

THE BOOK OF *SHMUEL*

LECTURE 32: CHAPTER 17 DAVID AND GOLYAT (PART I)

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I. Background

Yonatan's great victory in the campaign described in chapters 13-14 did not bring the struggle involving the Pelishtim to an end. The Pelishtim continued to vex and threaten, and in our chapter the people of Israel once again go out to war against them – for the fourth time since the beginning of the book. Nevertheless, the results of the last war are evident in the opening positions of the present campaign. Whereas in the previous campaign there was a wide disparity between the Pelishti forces and the small army headed by Shaul (see the beginning of chapter 13, and my comments there), now the respective forces seem to be more or less equal in strength:

(1) Now the Pelishtim gathered together their armies to battle, and they were gathered together at Sokho, which belongs to Yehuda, and pitched between Sokho and Azeka, in Efes-Dammim. (2) And Shaul and the men of Israel were gathered together, and pitched in the vale of Ela, and set the battle in array against the Pelishtim.

Attention should be paid to the change in the location of the campaign. In chapter 13, the Pelishtim had penetrated deep into the central mountain massif and reached Mikhmash (13:5), in the southern part of Mount Bet-El. The front during the present campaign, in contrast, is situated much more to the west, "between Sokho and Azeka," in the Ela valley, much closer to the land of the Pelishtim.

The campaign opens with the respective forces more or less equal in strength – and this is the basis of Golyat's proposal. It is precisely because neither side enjoys a clear advantage over the other that the Pelishtim propose an alternative way of deciding the outcome. Instead of shedding unnecessary blood on both sides, the campaign should be decided by a battle fought between two representatives, one from each side:¹[1]

(8) ... Choose you a man for you, and let him come down to me. (9) If he be able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants; but if I

prevail against him and kill him, then shall you be our servants, and serve us.

The proposal seems to be reasonable, but we can easily understand why the people of Israel had difficulty accepting it in light of the terrifying description of the designated Pelishti representative:

(4) And there went out a champion from the camp of the Pelishtim named Golyat of Gat, whose height was six cubits and a span. (5) And he had a helmet of brass upon his head, and he was clad with a coat of mail; and the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of brass. (6) And he had greaves of brass upon his legs,^{2[2]} and a javelin of brass between his shoulders. (7) And the shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam; and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron; and his shield-bearer went before him.

Golyat's enormous height, together with his weaponry and the armor that covered him from head to toe, created a very embarrassing situation for Israel. On the one hand, it was difficult to refuse the offer to decide the campaign without excessive bloodshed. On the other hand, who would dare to fight such a frightening figure?

II. "And you are servants to Shaul"

The question with which the previous section ended should have a simple answer. In fact, Golyat alludes to that answer:

(8) And he stood and cried unto the armies of Israel, and said unto them, "Why do you come out to set your battle in array? **Am not I a Pelishti, and you servants to Shaul?** Choose you a man for you, and let him come down to me."

With these words, Golyat expresses his contempt for Israel; they are not free men, but rather "servants to Shaul."^{3[3]} He also wishes to present Israel's situation as one in which they have little to lose, for in any event they will remain servants: if Golyat wins, "then shall you be our servants, and serve us;" and if not, they are servants to Shaul in any case.

But there is more to what Golyat is saying. Here, Golyat is challenging Shaul himself, for his mentioning of Shaul's name is meant to allude (as Rashi explains) that Shaul himself should have been the "man" to challenge him. For who is more fit to contend with Golyat's height than Shaul, who "from his shoulders and

upward was higher than any of the people" (9:2)? How will Shaul react to the implicit challenge?

