

THE BOOK OF II *SHMUEL*

LECTURE 59: CHAPTER 1 (2)

DAVID'S LAMENTATION OVER SHAUL AND YEHONATAN

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I. "To teach the sons of Yehuda the bow"

After dealing with the Amalekite lad who informed him of the deaths of Shaul and his sons, David now turns to his personal grief over Shaul and Yehonatan, expressing it in his famous lamentation.

Before turning to the lamentation itself, let us consider its opening verses:

(17) And David lamented with this lamentation over Shaul and over Yehonatan his son, (18) and said, "To teach the sons of Yehuda the bow. Behold, it is written in the book of Yashar."

We must first understand the words, "to teach the sons of Yehuda the bow," which are surprising in this context: How is teaching the sons of Yehuda the bow connected to the lamentation? The commentators (Rashi, Radak and Ralbag) understand that the matter is connected to the defeat in war: "Now that the mighty men of Israel have fallen, the sons of Yehuda must learn to fight and to shoot with a bow" (Rashi).

The Radak adds that this section is not an integral part of the lamentation, for it is not reasonable that David should mention the sons of Yehuda in his lamentation over Shaul, the proud son of Binyamin.¹[1] Indeed, the continuation of the verse, "Behold, it is written in the book of Yashar," seems on the simple level to be a side comment of the editor, and this suggests that the beginning of the verse is also not part of the lamentation itself,²[2] but rather a statement that stands on its own and is only indirectly connected to the content of the lamentation.

The Ralbag adds that the idea of teaching the bow is connected to Shaul's fear of the Philistine archers who surrounded him ("And the archers overtook him; and he was in great anguish by reason of the archers;" I *Shmuel* 31:3). He explains that one of the lessons of the war was the need to strengthen the Israelite army with archers, for "there was no one in Israel who was skillful in it."

We can adopt this approach with a certain modification. It is difficult to assume that there were no archers in Israel, but it seems that it was precisely in this war that many archers died. The sons of Binyamin, Shaul's tribe, were known as sharpshooters. Thus, for example, the camp of Binyamin is described at the time of the incident involving the concubine in Giv'a: "And the children of Binyamin numbered at that time out of the cities twenty six thousand men that drew sword... among all this people there were seven hundred chosen men lefthanded; **every one could sling stones at a hair, and not miss**" (*Shoftim* 20:15-16). In this, the sons of Binyamin were distinguished from the sons of Yehuda, who were men who bore shield and spear (see I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 12:25). Explicit mention of this difference is also made at a later period: "And Asa had an army of men **who bore targets and spears, out of Yehuda** three hundred thousand; and **out of Binyamin, who bore shields and drew bows**, two hundred and eighty thousand" (II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 14:7; and see II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 17:17). It is reasonable to assume that many sons of Binyamin fought in Shaul's army and fell in the war, and that many of them were archers – at the head of whom stood Yehonatan, about whom David laments in the continuation: "The bow of Yehonatan turned not back." Now Israel needs new archers, and it is possible that David expresses this idea in the introduction to his lamentation over the death of Yehonatan the archer.

1 [1] We took note of Shaul's identification as representative of the tribe of Binyamin throughout the book of I *Shmuel*; see especially 9:21; 10:21; 22:7.

2 [2] R. Yeshaya of Trani maintains that these words are indeed part of the lamentation, lamenting the loss of Shaul and Yehonatan, who taught the sons of Yehuda the bow. This understanding, however, is forced, both substantively and with respect to the structure of the lamentation.

There is, however, a certain difficulty with the incorporation of such a clearly military issue in the heading of a lamentation dealing with the emotional and national aspects of the deaths of Shaul and Yehonatan. In fact, it is also possible to offer an entirely different understanding of this statement: as a heading that indicates the melody to be used for the entire lamentation. It is well known that many headings in the book of *Tehillim* refer to musical instructions that are unfamiliar to us,^{3[3]} and among them we find several headings that are reminiscent of our heading. For example: "To the chief Musician upon Shushan-Edut, a Mikhtam of David, to teach" (*Tehillim* 60:1).^{4[4]} It is possible, then, that the heading of our lamentation should be understood as offering musical instructions.

