

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

LECTURE 58: CHAPTER 1 (1)

DAVID AND THE AMALEKI LAD

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We are now beginning our third year of the study of the book of *Shmuel*. As we have noted in the past, the external division of the book of *Shmuel* into two parts – I *Shmuel* and II *Shmuel* – is not a traditional Jewish division, and its origin lies in the Septuagint. It is reasonable to assume that those who divided the book did so precisely in this spot because the chapter opens with the words, "And it came to pass after the death of Shaul," words that bring to mind the opening verses of the books of *Yehoshua* and *Shoftim*. Content-wise, however, chapter 1 of II *Shmuel* is a direct continuation of chapter 31 of the book of I *Shmuel*, which describes the death of Shaul; it would have been much more reasonable to begin the second part of *Shmuel* with chapter 2, which deals with the beginnings of the kingdom of David.

Those new students who are joining us this year may find it easier to begin our joint study only in chapter 2, as our first two lectures will deal in great part with issues relating to the chapters that we already learned at the end of the book of I *Shmuel*.

I wish all those participating in this series, new students as well as veterans, a fruitful year of study. As always, I will be happy to receive your comments and questions, which may be sent to the e-mail address of the Virtual Beit Midrash.

With blessings for a productive and enjoyable year of study,

Amnon Bazak

I. "I AM AN AMALEKITE"

The story of how the information regarding the death of Shaul and his sons reached David covertly combines the two events that transpired at the same time at the end of the book of I *Shmuel*. Since the final meeting between David and Shaul (I *Shmuel* 26), Scripture has jumped back and forth from what was happening with David to what was happening with Shaul. Chapter 27 dealt with David's going to Akhish, and chapter 28 with Shaul's going to the medium in Ein-Dor; chapters 29-30 dealt with the story of David and his army's going out to battle together with Akhish and the heavy price that they paid for this when the Amalekites took their wives and children into captivity, and chapter 31 deals with the death of Shaul. Now it becomes clear that the various accounts share a common element – Amalek:

(1) And it came to pass after the death of Shaul, when David was returned from the slaughter of the **Amalekites**, and David had abode two days in Tziklag. (2) It came even to pass on the third day, that, behold, a man came out of the camp from Shaul with his clothes rent and earth upon his head; and so it was, when he came to David, that he fell to the earth and prostrated himself. (3) And David said unto him, "From whence do you come?" And he said unto him, "Out of the camp of Israel am I escaped." (4) And David said unto him, "How went the matter? I pray you, tell me." And he answered, "The people are fled from the battle, and many of the people also are fallen and dead; and Shaul and Yonatan his son are dead also."

As may be recalled, when Shaul went to the medium, he heard from Shmuel that he had been sentenced to death for one reason: "Because you did not hearken to the voice of the Lord, and did not execute His fierce wrath upon **Amalek**, therefore has the Lord done this thing unto you this day" (I *Shmuel* 28:18). Now Scripture emphasizes that Shaul's death at the hand of the Philistines, which was, as stated, in punishment for his not having smitten Amalek, took place at the same time that Amalek was slaughtered by his replacement – that is, by David.

This idea is emphasized by the national identity of the person who brought the news of Shaul's death. That same person relates that when Shaul saw him –

(7) "...he looked behind him, he saw me, and called unto me. And I answered, 'Here am I.' (8) And he said unto me, 'Who are you?' And I answered [according to the written text: "And he answered"]^{1[1]} him: 'I am an **Amalekite**.'

The story related here is entirely missing in the previous chapter (I *Shmuel* 31), and we shall deal with this issue below. In any event, according to the account of the Amaleki lad, Shaul met his death immediately after the Amaleki lad revealed to him his identity:

(9) "And he said unto me, 'Stand, I pray you, beside me, and slay me, for the agony has taken hold of me; because my life is just yet in me.' (10) So I stood beside him and slew him, because I was sure that he could not live after that he was fallen; and I took the crown that was upon his head, and the bracelet that was on his arm, and I have brought them here unto my lord."

We see, then, that the last words that Shaul heard before dying on account of not having fulfilled God's commandment to wipe out the memory of Amalek were: "I am an Amalekite."

