

THE BOOK OF *SHMUEL*

LECTURE 38: CHAPTER 19 (PART II) DAVID BEFORE SHMUEL

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I. "And Shaul Sent Messengers"

After fleeing his house with Mikhal's assistance, David turns to what appears to him to be the most natural address – the prophet Shmuel:

(18) Now David fled, and escaped, and came to Shmuel to Rama, and told him all that Shaul had done to him. And he and Shmuel went and dwelt in Nayot.

It is not clear whether David turned to Shmuel thinking that he would find safety in his house, or whether he thought that Shmuel, who had anointed him as king, would exercise his influence over Shaul and prevent him from harming David. In any event, Shmuel does not consider turning to Shaul, it being clear to him that their relationship had suffered irreparable damage. On the contrary, Shmuel offers David a haven, but it quickly becomes evident that he has no intention of relying on miracles, and he leaves his house and moves with David to Nayot in order to get away from Shaul. But Shmuel's maneuver fails:

(19) And it was told to Shaul, saying, "Behold, David is at Nayot in Rama."

It seems that the Divine plan could not make do with David's escape from Shaul; in order to close the circle, one final encounter between Shmuel and Shaul was necessary. At this point, something happens that at first glance appears exceedingly comical:

(20) **And Shaul sent messengers** to take David; and when they saw the company of the prophets prophesying, and Shmuel standing as head over them, the spirit of God came upon the messengers of Shaul, and they also prophesied. (21) And when it was told Shaul, **he sent other messengers**, and they also prophesied.^{1[1]} **And Shaul sent messengers again** the third time, and they also prophesied.

What is the meaning of this strange story? First of all, attention should be paid to the expression, "and Shaul sent messengers," which is repeated three times with slight variations in these two verses – these joining the three other instances of the expression in the previous verses (vv. 11, 14, 15)! Why is this expression used six times in the chapter?

Shaul's excessive use of messengers seems to indicate a certain lack of control. Sending and re-sending messengers on various missions testifies to the pressure experienced by the king, who is aware of the fact that the missions on which he is sending his messengers are immoral. A striking example of such conduct is found in the story of David and Bat-Sheva, which also begins in similar fashion: "And David **sent** and inquired after the woman, and one said, 'Is not this Bat-Sheva the daughter of Eli'am, the wife of Uriya the Chittite?' And David **sent messengers**, and took her; and she came in to him, and he lay with her" (II *Shmuel* 11:3-4) – and in the continuation of the chapter this phenomenon appears another three times (vv. 6, 14, 27).

As to what actually happened, we already discussed the phenomenon of prophesying,^{2[2]} in which Shaul's messengers inescapably take part. The central character in the story, however, is Shaul, who refuses to learn his lesson and keeps sending additional messengers - with stubbornness that recalls the conduct of the Pelishtim at the beginning of the book^{3[3]} - and who finds no peace until he himself goes to clarify the matter. Shaul's refusal to understand the spiritual message in what is happening to the messengers is clearly reported to his discredit, and attests to the spiritual low to which he has sunk.

II. The Difference Between Shmuel and Eliyahu

These verses, however, have another message as well. It is hard to overlook the similarity between the situation described here and a later event, where another king of Israel tries to harm a prophet who objects to his conduct by sending people to him, and there also fails three times. This is how the prophet reports the end of Achazya the son of Achav: "And he was sick, and **he sent messengers**, and said to them, 'Go, inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv the god of Ekron whether I shall recover from this disease'" (II *Melakhim* 1:2). The prophet Eliyahu meets the messengers and has harsh words to say to them about the king's inquiry of idols: "Is it because there is no God in Israel, that you go to inquire of Ba'al-Zevuv, the god of Ekron? Now therefore thus says the Lord, 'You shall not come down from that bed to which you have gone up, but shall surely die'" (ibid. vv. 3-4). The messengers return to Achazya, and when he understands that it was Eliyahu who had sent them back, he tries to apprehend Eliyahu by sending others after him:

Then the king **sent** to him a captain of fifty with his fifty. And he went up to him; and, behold, he sat on the top of a hill. And he said to him, "You man of God, the king said, 'Come down.'" And Eliyahu answered and said to the captain of fifty, "If I be a man of God, then let fire come down from heaven, and consume you and your fifty." And so fire came down from heaven, and consumed him and his fifty.

Again he also **sent** to him another captain of fifty with his fifty. And he answered and said to him, "O man of God, the king said thus, 'Come down quickly.'" And Eliya answered and said to them, "If I be a man of God, let fire come down from heaven, and consume you and your fifty." And the fire of God came down from heaven, and consumed him and his fifty.

