

THE BOOK OF *SHMUEL*

LECTURE 46: CHAPTER 24

SHAUL IN THE CAVE

Rav Amnon Bazak

I. INTRODUCTION

We concluded the previous chapter with Shaul's dramatic pursuit of David, a pursuit that was interrupted when a messenger arrived and informed Shaul that the Pelishtim had invaded the country. Our chapter opens with the following account:

And it came to pass, when Shaul returned from following the Pelishtim, that it was told to him, saying, "Behold, David is in the wilderness of Ein-Gedi."

Scripture does not tell us what happened in the confrontation between Shaul and the Pelishtim. Did Shaul emerge victorious? Did the Pelishtim bring their invasion to a halt? Or perhaps Shaul failed to drive them out of the country. Scripture does not provide us with any answers to these questions, and this is not by chance. In this way, Scripture emphasizes that from Shaul's perspective the struggle with the Pelishtim was merely an annoyance that cut short his pursuit of David. It may, however, be said to Shaul's credit that when push came to shove, he fulfilled the responsibility that fell on his shoulders and directed his efforts against the Pelishtim. Nevertheless, we are left with the impression that his main interest was – and remains – the pursuit of David.

This is also evident from the account of whom Shaul chooses for the purpose of pursuing David:

(2) Then Shaul took **three thousand chosen men out of all Israel**, and went to seek David and his men upon the rocks of the wild goats.

It is difficult to ignore the similarity between this verse and the description of Shaul's men in his first battle against the Pelishtim:

And Saul **chose him three thousand men of Israel...** (13:2)

The same efforts that Shaul invested in his fight against the Pelishtim at the beginning of his career as king of Israel are now invested in his pursuit after David. This gives us an indication of Shaul's priorities and what he thinks is his primary mission.

II. "BEHOLD THE DAY IN WHICH THE LORD HAS SAID UNTO YOU"

Shaul, however, cannot overturn God's decree, and so his pursuit of David turns into an exceedingly embarrassing event for him:

(3) And he came to the sheepcotes by the way, where there was a cave; and Shaul went in to cover his feet.^{1[1]} Now David and his men were sitting in the innermost parts of the cave.

Shaul enters into a dark cave and fails to notice David and his men, who are found deep inside, whereas they recognize him immediately. This situation provides David's men with a clear advantage over Shaul, who proceeds to relieve himself totally unaware of the danger in which he is found.

David's men very quickly understand what has happened and propose that he exploit the situation:

(4) And the men of David said unto him, "Behold the day in which the Lord has said unto you, 'Behold, I will deliver your enemy into your hand,' and you shall do to him as it shall seem good unto you."

The words sounded by David's men imply that they were aware of a prophecy stating that God would deliver David's enemies into his hands. The problem is that no such prophecy has yet been mentioned. The Radak suggests that David received a general prophecy that God would deliver his enemies into his hands. Clearly, however, there was no specific reference to Shaul, for in the end, Shaul did not fall into David's hands. Alternatively, we may suggest that David never received even a general prophecy of the sort suggested by the Radak, but since David's men knew that Shmuel had anointed him king and that David would not be able to ascend to the

throne before Shaul dies, they interpreted the prophecy about David's anointing as a prophecy that Shaul would fall into David's hands.

In any case, the interpretation offered by David's men to the prophecy about his success was exceedingly broad, and this attests to the problematic aspects of these bitter-spirited people.^{2[2]} As long as David is able to evade Shaul, there is no justification in his hurting him, especially in light of the fact that he is the lawful monarch. David is faced with a difficult test: Will he succumb to his men's proposal, or will he succeed in keeping them under control?

...Then David arose, and cut off the skirt of Shaul's robe privily. (5) And it came to pass afterward, that David's heart smote him, because he had cut off Shaul's skirt. (6) And he said unto his men, "The Lord forbid it me, that I should do this thing unto my lord, the Lord's anointed, to put forth my hand against him, seeing he is the Lord's anointed."^{3[3]} (7) So David checked his men with these words, and suffered them not to rise against Shaul. And Shaul rose up out of the cave, and went on his way.

