

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Book of Shmuel Yeshivat Har Etzion

LECTURE 20: CHAPTER 11 (PART II)

THE WAR AGAINST AMMON

Rav Amnon Bazak

I. THE CONTRADICTIONS

In the previous lesson, we noted the main points in the account of the war against Ammon. Let us now turn our attention to the problems arising in this and the previous chapters regarding the continuity of the narrative. Reading chapter 11 as a direct continuation of the previous chapter raises serious difficulties:

- 1) First of all, why did the people of Yavesh-Gilad seek help in "all the borders of Israel" (v. 3), rather than turn directly to Shaul, as might have been expected? The question is sharpened in light of the fact that in chapter 12 Shmuel states that Israel's request for a king arose entirely out of the threat from Ammon: "And when you saw that Nachash the king of the children of Ammon came against you, you said to me, No; but a king shall reign over us" (12:12). Thus, we might have expected that after Shaul had been appointed king over all of Israel, the people would immediately turn to him. Nevertheless, messengers are sent to all the borders of Israel, and it is only in the framework of these rounds that they come to Givat-Shaul.
- 2) Even when the messengers arrive in Givat-Shaul, they do not go directly to Shaul, but rather they speak to the people: "Then came the messengers to Givat-Shaul, and spoke these words in the ears of the people; and all the people lifted up their voice, and wept." None of this takes place in Shaul's presence.
- 3) Shaul's conduct in itself raises eyebrows: "And, behold, Shaul came after the herd out of the field; and Shaul said, What ails the people that they weep? And

they told him the tidings of the men of Yavesh." First, it is surprising that Shaul, after having been chosen to serve as king over Israel, should continue to work in the field, as if he did not have a country to run, especially at this critical point in time.

- 4) What happens afterwards is also strange. In order to cause the people to follow him out to the battlefield, Shaul employs a drastic measure: "And he took a yoke of oxen, and cut them in pieces, and sent them throughout all the borders of Israel by the hand of messengers, saying, Whosoever comes not forth after Shaul and after Shmuel, so shall it be done unto his oxen. And the dread of the Lord fell on the people, and they came out as one man" (v. 7). Again, if Shaul's whole appointment was to deliver the people from the hand of Nachash the Ammonite, why was it necessary for Shaul to use such a sharp threat in order to muster the nation to follow him? The people should have eagerly volunteered to go out to war!

The commentators noted these difficulties and suggested one answer to resolve all of them. At the end of chapter 10, it says: "And Shaul also went home to Giva." Radak comments: "This teaches that he [Shaul] went home just as before. When he saw that he had not been accepted and approved of by all of Israel, he went home and did not yet conduct himself as king" (Metzudat David offers a similar explanation in our chapter). This answers all the questions raised above: The people did not yet view Shaul as king, and in practice he continued to conduct himself as an ordinary person.

In my humble opinion, however, this explanation is difficult, for Scripture does not leave us with the impression that Shaul did not begin to function as king. On the contrary, it was only a few worthless men who did not relate to him in serious manner, but the rest of the people, who cried out, "Long live the king," saw him as worthy of the throne.

Thus, it seems that that we should continue with the approach adopted in previous chapters, according to which these chapters offer two parallel accounts of the early days of the monarchy in Israel. One account views Israel's request for a king in a negative light, whereas a second account views the request from a positive perspective. Thus far we have seen that the negative account begins in chapter 8. There the request for a king comes on Israel's initiative and is therefore viewed as a rebellion against God. The only reason that it is answered in the affirmative is that "the Torah spoke in view of man's evil inclination." It continues in the second half of chapter 10, where Shmuel assembles the nation, and a lottery chooses Shaul as king over Israel. In contrast, the positive perspective on the idea of the monarchy starts in chapter 9, where God Himself initiates Shaul's arrival before Shmuel, as one who will deliver Israel from the hand of the Pelishtim. This continues in the first half of chapter 10, where Shaul receives the signs and the spirit of God rests upon him.

I wish to argue now that most of chapter 11 constitutes a continuation of the positive perspective regarding the monarchy, which we last saw in 10:16. According to that account, Shaul had not yet been openly appointed king over Israel. This answers the questions raised above: At this point the people did not yet know of Shaul, and thus the messengers went out to all the borders of Israel, and even when they came to Givat-Shaul, they did not turn directly to Shaul. It is for this reason that Shaul had to

employ drastic measures in order to muster troops to go out to war with an unknown leader, and that he mentions the name of Shmuel together with his own name.

