down with you."

This verse is difficult: Why does Scripture note that David turned to Achimelekh and to Avishai and that only Avishai responded positively to his request? And who is Achimelekh the Chittite,⁸[8] who is not mentioned

anywhere else, even though here he is mentioned first, before Avishai the son of Tzeruya?

It might be argued that Achimelekh was not quick to volunteer because he did not know yet what David had in mind. David did not share with his men that he had no intention of hurting Shaul. Avishai, who was eager to strike at Shaul, quickly volunteered for the mission, with the hope that his presence would help David make the decision to kill Shaul. Achimelekh was more moderate and did not want any part in the deed that he feared might take place.

R. Amos Chacham (cited in the *Da'at Mikra* commentary, ad loc., note 11) raises an interesting suggestion, namely, that Achimelekh the Chittite was Uriyah the Chittite, husband of Bat-Sheva. Linguistically, this proposal can be grounded on the possible substitution of Achimelekh for Achiya (compare "Achiya the son of Achitov" [14:3] to "Achimelekh the son of Achitov" [22:9]). If Achimelekh is Achiya, the jump from "Achiya the Chittite" to "Uriya the Chittite" is not very far [the Hebrew letters are very similar].^{9[9]}

If we accept this novel suggestion, our chapter might have additional meaning. As stated, David seeks someone who will "go down" with him to the camp, but only Avishai volunteers and Achimelekh is not prepared to do so. Once again in II *Shmuel* 11, David will try to persuade Uriya the Chittite to go down (to his house) – and there, too, Uriya will refuse (the word *yod-resh-dalet* serves as a guide word in this passage)!

And David said to Uriya, "**Go down** to your house, and wash your feet." And Uriya departed out of the king's house, and there followed him a portion of food from the king. But Uriya slept at the door of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and **went not down** to his house. And when they had told David, saying, "Uriya **went not down** to his house," David said to Uriya, "Did you not come from a journey? Why then did you not **go down** to your house..." (II *Shmuel* 11:8-10)

What is the connection between the two stories? In hindsight it might be argued that even though our chapter constitutes a repair of chapter 24, the repair is still not complete because it is still not clear to all that David is seeking peace. In this chapter, there is no clear criticism of David. But in hindsight, after we have read the story of Bat-Sheva and Uriya the Chittite and ask ourselves how David come to such bloodshed, we can point also to our chapter and say that the problem already existed there. With the absence of sufficient awareness of the need to make it clear to his men that under no circumstances should injury to Shaul even be considered, David planted the seeds of calamity that eventually grew into a lack of caution regarding human life.

It might also be argued that for this reason Scripture chose to change Uriya's name to Achimelekh, in order to blur the connection between a story that is essentially one of sin and a story that is fundamentally one of repair. The connection between the two stories is only evident upon closer examination.

(Translated by David Strauss)

10[1] The verse does not state explicitly who it was who told him, but from the context and from the order of the chapters, it is reasonable to assume that we are dealing with the Ziffites.

11[2] Already from the time of Spinoza (see "Theological-Political Treatise," chapter 25), scholars who did not accept the sanctity of Scripture saw this redundancy as an expression of Scripture's multiple sources, and thus they failed to appreciate the chapter's meaning.

12[3] See the position of the Ralbag cited in that lecture, according to which David had initially planned to kill Shaul.

13[4] There we also explained the sensitive nature of this action, which alluded to Shaul's imminent loss of his kingdom.

14[5] As for the taking of the cruse of water, it is possible that its symbolic meaning is connected to the fact that water represents life; taking the water symbolizes that Shaul's life is in David's hands.

15[6] Note that it does not say here "*tardemat Elokim*," which might have been understood as "a great sleep," for we find similar expressions in which the word "*elohim*" denotes greatness and intensity: "With great wrestlings (*nafulei elohim*) have I wrestled with my sister" (*Bereishit* 30:8); "And he said, A great fire (*esh elohim*) has fallen from heaven, and has burned up the sheep, and the servants, and consumed them; and I only am escaped" (*Iyov* 1:16). The expression, "*tardemat ha-Shem*" (the Tetragrammaton), leaves no doubt as to God's involvement.

16[7] We shall see later in the book of *Shmuel* other cases where Avigayil's influence over David prevents him from engaging in bloodshed.

17[8] The fact that we are dealing with a person who appears to belong to a different nation is not surprising, for it is common for people to serve in a foreign army and be loyal to foreign leaders because they are paid to do so. Thus, for example, Itai the Gittite is one of the most important warriors at the time of Avshalom's rebellion (II *Shmuel* 15), and he shows exceptional loyalty to David; the list of David's warriors includes people like Tzelek the Amonite, and Ira the Yitrite (II *Shmuel* 23:36-38).

18[9] If we accept this identification, we can also answer the question of why Achimelekh the Chittite is not mentioned along with David's other warriors in the list found in II *Shmuel* 23, which ends with Uriya the Chittite.
