

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Book of Shmuel
Yeshivat Har Etzion

LECTURE 22: CHAPTERS 13-14 THE FIRST WAR AGAINST THE PELISHTIM (PART I)

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I. "SAUL WAS ONE YEAR OLD WHEN HE BEGAN TO REIGN"

The opening verse in our chapter is known for its difficulty:

Saul was one year old when he began to reign; and two years he reigned over Israel.¹[1]

The difficulty in the first part of the verse is self-evident, but the second part of the verse is also difficult: Did Shaul really rule as king for only two years? The Ri'az²[2] already pointed to this difficulty in his commentary to the verse:

Is it possible to say this? But surely it is written: "And he fought against all his enemies on every side, against Mo'av, and against the children of Ammon, and against Edom, and against the kings of Tzova, and against the Pelishtim; and wherever he turned himself, he did them mischief" (I *Shmuel* 14:47). When did he fight all these wars? And when did he pursue David, who spent a year³[3] and four months just in the land of the Pelishtim?⁴[4]

The commentators propose different answers to the first question or to both of them. Rashi cites the famous words of *Chazal* (*Yoma* 22b) that "one year old" means "like one year old, that he had not tasted sin." But he too explains the verse according to its plain sense (and so too Radak),⁵[5] that the verse means that the events described in this chapter took place during the first year of his reign. Ralbag, who was also bothered by the second question, suggests that one year passed from the

¹[1] Unless specified otherwise, reference to verses in this lesson refer to chap. 13.

²[2] The Ri'az was the grandson of the Rid, the well-known Tosafist, who lived in thirteenth century Italy. Since both sages bore the same name, R. Yeshaya di Trani, the accepted way to distinguish between the two is to call the grandfather, Rid (his initials, R. Yeshayahu di Trani), and to call the grandson, Ri'az (R. Yeshayahu Acharon *z"l*).

³[3] As it says: "And the number of the days that David dwelt in the country of the Pelishtim was **days and four months**" (I *Shmuel* 27:7), which according to the accepted understanding (see Rashi and Radak, ad loc.) means: a full year and four months.

⁴[4] Ralbag raised the same objection: "It is far-fetched to say that Shaul ruled as king for only two years, with all the many things that he did, combined with the fact that much time passed since his anointing before he established his kingdom."

⁵[5] Radak mentions another *derasha* on the verse, found in the *Yerushalmi* (*Bikkurim* 3:3), which learns from here that the sins of a *nasi* achieve atonement when he is appointed to his position: "Was he one year old? Rather, all his sins were pardoned as if he were a one year old infant."

anointing of Shaul to the renewal of the kingdom in Gilgal, and the events described in this chapter occurred two years later.^{6[6]}

There is a striking difficulty in all these explanations. The verse has the classic structure of verses that open the accounts of the reigns of kings, both those of Ish Boshet and David in the book of *Shmuel* (see II *Shmuel* 2:10; 5:4), and those of the vast majority of kings in the book of *Melakhim*: "X was Y years old when he began to reign; and Z years he reigned over Israel/Yehuda." In light of this, it is difficult to say that the words, "Shaul was one year old when he began to reign," relate to the time that he reigned thus far.

How then can we understand the verse? It seems that we should accept the explanation proposed by R. Tanchum ha-Yerushalmi,^{7[7]} that the verse is defective: It really should read: "Shaul was X years old when he began to reign," but Shaul's age was intentionally omitted. By writing the header to Shaul's kingdom in a defective manner, Scripture means to allude already from the very beginning that Shaul failed in his office, and that we should not relate to him as an ordinary king.

We find this technique of intentionally formulating verses in a defective manner in order to send out a negative message elsewhere in Scripture. I shall cite one similar example: Shaul's son, Ish Boshet. Ish Boshet's reign seems to have been impaired from the very outset; in effect he is portrayed as a meaningless character: the "strong man" in his kingdom is Avner, who initiated Ish Boshet's being crowned as king (see II *Shmuel* 2-3). In order to express Ish Boshet's weakness, Scripture omits his name over and over again, even at the price of creating unusual formulations:

Now Shaul had a concubine, whose name was Ritzpa, the daughter of Aya;
and he^{8[8]} said to Avner, Why have you gone in unto my father's concubine?
(II *Shemuel* 3:7)

And he could not answer Avner another word, because he feared him. (ibid. v. 11).

And when **Shaul's son** heard that Avner was dead in Hebron, his hands became feeble, and all the Israelites were affrighted. **And Shaul's son^{9[9]}** had two men that were captains of bands. (ibid. 4:1-2)

^{6[6]} Ri'az suggests a different solution to the second difficulty: Shaul ruled for two years until David was anointed, and from that time on already his kingdom was viewed as having come to an end.

^{7[7]} A thirteenth century biblical commentator and grammarian. Very little is known about his life. His original explanation of the verse here is also brought in the *Da'at Mikra* commentary.