And **he sent** a captain of the third fifty with his fifty. And the third captain of fifty went up, and came and fell on his knees before Eliyahu, and pleaded with him, and said to him, "O man of God, I pray you, let my life, and the life of these fifty your servants, be precious in your sight. Behold, the fire came down from heaven, and burnt up the two captains of the former fifties with their fifties; therefore let my life now be precious in your sight." And the angel of the Lord said to Eliyahu, "Go down with him; be not afraid of him." And he came, arose, and went down with him to the king. (ibid. vv. 9-15)

Here, too, we have a stubborn king, who refuses to recognize the power of the prophet. The very parallel between Shaul and Achazya, about whom it is stated, "For he served the Ba'al, and worshipped him, and provoked to anger the Lord God of Israel, according to all that his father had done" (I *Melakhim* 22:54), adds to Shaul's disgrace. It is precisely the third captain of fifty who is presented in this account as a more positive character than Shaul; he recognizes the fact that if an exceptional event occurs twice, it is liable to occur a third time as well, and he therefore begs Eliyahu for his life.

In addition to the parallel between Shaul and Achazya, there is also an interesting parallel between Eliyahu and Shmuel. This is not the forum to expand on the personality of Eliyahu, but without a doubt, fire is one of the most prominent markers of his stormy path. Eliyahu bases the people's faith at Mount Carmel on fire coming down from heaven (I *Melakhim* 18), and he repeats the message in this story as well – "If I be a man of God, then let fire come down from heaven, and consume you and your fifty." It is doubtful, however, whether this method of instilling fear and dread is an effective way of leading the people of Israel. Already at Chorev, between the incident that occurred on the Carmel and the story of Achazya, God tells Eliyahu, "but the Lord was not in the fire" (ibid. 19:12). The story of the captains of the fifties attests to the fact that Eliyahu did not internalize the message, and it was therefore decreed that he must leave the world, something that he does with "a chariot of fire and horses of fire" (II *Melakhim* 2:11).

This is not the way of Shmuel. When he stands before the king's messengers, he does not bring fire down upon them. The very opposite is true: Shmuel deals with them by raising them up and joining them to "a company⁴[4] of prophets" that were prophesying before him. This spiritual phenomenon is unique, but not without a precedent. We have previously noted the many similarities between Shmuel and Moshe Rabbenu.⁵[5] Here,

too, a situation is created that is reminiscent of an important incident in Moshe's life:

And Moshe went out, and told the people the words of the Lord, and gathered seventy men of the elders of the people, and set them round about the tent. And the Lord came down in a cloud, and spoke to him, and took of the spirit that was upon him, and gave it to the seventy elders. And it came to pass, that, when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied, but continued not. And there remained two of the men in the camp, the name of the one was Eldad, and the name of the other Medad. And the spirit rested upon them; and they were of them that were written, but went not out to the tent, and they prophesied in the camp. And there ran a young man, and told Moshe, and said, "Eldad and Medad do prophesy in the camp." And Yehoshua the son of Nun, the servant of Moshe from his youth, answered and said, "My lord Moshe restrain them." And Moshe said to him, "Do you envy for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put His spirit upon them!" (*Bamidbar* 11:24-29)

Moshe's standing among the seventy elders and the transfer of God's spirit from him to them brings to mind Shmuel's standing before the company of prophets. More than this, the fact that there were those who merited prophecy even though they had not been meant to receive it simply by virtue of Moshe parallels Shmuel's ability to cause Shaul's messengers to prophesy, even though they also had not been intended to merit prophecy.

In this chapter, we take leave of Shmuel, one of the greatest leaders to arise in Israel, and the parting scene reveals the full strength of this prophet. Shmuel, who had brought about an important spiritual revolution in Israel through systematic work and the ability to connect with the people,^{6[6]} exits the stage of history in a way that commands respect and high regard - by dealing with his opponents by raising their spiritual level and bringing them to prophecy.

On the night that Shmuel was consecrated as prophet, Scripture emphasized: "And the word of the Lord was precious in those days; there was no frequent vision" (I *Shmuel* 3:1). At the end of that chapter, it was already stated: "And the Lord **appeared again** in Shilo; for the Lord revealed Himself to Shmuel in Shilo by the word of the Lord" (ibid. v. 21). Now, it becomes clear that it was Shmuel's power to bring the people of Israel to a high level of prophecy and to add ordinary members of the people to the company of prophets. Shmuel merited that part of the prophet Yoel's vision would be realized in his generation:^{7[7]}

And it shall come to pass afterwards, that I will pour out My spirit upon

all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. (Yoe/ 3:1)

III. "Is Shaul Also Among the Prophets?"

As stated, Shaul did not content himself with the three delegations that he sent to Shmuel, and in the end he decides to act on his own:

(22) Then went he also to Rama, and came to the great cistern that is in Sekhu; and he asked and said, "Where are Shmuel and David?" And one said, "Behold, they are at Nayot in Rama."

The nature of "the great cistern that is in Sekhu" remains unclear.^{8[8]} In any event, Shaul's question, "Where are Shmuel and David" – especially against the background of the information supplied earlier, "**David** is at Nayot in Rama" (v. 19) – clearly testifies that Shaul was aware of the fact that Shmuel and David were together, and this knowledge does not hinder him from continuing on his way and on his mission.