If this is not enough, David once again asks the lad about his identity:

(13) And David said unto the young man that told him, "From where are you?" And he answered, "I am the son of an **Amalekite** stranger."

We shall later discuss why it was necessary for David to ask the lad again about his origins. In any event, the repeated mention of the fact that the lad was an Amaleki reinforces the impression that this is indeed a central theme in the chapter.

II. THE OBJECTIVE OF THE AMALEKITE'S STORY

¹ [1] The Radak, in his usual manner, notes the difference between the way the word is written and the way it is read, and proposes an interesting understanding. According to the way the word is written, "*va-yomer*," "and he said," someone else reported to Shaul that the lad was an Amalekite because the lad himself did not want to expose his origins.

The Amalekite lad relates to David what had happened to Shaul in his final moments, but the story differs with respect to several details from the account in the previous chapter:

Scripture's account (I <i>Shmuel</i> 31)	The lad's account (II <i>Shmuel</i> 1)
(3) And the battle went sore against Shaul, and the archers overtook him; and he was in great anguish by reason of the archers. (4) Then said Shaul to his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword, and thrust me through therewith; lest these uncircumcised come and thrust me through, and make a mock of me." But his armor-bearer would not, for he was sore afraid. Therefore, Shaul took his sword, and fell upon it.	(6) ... behold, Shaul leaned upon his spear; and, lo, the chariots and the horsemen pressed hard upon him. (7) And when he looked behind him, he saw me, and called unto me. And I answered, "Here am I." (8) And he said unto me, "Who are you?" And I answered him, "I am an Amalekite." (9) And he said unto me, "Stand, I pray you, beside me, and slay me, for the agony has taken hold of me; because my life is just yet in me." (10) So I stood beside him, and slew him...

The less significant differences (who were the fighters who drew close to Shaul – the archers or the chariots and horsemen – and did Shaul have with him his sword or his spear) can in one way or the other be reconciled,²[2] but the major difference between the two accounts relates, of course, to the question of how Shaul actually died. According to Scripture's account, Shaul died when he fell on his sword; there is no mention whatsoever of the Amalekite lad. As the Radak writes in the name of earlier commentators, it is reasonable to assume that the lad was lying. Indeed, there is a similarity between what Shaul said to his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword, and thrust me through therewith," and the Amalekite lad's story that Shaul said to him, "Stand, I pray you, beside me, and slay me." It may be assumed that the Amalekite was standing nearby, that he was even a witness to the exchange between Shaul and his armor-bearer, and that he then attributed the event to himself.³[3]

2 [2] It may be argued that there were two sets of pursuers or that the lad exaggerated in his account. (Archers, by their very nature, stand further away, whereas the lad speaks of real physical proximity: "The chariots and the horsemen pressed hard upon him").

3 [3] Another understanding, alluded to by the Radak, is also possible, namely, that the two accounts complement each other: Shaul did not die immediately upon falling on his sword, and he asked the lad to free him from

But if what we are saying is correct, there is room to ask: Why did the Amalekite lie about what happened? Why did he attribute Shaul's death to himself? This question is connected to how we understand the harsh sentence that David imposed upon the lad. David reacts sharply to the Amalekite:

(14) And David said unto him, "How were you not afraid to put forth your hand to destroy the Lord's anointed? (15) And David called one of the young men and said, "Go near, and fall upon him." And he smote him so that he died. (16) And David said unto him, "Your blood be upon your head; for your mouth has testified against you, saying: 'I have slain the Lord's anointed.'"

Note that David does not claim that the lad in fact killed Shaul; rather, he judges him for the very fact that he attributed the act to himself – "For your mouth has testified against you."

There is still room to ask: Why did David see fit to judge the Amalekite with such severity? Surely, according to his account, all that he did was fulfill Shaul's request! If Shaul wanted to rescue his honor and not die in the hands of the Philistines, should the lad have refused this request?!

It seems that the answer to this question may be found later in the book. When Rechav and Ba'ana, two of Shaul's captains of bands, killed Ish-Boshet, Shaul's surviving son who ruled in his place, and they then brought his head to David thinking that this would bring him joy, David forcefully responded: "When one told me, saying, 'Behold, Shaul is dead,' and **he was in his own eyes** as though he brought good tidings, I took hold of him and slew him in Tziklag, instead of giving a reward for his tidings.⁴[4] How much more, when wicked men have slain a righteous person in his own house upon his bed..." (4:10-11).⁵[5] From here it seems that what bothered David was

his suffering of a slow death and kill him – a request that the Amalekite was happy to fulfill.