II. "Behold, it is written in the book of Yashar"

Let us move on to the second half of the opening verse: "Behold, it is written in the book of Yashar." On the plain level, this verse attests to the fact that the lamentation appears also in another source that is called "*Sefer Ha-Yashar*." This expression is already familiar to us from elsewhere in Scripture: "Then spoke Yehoshua to the Lord on the day when the Lord delivered up the Emori before the children of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, "Sun, stand still upon Giv'on; and moon, in the valley of Ayalon;" And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed, until the people had avenged themselves upon their enemies. **Is not this written in the book of Yashar?**" (*Yehoshua* 10:12-13). What exactly is this book?

The *gemara* (*Avoda Zara* 25a) brings three opinions on the matter. What is common to all of them is that they all identify "the book of Yashar" with one of the books of the Bible, and they all connect the identification with the first part of the verse, "to teach the sons of Yehuda the bow."

3 [3] For example, "For the chief musician on strings, a psalm of David" (*Tehillim* 4:1); "To the chief musician for flutes, a psalm of David" (5:1); "To the chief musician on strings upon the Sheminit, a psalm of David" (6:1), and many others.

4 [4] It is interesting to note that in that psalm we are also dealing with a military situation: "When he strove with Aram-Naharayim and with Aram-Tzova, and Yoav returned, and smote twelve thousand of Edom in the valley of the salt" (v. 2.), and there too a difficult situation is described at the beginning of the psalm, bringing the psalmist to cry out: "O God, You have cast us off, You have shattered us, You have been angry" (v.3).

Which is "the book of Yashar? R. Chiyya bar Abba said in the name of R. Yochanan: It is the book of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, who are designated as righteous ["*yesaharim*"] and of whom Scripture says, "Let me die the death of the righteous and let my last end be like his" (*Bamidbar* 23:10). And where is this fact referred to? "Yehuda, you shall your brethren praise; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies" (*Bereishit* 49:8). What kind of fighting requires the aiming of the hand at the [enemy's neck]? Surely, archery.

R. Elazar said: It is the book of Deuteronomy, which is here called the book of Yashar, because it contains the words, "And you shall do that which is *yashar* [right] in the sight of the Lord" (*Devarim* 6:18). And where does it refer [to Yehuda's archery]? "With his hands he contended for himself" (*ibid.* 33:7). What kind of fighting requires both hands? Surely, archery.

R. Shmuel bar Nachmani said: It is the book of *Shoftim*, which is here called the book of Yashar, because it contains the verse: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was *yashar* [right] in his own eyes" (*Shoftim* 17:6). And where is [Yehuda's skill in archery] referred to in it? "That the generations of the children of Israel might know, to teach them war" (*ibid.* 3:2). Now what kind of warfare requires teaching? Surely, archery.

The differences between the various opinions are interesting in themselves.⁵[5] For our purposes, let us note that *Chazal* relate in similar fashion to other "books" referred to in Scripture (and, in their footsteps, Rashi in his commentaries to these references).⁶[6] For example, commenting on the phrase, "the book of the wars of the Lord" (*Bamidbar* 21:14), they also identify these books with the Torah itself. The underlying assumption here is that Scripture does not refer to books that are not part of the Biblical canon.

5 [5] For example, the difference between the first approach, which appears to be a possible explanation according to the plain sense of the text for the term "the book of Yashar," and the other approaches, which appear to be *midrash*. Similarly, the difference between the categories to which the various identifications belong – the Torah, the book of *Devarim*, or a book of the Prophets. This is not the forum in which to expand upon this matter.

6 [6] We noted this in I *Shmuel* 24; see lecture no. 46 on I *Shmuel*, note 8.

According to the plain sense of the text, however, it seems more reasonable to adopt the position of the Ramban here^{7[7]} -- we are dealing with a separate book that has not come down to us. It is likely that this book was comprised of various songs and poems, including the poem, apparently cited only in part, in the book of *Yehoshua*, and David's lamentation over Shaul and Yehonatan.

