

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Book of Shmuel
Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #15: CHAPTER 9 (PART II) THE MEETING BETWEEN SHMUEL AND SHAUL

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I. THE MOTIF OF "CONINCIDENCE" IN THE STORY OF SHAUL

In the previous lesson I dealt with the character of Shaul as it is reflected in the story of his search for the donkeys. In this lesson I will deal with another point emerging from this story. One of the striking phenomena throughout the story is the element of chance, as it were, in the various events described over the course of the chapter. The very process - Shaul going off in search of donkeys and finding the monarchy - has turned into a popular saying that gives expression to the surprises occurring in the world, man having no control over them whatsoever. But this point is also emphasized over the course of the story itself.

The root *mem-tzadi-alef* ("find") seems to be the keyword in the story, appearing seven times (in the usual manner of keywords). This root generally denotes coincidence, and so too in our story: By chance, the lad "finds" a quarter shekel of silver in his hand, without which Shaul and the lad would have had to go home without meeting Shmuel; and by chance, they "find" on their way to the city the maidens who help them reach Shmuel.^{1[1]} Despite the appearance of chance, however, it eventually becomes clear that everything had been carefully planned out in advance:

Now the Lord had revealed unto Shmuel a day before Shaul came, saying.
Tomorrow about this time I will send you a man out of the land of Binyamin,
and you shall anoint him to be prince over My people Israel.... (15-16)

The timing is so precise that they meet Shmuel precisely at the moment that he expects to see them:

[1] In the previous lesson I mentioned two of the Gemara's explanations (*Berakhot* 48b) of the lengthy talk on the part of the young maidens. I will now add the third explanation offered there, which fits in with the phenomenon under discussion here: "Rabbi Yochanan says: It was because one kingdom cannot overlap another by a hair's breadth." Rashi explains: "Since Shmuel was the leader of Israel, and Shaul would be assuming leadership once Shmuel talked to him, the lengthy talk temporarily delayed it." According to this approach, the precise timing of the events stemmed from the fact that the time did not yet arrive for Shmuel to terminate his leadership over Israel, and Shaul's anointing symbolizes the moment of the transfer of authority.

And they went up to the city; and as they came within the city, behold, Shmuel came out toward them, to go up to the high place.^{2[2]} (14)

This point seems to be of great significance. It is precisely in anticipation of the appointment of the first king in Israel that it is important to emphasize that God continues to run the show, and that man has only limited control of what happens around him. Even in times of success and victory, the king must remember that true control over what goes on in the world is in the hands of God, and that nothing essential changed since he went off in search of the donkeys and found the kingship.

II. "A MAN OUT OF THE LAND OF BINYAMIN"

One of the surprising aspects of Shaul's selection is that the only thing that God tells Shmuel about the designated king is that he is "a man out of the land of Binyamin." This criterion is surprising in itself: why is it necessary to emphasize the fact that the king is from the tribe of Binyamin?^{3[3]}

Shaul himself provides an answer to this question in the continuation of the story. When Shmuel asks him: "And on whom is all the desire of Israel? Is it not on you, and on all your father's house?" (v. 20), Shaul responds:

And Shaul answered and said, Am not I a Binyaminite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel; and my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Binyamin? Why then do you speak to me in this manner? (21)

Why is the tribe of Binyamin "the smallest of the tribes of Israel"? It may, of course, be suggested that being the youngest of Yaakov's children, Binyamin is therefore called "the smallest of the tribes of Israel." Shaul, however, seems to be referring to quantitative smallness as well. Already in the wilderness, Binyamin was

^{2[2]} The combination, "And they... behold," in and of itself marks a surprising event, e.g.: "And it came to pass, as **they** still went on, and talked, that, **behold**, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them from one another, and Eliyahu went up by a storm of wind into heaven." (II *Melakhim* 2:11). See also *Bereishit* 42:35; *Shoftim* 19:22.

^{3[3]} Another problem is that this seems to contradict Yaakov's blessing given to Yehuda: "The staff shall not depart from Yehuda, nor the scepter from between his feet" (*Bereishit* 49:10). If this promise means – as many have understood it – that authority will remain in the hands of Yehuda – how can the monarchy begin with someone from the tribe of Binyamin? What would have happened had Shaul not sinned? Ramban deals with this question at length in his commentary to the verse in *Bereishit*. He explains that from the very outset Shaul's monarchy was supposed to be temporary, for Israel's "asking for a king at that time was loathsome to the Holy One, blessed be He." And therefore, "He did not wish to set upon them a king from a tribe from which the monarchy would never depart, and so He gave them a temporary monarchy." Nevertheless, Ramban notes the words of Shaul, "You have done foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which He commanded you; for now the Lord would have established your kingdom upon Israel forever" (13:13). He explains that had Shaul not sinned, his monarchy would have continued at least in part: "Perhaps he would have reigned as king over the tribes of his mother, over Binyamin, Ephraim and Menasheh... Or else, he would have reigned as king under the king of Yehuda." It should be noted that the second possibility suggested by Ramban had already been proposed by Yehonatan, the son of Shaul, when he said to David before they parted for the last time: "And you shall be king over Israel, and I shall be next to you, and that also Shaul my father knows" (23:17).

