

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

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LECTURE 64: CHAPTER 3 (3)

YOAV KILLS AVNER

I. SCRIPTURE'S POSITION REGARDING YOAV'S DEED

The previous lecture ended at a point where it appeared as if the unification of the entire people under the rule of David was about to be realized. And it was precisely at that point that the process was cut off by someone who had not taken part in the most recent events – Yoav ben Tzeruya:

(22) And, behold, the servants of David and Yoav came from a foray, and brought in a great spoil with them; but Avner was not with David in Hebron; for he had sent him away, and he was gone in peace. (23) When Yoav and all the host that was with him were come, they told Yoav, saying, "Avner the son of Ner came to the king, and he has sent him away, and he is gone in peace." (24) Then Yoav came to the king, and said, "What have you done? Behold, Avner came unto you; why is it that you have sent him away, and he is quite gone? (25) You know Avner the son of Ner, that he came to deceive you, and to know your going out and your coming in,¹[1] and to know all that you do." (26)

1 [1] The way the word is written, "*mevo'ekha*," seems more logical than the way it is read, "*mova'ekha*," for the word "*mevo*" is familiar to us (as in the expressions "*mevo ha-shemesh*" [*Devarim* 11:30], "*mevo ha-susim*" [*Melakhim* 11:16], and others), whereas the word "*mova*" has no meaning in Hebrew. It seems that the way the word is read reflects the influence of the word "*motza*."

We already noted this phenomenon (in our lecture on I *Shmuel*, lecture no. 3, note 5) regarding the verse in Chana's prayer: "The bows of the mighty men are broken ("*keshet giborim chitim*"), and they that stumbled are girded with strength" (I *Shmuel* 2:4). We may have expected the reading "*chita*," i.e., "broken," but the verb used is "*chitim*" in the plural, under the influence of the word "*giborim*." We find a similar phenomenon in *Iyov* 29:10: "The voice of the

And when Yoav was come out from David, he sent messengers after Avner, and they brought him back from Bor-ha-Sira;^{2[2]} but David knew it not. (27) And when Avner was returned to Hebron, Yoav took him aside into the midst of the gate to speak with him quietly,^{3[3]} and smote him there in the groin, that he died, for the blood of Asa'el his brother.

Yoav argues before David that the latter fell into a trap laid for him by Avner, and that Avner's entire intention was to spy on David and uncover his secret plans. Yoav then goes out after Avner without David's knowledge, sends men after him to bring him back to Hebron, and kills him at the city gate.

The main question in this story relates to Scripture's attitude toward Yoav's action. Was Yoav really afraid of Avner? Was there any justification whatsoever for killing him? In the continuation, Scripture offers an unequivocal answer to this question:

nobles was hushed" (the plural "*nechba'u*" instead of the singular "*nechba*," under the influence of the plural "*negidim*"). Influence in the opposite direction, from plural to singular, may be found in the verse: "The eyes of the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down" (*Yeshayahu* 2:11), where the plural "*shafu*" became the singular "*shafel*" under the influence of the singular "*adam*."

2 [2] "Bor-ha-Sira" is not mentioned anywhere else in Scripture. It is clear from the context that it is located north of Hebron, and various identifications have been proposed with places in the general area bearing a similar Arabic name, e.g., Ein Sara, or Sirat al-Bala (see *Encyclopedia Mikra'it*, s.v. *bor ha-sira*, vol. 2, p. 43); and see Radak, ad loc.

3 [3] The word "*ba-shel*" is exceedingly obscure, but from the context it would appear that the intention is that Yoav misled Avner, causing him to believe that he wanted peace. Some have explained the word in the sense of "Do not deceive ('*tashleh*') me" (II *Melakhim* 4:28). The Radak argues that the word is derived from "*shalva*" (serenity); that is to say, Yoav took Avner aside at the gate in an atmosphere of serenity and security. As in, "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem; they who love you shall prosper (*yishlayu*)" (*Tehillim* 122:6; and see also *Iyov* 12:6).

(30) So Yoav and Avishai⁴ his brother slew Avner, because he had killed their brother Asa'el at Giv'on in the battle.

This verse emphasizes two points to Yoav's discredit:

- 1) First of all, it becomes clear that Yoav's argument was false even in his own eyes. Yoav was not really concerned that Avner wanted to spy after David, and he did not kill him out of concern for David's future rule. Yoav killed Avner in order to settle a personal score: to revenge the blood of Asa'el his brother. It is for this reason that he killed Avner in a most symbolic manner: "And he smote him there **in the groin**" – a clear act of revenge for the killing of Asa'el "with the hinder end of the spear he smote him **in the groin**" (2:23).
- 2) It would still be possible to vindicate Yoav, were we to decide that the strike against Avner was justified – even if the reason that he gave David was not the real reason. Accordingly, Scripture emphasizes that Avner killed Asa'el "in the battle:" there is no justification for avenging blood spilled in battle,⁵ and all the more so in a case like that before us – for we already saw in chapter 2 (lecture no. 5) the extent to which Avner tried not to kill Asa'el.