The order of events is very odd. One might have expected David's words to his men in verse 6 to appear immediately after their own words and as a response to them. Why, then, are they recorded only after David cuts off the skirt of Shaul's robe? The Ralbag has a surprising comment on this matter:

It is possible, according to the plain sense of the text, that David had already wanted to kill him, but he only reached the skirt. Afterwards David regretted his plan, even though he was permitted to kill him inasmuch as [Shaul] fell into the category of a *rodef* (a pursuer). [David] then said: "The Lord forbid it me, that I should do this thing unto my lord." This was because of his excessive piety.

According to the Ralbag, David was indeed convinced by his men, and he rose up to kill Shaul. Moreover, the Ralbag argues that had David killed Shaul, he would have been justified in doing so, for Shaul had the status of a *rodef*. In actuality, however, David failed to kill Shaul, and managed only to cut off the skirt of his robe. At that point, he had regrets about his decision to kill Shaul owing to his great piety.^{4[4]}

The Ralbag's position appears to be rather extreme, for there is no hint in Scripture that David had actually intended to harm Shaul. But his underlying approach can be accepted in a more moderate form. Without a doubt, David regretted his cutting off the skirt of Shaul's robe. It is also reasonable to assume that David had performed that act under the influence of his men's words. At no stage, however, did David intend to hurt Shaul himself, and therefore he did not respond to his men's call to strike at Shaul, but merely rose up against him and cut off the skirt of his robe. Only afterwards did David regret even this, which also involved insult and scorn for Shaul.^{5[5]} After coming to regret his action, David girded strength and in a determined fashion stood up to his men, clarifying that he must not raise his hand against the Lord's anointed. It would seem that David's men were not satisfied, and they tried to rise up and strike at Shaul themselves, but once again David managed to gain control and prevent them from carrying out their plan.

David did in fact demonstrate great piety, as argued by the Ralbag, for Shaul had done everything in his power to kill David, whereas David suffered pangs of guilt regarding his almost trivial act – cutting off the skirt of Shaul's robe. It seems, however, that it was precisely this act that had special significance, for even if this was not David's intention, it was nevertheless a strike against Shaul, as we shall see immediately.

III. SHAUL'S GARMENTS

An examination of the previous chapters teaches us about the significance of the motif of garments with respect to Shaul. In chapter 15 (lecture no. 29), we noted what happened immediately following the war against Amalek:

And as Shmuel turned about to go away, he laid hold upon the skirt of his robe, and it rent. And Shmuel said unto him, "The Lord has rent the kingdom of Israel from you this day, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you." (vv. 27-28)

We saw there that while, according to the plain sense of the text, it is more reasonable to assume that it was Shaul who seized the skirt of Shmuel's robe, Scripture's wording allows for the understanding that it was Shaul's robe that was rent. According to this understanding, greater emphasis is given to what Shmuel says to Shaul: "The Lord has rent the kingdom of Israel from you this day, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, that is better than you." It turns out, then, that even if

David did not have this explicitly in mind, an additional rending of Shaul's garment – and especially by David, whom Shaul rightfully suspects is that "neighbor of yours, who is better than you" – had great symbolic meaning.

This was given further expression during the war against Golyat, when Shaul thought to send David out clothed in his own fighting gear: "And Shaul clad David with his apparel" (17:38). This act gave additional symbolic expression to the passing of the kingship from Shaul to David. In the end, David refused to wear Shaul's clothing, and this, too, may have symbolic meaning; the time had not yet come for David to rule as king over Israel. From Shaul's perspective, however, this step had meaning, which only deepened at a later occasion, when Shaul pursued David while he was with Shmuel: "And he also stripped off his clothes, and he also prophesied before Shmuel, and lay down naked all that day and all that night" (19:24).

Without a doubt, David was not aware of all the symbolic meaning attached to Shaul's garments. Nevertheless, it is clear from these stories the extent to which there is symbolic meaning to clothing in general,^{6[6]} and to the clothing of high officeholders in particular, and it is clear that David was also aware of this meaning. It is for this reason that David felt uncomfortable about his action, which symbolized the imminent end of Shaul's kingdom.