III. The structure of the Lamentation

Now we can begin with the lamentation itself. First of all, it is important to emphasize that even without any analysis or exegesis, the lamentation radiates a unique intensity, and many of its expressions have become common idioms, especially in the context of mourning and eulogy. Nevertheless, there is still room to briefly discuss the literary structure of the lamentation.

Despite its emotional character, the lamentation has a very clear structure; it divides into five sections organized in chiasmic order as follows (exegetical comments on words and expressions can be found in the footnotes):

(19) Your beauty, O Israel,^{8[8]} upon your high places is slain! **How are the mighty fallen!**

7 [7] This parallels the approach of the Ramban and the Ibn Ezra regarding "the book of the wars of the Lord;" see their commentaries to the Torah, ad loc.

8 [8] This expression, "*Ha-tzevi Yisrael*," is exceedingly obscure. The word "*tzevi*" in Scripture mean "desire," that is, something that is desired. For example: "In that day shall the plant of the Lord be beautiful (*tzevi*) and comely" (*Yeshayahu* 4:2); "But I said, How shall I put you among the sons, and give you a pleasant land, the finest (*tzevi*) heritage" (*Yirmiyahu* 3:19); "In the day that I lifted up My hand to them, to bring them out of the land of Egypt into a land that I had spied out for them, flowing with milk and honey, which is an ornament (*tzevi*) for all the lands" (*Yechezkel* 20:6). In light of this, the commentaries have suggested that "*ha-tzvi Yisrael*" refers to *Eretz Yisrael*, upon whose high places the mighty have fallen. It is, however, possible, that the reference is to Shaul and Yehonatan, who are the "*tzevi*," the best part, in which case the verse must be read: "Your beauty, O Israel, upon your high places is slain."

(20) Tell it not in Gat,9[9] publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon; lest **the daughters of the Philistines** rejoice, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised10[10] triumph. (21) You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew nor rain upon you, neither fields of choice fruits;11[11] for there the shield of the mighty was vilely cast away, the shield of Shaul, not anointed with oil.12[12]

(22) From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Yehonatan turned not back, and the sword of Shaul returned not empty.13[13] (23) Shaul and Yehonatan, the lovely and the pleasant in their lives, even in their death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.

9 [9] There is here a play on sounds, which was greatly developed by the prophet Mikha (1:10-15): "**Tell** (*tagidu*) it not in **Gat**, weep not at all; at Bet-le-**Afra** roll yourself in the **dust** (*afar*)... Bind the chariots to the swift **steeds** (*la-rechesh*, O inhabitant of **Lachish**... the houses of **Achziv** shall be a **deceitful thing** (*le-achzav*) unto the kings of Israel. I will yet bring unto you, O inhabitant of **Maresha**, him that shall **possess** (*ha-yoresh*) you." There may also be a similar play on sounds in the words, "Publish it not in the streets (*be-chutzot*) of Ashkelon," if we assume that in Biblical Hebrew, the letter *tzadi* was pronounced as a sibilant similar to the letter *samekh* (as in the Yemenite pronunciation).

10 [10] This designation is reminiscent of Shaul's last words to his armor bearer: "Draw your sword, and thrust me through therewith; lest these uncircumcised come and thrust me through" (I *Shmuel* 31:4).

11 [11] It seems that the verse means as follows: "You mountains of Gilboa, let there be no dew nor rain upon you, neither [be you] fields of choice fruits." In other words, David curses the mountains of Gilboa that it should have no blessed fields fit to produce choice fruits (Radak).

12 [12] The word "*nig'al*" means: despised, loathed. The words "the shield of Shaul, not anointed with oil" are a bit obscure. The commentators explain that it was common practice to anoint shields with oil so that the arrows that hit them should slide down (see *Yeshayahu* 21:5: "Arise, princes, and anoint the shield"). But it is possible that the reference is to Shaul himself, who fell as if he hadn't been anointed with oil to rule over Israel (see I *Shmuel* 10:1).

