

THE BOOK OF *SHMUEL*

LECTURE 51: CHAPTER 26 SHAUL IN DAVID'S HANDS – A SECOND TIME (PART II) Rav Amnon Bazak

IV. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DAVID AND AVISHAI

We saw in the previous lecture that the second incident in which Shaul fell into the hands of David repaired what happened the first time that he fell into David's hands in chapter 24, where David's hesitation was evident and the step that he took (cutting off the skirt of Shaul's robe) involved a certain humiliation of Shaul. In this lecture, we will continue to deal with additional aspects of the story.

Let us begin with David's descent to Shaul's camp:

(6) Then answered David and said to Achimelekh the Chittite and to Avishai the son of Tzeruya,^{1[1]} brother to Yoav, saying, "Who will go down with me to Shaul to the camp?" And Avishai said, "I will go down with you."

In the previous lecture, we dealt with the figure of Achimelekh, who did not go down with David. This time we will discuss the one who volunteered to go down with David: Avishai the son of Tzeruya. There is a certain problem with this verse: Presenting Avishai the son of Tzeruya as "brother to Yoav" is a bit puzzling, for Yoav has not yet been mentioned in Scripture.^{2[2]} Scripture appears to have had a reason for mentioning Yoav here, the nature of which we shall discuss below.

When David and Avishai arrive in Shaul's camp and see Shaul and all the people sleeping, an argument develops between them:

(8) Then said Avishai to David, "God has delivered up your enemy into your hand this day; now therefore let me smite him, I pray you, with the spear to the earth^{3[3]} at one stroke, and I will not smite him the second time." (9) And David said to Avishai, "Destroy him not; for who can put forth his hand against the Lord's anointed, and be guiltless?"

As mentioned in the previous lecture, this argument brings to mind the argument between David and his men in chapter 24. Nevertheless, attention should be paid to a striking difference between the words of Avishai here and the words of David's men in chapter 24. There, David's men suggested to

David: "And you shall do to him as it shall seem good unto you" (24:4), whereas here Avishai offers on his own initiative: "Now therefore let me smite him, I pray you, with the spear to the earth at one stroke, and I will not smite him a second time." On the one hand, this proposal attests to Avishai's courage and bravery, but on the other hand, and more significantly, it attests to his hot and violent temperament.

We shall encounter this temperament at later stages as well. When David flees Jerusalem in the wake of Avshalom's rebellion, David encounters Shim'i the son of Gera, who goes out of his city Bachurim, stones David, and curses him. Avishai reacts with harsh words:

Then said Avishai the son of Tzeruya to the king, "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over, I pray you, and take off his head." (II *Shmuel* 16:9)

There, David also responds sharply to Avishai's proposal, and rejects it for religious reasons:

And the king said, "What have I to do with you, you sons of Tzeruya? So let him curse, because the Lord has said to him, 'Curse David,' who shall then say, 'Why have you done so?'" And David said to Avishai and to all his servants, "Behold, my son, who came out of my body, seeks my life; how much more now may this Binyaminite do it? Let him alone, and let him curse; for the Lord has bidden him. It may be that the Lord will look on my affliction, and that the Lord will requite me good for his cursing this day." (ibid. 10-12)

David accepts Shimi the son of Gera's curses with love, based on his faith that the entire incident – which is happening at a difficult time for David, when his son is trying to kill him – is by the will of God,^{4[4]} and he therefore must restrain himself. In any event, attention should be paid to the fact that David attacks here not only Avishai, but also "the sons of Tzeruya;" thus, he throws together Avishai and Yoav.

Without a doubt, Yoav's violent personality is even more striking than that of Avishai. It is Yoav who kills Avner the son of Ner, Shaul's commander who went over to David's camp (see II *Shmuel* 3);^{5[5]} it is he who kills Avshalom the son of David (ibid. 18); and it is he who kills Amasa the son of Yeter, whom David had appointed to replace Yoav at the end of Avshalom's rebellion (ibid. 20).^{6[6]} David is familiar with the might and courage of Yoav and Avishai, which reach their climax in their ability to decide the war "before and behind" against Aram and Amon (ibid. 10), which results from great faith in God. Nevertheless, David is aware of the price that he must pay for having

these two brothers at his side. In most instances, David succeeds in putting the reins on Avishai and Yoav's fiery temperaments.

