

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

LECTURE 60: CHAPTER 2 (1)

THE FIRST SPLIT OF THE KINGDOM

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I. David Goes up to Hebron

Immediately following his lamentation over Shaul and Yehonatan, David inquires of God:

(1) And it came to pass after this, that David inquired of the Lord, saying, "**Shall I go up** into any of the cities of Yehuda?" And the Lord said unto him, "**Go up.**" And David said, "Whither shall I **go up**?" And He said, "Unto Hebron." (2) So David **went up** thither, and his two wives also, Achinoam the Yizre'elites and Avigayil the wife of Naval the Karmelite. (3) And his men that were with him did David **bring up**, every man with his household; and they dwelt in the cities of Hebron. (4) And the men of Yehuda came, and they there anointed David king over the house of Yehuda...

The root *ayin-lamed-heh* appears five times in these verses. And indeed, following an extended period of decline, which reached its low point with the death of Shaul and his sons and Israel's rout before the Philistines, a turn for the better now begins with David's ascendancy to the kingdom.

Why does God tell David to go up specifically to Hebron? This choice reflects twofold logic. First of all, Hebron has well-known religious significance

– it is the site of the eternal rest of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs – and thus ruling over it is of great importance.¹[1] Second, David can feel safe in Hebron – in the company of members of his own tribe, with whom he had been connected during the period of his wanderings when he was running away from Shaul, as is mentioned at the end of I *Shemuel*: "And when David came to Tziklag, he sent of the spoil unto the elders of Yehuda, even to his friends, saying, 'Behold a present for you of the spoil of the enemies of the Lord,' to them that were in Bet-El... and to them that were in Hebron, and to all the places where David himself and his men were wont to haunt" (I *Shemuel* 30:26-31).

II. The Men of Yavesh-Gil'ad

At this stage, Scripture ignores what is happening in the camp of Israel; it will deal with this only later in the chapter. In the meantime, an account is given of David's first act following his ascendancy to the kingdom in Yehuda:

(4) ...And they told David, saying, "The men of Yavesh-Gil'ad were those who buried Shaul. (5) And David sent messengers unto the men of Yavesh-Gil'ad and said unto them, "Blessed be you of the Lord,²[2] that you have shown this kindness unto your lord, even unto Shaul, and have buried him. (6) And now the Lord show kindness and truth unto you; and I also will requite you this kindness, because you have done this thing. (7) Now therefore let your hands be strong, and be you valiant; for Shaul your lord is dead, and also the house of Yehuda have anointed me king over them.

1 [1] The importance of the capital city having religious significance may be learned from the story of the calves erected by Yerov'am ben Nevat following his rebellion against Rechav'am ben Shelomo and the division of the kingdom, based on the political concern that Rechav'am would exploit his control over Jerusalem to restore the other tribes of Israel to his kingdom: "If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then will the heart of this people turn back unto their lord, even unto Rechav'am king of Yehuda; and they will kill me, and return to Rechav'am king of Yehuda" (I *Melakhim* 12:27).

2 [2] It is difficult to ignore the ironic element connected to this expression. David blesses the people of Yavesh-Gil'ad for the kindness that they performed for Shaul with the very same words with which Shaul blessed the Zifites when they helped him in his pursuit of David himself: "And Shaul said, 'Blessed be you of the Lord; for you have had compassion on me'" (I *Shmuel* 23:21).

What is the significance and importance of this story? Why does it interrupt the account describing the split of the kingdom between Israel and Yehuda? It seems that answers to this question may be offered in two opposite directions, although they do not necessarily contradict each other.

Let us first mention what we saw at length in the book of I *Shemuel* regarding the men of Yavesh-Gil'ad. David relates directly to the courageous action of the men of that town, who put an end to the humiliation of the corpses of Shaul and his sons on the part of the Philistines: "And when the inhabitants of Yavesh-Gil'ad heard concerning him that which the Philistines had done to Shaul, all the valiant men arose, and went all night, and took the body of Shaul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Bet-Shan; and they came to Yavesh, and burnt them there. And they took their bones, and buried them under the tamarisk-tree in Yavesh, and fasted seven days" (I *Shemuel* 31:11-13). As we noted there, this act was, of course, not by chance; the men of Yavesh-Gil'ad thereby repaid Shaul with kindness for his having delivered them from the hand of Nachash the Amonite, who had conquered them and agreed to enter into a "covenant" with them in return for the gouging out of the right eyes of all the town's inhabitants (I *Shemuel* 11).^{3[3]} It may be suggested that the men of Yavesh-Gil'ad were the "hard core" of Shaul's supporters.

It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that David's turning to them was also not by chance. David praises them for the kindness that they performed for Shaul, and even promises them reward for their actions, but he concludes his words with a clear allusion: "Now therefore let your hands be strong, and be you valiant; for Shaul your lord is dead, and also the house of Yehuda have anointed me king over them." It is as if David were saying to the men of Yavesh-Gil'ad as follows: I bless you that you should be strong and overcome the death of your king Shaul; and if we are already talking about the king – know that the men of Yehuda have anointed me as king over them.