From a conceptual perspective as well, this account is a continuation of the first half of chapter 10, where Shmuel says to Shaul: "And let it be, when these signs are come to you, that you do as occasion serve you; for God is with you" (10:7). Our chapter describes the realization of this promise and the expectation that Shaul will act as he pleases. Later in chapter 10 it says: "And when they came there to the hill, behold, a company of prophets met him; and the spirit of God came upon him" (v. 10); and the very same expression is used in our chapter: "And the spirit of God came upon Shaul when he heard those tidings" (v. 6). These expressions characterize Shaul from the positive perspective regarding the monarchy.

II. THE MISSING SECTION IN THE NEGATIVE ACCOUNT

Thus far the division into separate accounts has helped us resolve several serious difficulties in the structure of the narratives, and we shall still use this division to resolve certain difficult contradictions that await us in the coming chapters. Here, however, there is a certain difficulty with the solution that has just been presented. At the end of chapter 11, following the victory in battle, it says:

And the people said unto Shmuel, Who is he that said, Shall Shaul reign over us? bring the men, that we may put them to death. And Shaul said, There shall not a man be put to death this day; for to-day the Lord has wrought deliverance in Israel.^{1[1]} Then said Shmuel to the people, Come and let us go to Gilgal, and renew the kingdom there. And all the people went to Gilgal; and there they made Shaul king before the Lord in Gilgal; and there they sacrificed sacrifices of peace-offerings before the Lord; and there Shaul and all the men of Israel rejoiced greatly. (12-15)

It cannot be said about these verses that they are part of the positive perspective on the monarchy, for the people's words relate to those worthless men who had said, "How

^{1[1]} Here Shaul establishes a principle that will "keep rolling" over the course of the book of *Shmuel*: Nobody is put to death on a day that God brings salvation to Israel. Later, the people will use this argument against Shaul when he wants to kill Yehonatan after he violates the oath and tastes of the honey: "And the people said unto Shaul, Shall Yehonatan die, who has wrought this great salvation in Israel? Far from it; as the Lord lives, there shall not one hair of his head fall to the ground; for he has wrought with God **this day**" (14:45). If nobody is put to death on the day that God delivers Israel, then all the more so he who brought the deliverance "with God" should not be put to death. Later Yehonatan himself uses this argument, when he asks Shaul not to harm David: "For he put his life in his hand, and smote the Pelishti, and the Lord wrought **a great victory** for all Israel; you saw it, and did rejoice; why then will you sin against innocent blood, to slay David without a cause?" (19:5). And finally, David himself uses this principle, when at the end of Avshalom's rebellion, he refuses to kill Shimi ben Gera, who had thrown stones at him: "Shall there any man be put to death this day in Israel? for do not I know that I am this day king over Israel?" (II *Shmuel* 19:23).

shall this man save us?" (10, 27), at the end of chapter 10, in the framework of the negative perspective on the monarchy. Shmuel's words in the continuation about the need to renew the monarchy also seem to belong to that perspective, for only from that perspective was there already one crowning of the king, and now a need to renew his kingship. Does this not contradict the explanation proposed above?

It seems that the matter should be understood as follows. As opposed to what we have seen thus far, a two-fold account and parallel description of the same points from each of the two perspectives (the initiative to establish a monarchy, the selection of Shaul, the physical description of Shaul, and more) - the war against Ammon, though relevant to both perspectives, is described primarily from the positive perspective. Presumably, it was omitted from the negative account of the monarchy because of the desire to downplay Shaul's success and minimize his achievements. But even from this perspective, the war against Ammon had significance that could not be ignored: Shaul's kingship was now accepted by the entire nation, and not just by a part thereof as before the war. Therefore, all that is left of the negative account of the monarchy is the story of the conclusion of the war, in the context of the need to renew the monarchy, as indeed occurs in chapter 12.

While this resolution is a bit complicated, its correctness seems to follow from another contradiction regarding the war against Ammon. As we saw at length in the previous lesson, our chapter describes the war against Ammon as a local battle between Nachash the Ammonite and the residents of Yavesh-Gilad, the rest of Israel not rushing to their aid (for the reasons which I expanded upon at length there). In contrast, in chapter 12, in the description of the "renewal of the monarchy," which continues the negative perspective regarding the monarchy, Shmuel says to the people: "And when you saw that Nachash the king of the children of Ammon came against you, you said unto me, Nay, but a king shall reign over us" (12:12). As stated earlier, this suggests that the entire idea of the monarchy arose only on account of Nachash the Ammonite. But this does not accord with what is stated in our chapter, which presents the war as a local problem!