At this point, the decline in Shaul's state of mind at the beginning of the various campaigns in which he participated is evident. There are points of similarity between our story and the story of the war against Nachash the Ammoni in chapter 11. In both stories, a representative of the enemy appears and makes a proposal that would bring disgrace upon the people of Israel:

And Nachash the Ammoni said unto them, "On this condition will I make it with you, that all your right eyes be put out; and I will lay it for a **disgrace** (*cherpa*) upon all Israel." (11:2)

And the Pelishti said, "I do **taunt** (*cherafti*) the armies of Israel this day; give me a man that we may fight together." (17:10)

In both stories, Israel is given a certain period of time to get organized (the people of Yavesh-Gil'ad asked of Nachash the Ammoni: "Give us seven days' respite" [11:3], whereas in the case of Golyat – "and he presented himself forty days"). And in both stories, deliverance finally arrives in a sudden fashion, by way of someone who is not prepared to bear the shame of Israel. Whereas in chapter 11, this someone was Shaul, who responded to Nachash's challenge with fierce anger – "And the spirit of God came mightily upon Shaul when he heard those words, and his anger was kindled greatly" (11:6) – in our chapter, it is David who responds with furor to Golyat's words: "For who is this uncircumcised Pelishti, that he should have taunted the armies of the living God?"^{4[4]} Shaul, in contrast, responds in an entirely different manner:

(11) And when Shaul and all Israel heard those words of the Pelishti, they were dismayed, and greatly afraid.

The separate mention of Shaul seems to support the assumption that it was he should have gone out to fight against Golyat; but after the spirit of God departed from him, he was afraid of Golyat, and his fear impacted upon all of Israel. At this point, David assumes the role that Shaul had played in the war against Ammon.

It should be noted that we find an intermediate stage in the decline in Shaul's standing up to the enemy already in the first battle against the Pelishtim in chapters 13-14 (lectures 23-24). There, we noted Shaul's passive "tarrying," although at that point there is no evidence of fear. In that campaign, it is Yonatan who brings about the sudden deliverance.

III. David and His Brothers

The description of David's arrival in the Israelite camp (vv. 12-30) is somewhat surprising. Even though the chapter focuses on David's volunteering to fight against Golyat, Scripture assigns significant room to the conflict between David and his oldest brother Eliav and to the discussions that David conducts in the Israelite camp. Why does Scripture expand upon these side stories?

It seems that we can best understand the matter in light of the surprising correspondence between what is related here and the relationship between Yosef and his brothers. After the background information regarding the battle presented above, Scripture describes how David was sent on his mission to his brothers by his father Yishai. This description parallels – both linguistically and substantively – the story of Yosef's being sent on a mission to his brothers by his father Yaakov (*Bereishit* 37).^{5[5]} I will first present the parallel points in order:

- 1) Both stories open with the absence of the older brothers from their home:

And his brothers went to feed their father's flock in Shekhem. (*Bereishit* 37:12)

And the three eldest sons of Yishai had gone after Shaul to the battle. (I *Shmuel* 17:13)

- 2) In both episodes, the father sends his younger son to see how his older brothers are faring:

And he said to him, "Go, I pray you, see whether it be well with your brothers, and well with the flocks." (*Bereishit* 37:14)

And Yishai said unto David his son, "Take now for your brethren an *efa* of this parched corn... and to your brethren shall you bring greetings." (I *Shmuel* 17:17-18)

- 3) The younger brother is a shepherd:

Yosef being seventeen years old was feeding the flock with his brethren. (*Bereishit* 37:2)

Now David went to and fro from Shaul to feed his father's sheep at Beth-lehem. (I *Shmuel* 17:15)

- 4) In both stories, a discussion is conducted between the brother and people whose words he hears, to whom he poses a question, and from whom he receives an answer:
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And a certain man found him, and, behold, he was wandering in the field. **And the man asked him**, saying, "What do you seek?"

And he said, "I seek my brothers; tell me, I pray you, **where they feed their flocks.**"

And the man said, "They are departed from here; for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dotan.'" (*Bereishit* 37:15-17)

And the men of Israel said, "Have you seen this man that is come up? Surely to taunt Israel is he come up; and it shall be, that the man who kills him, the king will enrich him with great riches..."

And David spoke to the men that stood by him, saying, "**What shall be done to the man** that kills this Pelishti..."