not counted among the larger tribes.^{4[4]} But the tribe of Binyamin became especially diminished in numbers during the war with the other tribes of Israel following the incident of the concubine in Giva, described at the end of the book of *Shofetim*. In this difficult war, Binyamin suffered a loss of "twenty-five thousand people" (*Shofetim* 20:46), and afterwards, "the men of Israel turned back upon the children of Binyamin, and smote them with the edge of the sword, both the men of every city, and beasts, and all that came to hand: also they set on fire all the cities that they came to" (ibid. v. 48). The women of Binyamin appear to have been particularly hard hit, for the last chapter in the book of *Shofetim* tells of Israel's attempts to solve the problems of the women of Binyamin – "seeing the women are destroyed out of Binyamin" (ibid. 21:16). It is reasonable to assume that the population of the tribe of Binyamin became drastically reduced in the wake of the war, and thus it was "the smallest of the tribes of Israel."

Shaul adds that not only is his tribe the smallest of the tribes, but his family is "the least of all the families of the tribe of Binyamin." In the next chapter (10:21), Shaul's family is designated "the family of Matri"; this name is not familiar to us from the list of the tribe's known families in *Parashat Pinchas* (*Bamidbar* 26:38-40), and thus it would appear that indeed we are dealing with a "lesser" family.

It seems that it is not by chance that the man chosen to be king of Israel comes from the least of the families of the smallest tribe in Israel. This choice emphasizes the primary message of the chapter: the need for modesty, humility, and the recognition that the king is subject to God's command. At the beginning of the chapter, I noted that modesty was a basic component of Shaul's personality; at this point the external facts underlying this modesty are revealed – his lowly lineage and humble origins.^{5[5]}

III. A CLOAK OF SECRECY

The first encounter between Shmuel and Shaul includes two slightly contradictory inclinations. On the one hand, Shmuel relates to Shaul with great respect; he makes him sit "in the chiefest place among them that were bidden, who were about thirty^{6[6]} persons" (v. 22), and he gives him the best portion of the meat:

^{4[4]} In the census at the beginning of the book of *Bamidbar* the tribe of Binyamin counted thirty-five thousand, four hundred men (*Bamidbar* 1:37); only the tribe of Menashe was smaller. In the census in *Parashat Pinchas*, the tribe grew to forty-five thousand, six hundred men (*Bamidbar* 26:41), but most of the tribes were still more larger than the tribe of Binyamin.

^{5[5]} It should be noted that Shaul's modest words bring to mind the words of Gidon ben Yoash: "O my Lord, with what shall I save Israel? behold, my family is the poorest in Menashe, and I am the youngest in my father's house" (*Shoftim* 6:15). Of all the *Shoftim*, Gidon was the closest to becoming king (as requested by the people: "Rule you over us, both you, and your son, and your son's son also" [ibid. 8:22]). Significantly, Gidon was graced with the quality of modesty that so characterized Shaul. As for the parallels between Shaul and Gidon, see below, in the discussion of the war against the Pelishtim in chapters 13 and 14.

^{6[6]} The Septuagint reads "seventy persons," suggesting that Shaul sat at the head of a political body that represented the people of Israel over the course of many generations: the seventy elders. The Masoretic reading, however, is more reasonable, because, among other reasons, the general tendency in the chapter is for Shmuel to conceal more than he reveals. It is difficult to assume that Shmuel convened a large and well-known public body. It is more reasonable that we are dealing with a group of the city's notables, and nothing more.