We see then that we can relate to the war against Ammon from two different perspectives, which depend on the two perspectives regarding the monarchy in general. According to the positive perspective on the monarchy, the enemy which gave rise to the need for a king were the Pelishtim: "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, and he shall save My people out of the hand of the Pelishtim; for I have looked upon My people, because their cry is come unto Me" (9:16). From this perspective, the war against Ammon was indeed a local episode, its primary significance being the way in which Shaul revealed himself to the people. In contrast, from the negative perspective regarding the monarchy,

the request for a king arose as a result of the threat from Nachash the Ammonite, which is described as a threat to the entire people of Israel. As explained above, the description of the war from this perspective is missing. All that is left of it is the epilogue, that is relevant to the issue of the monarchy, namely, that Shaul was now accepted as king by all of Israel, after his kingship had been accepted at first by only part of Israel.

Let us summarize the two accounts thus far:

The Negative Perspective	The Positive Perspective
8 – the people request a king, a request that is understood as a rejection of God.	God informs Shmuel about Shaul's appointment as king, in order to deliver Israel from the Pelishtim.
	10:1-16 – the signs and the resting of the spirit of God upon Shaul.
10:17-26 – choosing Shaul as king by way of a lottery, and Shaul's appearance before the people.	
[the missing piece – the victory over Ammon as part of the appointment of a king on Israel's initiative.]	11:1-11 – the victory over Ammon and Shaul's appearance to the people.
11:12-15 – the result of the war against Ammon: acceptance of Shaul as king by all of Israel.	
12 – renewal of Shaul's monarchy.	

As stated, it is possible and necessary to read each column separately, as a single continuum (except for the account of the war against Ammon from the negative perspective, which was intentionally omitted), thereby resolving the various problems that arise in the flow of the narrative.

At this point we can leave for several lectures the issue of the two perspectives regarding the crowning of Shaul as king. We will return to it at the end of chapter 13, when we will deal with the contradiction between that chapter and chapters 13-14 on the question of the reason that Shaul lost the royal throne.

III. YEHUDA AND ISRAEL

Before concluding my analysis of chapter 11, I wish to note another point that is unconnected to the previous discussion:

And he numbered them in Bezek;^{2[2]} and the children of Israel were three hundred thousand, and the men of Yehuda thirty thousand. (8)

This division between Israel and Yehuda is a bit surprising: We are now at the beginning of the united kingdom, in the days of Shaul and David; why do we find such a division?

It seems that already in these chapters Scripture wishes to emphasize that the division between Yehuda and Israel was present from the very beginning, and that one of the major tests of the king was to overcome this division. Over the course of the book, Scripture from time to time weaves this division into the story, as if by the way. Thus, for example, toward the end of the story of the battle between David and Golyat, we read: "And the men of Israel and of Yehuda arose, and shouted, and pursued the Pelishtim" (17:52). And afterwards, when David becomes a more central figure, this point is emphasized once again: "But all Israel and Yehuda loved David; for he went out and came in before them." (18:16).

At a certain point in the book, the monarchy does in fact split for a period of years. Following the death of Shaul, the people of Yehuda set David as king over them, whereas Israel raise as king for a short time Ish-Boshet the son of Shaul (see II *Shmuel* 2:1-11). Toward the end of the book as well, following Avshalom's rebellion, a "minor" rebellion breaks out under Sheva ben Bikhri, who represents the tribes of Israel rebelling against David and Yehuda (II *Shmuel* 20).

^{2[2]} The commentators disagree whether the term "Bezek" is a place name or a description of the commander's action. Both interpretations are brought by Rashi (ad loc.). According to the first interpretation, we are dealing with a description of the commander's action: "Our Rabbis said: With broken shards. Another explanation: *Be-bezek* – with stones; he took a stone from each one and counted them, like 'He numbered them *bi-tela'im*' (15:4) – he took a lamb from each one and counted them, in the way that they would count them with the half-shekel." According to the second interpretation, we are dealing with a place-name. Rashi refers to the verse: "And they found Adoni-Bezek in Bezek" (*Shoftim* 1:5). According to the plain sense of Scripture, we seem to be dealing with a place-name, though a different place than that referred to by Rashi. The Bezek in the book of *Shoftim* is in the territory of Yehuda, whereas here we are dealing with a place near the border with Ammon. The Bezek in *Shmuel* is generally identified today with Chirbat Ivzik, south-west of Bet-Shan.

In this way we are told that even the early kings of Israel failed to unite the ranks of the people, and that the division of the monarchy following the death of Shelomo (I *Melakhim* 12) was only a question of time. The roots of the schism were present from the very beginning of the establishment of the monarchy, and none of the kings of Israel were able to uproot them before they led to a full-fledged split between the two kingdoms. The reasons for this split will be discussed in the coming lessons.

(Translated by David Strauss)