⁴ [4] The mention here of Avishai is surprising, for he was not mentioned earlier. Something similar is found in the account of Yoav's second murder, that of Amasa ben Yeter. There too, Scripture describes at length how Yoav deceived Amasa, to the point that "Amasa took no heed to the sword that was in Yoav's hand; so he smote him therewith in the groin, and shed out his bowels to the ground, and struck him not again; and he died." And there too, it later says (in the same verse): "And Yoav and Avishai his brother pursued after Sheva the son of Bichri." It stands to reason that in both cases Yoav was the dominant figure, but he had the help of his brother Avishai. Of course, in our chapter Avishai's involvement was more significant – Scripture testifies that he participated in the murder itself! This is understandable, for avenging the death of Asa'el was Avishai's concern no less than that of Yoav.

⁵ [5] It seems that this is the way to understand the words of David in his testament to Shelomo: "Moreover you know also what Yoav the son of Tzeruya did to me, and what he did to the two captains of the hosts of Israel, to Avner the son of Ner and to Amasa the son of Yeter, whom he slew, **and shed the blood of war in peace**" (1 *Melakhim* 2:5). That is to say, Yoav related to blood shed in war as if it were shed in a time of peace.

These explicit statements of Scripture also find literary expression. Scripture emphasizes in an interesting way that Avner was indeed interested in peace. Three consecutive verses end with the words "and he was gone in peace" (vv. 21-23). This joins with the general impression that we received thus far regarding Avner's actions. Avner did indeed bring about the split of the kingdom, and he is therefore the primary guilty party with respect to the blood that was shed in its wake, as we saw in previous lectures. Towards the end, however, he was beginning to improve his ways – even if he did so as a result of political pressure, and not for genuine motives. At this point in his life, he sought peace, and it was precisely Yoav who continued to relate to the situation as one of war. Yoav's description of Avner as "and he was quite gone" ("*va-yelekh halokh*") (v. 24) stands out against the thrice repeated "and he was gone in peace" in the earlier verses.

Yoav's decision to kill Avner was doubly problematic: Not only was there no real justification for this murder, but it also hurt David's plan to unify the kingdom through peaceful means. Avner was murdered while he was on his way to gather all of Israel to David in order to make a covenant with him, a course that would have realized David's aspirations. Owing to a personal interest that in itself had no justification,^{6[6]} Yoav hurt this process and delayed it,^{7[7]} and as we shall see, also put David in a very unpleasant situation. Accordingly, Scripture judges Yoav with stringency for this move, which eventually will lead to his death (see I *Melakhim* 2).^{8[8]}

6 [6] Yoav may have had another motivation: concern about competition with another army commander, which might diminish his own status. This motivation is not stated explicitly in the verses, but it may be alluded to in the verse that opens this part of the story: "And, behold, the servants of David and Yoav came from a foray, and brought in a great spoil with them" (v. 22). Why was it necessary for Scripture to mention that Yoav came from a foray with a great deal of spoil? Perhaps Scripture wishes to allude that it angered Yoav that while he was enjoying military successes, someone else exploited his absence to strengthen his position with David. In any event, Yoav had a clear and sufficient motive to kill Avner, and if he had also another motive, it was marginal.

7 [7] Later, in the affair involving the woman from Tekoa (chapter 14), Yoav himself will express the idea that revenge should not always be exacted from a murderer, and that consideration must be given to the general circumstances. When, however, it touched upon him himself, Yoav acted out of absolutely personal considerations.

8 [8] There is one verse which seems to imply that Avner's murder was justified: "And he smote him there in the groin, that he died, for the blood of Asa'el his brother" (v. 27); Scripture hangs Avner's death on Asa'el's brother. This, however, is an optical illusion: The words "for the blood of Asa'el his brother" do not relate to Avner, about whom it says, "that he died," but rather

II. DAVID'S REACTION

As stated above, the severity of Yoav's act stems from the fact that he acted out of personal interest, causing great harm to David. In the nation's eyes, of course, Avner's murder was very serious, and what made matters worse, it was perceived at first as having been carried out on David's initiative. The people were inclined to suspect David of having deceived Avner in the cruelest fashion: first, David received him in peace, and then following Avner's departure, he exploited his naiveté and sent Yoav to kill him. It was difficult to imagine that Yoav would do such a thing without, at the very least, David's tacit agreement. For this reason, David had to work exceedingly hard to prove to the people that it was not his hands that shed this blood, and that he had no part in what happened. This effort was of critical importance, for it was David's aspiration during this entire period to reach unity through peaceful means, and Yoav's act threatened to create the completely opposite impression and stir up the people's anger against David.^{9[9]}

David adopts four main measures:

1. Cursing Yoav:

(28) And afterward, when David heard it, he said, "I and my kingdom are guiltless before the Lord forever from the blood of Avner the son of Ner. (29) Let it fall upon the head of Yoav, and upon all his father's house; and let there not fail from the house of Yoav one that has an issue, or that is a leper, or that leans on a staff, or that falls by the sword, or that lacks bread."

to Asa'el's "brother," Yoav. These words refer then to "and he smote him there," and do not come to explain why Avner died, but rather why Yoav killed him.