Expression is thereby given to a tendency of David which will grow stronger in the coming chapters. David wishes to establish a united kingdom through peaceful means and to rule over Yehuda and Israel with the consent of both parties. We will see later that David eventually succeeds in realizing

3 [3] See our lecture on I *Shmuel* 11 (lecture no. 19), where we noted the early roots of the connections between the people of Binyamin and the people of Yavesh-Gil'ad, which found expression in the story of Israel's war against Binyamin in the book of *Shoftim*.

this dream, but the delay in its realization, which did not help David, led in the meantime to a great deal of bloodshed.

III. The value of acts of kindness

It is, however, possible that there is another dimension to David's turning to the people of Yavesh-Gil'ad, in addition to the political connection. David notes the kindness that the men of Yavesh-Gil'ad did for Shaul, and blesses them: "And now the Lord show kindness and truth unto you." A similar expression is found in another place in Scripture, and there too praise is heaped on people who performed a kindness to the dead – in the words of Naomi to her daughter-in-laws Ruth and Orpa: "**The Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me**" (*Ruth* 1:8).

It stands to reason that this similarity is also not by chance. There is a consistent connection between the book of *Ruth* and David's behavior. As is well-known, the value of kindness is a central theme in the book of *Ruth*: the word "*chesed*" (kindness) appears in the book several times (*Ruth* 1:8; 2:20; 3:10), and *Chazal* have already said: "This book has [no discussion of] purity or impurity, of that which is forbidden or that which is permitted. Why then was it written? To teach how much good reward [comes] to those who perform acts of kindness" (*Ruth Rabba* 2:14). This book, however, plays another role: it constitutes a transition from "the days when the judges ruled" at its beginning to "and Yishai begot David" at its end. What this means is that the idea of kindness lies at the foundation of the establishment of the kingdom of the house of David, a descendant of Ruth, the performer of kindness.

Indeed, the idea of kindness repeats itself in striking fashion in the kingdom of David (and only in the kingdom of David). We mentioned David's high regard for the kindness performed by the men of Yavesh-Gil'ad, and we also find later that the performance of kindness is a fundamental element of his kingdom. Later in the book, David wishes to perform an act of kindness for the descendants of his friend Yehonatan: "And David said, 'Is there yet any that is left of the house of Shaul, **that I may show him kindness** for Yehonatan's sake?'" (9:1); David brings the lame Mefiboshet, Yehonatan's son, into his house, and attends to his well-being.⁴[4] The following chapter begins in similar fashion: "And it came to pass after this, that the king of the children of Ammon died, and Chanun his son reigned in his stead. And David said, '**I will**

4 [4] It is interesting that the word "*chesed*" appears three times in this chapter (see vv. 3, 7), the same number as it appears in the book of *Ruth*.

show kindness unto Chanun the son of Nachash, as his father showed kindness unto me.¹ So David sent by the hand of his servants to comfort him concerning his father. And David's servants came into the land of the children of Ammon" (10:1-2).⁵[5] And finally, in his testament to his son Shelomo, David asks him to repay another kindness: "But **show kindness** unto the sons of Barzilai the Giladite, and let them be of those that eat at your table; for so they drew nigh unto me when I fled from Avshalom your brother" (I *Melakhim* 2:7).⁶[6] Thus, it may be suggested that David's turning to the people of Yavesh-Gil'ad immediately at the beginning of his kingdom reflects not only political aspirations, but also a scale of values: David wishes to present the value of kindness as a significant factor in his kingdom.

Iv. Avner

David's good intentions to unify his kingdom through peaceful means did not succeed in practice. Scripture makes no mention whatsoever of the response of the people of Yavesh-Gil'ad to David's implied offer. Instead, it describes the real reason owing to which the kingdom was not unified:

(8) Now Avner the son of Ner, captain of Shaul's host, had taken Ish-Boshet⁷[7] the son of Shaul, and brought him over to Machanayim; (9)

5 [5] We will deal with the question of why David found it right to act with kindness toward the son of Nachash the Ammonite, who was an exceedingly negative character, when we reach that story.

6 [6] It is interesting that in each of the four examples that we brought, David repays with kindness someone who had previously acted with kindness towards him: Yehonatan, Nachash, and Barzilai the Gil'adite. He similarly appreciates the kindness that the men of Yavesh-Gil'ad performed for Shaul, who had delivered them from the hand of Ammon. Indeed, in the book of Ruth as well, many of the acts of kindness come as reward for previous acts of kindness, e.g., Ruth's acts of kindness towards Boaz and vice versa. In no way does this lessen the value of these acts of kindness. On the contrary, when a person remembers previous acts of kindness performed for him, there is an element that is not present in ordinary acts of kindness: one who repays another person for the kindness extended to him does not radiate a sense of undeserved kindness, but rather conducts himself as one who is morally obligated toward the recipient of his kindness.