In the continuation of the story of Shim'i the son of Gera, there is another confrontation between David and Avishai, which in a certain way is connected to our chapter. At the end of Avshalom's rebellion, Shim'i hastens to beg David's forgiveness, based on the heavy fear that now, with David's return to the royal throne, David will punish him for the severe insult that he had cast against him:

And Shim'i the son of Gera fell down before the king, as he came over the Jordan; and he said to the king, "Let not my lord impute iniquity unto me, neither remember that which your servant did perversely that day that my lord the king went out of Jerusalem, that the king should take it to his heart. For your servant knows that I have sinned: therefore, behold, I am come the first this day of all the house of Yosef to do down to meet my lord the king." (II *Shmuel* 19:19-21)

Avishai the son of Tzeruya is not impressed by Shim'i's act, and advises David not to forgive him for what he had done:

But Avishai the son of Tzeruya answered and said, "Shall not Shim'i be put to death for this, because he cursed the Lord's anointed?" (ibid. v. 22)

It seems that it is not by chance that Avishai uses the expression, "the Lord's anointed," which sends the reader back to our chapter. It is as if Avishai were saying to David: When I suggested that you strike at Shaul when he was chasing after you, you prevented me from doing so by arguing that Shaul is the "the Lord's anointed;" now, when Shim'i the son of Gera curses you while you are "the Lord's anointed," surely then you should strike at him. But once again, David refuses:

And David said, "What have I to do with you, you sons of Tzeruya, that you should this day be a hindrance to me? Shall there be any man be put to death this day in Israel, for do not I know that I am this day king over Israel?"⁷[7] (ibid. v. 23)

David rejects Avishai's proposal even though he agrees that Shim'i deserves to be punished, as is evident from the instructions that he gives Shlomo on his deathbed, where he tells him to find a way to strike at Shim'i. David's vision is broader than Avishai's, and he justifiably assumes that killing Shim'i on this special day would interfere with his objective of uniting the kingdom; he therefore must overcome his narrow personal interest. This point – the ability to rise above his natural impulse to react aggressively – ties together all of David's confrontations with the sons of Tzeruya.

In our chapter, in any event, David manages to stop Avishai, but it would appear that Avishai did not accept David's approach in a good spirit:

(11) "The Lord forbid it to me, that I should put forth my hand against the Lord's anointed; but now take, I pray you, the spear that is at his head, and the cruse of water and let us go." (12) So David took the spear and the cruse of water from Shaul's head; and they got them away...

David asks Avishai to take Shaul's spear and cruse of water, but in actuality, it is David himself who takes them. Why is this? The Radak explains: "After he said to Avishai, 'Take, I pray you,' he regretted it, and he did not want Avishai to come close to him, lest he be unable to control his passion and smite him." It might be added that it is possible that Avishai was not prepared to accept anything less than killing Shaul and that he refused the order, so that David had to carry it out himself. In any event, from now on, there is no further mention of Avishai until the end of the story.

V. "FOR THEY HAVE DRIVEN ME OUT THIS DAY"

After taking his spear and the cruse of water, David turns to Avner and speaks to him, perhaps seriously, perhaps mockingly:

(14) And David cried to the people and to Avner the son of Ner saying, "Answer you not, Avner?" Then Avner answered and said, "Who are you that cry to the king?"^{8[8]} (15) And David said to Avner, "Are you not a valiant man? And who is like you in Israel? Wherefore then have you not kept watch over your lord the king? For there came one of the people in to destroy the king your lord. (16) This thing is not good that you have done. As the Lord lives, you deserve to die, because you have not kept watch over your lord, the Lord's anointed. And now, see, where the king's spear is, and^{9[9]} the cruse of water that was at his head."

Shaul hears David's voice and addresses him directly, and David repeats the arguments that he had put forward in chapter 24:

(18) And he said, "Why does my lord pursue after his servant? For what have I done? Or what evil is in my hand? (19) Now therefore, I pray you, let my lord the king hear the words of his servant. If it be the Lord that has incited you against me, let Him accept an offering;^{10[10]} but if it be the children of men, cursed be they before the Lord; for they have driven me out this day that I should not cleave unto the inheritance of the Lord, saying, 'Go, serve other gods.'"

Conceptually, David expresses an interesting position that someone who is driven from God's inheritance¹¹[11] is regarded as if he had been asked to serve other gods. This is not the only place in Scripture that this idea appears, although here it finds far-reaching expression.