And the people answered him after this manner, saying, "So shall it be done to the man that kills him." (I *Shmuel* 17:25-27)

5) In both cases, the brothers respond harshly to their younger brother who came to seek out their welfare. Of course, the reaction of Yosef's brothers is much harsher:

And they said one to another, "Behold, this dreamer comes. Come now, therefore, and let us slay him, and cast him into some pit, and we will say, 'An evil beast has devoured him.' And we shall see what will become of his dreams." (*Bereishit* 37:19-20)

We should not, however, overlook the hostile reaction of Eliav, David's oldest brother, to David's interest in what was happening:

And Eliav's anger was kindled against David, and he said, "Why are you come down? **And with whom have you left those few sheep** in the wilderness? I know your presumptuousness, and the naughtiness of your heart; for you came down that you might see the battle." (I *Shmuel* 17:28)

This response involves a two-fold distortion. First, David never abandoned his flocks, but rather, as is stated several verses earlier – "and he left the sheep with a keeper" (v. 20). Second, David came on his father's mission, and not "to see the battle."⁶[6]

6) In the end, the two missions end in a close relationship with the king, which ultimately leads to marriage:

And Pharaoh called Yosef's name Tzafnat Pa'ane'ach; **and he gave him to wife** Asenat the daughter of Poti-Fera priest of On. (*Bereishit* 41:45)

And Shaul gave him Mikhal his daughter **to wife**. (I *Shmuel* 18:27)

7) The close connection to the king also finds expression in the distinguished standing that is achieved in the highest echelons of the regime:

And Yosef **went out** over all the land of Egypt... And Yosef **went out** from the presence of Pharaoh, and went through all the land of Egypt. (*Bereishit* 41:45-46)

And he made him his captain over a thousand; **and he went out** and came in before the people... But all Israel and Yehuda loved David; for **he went out** and came in before them. (I *Shmuel* 18:13-16)

8) In addition to the parallels in the substance of the story, there are also unique parallels in the descriptions of Yosef and David. These are the only two individuals described by Scripture as "*navon*" (discerning, prudent):^{7[7]}

And Pharaoh said to Yosef, since God has shown you all this, there in none so **discerning** (*navon*) and wise as you are. (*Bereishit* 41:39)

Then answered one of the young men, and said, "Behold, I have seen a son of Yishai the Beth-Lehemite, that is skilful in playing, and a mighty man of valor, and a man of war, and **prudent** (*navon*) in affairs, and a comely person." (I *Shmuel* 16:18)

These are also the only two males in Scripture described as "*yefeh mar'eh*" (handsome, of fair countenance):

And Yosef was a good-looking person and of a fair countenance (*yefeh mar'eh*). (*Bereishit* 39:6)

And when the Pelishti looked about, and saw David, he disdained him; for he was but a youth, and ruddy, and withal of a fair countenance (*yefeh mar'eh*). (I *Shmuel* 17:42)

Now we can examine the matter: What is the meaning of this correspondence?

IV. The Meaning of the Correspondence

The similarities between the two stories highlight the difference between the two figures. In the confines of the present story, David's mission ends with Israel's deliverance from the hands of the Pelishtim, whereas Yosef's mission ends – here, too, in the confines of the present story – with his sale to Egypt and

his extended detention in prison. This fundamental difference, so it would seem, stems from the difference in the relations between the brothers in the two accounts.

Among other things, Yosef and David share the trait of ambition. Yosef dreams about great dominion, and David's interest in the prize promised to the one who kills the Pelishti ("What shall be done to the man that kills this Pelishti?") testifies to his confidence in his ability to earn that reward. It is reasonable to assume that this characteristic was nurtured by objective features common to the two of them – both being wise and handsome.

Here, however, the difference between Yosef's attitude towards his brothers and that of David is striking. Yosef brings their evil report to their father, and thus gives rise to their jealousy and hatred, especially after he receives the striped coat from his father. This reality does not prevent Yosef from telling his brothers about his dreams, the clear meaning of which is that they would eventually come to bow down to him and that Yosef would ultimately rule over them. With this conduct, Yosef made the situation even worse – "And they hated him yet the more for his dreams, and for his words" (*Bereishit* 37:8) – and he was punished for this behavior with a lengthy period of captivity in Egypt.

David, on the other hand, does not enter into any confrontations with his brothers, nor does he at any stage display negative feelings toward them. Even when Eliav rebukes him, demonstrating his own ingratitude, he does not allow himself to be drawn into confrontation, but rather modestly answers: "What have I now done? Was it not but a word?" (v. 29).