"And the cook took up the thigh, and that which was upon it,^{7[7]} and set it before Shaul. And [Shmuel] said, Behold the meat (*ha-nishar*)!^{8[8]} It is set before you (*sim lefanekha*),^{9[9]} eat..." (v. 24). On the other hand, at this stage Shmuel does not reveal to Shaul what is behind this attitude. Shmuel first responds to Shaul's question, "Tell me, I pray you, where the seer's house is" (v. 18), with an inappropriate answer:

I am the seer;^{10[10]} go up before me unto the high place, for you shall eat with me today; and in the morning I will let you go, and will tell you all that is in your heart. And as for your donkeys that were lost three days ago, set not your mind on them; for they are found. And on whom is all the desire of Israel? Is it not on you, and on all your father's house? (19-20)

Apart from the first two words, Shaul was undoubtedly very surprised by the mysterious welcome. Shmuel invites Shaul to eat with him, and even tells him that the donkeys have been found, but he adds an unintelligible sentence: "And on whom is all the desire of Israel? Is it not on you, and on all your father's house?" It stands to reason that Shaul first understood that Shmuel meant to say that he should not worry about the donkeys, because his family is wealthy. For if not, there is no way to understand Shaul's response: "Am not I a Binyaminite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel, and my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Binyamin? Why then do you speak to me in this manner?"

In the continuation as well Shmuel fails to explain to the surprised Shaul what stands behind the special treatment that he is receiving. After the meal, Shmuel talks with Shaul confidentially – "And when they were come down from the high place into the city, he spoke with Shaul upon the roof" (v. 25) – but Scripture does not tell us what he said.^{11[11]} It stands to reason that Shmuel began to discuss with Shaul the matter of the kingship. The conversation continues the next day, early in the morning – once again in secret: "And they arose early; and it came to pass about the break of day, that Shmuel called to Shaul **on the roof**, saying, Up, that I may send you away" (v. 26). The chapter ends with a description that is unique in its style:

^{7[7]} The Gemara in *Avoda Zara* (25a) brings a disagreement whether the reference is to the thigh and fat tail or to the thigh and the breast.

^{8[8]} It stands to reason that the word *ha-nishar* is not derived from the word *she'erit*, "what is left," for it is not a sign of honor to offer leftovers to a distinguished guest. Rather, it is used here in the sense of "flesh, meat," as in "My flesh (*she'eri*) and my heart fail" (*Tehillim* 73:26). See also *Vayikra* 21:2; *Mishlei* 5:11.

^{9[9]} "*Sim lefanekha*" is not a command (the command appears earlier in v. 23), but rather a participle, i.e., "it is set before you," as in *Bamidbar* 24:21.

^{10[10]} *Chazal* saw this expression as problematic, and as testifying to a certain arrogance: "Similar to this you find: 'Then Shaul drew near to Shmuel in the gate, etc. And Shmuel answered Shaul, and said, I am the seer.' The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: You are the seer? I am telling you that you fail to see. When did He tell him this? When He said to him: 'Fill your horn with oil, and go. I will send you to Yishai, the Bet-Lechemite: for I have provided for Me a king among his sons' (16:1), what did he say: 'And it came to pass, when they were come, that he looked on Eliav, and said, Surely the Lord's anointed is before him' (ibid. v. 6). The Holy One, blessed be He said: Did you not say: 'I am the seer'? 'Look not on his countenance, nor on the height of his stature; because I have refused him' (ibid. v. 7)" (*Sifrei Devarim*, 17). In chapter 17, I will explain that the criticism is primarily about what is related there, it being difficult to see anything problematic in Shmuel's conduct here.

^{11[11]} Rashi explains: "He rebuked him and taught him to fear the Holy One, blessed be He."

As they were going down at the end of the city,^{12[12]} Shmuel said to Shaul, Bid the servant pass on before us - **and he passed on** - but stand you still at this time, that I may cause you to hear the word of God. (27)

It should be noted that following Shmuel's words to Shaul, "Bid the servant pass on before us," we are told that this was done – "and he passed on." Only after the servant is out of earshot, does Shmuel continue to talk to Shaul. This description emphasizes the great secrecy adopted by Shmuel, who did not allow anybody to witness Shaul's being anointed king, not even his faithful servant.

What is the meaning of all this secrecy? We will see below that it is very important that the people should not know at this stage that Shaul was chosen to be king, and that his being chosen should be announced in the presence of all of Israel. I will come back to this point in the coming chapters, and explain its significance. Now, I merely draw your attention to the phenomenon. At this point it may be said that Shmuel is preparing Shaul for the expected announcement, but at the same time he conceals from the people, for now, Shaul's goal and mission.

(Translated by David Strauss)

^{12[12]} This is sort of a "mirror image" of what was stated at the beginning of the story: "**As they went up the ascent to the city**, they found young maidens going out to draw water" (v. 11). It might be Scripture's intention to emphasize the change that transpired in Shaul: All through the chapter the term "*heima*" refers to Shaul and his lad (vvs. 5, 11 [2], 14), but now it refers to Shmuel and Shaul. Shaul's modesty – his going with his lad as an equal (as noted in the previous lecture) – earned him the privilege to go as an equal with Shmuel.