The tribes of Reuven, Gad, and Menashe expressed a similar concern when they explained the reason for the great altar that they had constructed on the east bank of the Jordan: "Or if we have not rather done this out of anxiety, saying, In time to come your children might speak to our children, saying, 'What have you to do with the Lord God of Israel? For the Lord has made the Jordan a border between us and you, you children of Reuven and children of Gad; you have no part in the Lord.' So shall your children make our children cease fearing the Lord" (*Yehoshua* 22:24-25). Here, too, the position is stated that someone who lives outside the borders of Israel has no part in the Lord.

This conception is familiar to us from the world of idol-worship, where each god is assigned a certain domain of its own, so that someone who left his homeland would accept the commandments of the god of his new country.¹²[12] Of course, Scripture rejects the assumption that God's dominion is limited to the Land of Israel, but nevertheless it is clear that the Land of Israel has special standing in that it is "a land which the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of Lord your God are always upon it" (*Devarim* 11:12).

Moreover, even if, from God's perspective, leaving the Land of Israel does not bring an end to His providence, it nevertheless constitutes a significant detachment from the people of Israel. David's roots, described in the book of *Rut*, are a family that became almost totally assimilated when it left the Land of Israel and its sons took foreign wives. At a time when there were almost no means of communication between different countries, there was no serious possibility of remaining part of the people of Israel while living abroad. In this sense, then, being driven out of the Land of Israel effectively means being driven away from the people and faith of Israel. It seems that this is what *Chazal* meant when they said:

Our Rabbis taught: A person should always live in the Land of Israel, even in a city the majority of whose inhabitants worship idols, and he should not live outside the Land of Israel, even in a city the majority of whose inhabitants are Israelites. For anyone who lives in the Land of Israel, it is as if he has a God, and **anyone who lives outside the land of Israel, it is as if he does not have a God.** As it is stated: "To give you the land of Cana'an to be your God" (*Vayikra* 25:38). And one who does not live in the Land of Israel, it is as if he does not have a God? Rather, to tell you: Whoever lives outside the Land of Israel, it is

as if he worships idols. And so, too, regarding David, it says: "For they have driven me out this day that I should not cleave unto the inheritance of the Lord, saying, 'Go, serve other gods.'" Who told David, "Go, serve other gods?" Rather, to tell you: Whosoever lives outside the Land of Israel, it is as if he worships idols. (*Ketuvot* 110b)

Our chapter concludes in the same manner as chapter 24:

(25) Then Shaul said to David, "Blessed be you, my son David; you shall both do mightily, and shall surely prevail." So David went his way, and Shaul returned to his place.

And like the previous time, this time it is also clear to both sides that the story is not finished. In any event, this is the last meeting between David and Shaul. Shaul's end is approaching, and with it David's kingdom as well.

(Translated by David Strauss)

13[1] According to I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 2:16, Tzeruya was David's sister (as was Avigayil, as opposed to Avigayil the wife of Naval, who eventually became David's wife). Other than there, this family connection finds no expression anywhere else in Scripture. On the contrary, another verse in *Shmuel* implies otherwise: "And Avshalom placed Amasa in charge of the army in place of Yoav; and Amasa was the son of a man named Yitra the Yisraelite who had taken to himself Avigayil the daughter of Nachash, sister of Tzeruya, the mother of Yoav" (II *Shmuel* 17:25). The implication is that Tzeruya and Avigayil were the children of Nachash, and not the children of Yishai! The commentators toiled to resolve the contradiction between the verses in II *Shmuel* and *Divrei Ha-yamim* (see Rashi, Radak and *Metzudat David*, ad loc.). It can be argued that the book of *Shmuel* tries to hide the family connection between David and the sons of Tzeruya for the reasons to be given below.

14[2] Other than in our verse, Yoav is first mentioned in II *Shmuel* 2:13. There, he is also not given any title, and it would seem from the verse that the reader is supposed to understand on his own that we are discussing an important person.