Be that as it may, at this point, the phenomenon of coerced prophecy reappears, and applies to Shaul himself:

(23) And he went there to Nayot in Rama; and the spirit of God came upon **him also**, and he went on, and prophesied, until he came to Nayot in Rama. (24) And **he also** stripped off his clothes, and **he also** prophesied before Shmuel, and lay down naked all that day and all that night...

The expression "he also" appears three times in these verses, perhaps corresponding to the three earlier delegations. Attention should be paid, however, to those phenomena that are unique to Shaul in this act of prophecy. First of all, Shaul begins to prophecy even before Shmuel arrives: "And he went there to Nayot in Rama; and the spirit of God came upon him also." It is reasonable to assume that the reason for this is the fact that Shaul had already prophesied in the past and was used to the phenomenon. Hence, the spirit of God rested upon him even when he was still distant from the place – and thus there is an even greater parallel to the story of Eldad and Medad.

Second, regarding Shaul the verse states: "And he also stripped off his clothes." These words imply that others as well had stripped off their clothes (see Radak), even though this was not noted above. In any event, the very fact that the phenomenon is described specifically with respect to Shaul, and especially the words, "And he lay down naked all that day and all that night," intensify the criticism cast at him. We are not dealing here with prophecy indicating a high spiritual level, but rather with the capture of a king, who was about to perform a perverse deed, by way of the spirit of God.

The chapter ends with the words: "Wherefore they say, 'Is Shaul also among the prophets?'" (v. 24). We already noted in chapter 10 (lecture no. 17) the relationship between the story told in our chapter and what was described there in connection with the development of this expression in the wake of the resting of God's spirit upon Shaul and his prophesying with the company of prophets. The two stories, here and there, create a clear framework inasmuch as they are opposites. Whereas there the expression was used in appreciation of the fact that a simple person became one of the prophets, in our chapter the words express astonishment and shock over the fact that a king of Israel became one of those people who prophesy even though they are not on the appropriate spiritual level, and therefore do strange and bizarre things.^{9[9]} From a literary perspective, the oppositeness of the stories finds expression in the direction in which Shaul is headed. In our chapter, Shaul is going from his house in Giv'at Shaul toward Rama, whereas in chapter 10, he is going in the opposite direction – from Rama to the Giv'a.

Shaul's stripping off of his clothing might have another meaning. As might be recalled, in chapter 17 (v. 38), Shaul gave his apparel to David, and there (lecture no. 33) we noted the symbolism of this act: Shaul's handing over of the kingdom to David. Shaul's stripping off of his clothing in our chapter may symbolize the end of the period of his prophecy. And indeed, from now on we do not find the evil spirit resting upon Shaul. For him, this may have been a certain relief, but this is relief that testifies to an additional decline in his spiritual level. If until now an evil spirit rested upon Shaul owing to his failed attempts to attain the word of God,^{10[10]} from now on he no longer thirsts for the word of God, and he reverts to being an ordinary person in all senses.

(Translated by David Strauss)

^{11[1]} According to Masoretic tradition, there is a break here in the middle of the verse, and thus a refrain is created that further strengthens the feeling of repetition: "The spirit of God came upon the messengers of Shaul, **and they also prophesied**/ And when it was told Shaul, he sent other messengers, **and they also prophesied**/ And Shaul sent messengers again the third time, **and they also prophesied**."

^{12[2]} See lecture no. 17 on chapter 10.

^{13[3]} See our lectures on chapters 5-6 (lectures no. 9-10). The story can also be compared to the story of Bil'am and the ass. There, too, the ass merits revelation, but Bil'am stubbornly

refuses, "three times" (*Bamidbar* 22:28, 33), to recognize the fact that something very illogical is taking place, something that requires a spiritual explanation.

14[4] The word "*lahaka*" is very common in modern Hebrew, but in Scripture it is found only here. It has been suggested that the root *lamed-heh-kuf* is a transmutation of the root *kuf-heh-lamed*, that is to say, "*kehilat* [a congregation of] prophets."

15[5] See lectures to chapters 3 and 7 (lectures no. 6 and 11).

16[6] See our lecture on chapter 7 (lecture no. 11).

17[7] Perhaps for this reason *Chazal* expounded that Yoel the son of Petu'el is Yoel the son of Shmuel the prophet (*Bamidbar Rabba* 10, 5).

18[8] It might be argued that Shaul's going from the Rama [the elevation] to a great cistern symbolizes his descent from *igra rama le-bira amikta*, "from a high roof to a deep cistern."

19[9] The words, "*va-yipol arom*," are rendered by the Targum as "*ve-nafal barshan*." See Rashi, who writes: "And in the name of Rabbi Menachem who heard from a certain Arab: '*barshan*' in Arabic denotes 'crazy.'" We already noted in an earlier lecture (no. 7, note 8) the blurring of the distinction between prophets and crazy men.

20[10] See lecture no. 16 on chapter 15.