IV. "THE LORD JUDGE BETWEEN ME AND YOU"

All that was said above notwithstanding, after the fact David found justification for cutting off the skirt of Shaul's robe, for it provided him with proof that, had he so desired, he could have brought harm to Shaul. David turns to Shaul with aroused emotions:

(9) And David said to Shaul, "Why do you hearken to men's words,^{7[7]} saying, 'Behold, David seeks your hurt?' (10) Behold, this day your eyes have seen how that the Lord had delivered you today into my hand in the cave, and some bade me kill you; but my eye spared you, and I said, 'I will not put forth my hand against my lord, for he is the Lord's anointed.' (11) Moreover, my father, see, yea, see the skirt of your robe in my hand; for in that I cut off the skirt of your robe, and killed you not, know you and see that there is neither evil nor

transgression in my hand, and I have not sinned against you, though you lay wait for my soul to take it. (12) The Lord judge between me and you, and the Lord avenge me of you; but my hand shall not be upon you. (13) As says the proverb of the ancients: Out of the wicked comes forth wickedness⁸[8]; but my hand shall not be upon you. (14) After whom is the king of Israel come out? After whom do you pursue? after a dead dog, after a flea. (15) The Lord therefore be judge, and give sentence between me and you, and see, and plead my cause, and deliver me out of your hand."⁹[9]

David tells Shaul the simple truth: He had never sinned against Shaul, and there is no justification whatsoever for Shaul's chasing after him. David leaves the judgment between them to God, declaring that he will not personally bring harm to Shaul owing to his recognition that he is the Lord's anointed.

Shaul is not left with very much to say, and he therefore apologizes to David:

(16) ...that Shaul said, "Is this your voice, my son David?" And Shaul lifted up his voice, and wept. (17) And he said to David, "You are more righteous than I; for you have rendered unto me good, whereas I have rendered unto you evil. (18) And you have declared this day how that you have dealt well with me; forasmuch as when the Lord had delivered me up into your hand, you did not kill me. (19) For if a man find his enemy, will he let him go well away? Wherefore the Lord reward you good for that which you have done unto me this day. (20) And now, behold, I know that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand. (21) Swear now, therefore, unto me by the Lord that you will not cut off my seed after me, and that you will not destroy my name out of my father's house."

Shaul's weeping is indeed moving. He weeps out of frustration and out of pain; because he knows that David is telling him the entire truth; because he is unable to overcome his evil spirit; because he must stand before David, whose music was the only thing that had helped him when the evil spirit fell upon him; because he recognized that what he was doing was not good; and because he truly internalized, perhaps for the first time, that David would indeed rule as king in his place. At this moment of despondency, of inner truth, of heart-to-heart talk, Shaul is worried about only one thing: that perhaps when he ascends to the throne, David will destroy the house of Shaul, in the manner of other kings over the course of history.¹⁰[10] But

Shaul does not promise what he is incapable of promising – that he will not pursue David in the future.

Even though "David swore unto Shaul" (verse 23), the chapter does not end on an optimistic note:

(23) ...And Shaul went home; but David and his men got them up unto the stronghold.

The story of Shaul's pursuit of David is not over.

(Translated by David Strauss)

11[1] According to the common understanding among the commentators (here and in *Shoftim* 3:24), this expression refers to a bowel movement (see Rashi here).

12[2] See 22:2, and our first lecture on chapter 22 (lecture no. 42).

13[3] David's words correspond to the words of his men: Corresponding to what they say: "Behold the day in which **the Lord has said unto you**," David says: "**The Lord forbid it me**, that I should do this thing." Corresponding to the general statement of David's men, "And you shall do to him **as it shall seem good unto you**," David emphasizes what they really had in mind: "The Lord forbid it me... **to put forth my hand against him**." And corresponding to the description of Shaul in David's men's words as "**your enemy**," David clarifies of whom they are speaking: "That I should do this thing **unto my lord, the Lord's anointed**, to put forth my hand against him, seeing he is **the Lord's anointed**."

14[4] The continuation of the Ralbag's comment is even more surprising. He suggests that David may have refrained from killing Shaul for practical, rather than moral, reasons: "For this would be a reason afterwards to make light of killing kings, and David knew that the kingdom would be his, and therefore he tried to cast off [the idea] of killing kings who are the Lord's anointed. And for this very reason he ordered the execution of the Amaleki lad who told him that he had killed Shaul, even though Shaul had commanded him to do so, and for this reason he also ordered the execution of the person who killed Ish-Boshet the son of Shaul." According to the Ralbag, David acted out of self-interest: Knowing that he would eventually rule as king, David wanted to avoid giving legitimacy to regicide. This goal also guided him when he ordered the execution of the Amaleki lad who had killed Shaul and of Rechev and Ba'ana who had killed Ish-Boshet. The Ralbag's argument is very difficult, and this attitude toward David finds no expression in Scripture itself.

