

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

**The Book of Shmuel
Yeshivat Har Etzion**

LECTURE 24: CHAPTERS 13-14

THE FIRST WAR AGAINST THE PELISHTIM (PART III)

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VIII. THE EXPOSITION

The chapter opens with a classic exposition^{1[1]} that has a very clear structure. Following the introductory verse – "Now it fell upon a day, that Yehonatan the son of Shaul said unto the young man that bore his armor, Come and let us go over to the Pelishtim's garrison, that is on yonder side" (v. 1)^{2[2]} – we find an exposition that continues until the end of verse 5. At that point, Scripture repeats what was said in the introduction: "And Yehonatan said to the young man that bore his armor, Come and let us go over unto the garrison of these uncircumcised" (v. 6) – "like a person who says: Let us return to the previous subject" (see, for example, Rashi, *Shemot* 6:30; and so too in Ramban's commentary to the Torah in several places). The expository verses record several facts that are necessary in order to understand the rest of the story:

- 1) "But he told not his father" (v. 1). On the simple level, this piece of information is necessary in order to explain why later in the chapter Shaul had to say to the people who were with him: "Number now, and see who is gone from us" (v. 17). And it is also for this reason that it is stated at the end of verse 3: "And the people knew not that Yehonatan was gone." Nevertheless, this information prepares us for the growing rift between Shaul and his son, a rift that will only broaden before we reach the dramatic end of the campaign.

^{1[1]} The phenomenon of "exposition" was mentioned already at the beginning of chap. 3. The term "exposition" refers to that part of a literary composition in which information is provided that will be important for understanding what happens in the continuation. Even though it is often difficult to understand the significance of such information at the stage when it is presented, it is offered at that point so as not to interrupt the later narrative with explanatory notes.

^{2[2]} Unless otherwise specified, all references to verses relate to chap. 14.

- 2) "And Shaul tarried in the uttermost part of Giva under the pomegranate-tree which is in Migron; and the people that were with him were about six hundred men" (v. 2). This information explains the situation that brought Yehonatan to take the unusual step that he took. In response to the attack of the three companies of Pelishtim, which was noted in the previous lesson, Shaul "tarries" and does nothing. Following Shmuel's harsh rebuke, Shaul becomes totally passive, and dares not take any step in order to improve the situation. In contrast to Shaul's passivity, Yehonatan's activity stands out prominently.

- 3) "And Achiya, the son of Achituv, Ikhavod's brother, the son of Pinchas, the son of Eli, the priest of the Lord in Shilo, wearing an *efod*" (v. 3). This fact is of great importance in the continuation of the narrative. The fact that a priest wearing an *efod* was found in the camp should have brought Shaul to inquire of God what he should do. But Shaul fails to do this, and he uses the *efod* only at a much later stage (and then too he cuts off the process in the middle, as we shall see below).

- 4) "And between the passes, by which Yehonatan sought to go over unto the Pelishtim's garrison, there was a rocky crag on the one side, and a rocky crag on the other side; and the name of the one was Bozez, and the name of the other Seneh" (v.4). This description comes to explain how Yehonatan succeeded in hiding from the Pelishtim between the rocky crags near the Pelishti garrison.

We can now consider the story of Yehonatan itself.

IX. THE SIGN

As stated above, Yehonatan refuses to accept his father's passivity and failure even to inquire of God. He goes out together with his lad, out of deep faith in God and His ability to deliver Israel:

And Yehonatan said to the young man that bore his armor, Come and let us go over unto the garrison of these uncircumcised; it may be that the Lord will work for us; for there is no restraint to the Lord to save by many or by few. And his armor-bearer said unto him, Do all that is in your heart; turn you, behold I am with you according to your heart. (6-7)

The conversation between Yehonatan and his lad is in great measure reminiscent of the conversation between Shaul and his lad at the time of the search for the donkeys, as described at length in chapter 9. The contrast between the account is striking: Whereas regarding Shaul it is the lad who takes the initiative, Shaul being dragged along after him (as

we saw there at length) – here Yehonatan is the initiator, and it is the lad who follows after him.^{3[3]}