4 [4] In other words, "Which he thought that I would give him" (Radak, and similarly in Rashi).

5 [5] The references to verses will heretofore be to the book of II *Shmuel* unless otherwise noted.

the way in which the lad related the information about Shaul's death: as good tidings, rather than as a report of calamity.

The matter still requires further clarification: Where do we see in our story that the Amalekite lad presented the matter as good news? On the contrary, there are several indications of the very opposite:

1) Already from the beginning, the lad arrives as one who fled in his grief from the battle: "Behold, a man came out of the camp from Shaul with his clothes rent and earth upon his head." Rent clothing is a well-known expression of sorrow and mourning,^{6[6]} as is the placement of earth upon one's head.^{7[7]}

2) The lad describes the events in ascending order: "The people are fled from the battle, and many of the people also are fallen and dead; and Shaul and Yonatan his son are dead also." As we shall see below, this account is one of many similarities between this story and the story of the man who returned to Shilo after Israel's fall before the Philistines, but at this point, it shall suffice to note the fact that that messenger also reported the rout in ascending order: "Israel is fled before the Philistines, and there has been also a great slaughter among the people, and your two sons also, Chofni and Pinchas, are dead, and the ark of God is taken" (I *Shmuel* 4:17).^{8[8]} From here it would seem that the lad regarded the death of Shaul and his sons as a most tragic event.

6 [6] This is what Yaakov did following the sale of Yosef (*Bereishit* 34:34), and what Yiftach did when he saw his daughter emerging first from his house (*Shoftim* 11:35), and what David did when he heard about Amnon's death at the hands of Avshalom (II *Shmuel* 13:31), and many other examples.

7 [7] This is what Yehoshua, for example, did following the first rout at Ai: "And Yehoshua **rent** his clothes and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the Lord until evening, he and the elders of Israel, **and put dust upon their head**" (*Yehoshua* 7:6). And see II *Shmuel* 13:19: "And Tamar put **ashes on her head** and **rent** her garment of many colors that was on her."

8 [8] Without a doubt, the man was right in his understanding of the order of priorities of the listener, Eli, as is proven by his reaction: "And it came to pass, when he made mention of the ark of God, that he fell from off his seat backward by the side of the gate, and his neck broke" (*ibid.* v. 18). The question of whether this order of priorities is correct on the fundamental level was discussed at length in our lecture on that chapter; see there (lecture 7).

3) The lad also emphasizes that when he killed Shaul he knew that he was merely hastening his death, and that Shaul would in any case have died: "So I stood beside him, and slew him, because I was sure that he could not live after that he was fallen."

These points sharpen the question: Why was David so angry with the lad that he had him executed?

III. THE CROWN

It seems that the problematic element rises toward the end of the lad's story: "And I took the crown that was upon his head, and the bracelet that was on his arm, and have brought them here unto my lord." If up until this stage the Amalekite's account seems reasonable, and perhaps even invites our empathy, with this step the Amalekite veers from the role of reporter. Removing the crown from Shaul's head and bringing it to David testifies beyond all doubt that the lad sees Shaul's end as an opportunity for crowning David as king.^{9[9]} Even if the Amalekite did not express joy over Shaul's death, nevertheless, this step involved an act of flattery toward David; it expresses the feeling that if a tragedy already took place, he should at least derive from it benefit through what he sees as being desirable in David's eyes.

But it was precisely through this step that the Amalekite roused David's fury. As we saw throughout the book of I *Shmuel*, David demonstrated great and sometimes even baffling respect towards Shaul and prevented any injury toward him, repeating time and time again that he is "the Lord's anointed." Thus, for example, David said to his men, who wanted to kill Shaul when he wandered by himself into the cave in which they were hiding, "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" (I *Shmuel* 24:6). In similar fashion, he rebutted Avishai's argument when he went down with him into Shaul's camp: "The Lord forbid it me, that I should put forth my hand against the Lord's anointed" (ibid. 26:11).^{10[10]} If the Amalekite already acted

9 [9] As is stated at the coronation of Yoash: "And he brought out the king's son, **and put the crown upon him**, and gave him the testimony; and they made him king, and anointed him; and they clapped their hands, and said, 'Long live the king'" (II *Melakhim* 11:12). See *Tehilim* 89:40; 132:18.