7 [7] This name is not mentioned in the book of I *Shmuel* among the sons of Shaul. In I *Shmuel* 14:49, mention is only made of Yonatan, Yishvi, and Malkishua, and in 31:2, mention is made of another son, Avinadav, who fell together with Yehonatan and Malkishua in Shaul's last battle against the

and he made him king over Gil'ad, and over the Ashurites,^{8[8]} and over Yizre'el, and over Efrayim, and over Binyamin, and over all Israel.^{9[9]}

Philistines. It seems that it is Ish-Boshet who is mentioned in the book of *Divrei Ha-Yamim* by a similar name: "And Shaul begot Yehonatan, and Malkishua, and Avinadav, and **Eshba'al**" (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 8:33). The word "*Ba'al*" was originally understood as parallel to the word "*Adon*," and it implied the God of Israel, so that the name Eshba'al means "man of God." However, after the word "*Ba'al*" assumed the negative connotation as the specific name of a false god, an interesting change took place in the book of *Shmuel*. The redactor of the book replaced it, wherever it appears, with the derogatory term, "*Boshet*" (shame). Thus the name Eshba'al was turned into Ish-Boshet, Yeruba'al became Yeruboshet (see II *Shmuel* 11:21), and Meriv-Ba'al (see I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 8:34) became Mefiboshet (II *Shmuel* 4:4, and elsewhere). It is reasonable to assume that the name Eshba'al/Ish-Boshet is merely a variation of the name Yishvi, who was mentioned above among the sons of Shaul, and which also means "man of God" (like the name Yishai, who is also called Ishai [I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 2:13]). It seems, then, that Shaul had four sons, three of whom – Yehonatan, Avinadav, and Malkishua – died together with him in battle, and the fourth, who did not go out to war, was Yishvi/Eshba'al/Ish-Boshet.

8 [8] The kingdom of Ashur was, of course, not under the rule of the house of Shaul. Thus, it seems that the reference is to the tribal territory of Asher (and so translates the Targum Yonatan). Thus, the description goes from the east (Gil'ad) to the north (Asher), and from there it turns south to Yizre'el, Efrayim, and Binyamin.

9 [9] It would seem from this account that the setting of Ish-Boshet as king over all of Israel was a gradual process. This explains the apparent contradiction between two verses: Verse 10 states – "Ish-Boshet, Shaul's son, was forty years old when he began to reign over Israel, and he reigned for **two years**," whereas verse 11 states – "And the time that David was king over Hebron over the house of Yehuda was **seven years and six months**." Our chapter describes what happened after the death of Shaul, and David's rule in Hebron ended after the death of Ish-Boshet. How, then, was there a gap between the two years of Ish-Boshet's reign and the seven and a half years during which David ruled in Hebron? The *gemara* in *Sanhedrin* 20a discusses this issue; see Rashi, ad loc., s.v. *she-shaha malkhut*, and Tosafot, s.v. *shetei shanim u-mechtza*. Most reasonable, however, is the position of the *Metzudot*, that the crowning of Ish-Boshet as king over Israel was a drawn out process, which extended about five and a half years; only then did Ish-Boshet rule two years over all of Israel (see also Ralbag). Alternatively, it may be suggested that verse 10 was purposely written in defective manner; in this way Scripture expresses its negative assessment of Ish-Boshet's reign (see lecture 22 on I *Shmuel*, where we related at length to this possibility in our discussion of the difficult verse in I *Shmuel* 13:1: "Shaul was one year old when he began to reign; and two years he reigned over Israel," where this phenomenon is even more striking).

This account displays a certain irony. It was not Ish-Boshet who appointed himself king over Israel, but rather Avner the son of Ner, whose actions concerning Ish-Boshet are described through three verbs: "had taken... and brought him over... and he made him king." Ish-Boshet is painted here as an exceedingly weak figure – as it seems also from the coming chapters – and this also helps us understand why he never went out to battle against the Philistines together with his father and brothers. It is possible that he was Shaul's youngest son, and it is possible that he was weak and far from being an exemplary soldier. In any event, Ish-Boshet is clearly not fit to rule as king over Israel.

This casts heavy guilt upon Avner. Avner was responsible for the delay in the process that eventually, after seven years, was completed – the unification of Yehuda and Israel – and for the great amount of bloodshed that this delay caused, as we shall see in the coming chapters. Of course, Avner could not have appointed himself king, for he was not a son of Shaul. Being the strongest figure in Shaul's camp, Avner preferred to officially appoint Ish-Boshet as king, and thus turn himself into the true ruler and strong man in the house of Shaul. In the end, Avner paid for this step already in his lifetime.

In any event, it was at this point that the negative phenomenon of a kingdom divided between Israel and Yehuda reared its head for the first time. This situation placed David before a test: will he be able to unite these two kingdoms through peaceful means when other people are adopting negative behaviors that do not fit in with his chosen path?

(Translated by David Strauss)