The main difference between Shaul and Yehonatan, however, relates to the inquiry made of God. As noted above, Shaul could have inquired of God by way of the priest and the *efod*, but he fails to do so. Yehonatan lacks the means to inquire of God, but he creates such a means for himself, and he does not go out to battle without first receiving a sign of God's approval:

Then said Yehonatan, Behold, we will pass over unto the men, and we will disclose ourselves unto them. If they say thus unto us, Tarry until we come to you; then we will stand still in our place, and will not go up unto them. But if they say thus, Come up to us; then we will go up; for the Lord has delivered them into our hand; and this shall be the sign unto us. (8-10)

What is the nature of the sign? Is a person permitted to act in this manner, and create for himself signs that testify to God's will? This question stands at the heart of an important discussion among the Rishonim on this issue. The focus of the discussion is a somewhat vague statement in the Gemara in *Chullin*:

Any divination which is not proposed in the manner of Eliezer, Avraham's servant, or of Yehonatan the son of Shaul, is not a divination. (*Chullin* 95b)

As stated above, this statement is unclear: Were the divinations of Avraham's servant (in choosing a bride for Yitzchak) and Yehonatan forbidden or permitted? The commentators disagree on this question. Rashi and Tosafot (*ibid.*) understand that only divinations like those of Eliezer and Yehonatan – where the person truly accepts upon himself to act in accordance with the result – are forbidden divinations. Nevertheless, argue Tosafot, Yehonatan himself did not violate any prohibition, for "he said that in order to goad his lad, but he would have gone up in any event." Rambam does not discuss Yehonatan, but what he says about Eliezer implies that *Chazal* disapproved of Yehonatan's conduct as well:

Divining in the manner of idolators is forbidden. As it is stated: "You shall not divine" (*Vayikra* 19:26). How so divination? For example, those who say: Since my bread fell from my mouth or my stick fell from my hand, I will not go to such-and-such place today, for if I go, my desires will not be fulfilled... And similarly one who sets signs for himself: If such-and-such happens, I will do such-and-such, and if not, not, like Eliezer the servant of Avraham. And so

^{3[3]} There might even be a linguistic connection between the two stories: The lad's words to Yehonatan, "Do all that is in your heart," are reminiscent of Shmuel's words to Shaul in that chapter, "And I will tell you all that is in your heart" (9:19).

too all similar things, **they are all forbidden.** And whoever does one of these things is liable for lashes. (Rambam, *Hilkhot Avoda Zara* 11:4)

Ra'avad sharply disagrees with the Rambam:

This is a great mistake, for **this thing is absolutely permitted.** Perhaps he was led astray by the formulation that he saw: "Any divination which is not proposed in the manner of Eliezer or of Yehonatan is not a divination," and he understood that this is dealing with the matter of permissibility. But this is not the case, but rather it means as follows: It is not fit to be relied upon. How did he think that righteous people like them committed such a transgression? **If they were here, they would strike him with lashes of fire.**

According to Ra'avad, the Gemara does not mean to say that a divination that is not like that of Eliezer and Yehonatan is not a forbidden divination, but just the opposite: only such a divination is a divination that can be relied upon. Kesef Mishneh's explanation of Ra'avad's position is also important for understanding our chapter:

So it seems to me that the matter should be understood. The divination that is forbidden by the Torah is **when a person conditions his actions on a sign that reason does not suggest is indicative of [pending] benefit or harm.** For example, bread fell from his hand, or a deer caused him to stop on the road, for these and things like them are ways of the Emori. But a person who makes a sign out of something that reason dictates is indicative of [pending] benefit or harm, this is not divination. **For all worldly affairs are like this,** for someone who says: If it rains, I will not go out on the road, but if not, I will, this is not divination, but the way of the world. And Eliezer and Yehonatan conditioned their actions on similar things, for Eliezer knew that Yitzchak would only be given a wife who is fit for him. Therefore he made a sign for himself, that if she is so good in her actions and perfect in her character that when he says to her, "Give me a little water to drink" (*Bereishit* 24:17), she will answer him with a generous spirit, "I will also give your camels to drink" (*ibid.* v. 14) – she is the one whom heaven has set aside for Yitzchak. And similarly Yehonatan, who wanted to strike at the Pelishti camp, only him and his armor-bearer, made this sign: If they say to him, "Come up to us," **it will be a sign that they fear an ambush.** In such a case Yehonatan could trust in his strength that he and his armor-bearer would bring them down. For it is the way of the world that two or three bold-hearted fighters can put to flight many frightened soldiers. But if they say, "Tarry until we come to you," it will be evident from their words that they are not afraid. In such a case, it would be inappropriate for Yehonatan to risk his life. And anything like this is the way of the world.^{4[4]}

^{4[4]} At the end, Kesef Mishneh suggests the possibility that even Ramban would agree with what he said.

According to Rabbi Yosef Karo, there was no problem with Yehonatan's sign, for we are dealing essentially with an assessment based on logical assumptions and unconnected to mystic influences. According to him, the sign was based on the fact that were the Pelishtim to say, "Tarry until we come to you," this would prove that they are not afraid of being ambushed and testify to their strength. But if they were to say, "Come up to us," this would prove that they are afraid and testify to their weakness.

On rational grounds, this can also be explained differently. If the Pelishtim say, "Tarry until we come unto you," this would testify to their readiness – just like today every soldier or policeman is taught that the first step in apprehending a suspect is to call out "Halt!" The response, "Come up to us," on the other hand, broadcasts complacency and a lack of seriousness, which Yehonatan and his lad could exploit in order to overcome the Pelishtim despite the imbalance in their numbers.

Indeed, this is what we see in the account of the actual event:

And both of them disclosed themselves unto the garrison of the Pelishtim; and the Pelishtim said, Behold Hebrews coming forth out of the holes where they hid themselves. And the men of the garrison spoke to Yehonatan and his armor-bearer, and said, Come up to us, and we will show you a thing. And Yehonatan said unto his armor-bearer, Come up after me; for the Lord has delivered them into the hand of Israel. (11-12)

Everything that the Pelishtim say expresses disdain: the designation, "Hebrews," which generally reflects the scorn of the nations for Israel;^{5[5]} the mocking phrase, "coming forth out of the holes where they hid themselves"; the boastful words, "Come up to us, and we will show you a thing," which reflect even greater complacency and arrogance than Yehonatan had imagined. Yehonatan, therefore, concludes that he and his lad would be capable of overcoming the Pelishti garrison.

However, the more we base Yehonatan's sign on logic, the more difficult it is to understand why we are dealing with a sign that proves that "the Lord has delivered them into our hand." We must assume that even though the sign was fundamentally based on rational

^{5[5]} As in the words of Potifar's wife: "See, he has brought in a Hebrew unto us to mock us" (*Bereishit* 39:14), and as in the words of the officer of the butlers to Pharaoh: "And there was there with us a lad, a Hebrew, servant to the officer of the executioners" (*ibid.* 41:12). As Rashi explains there: "Cursed be the wicked for the favors they do are never really complete! He mentions him in disparaging language... 'a Hebrew' – who does not even know our language." See also above 4:9; 13:19, and below 29:3.

considerations, nevertheless it still involved a mystical element. This may be what Radak is saying. According to Radak, Yehonatan acted properly, for "were it forbidden, the Holy One, blessed be He, would not have helped him" – but he understands that the sign was not based on the state of the Pelishtim, but on something mystical: "For if they say, 'Come up to us' – their mouths caused them to stumble, for we will go up and they will go down." Nevertheless, Radak does not see this as problematic, for "if a person wishes to perform an action, and he does something as a sign regarding that action in order to strengthen his heart and rouse his heart to that action, this is permitted."