9 [9] It is perhaps for this reason that the words "all the people" are repeated seven times in this part of the story (vv. 31-37), for in the end, it is the people who constitute the backdrop of the entire story.

David emphasizes that he is in no way connected to Avner's murder, and that the responsibility for Avner's blood falls squarely on the shoulders of Yoav and his family.

2. Ordering mourning of unprecedented scope

(31) And David said to Yoav and to all the people that were with him, "Rend your clothes, and gird you with sackcloth, and wail before Avner." And king David followed the bier.¹⁰[10] (32) And they buried Avner in Hebron; and the king lifted up his voice, and wept at the grave of Avner; and all the people wept.

Chazal noted that this act might go well beyond the ordinary laws governing a king:

If a death occurs in his [the king's family], he must not go out of the door of his palace. R. Yehuda said: If he wishes to follow the bier, he may, even as we find in the case of David, who followed the bier of Avner, as it is written: "And king David followed the bier." But they [the Sages] said: [This is no proof, for] that was **but to pacify the people**" (*Sanhedrin* 2:3).

3. Lamentation

(33) And the king lamented for Avner and said, "Should Avner die as a churl dies? (34) Your hands were not bound, nor were your feet put into fetters;¹¹[11] as a man falls before the children of iniquity, so did you fall..."

¹⁰ [10] Heavy mourning was also observed when Shaul died: "Then David took hold on his clothes, and rent them; and likewise all the men that were with him. And they wailed, and wept, and fasted until even..." (1:11-12) – but without the wearing of sackcloth.

¹¹ [11] The commentators disagree about how to understand this verse. According to Rashi and the Radak, the verse expresses astonishment over Avner: "Why did you not also strike him? Your hands were not bound, nor

This lamentation is clearly different from David's lamentation in chapter 1 over Shaul and Yehonatan. There, David wept over the unique attributes of Shaul and Yehonatan and over Yehonatan's love for him. His lamentation over Avner, in contrast, relates not at all to the personality of Avner, who until recently had been David's enemy, but only to the despicable manner in which he was killed. This difference seems to be reflected also in the headings of the respective lamentations: Whereas the lamentation over Shaul and Yehonatan opens with the words, "And **David** lamented with this lamentation over Shaul and over Yehonatan his son" (1:17), the heading of the lamentation over Avner reads, "And **the king** lamented for Avner." In other words, this is not a personal lamentation, but rather a state lamentation. Nevertheless, it is a lamentation, and it is part of the mourning practices adopted by David to demonstrate his sorrow over what had happened.

4. Fasting

(35) And all the people came to cause David to eat bread¹²[12] while it was yet day; but David swore, saying, "God do so to me, and more also, if I taste bread, or aught else, till the sun be down."

Indeed, Scripture emphasizes that the steps taken by David convinced the people of his innocence:

(36) And all the people took notice of it, and it pleased them; whatsoever the king did, pleased all the people. (37) So all the people and all Israel understood that day that it was not of the king to slay Avner the son of Ner.

were your feet put into fetters! Why did you not run away from them?" The *Metzudot*, however, understands the astonishment as referring to the circumstances: How is it possible that they killed Avner with the sword, as they would do to captives?

12 [12] The practice of serving mourners a meal, which is still observed today, is also mentioned below in chapter 12:17 (although in our story David is not really a mourner, for he was not related to Avner).

The implication is that had it not been for these steps taken by David, the people would have been left with the feeling that Avner had been put to death on David's orders.

Chazal expressed this idea in an interesting manner:

The text is written: "*le-hakhrot*," but we read, "*le-havrot*." At first, they intended to destroy him; but afterwards, [being appeased,] they gave him to eat [the comforters' meal]. (*Sanhedrin* 20a)

This *midrash* is interesting because the Scriptural text before us does not match what is noted in the *derasha*.¹³[13] In any event, the *derasha* faithfully expresses what happened in the chapter: at first the people came to David with hostile intentions, but in the end they came to give him to eat, after having been convinced of his honesty.

In the next lecture, we will complete our analysis of this dramatic chapter and its ramifications.

(Translated by David Strauss)

13 [13] The *Mesoret Ha-Shas* (ad loc.) notes another *midrash*, which also does not correspond to the Masoretic text. In *Sanhedrin* 103a, it is expounded about King Menasheh: "What is meant by: 'And He heard him, and an opening was made for him ('*va-yechater*')' (II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 33). Should not 'and He received his entreaty' ('*va-ye'ater*') rather have been written? This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, made him a kind of opening in the Heavens, in order to accept him with his repentance, on account of the Attribute of Justice." But the Scriptural text before us reads: "And he prayed to him, and He received his entreaty (*va-ye'ater*), and heard his supplication" (II *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 33:13). A long list of *midrashim* based on a Scriptural text that is different from the Masoretic text (including the *midrash* on our chapter) was compiled by R. Akiva Eiger in his *Gilyon Ha-Shas*, *Shabbat* 55b.