^{8[8]} About whom is it said here "And he said"? At first glance it seems to be Shaul, but as we know, at this point, Shaul is already dead. It is clear from the context that the reference is to Ish-Boshet. Ish-Boshet was last mentioned tens of verses earlier, and according to the regular rules of the language, his name should have appeared in this verse, only that Scripture intentionally erased it.

^{9[9]} The expression "the son of Shaul" is also used as an expression of derision: Scripture does not usually refer to people exclusively by their fathers' names, and such designations generally imply derision (see, for example, I *Shmuel* 10:11; 20:31). The omission of the words "Ish-Boshet" automatically creates contempt toward the person.

In this way we can also understand the words, "And two years he reigned over Israel," they too being an expression of derision, reflecting the weakness of Shaul's kingdom. Whether they refer to the period until David's anointment (as proposed by Ri'az, see note 6), or they do not refer to any particular period – their main objective is to say that this kingdom did not last for a significant period of time, and was not worthy of the name "kingdom."¹⁰[10] This is a particularly important statement at the beginning of this chapter – the account of Shaul's first failing.

An additional literary expression of the negative evaluation of Shaul may be found in another difficulty in the next verse:

And Shaul chose him three thousand men of Israel; whereof two thousand were with Shaul in Mikhmas and in the mount of Bet-El, and a thousand were with Yonatan in Giv'at-Binyamin.... (2)

At first glance, the verse appears to be absolutely natural – but this is only because we are familiar with the book and its main characters. Were we reading the book for the first time, however, we would immediately ask: Who is this Yonatan, mentioned here for the first time? Why doesn't Scripture read at least, as it usually does, "Yonatan the son of Shaul" or "Yonatan his son"? How are we to know at this stage that we are dealing with Shaul's son?

It seems that here too Scripture is alluding that the text should have been formulated differently. At the end of chap. 14, we find a list of the sons of Shaul:

Now the sons of Shaul were Yonatan, and Yishvi, and Malki-Shua; and the names of his two daughters were these: the name of the first-born Merav, and the name of the younger Mikhal. (14:49)

It is reasonable to assume that the original location of this verse was at the beginning of our chapter, as we find regarding other kings;¹¹[11] thus we understand why Yonatan is mentioned later without explaining who he is and what is his connection to Shaul. But in order to upset the usual framework, this verse was put off until the end of the war, thus creating a difficulty regarding the identification of Yonatan – a difficulty that strengthens the impression that there is something wrong with Shaul's kingdom.

II. THE REBELLION

¹⁰[10] In this way, we can also understand a difficult verse regarding Ish-Boshet: "Ish-Boshet Shaul's son was forty years old when he began to reign over Israel, and he reigned **two years**. But the house of Yehuda followed David. And the time that David was king in Hebron over the house of Yehuda was seven years and six months" (II *Shmuel* 2:10-11). If Ish-Boshet reigned for only two years, why did David rule in Hebron seven years and six months only over the tribe of Yehuda? The commentators proposed several solutions to this problem, but it seems that here too the expression "two years" is a term of diminution that does not necessarily reflect objective reality.

¹¹[11] So, for example, regarding David: "David was thirty years old when he began to reign; forty years he reigned" (II *Shmuel* 5:4). And several verses later: "And David took him more concubines and wives out of Jerusalem, after he was come from Hebron; and there were yet sons and daughters born to David. And these are the names of those that were born unto him in Jerusalem: Shamua, and Shovav, and Natan, and Shlomo" (ibid. vv. 13-14).

After having noted the difficulties in the opening verse, we can now move on to the story itself. Chapters 13-14 describe Shaul's first war. At the beginning of the chapter, we hear about the outbreak of a rebellion against the Pelishtim:

And Yonatan smote the garrison of the Pelishtim that was in Geva, and the Pelishtim heard of it. And Shaul blew the horn^{12[12]} throughout all the land, saying, Let the Hebrews hear. And all Israel heard say that Shaul had smitten the garrison of the Pelishtim, and that Israel also had made himself odious with the Pelishtim. And the people were gathered together after Shaul to Gilgal. (3-4)

Shaul prepares for himself a small army, which he stations in two places in Binyamin, and the rest of the people he sends home. The beginning of the rebellion indicates that Shaul and Yonatan are working together in coordination: Yonatan strikes at the garrison of the Pelishtim, and Shaul musters the entire nation for an open struggle against the Pelishtim. Who told Shaul to do this? It seems that here we see the reason for the phenomenon that was noted at the end of chapter 9 (see Lecture no. 15, III) – the cloak of secrecy that marked Shmuel's conversation with Shaul (see 9:25-27). It stands to reason that in that secret talk, Shmuel laid out before Shaul his plans for a rebellion, for according to that account, the objective of Shaul's appointment was that "he shall save My people out of the hand of the Pelishtim" (ibid., v. 16). All that Scripture records of Shmuel's words to Shaul regarding the war is Shmuel's order: "And you shall go down before me to Gilgal... and tell you what you shall do" (10:8). Now Shaul begins to fulfill the function for the sake of which he had been appointed, and therefore he opens the rebellion.