To summarize, on the one hand it is reasonable to accept the assumption that the sign was based on a rational analysis of the Pelishtim's situation, but on the other hand, it also included a mystical element, based on a desire to strengthen Yehonatan's resolve to act. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that this did not involve the violation of a prohibition.

X. THE RESULTS

Indeed, God helps Yehonatan and his armor-bearer. They go up and inflict a blow that was impressive in itself, but was certainly not the deciding factor in the campaign:

And that first slaughter, which Yehonatan and his armor-bearer made, was about twenty men, within as it were half a furrow's length in an acre of land.^{6[6]} (14)

Since Yehonatan puts his faith in God, God rewards him, and for the first time we find Divine intervention in the campaign:

And there was a trembling in the camp in the field, and among all the people; the garrison, and the spoilers, they also trembled; and the earth quaked; **so it grew into a terror from God.** And the watchmen of Shaul in Giv'at-Binyamin looked; and, behold, the multitude melted away, and they went hither and thither... and, behold, every man's sword was against his fellow, and there was a very great discomfiture. (15-16,20)

The strike inflicted by Yehonatan and his lad gave rise to panic in the Pelishti camp, and quickly that panic turned into flight. Yehonatan's assertion at the beginning of the chapter turns out to be absolutely correct:

^{6[6]} This expression is somewhat vague, and the commentators proposed several ways to understand it. It is clear, however, that the verse means to say that the slaughter took place in a small area. See Radak.

For there is no restraint to the Lord to save by many or by few. (6)

So great was the deliverance that Scripture states as follows:

So the Lord saved Israel that day... (23)

Scripture is clearly trying to draw a comparison between the deliverance here and the deliverance at the splitting of the Sea of Suf – the only other place in Scripture where precisely the same expression is used:

So the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of Egypt. (*Shemot* 14:30)

XI. "WITHDRAW YOUR HAND"

In light of Yehonatan's great demonstration of faith, Shaul appears once again in all his weakness. When the panic first breaks out in the Pelishti camp, Shaul finally decides to inquire of God:

And Shaul said unto Achiya, Bring hither the ark of God. For the ark of God was there at that time with the children of Israel. (18)

The mention of the ark here in place of the *efod* (which was explicitly mentioned in verse 3, along with Achiya the priest) is surprising, as will be discussed below. But first we must pay attention to the continuation of Shaul's action:

And it came to pass, while Shaul talked unto the priest, that the tumult that was in the camp of the Pelishtim went on and increased; and Saul said unto the priest, **Withdraw your hand**. And Shaul and all the people that were with him were gathered together, and came to the battle...(19-20)

This step is very serious: Shaul starts to inquire of God, but when he sees what is taking place in the Pelishti camp he abandons the idea, and tells the priest to halt his attempt to receive the word of God. Shaul thereby repeats the mistake that he had made at the beginning of the campaign, when he failed to wait for Shmuel, but instead hastened to offer a sacrifice in contravention of God's command because of his fear that the people would disperse. At two points, then, in the course of the campaign, Shaul gives priority to military considerations over walking in the path of God.

In light of this, it might be possible to understand the strange mention of the ark instead of the *efod*.^{7[7]} The ark was last mentioned in the account of the tragic death of Eli and his sons. There we noted that Eli was punished for having brought the people to pay excessive attention to external vessels and to give them priority over their own spiritual situation. With Shaul we find just the very opposite phenomenon: insufficient respect for these vessels. Neither Eli nor Shaul are able to find the necessary balance between obeying the word of God, on the one hand, and respecting the vessels used in His service, on the other.

Both of these tragic figures fail to establish a dynasty and die on the very same day as do their sons.

(Translated by David Strauss)

^{7[7]} In the Septuagint, the *efod* is mentioned here as well, and not the ark. However, following the rule of "*lectio difficilio*" – preferring the more difficult reading, on the assumption that it is more authentic – requires that we find a different solution.