13 [13] In other words, Yehonatan's bow and Shaul's sword did not turn back until they were filled with the blood of the enemy.

(24) **You daughters of Israel**, weep over Shaul, who clothed you in scarlet, with other delights, who put ornaments of gold upon your apparel.

(25) **How are the mighty fallen** in the midst of the battle! Yehonatan upon your high places is slain! (26) I am distressed for you, my brother Yehonatan; very pleasant have you been unto me; wonderful was your love to me, surpassing the love of women. (27) **How are the mighty fallen**, and the weapons of war perished!

The verses that frame the lamentation express mourning and distress, without relating to the content itself. Three times, David laments with the cry, "How the mighty have fallen," giving special expression to his grief over the death of Yehonatan, who is mentioned twice by name, in contrast to Shaul, who is not mentioned at all in these verses. In the second and fourth sections, the main theme is the reaction to the death of Shaul - the concern about the rejoicing of "the daughters of the Philistines" as opposed to the appropriate distress of "the daughters of Israel," and the symbolic curse of the mountains of Gilboa. Shaul is mentioned twice in these verses, while Yehonatan is mentioned not at all. In the heart of the lamentation, the middle section, Shaul and Yehonatan are both mentioned twice, and here David relates to the fallen themselves: to their valor in battle, which found expression in Yehonatan's bow and Shaul's sword, and to the special and tragic bond between them in their lifetimes and in their deaths.¹⁴[14]

This analysis reveals the special beauty of this lamentation. David is careful to give equal mention to Shaul and Yehonatan, four times apiece, though he does this in split fashion. The outer frame – the cry of mourning and distress – relates directly to Yehonatan, for it is perfectly understandable that the formal bond and tortuous relationship between David and Shaul cannot at all be compared to the special connection between David and Yehonatan. In the inner frame that deals with the national dimension, the most

14 [14] It should be noted that in contrast to the common expression, "in their lives and in their deaths they were not divided," the *ta'amim* suggest a different reading: "Shaul and Yehonatan, the lovely and the pleasant in their lives, even in their death they were not divided." According to the plain sense of the text, it is difficult to decide between these two possibilities, but without a doubt the common expression well reflects the full tragedy of Yehonatan, who chose to remain alongside his father during his lifetime, and thus sealed his fate – to die together with his father (we noted this point throughout the book of I *Shmuel*; see especially end of chap. 20, and our comments there [lecture no. 40]).

important consequence of the battle was the fall of the king. In the center of the lamentation, David posits the personalities of Shaul and Yehonatan, and this reveals his greatness: Despite the enormous difference between Shaul's attitude toward David and Yehonatan's attitude toward him, David in the end honors them equally in the heart of the lamentation, recognizing their greatness and expressing it with intensity, noting their tragic fate.

As we noted in the past,¹⁵[15] the book of Shmuel is decorated with three songs: Chana's song at the beginning (I *Shmuel* 2:1-6), David's lamentation over the deaths of Shaul and Yehonatan in the middle (II *Shmuel* 1:17-26), and the psalm recited by David "in the day that the Lord delivered him out of the hand of his enemies, and out of the hand of Shaul" at the end (II *Shmuel* 22). In Chana's prayer the hope is expressed that God "shall give strength to His **king** and exalt the horn of His **anointed**" (I *Shmuel* 2:10); David in his lamentation grieves over the fact that "there the shield of the mighty was vilely cast away, the shield of Shaul, not anointed with oil;" whereas his song closes the book with thanksgiving to God – "He is the tower of salvation for His **king**; and shows mercy to His **anointed**" (22:51). The lamentation over Shaul and Yehonatan expresses the sad and difficult stage in the kingdom of Israel; this is a lamentation over the failure of the first attempt to set up a king over Israel. But the setting of Shaul's sun is accompanied by the rising of David's sun, as we shall immediately see in the next chapter.

(Translated by David Strauss)

¹⁵ [15] In the lecture on Chana's prayer, I *Shmuel* 2 (lecture no. 3).