Israel's starting position vis-a-vis the Pelishtim was not very encouraging. Perhaps more than any other campaign in Scripture, this campaign seems to be one of the few against the many, the weak against the mighty. The enormous gap between the Pelishti forces, whose control extends within the borders of Israel, and the limited forces of Shaul, is striking in several ways:

1. The Pelishti control in *Eretz Yisrael* finds expression in the Pelishti garrisons situated deep within the land: in chapter 10, in the framework of the signs that he gives him, Shmuel sends Shaul "to the hill of God, where is the garrison of the Pelishtim" (10:5); and the rebellion itself in our chapter starts with a strike against "the garrison of the Pelishtim that was in Geva" (v. 3). The existence of these garrisons undoubtedly impacted on Israel's ability to organize itself militarily – as we shall see also from the points mentioned below.

2. The Pelishtim control the industrial infrastructure of *Eretz Yisrael*:

Now there was no smith found throughout all the land of Israel; for the Pelishtim said, Lest the Hebrews make them swords or spears... So it came to pass in the day of battle, that there was neither sword nor spear found in the hand of any of the people that were with Shaul and Yonatan; but with Shaul and with Yonatan his son was there found. (19-22)

^{12[12]} Blowing a horn as signifying the beginning of a revolt or a battle is familiar to us from other places: regarding Ehud ben Gera (*Shoftim* 3:27); Gidon (ibid. 6:34); and Yehu (II *Melakhim* 9:13).

3. As stated above, Shaul establishes a small army. It stands to reason that the size of this army was influenced by the Pelishti control that did not allow for the maintenance of a larger army. In the continuation, with the beginning of the revolt, Israel gathers behind Shaul at Gilgal, but they face a Pelishti force of unprecedented might:

And the Pelishtim assembled themselves together to fight with Israel, **thirty thousand chariots**,^{13[13]} and six thousand horsemen, and people as the sand which is on the seashore in multitude. (5)

4. Pelishti control led to the situation that some of the Hebrews were forced to serve in the Pelishti army, and only after the change brought about by Yonatan could they join the rest of the people of Israel, as is stated below:

Now the Hebrews that were with the Pelishtim as beforetime, and that went up with them into the camp round about; even they also turned to be with the Israelites that were with Shaul and Yonatan. (14:21)

But it suddenly becomes clear that this very difficult situation was not unexpected. It stemmed from the fundamental objectives of Shmuel, as representative of God. For Shmuel is not satisfied with the difficult conditions described thus far, but rather he adds another difficulty.

III. "AND YOU SHALL GO DOWN BEFORE ME TO GILGAL"

From a strategic perspective, the campaign starts out from a very strange point: The Pelishtim assemble "in Mikhmas, eastward of Bet-Aven" (v. 5) – south of Mount Bet-El, on the border of the desert that extends down to the valley of Jericho. Shaul, on the other hand, gathers Israel in Gilgal, east of Jericho, in accordance with Shemuel's command mentioned above. What is the logic in this? Surely Shaul and his forces suffer from great strategic disadvantage!

It seems that it is precisely this point that stands at the center of Shaul's first test as king over all of Israel.^{14[14]} Shaul is the first king of Israel, and this is the first war waged by Israel under the leadership of a king. Therefore, it is exceedingly important that it be absolutely clear that even when God agrees to the monarchical framework, He continues to stand behind the scenes. This message will be best delivered through a victory void of all military logic. The miracle upon which the victory will be built will be magnified with the selection of a place that has no strategic logic, for through this selection the lesson will be internalized that in the kingdom of Israel the strategic consideration is not always the decisive one. For this reason, Shaul was appointed king from the very outset at Gilgal (11:14-15), and there, as we already saw, Shmuel emphasized at length the importance of obeying the word of God as the sole condition for success (12:13-25). The preparations for the first war

^{13[13]} For comparison's sake, the Egyptian army that pursued Israel at the Sea of Suf numbered six hundred chariots (*Shemot* 14:7); Sisera's grand army that "strongly pressed the children of Israel for twenty years" numbered nine hundred iron chariots (*Shoftim* 4:1); and Shlomo's army had "a thousand and four hundred chariots and twelve thousand horsemen" (I *Melakhim* 10:26).

^{14[14]} As we saw in Lecture 20, Shaul did not go out to war against Ammon (I *Shmuel* 11) as king, in part because his kingship had not yet been accepted by the entire people.

against the Pelishtim were also made specifically at Gilgal, in order to illustrate the idea that what is most important is trust and faith in God, and while war was must be conducted in natural ways, nevertheless "the battle is the Lord's" (17:47). This lesson is particularly important in the first war,^{15[15]} and therefore it was precisely in this war that Shaul was asked to take such unusual steps.

Shmuel, however, did not content himself with this. He tried to impose even more stringent conditions upon Shaul, as will be explained in the next lesson.

(Translated by David Strauss)

^{15[15]} This was also true regarding Yehoshua's first battle, which was based entirely on the miraculous fall of the walls of Jericho (*Yehoshua* 6).