15[5] *Chazal's* censure of this action is well known: "Whoever treats garments contemptuously will, in the end, derive no benefit from them; for it says: 'Now King David was old and stricken in years; and they covered him with clothes, but he could get no heat' (I *Melakhim* 1:1)" (*Berakhot* 62b). According to the plain sense, of course, the problem is the insult to the king's honor, and not just the insult to the clothing in itself.

16[6] In the previous lectures, we noted other aspects of clothing as an expression of distinguished positions: Aharon and his sons were consecrated for service in the *Mishkan* through their donning of the priestly garments (see *Shemot* 28); Eliyahu threw his mantle over Elisha when he appointed him as prophet – in great measure to replace himself (I *Melakhim* 19); and elsewhere.

17[7] The plain sense of the words "*divrei adam*" is "the people's words." David adopts a respectful attitude toward Shaul, presenting the matter as if other people were inciting Shaul in vain against David. It is possible, however, that this wording also alludes to Shaul himself, for David had already employed this double meaning when he said to Shaul before going out to fight Golyat: "Let no **man's** (*adam*) heart fail within him; your servant will go and fight with this Pelishti" (17:32) (see lecture no. 33, note 3).

18[8] What is "the proverb of the ancients" (*meshal ha-kadmoni*)? Rashi (based on *Chazal*) explains that the reference is to the Torah, which is "the proverb of the Holy One, blessed be He." Thus, he is forced to find a source for the proverb in the Torah (for the proverb as it is worded here, "out of the wicked comes forth wickedness," does not appear in the Torah). He explains that the idea finds expression in the verse, "But God allowed it to happen to him" (*Shemot* 21:13), and as the Gemara understands it (*Makkot* 10b): "What is Scripture talking about? Two people who [each] killed [another person], one unintentionally and the other intentionally. Regarding the first there were no witnesses and regarding the second there were no witnesses. The Holy One, blessed be He, arranges that they come to the same inn. The one who killed intentionally sits under a ladder, and the one who killed unintentionally descends the ladder, falls upon the other person and kills him. The one who killed intentionally is killed, and the one who killed unintentionally goes into exile." Rashi also follows the same approach in other places where a proverb is recited. He consistently avoids explaining that the proverb is a citation from sources outside the Torah. Thus, for example, on the verse, "Whereas it is said in the **book of the wars of the Lord**, Vahev in Sufa and Arnon among the brooks." (*Bamidbar* 21:14), Rashi does not explain that the reference is to a separate book that is not in our hands (as proposed by the Ibn Ezra), but rather he explains these words as a description of time: "Whenever people narrate the miracles that were wrought for our fathers." Twice, Rashi explains the term "**the book of the righteous**" as referring to the Torah (see his commentary to *Yehoshua* 10:13, against the Ralbag ad loc.; and II *Shmuel* 1:18 – there, too, against the Ralbag, who explains that the term refers to a book that we do not have in our possession).

The Radak, on the other hand, explains that the reference here is to a proverb expressed by an ancient (*kadmon*) ruler. According to the plain sense of the text, it would appear that the reference is to the people of the east (*kedem*) country, who were known for their wisdom and proverbs, as it is stated: "And Shlomo's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country (*benei kedem*)... And he spoke three thousand proverbs" (I *Melakhim* 5:10-12); and see *Yeshayahu* 19:11 and *Iyov* 1:3.

19[9] The word "*yad*" (hand) appears many times in the chapter in different senses: "Behold, I will deliver your enemy in your **hand**," in the sense of control; "to put forth my **hand** against him," in the sense of injury; "the Lord had delivered you today into my **hand**," in the sense of

control; "the skirt of your robe in my **hand**," in the sense of an actual hand; "there is neither evil nor transgression in my **hand**," in the sense of actions; "but my **hand** shall not be upon you," in the sense of injury; "and deliver me out of your **hand**," in the sense of "from you." Since the word is used to express rule and control, it is of great significance in a chapter which focuses on the issue of the identity of the true ruler.

20[10] We find in Scripture that Basha destroyed the house of Yerov'am (I *Melakhim* 14:14; 15:27-30), and Yehu destroyed the house of Ach'av (II *Melakhim* 9:6-10; 10:11). In those two cases, the previous royal house was eradicated based on a prophecy, because those kings sinned and caused Israel to sin.