In the continuation of each of the two stories, the two heroes are stripped of their clothing. But what a difference between the two! Yosef's striped coat, which symbolized Yaakov's special love for him, and which had been among the factors that led to the brothers' jealousy and hatred towards Yosef,^{8[8]} was removed from Yosef by force:

And they stripped Yosef of his coat, the striped coat that was on him.
(*Bereishit* 37:23)

In contrast, when Shaul dresses David in his battle gear, David does not feel comfortable in them, and on his own initiative removes them and puts back on his own more humble clothing:

(38) And Shaul clad David with his apparel, and he put a helmet of brass upon his head, and he clad him with a coat of mail. (39) And David girded his sword upon his apparel, and he essayed to go, [but could not]; for he

had not tried it. And David said unto Shaul, "I cannot go with these; for I have not tried them." And David put them off him.

The same is true later in the story. It is decreed against Yosef that he must live a long period in Egypt, cut off from his family. David is also forced to leave his home, but, as opposed to Yosef, David's brothers join him:

David therefore departed thence, and escaped to the cave of Adullam; and when his brethren and all his father's house heard it, they went down there to him. (I *Shmuel* 22:1)

It seems that modesty and humility in interpersonal relations are connected to one's service of God. It is difficult to detach Yosef's problematic relationship with his brothers during his early years from the fact that the name of heaven is not mentioned in any of the statements cited in Yosef's name in chapter 37. Yosef first mentions God's name when he begins his process of repentance in the context of the incident involving the wife of Potifera (*Bereishit* 39:9), and from then on, Yosef invokes God's name and recognizes His greatness time and time again.^{9[9]}

David, on the other hand, expresses his faith in God from the very beginning. The very first statement that Scripture reports in David's name is:

(26) And David spoke to the men that stood by him, saying, "What shall be done to the man that kills this Pelishti, and takes away the taunt from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Pelishti, that he should have taunted the armies of the living God?"

And throughout the chapter David reiterates his belief that God will assist him in his battles.

We can summarize, then, by saying that David's conduct served to "repair" Yosef's mistakes. Leadership over Israel must be based on a basic sense of modesty, pleasant ways, and preservation of the family unit, despite all the sensitivity accompanying preference given to a younger brother over his older brothers. Yosef learned this the hard way, whereas David had these qualities from the very outset.

(Translated by David Strauss)

10[1] There is another instance in which a battle is fought between representatives of the two sides as a way to decide between them. This seems to be the way to understand Avner's suggestion when he encountered Yoav's forces in the pool of Giv'on: "Let the young men now arise, and play before us" (II *Shmuel* 2:14). And this is also the way to understand what happens next: "Then there arose and went over by number twelve of Binyamin, belonging to Ish-Boshet the son of Shaul, and twelve of the servants of David" (ibid. v. 15).

11[2] It is reasonable to assume that the original meaning of the word *mitzcha* is a shield for the *metzach* (forehead), but eventually the word was used in a more general sense to denote any kind of shield. Thus, the term is used here to describe a shield for the legs (see Radak).

12[3] It is possible that these words of Golyat reminded Israel of Shmuel's warning when they first asked for a king: "And you shall be his servants. And you shall cry out in that day because of your king whom you shall have chosen yourselves..." (I *Shmuel* 8:17-18).

13[4] While Golyat taunts "the armies of Israel" (v. 10), David claims that he thereby taunts "the armies of the living God," for the army of Israel is perceived as the army of God, as is evident from many places in Scripture. See *Shemot* 7:4; *Devarim* 23:15; *Tehilim* 79:10-12; and elsewhere.

14[5] I have expanded on this correspondence in my book: *Makbilot Nifgashot – Makbilot Sifrutiyot Be-Sefer Shmuel* (Alon Shevut 5766), pp. 94-102.

15[6] It stands to reason that this quality of Eliav demonstrates why God had said about him: "I have rejected him" (above 16:7).

16[7] About Shlomo it is stated: "Behold, I have done according to your words: lo, I have give you a wise (*navon*) and understanding heart" (I *Melakhim* 3:12), but there the term *navon* refers to his heart.

17[8] See *Bereishit Rabba* 84, 3 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 1010).

18[9] See *Bereishit* 40:8; 41:16, 25, 28, 32, 51, 52; and elsewhere.