10 [10] In the continuation of that chapter, David argues with Shaul's guards, who fell asleep and failed to notice David and Avishai's penetration into

in this manner toward Shaul, his striking of Shaul was also perceived as unjustified. It may be recalled that Shaul's lad was unable to fulfill his order to stab him with his sword: "But his armor-bearer would not, for he was sore afraid." Presumably, the armor-bearer feared precisely that which David mentioned – putting forth his hand against the Lord's anointed. In contrast, the words of the Amalekite give no indication of any hesitation regarding this step, and this adds to the feeling that he acted with hypocrisy in everything related to the meaning of the difficult events that took place in his presence.

To all this it may be added that the fact that the lad was an Amalekite only made the matter worse. This may be the reason that David asked him again about his origins, even though this was already known from his story. Once it became clear that the lad was acting out of personal interests, it was not impossible that his action also involved revenge against Shaul. This is the way we might understand the meaning of the conversation between David and the lad:

(13) And David said unto the young man that told him, "From where are you?" And he answered, "I am the son of an Amalekite stranger." (14) And David said unto him, "How were you not afraid to put forth your hand to destroy the Lord's anointed?"

At first glance it would appear that David's argument is unconnected to the lad's origins; why then did he hold back his accusation regarding the lad's killing of Shaul and ask him first about his origins? It stands to reason that David wished to highlight the lad's Amalekite origins, in order to emphasize even more strongly the severity of his actions, and thus expose the true nature of the Amalekite lad and his actions.

IV. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE DEATH OF SHAUL AND THAT OF ELI

As we already noted, the story about the Amalekite lad completes the parallel between the death of Shaul and the account of the death of Eli at the beginning of the book of *Shmuel*. The points of correspondence are presented in the following table:

Shaul's camp: "As the Lord lives, you deserve to die, because you have not kept watch over your lord, the Lord's anointed" (ibid. v. 16).

The death of Eli (I <i>Shmuel</i> 4)	The death of Shaul
(1) And the Philistines pitched in Afek.	Now the Philistines gathered together all their hosts to Afek. (II <i>Shmuel</i> 29:1)
(10) And the Philistines fought, and Israel was smitten, and they fled.	Now the Philistines fought against Israel, and the men of Israel fled (31:1)
(11) And the two sons of Eli, Chofni and Pinchas, were slain.	And the Philistines followed hard upon Saul and upon his sons; and the Philistines slew Yonatan, and Avinadav, and Malkhishua, the sons of Shaul. (31:2)
(12) And there ran a man of Binyamin out of the army, and came to Shilo the same day with his clothes rent, and with earth upon his head.	A man came out of the camp from Shaul with his clothes rent, and earth upon his head. (II <i>Shmuel</i> 1:2)
(16) And the man said unto Eli, "I am he that came out of the army, and I fled today out of the army."	And he said unto him, "Out of the camp of Israel am I escaped." (1:3)
(16) And he said, "How went the matter, my son?"	And David said unto him, "How went the matter?" (1:4)
(17) And he that brought the tidings answered and said, "Israel is fled before the Philistines, and there has been also a great slaughter among the people, and your two sons also, Chofni and Pinchas, are dead, and the ark of God is taken."	And he answered, "The people are fled from the battle, and many of the people also are fallen and dead; and Shaul and Yonatan his son are dead also." (1:4)

The two leaders who failed in their positions ended their lives with similar tragedies: Both died on the same day as their sons, a day on which the people of Israel suffered a humiliating defeat before the Philistines. This correspondence seems to have stood before *Midrash Shmuel* (*parasha* 11), which completes it by noting that the man from Binyamin who ran out of the army was Shaul. The parallelism leaves its negative final imprint on the kingdom of Shaul, which ended the same way as did the leadership of Eli. Even though a punishment as severe as that which was decreed upon Eli was not decreed upon Shaul, nevertheless, the parallelism itself expresses a negative assessment of the period of his monarchy.

(Translated by David Strauss)