15[3] a) This formulation of Avishai's proposal alludes that David's opposition to killing Shaul stands in total contrast to what Shaul had tried to do to David: "I will smite David even to the wall" (18:11).

b) Killing a person with his own weapon is a familiar phenomenon, which gives special expression to the debasement of the killed party. Compare: "And David ran, and stood over the Pelishti, and took his sword, and drew it out of the sheath thereof, and slew him, and cut off his head therewith" (17:51); "And Benayahu the son of Yehoyada, the son of a valiant man... and he slew an Egyptian, a fine looking man, and the Egyptian had a spear in his hand; but he went down to him with a staff, and plucked the spear out of the hand of the Egyptian, and slew him with his own spear" (II *Shmuel* 23:20-21).

c) Regarding the theme of Shaul's spear, see above, chapter 17 (lecture no. 17).

16[4] This recognition appears to be part of David's process of repentance for what happened with Bat-Sheva.

17[5] There, too, David expressed himself in general terms: "And I am this day weak, though anointed king; and these men the sons of Tzeruya are too hard for me: the Lord shall reward the doer of evil according to his wickedness" (II *Shmuel* 3:39).

18[6] The way that Yoav killed Amasa – "But Amasa took no heed of the sword that was in Yoav's hand; so he smote him with it in the belly, and shed out his bowels to the ground, **and he struck him not a second time**; and he died" (II *Shmuel* 20:10) – is reminiscent of Avishai's aggressive proposal: "Let me smite him, I pray you, with the spear to the earth at one stroke, **and I will not smite him the second time.**"

19[7] We discussed the connection between a festive occasion and pardoning people who deserve to die in chapters 11 and 14 (lecture no. 20, note 1, lecture no. 26).

20[8] These words are difficult, for David called out to Avner and not to the king (in the Septuagint, version b) these words are missing). The Radak explains: "As if it says '*al ha-melekh*,' near the king. That is to say, you were not afraid to call out in a place where the king is sleeping; you were not concerned that you would wake him up from his sleep by calling out loud." According to the plain sense of the verse, the argument seems to be that calling out to Avner is regarded as a challenge to the king himself. It might also be suggested that Avner utters two cries: "Who are you that cry" is directed at David; "To the king," is directed at Avner's men, on the understanding that the king's life is in danger.

21[9] This word, "*et*," is also difficult. The *Metzudat David* understands it in the sense of "with," as in the verse: "And David said unto Shaul, 'Your servant kept his father's sheep; and when there came a lion with (*ve-et*) a bear, and took a lamb out of the flock" (17:34). Rashi (*Sanhedrin* 49a, s.v. *bor*), however, writes: "When David said to them: You deserve to die, because you have not kept watch over your lord, for I could have killed him already. And now, see, where the king's spear is, and where is (*ve-ayeh*) the cruse of water that was at his head." It is possible that his text read "*ei chanit*...." This is also the implication of *Targum Yonatan* (*Keter* version).

22[10] These words of David raise questions, for they seem to express scorn for God. *Chazal* already noted the difficulty with this expression: "Rabbi Eliezer said: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to David: You say I incited him? I will cause you to stumble over something that even school children know. For it is written: 'When you take the sum of the children of Israel after their number, then shall they give every man a ransom for his soul, etc.' (*Shemot* 30:12). Immediately, 'Satan stood up against Israel' (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 21:1), and it is written: 'And he incited David against them, saying Go, number Israel' (II *Shmuel* 24:1)" (*Berakhot* 62b). According to *Chazal*, David was punished for his words here when Satan incited him to count Israel, in the wake of which a heavy punishment was imposed upon the people.

Chazal and the commentators did not see the words, "let Him accept an offering," as problematic in themselves. They explain: "That is to say, I shall offer a sacrifice before Him which He will accept to atone for my sin and to remove your hate from me" (Radak). It seems, however, that this expression is problematic, inasmuch as David is suggesting that the problem can be "solved" by bringing a sacrifice. It is reasonable to assume that these words

reflect the psychological pressure to which David was subject at this time. They require further study.

23[11] He seems to mean that he feels as if he is forced to leave *Eretz Yisrael* and go to the Pelishtim, as he did already in chapter 21 and as he will do again in the next chapter.

24[12] As it is related, for example, about the Cutheans, whom the king of Ashur exiled to *Eretz Yisrael*: "Then they spoke to the king of Ashur, saying, 'The nations which you have removed, and placed in the cities of Shomeron, know not the law of the God of the land; therefore, He has sent lions among them, and, behold, they slay them, because they know not the law of the God of the land'" (II *Melakhim* 17:26).
