

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

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LECTURE 65: CHAPTER 3 (4)

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DAVID AND YOAV

I. DAVID'S RESPONSIBILITY

In the previous lecture, we noted the enormous damage that Yoav ben Tzeruya's murder of Avner might have caused David, and the way that David succeeded in convincing the people that he had no part in what happened. But the question may still be raised: Generally speaking, Biblical characters do not encounter hardship without some spiritual reason. Why then was David punished in our story?

It seems that the answer to our question is found in David's response to Yoav. Yoav argued before David that Avner was a spy, and that he was not seeking peace:

(25) “You know Avner the son of Ner, that he came to deceive you, and to know your going out and your coming in, and to know all that you do.”

What was David's response to Yoav's accusations? All that Scripture says in the next verse is:

(26) And when Yoav was come out from David, he sent messengers after Avner, and they brought him back from Bor-Sira; but David knew it not.

Scripture stresses the fact that David did not know what Yoav was doing. But at the same time it emphasizes what is not stated here: the verse implies that

David did not respond to Yoav's charges. One might have expected David to dispute Yoav's arguments, so as not to leave him any room to understand that he is free to act in accordance with his appraisal of the situation. As we saw at length in the previous lecture, David clearly had no interest in any harm coming to Avner. At the same time, however, David apparently did not want to confront Yoav head on, and therefore he preferred to remain silent. This silence seems to cast upon David a certain degree of responsibility for what happened, and this explains the hardship that he suffered.¹[1]

This apparently is also the way to understand what the *gemara* had to say regarding this matter:

R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav: All the curses wherewith David cursed Yoav were fulfilled in David's own descendants. [It is written:] "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" (v. 29) – "He that has an issue" [was fulfilled] in Rechov'am... "A leper" – Uziyahu... "He that leans on a staff" — Asa... "He that falls by the sword" — Yoshiyahu... "That lacks bread" — Yekhonya... R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav: Thus people say: Let yourself be cursed rather than curse [another].²[2] (*Sanhedrin* 48b-49a)

This is a radical statement: David's curses are perceived as having been baseless, and therefore they fell upon his own descendants! But, according to what was suggested above, it is perfectly reasonable: David too was partly responsible for Avner's murder, and when the curses fell upon his

1 [1] A similar case, though of course much more serious, is the story of Navot's vineyard (I *Melakhim* 21). There too, the king was not involved at any stage in the events leading up to Navot's murder. As soon as Izevel understood why Achav was upset, she said to him, "Arise, and eat bread, and let your heart be merry; I will give you the vineyard of Navot the Yizre'elite" (ibid. v. 7). Even though he could have imagined what Izevel had in mind, Achav says nothing. He leaves the picture entirely, until Izevel returns and says, "Arise, take possession of the vineyard of Navot the Yizre'elite, which he refused to give you for money; for Navot is not alive, but dead" (ibid. v. 15). Once again, when the results of his wife's actions become known, Achav doesn't raise any questions, but rather goes immediately to take possession of the vineyard. Accordingly, Eliyahu meets him along the way and levels at him the following charge: "Have you killed, and also taken possession?" (ibid. v. 19). The message of the two stories (despite the clear differences between the two kings and the two cases) is the responsibility and the vigilance that every person – and especially the king – must maintain in his life, even if he is not directly involved in a particular deed.

2 [2] Rashi, ad loc.: "It is better that you be among those who are cursed and not among those who curse, for a **baseless curse** will eventually return to the one who pronounced the curse."

own descendants, David in effect received the punishment that he himself had decreed.^{3[3]}

II. "AND THESE MEN THE SONS OF TZERUYA ARE TOO HARD FOR ME"

The end of the story does not make any allowances for David either. David is aware of the fact that after having convinced the people that he was not connected to Avner's murder, and that the murder only caused him harm, it might have been expected that he would punish Yoav for his action. But at this point David is incapable of striking at Yoav, and therefore he deems it necessary to clarify the matter, at least within his innermost circle:

(38) And the king said unto his servants,^{4[4]} "Know you not that there is a prince and a great man fallen this day in Israel? (39) And I am this day weak, and just anointed king; and these men the sons of Tzeruya are too hard for me; the Lord reward the evildoer according to his wickedness."

David explains to his servants that he is still at the beginning of his reign, and that he must solidify his power, and therefore he cannot touch the

3 [3] Rav's statement can also be understood in an entirely different manner, and connected to the exposition recorded in the previous passage: "And Benayahu brought back word unto the king saying, Thus said Yoav and thus he answered me' (I *Melakhim* 2:30). He [Yoav] had said to him, Go and tell him [the king]: You can not inflict a twofold punishment upon me: if you slay me, you must submit to the curses which your father uttered against me; but if you are unwilling [to submit thereto], you must let me live and suffer from your father's curses against me. 'And the King said unto him, 'Do as he has said, and fall upon him and bury him' (ibid. v. 31)." According to this, Yoav argued before Benayahu ben Yehoyada, whom Shlomo sent to kill him, that is it not right or just that he should receive two punishments – both death and David's curses – and he presented Shlomo with a choice: He should either spare Yoav, or he should accept upon himself David's curses. Shlomo responded by telling Benayahu to kill Yoav, and in light of this, Rashi explains (ibid. 48b, s.v. *kulan nitkaimu*), that David's curses were fulfilled in his descendants, "because Shlomo had accepted them upon himself."

This explanation, however, does not fit in with the *gemara's* conclusion: "Thus people say, Let yourself be cursed rather than curse [another]" (and see the words of Rashi in the previous note). If the curses fell upon the house of David only because Shlomo accepted them upon himself, how is it possible to infer from here that in general it is better to be among those who are cursed than among those who utter the curses? It seems, therefore, that we are dealing here with two different *derashot*, and that Rav's words stand on their own, and are not connected to the idea that Shlomo accepted the curses upon himself.

4 [4] It is not clear whether the sons of Tzeruya were present when these words were stated or whether they were said in their absence.

sons of Tzeruya.⁵[5] Though he seems to be saying that practically speaking he cannot do anything to them, David appears also to be aware of the fact that without their help, he cannot establish his kingdom on firm foundations.⁶[6]

David's issue with the sons of Tzeruya seems to be very broad, and not limited to Avner's murder. Indeed, already in I *Shmuel* (chap. 26), we noted Avishai's hot temperament, and how he wanted to kill Shaul when he went down with David into his camp. In the future, additional conflicts will erupt between David and Yoav and Avishai. In one of them, Avishai seeks permission to strike Shimi ben Gera, who had cast stones upon David, and David says to him: "What have I to do with you, **you sons of Tzeruya?**" (16:10). Similarly, when Avshalom's rebellion came to an end and Shimi ben Gera came to apologize, Avishai advised David to do away with him, and once again David responded: "What have I to do with you, **you sons of Tzeruya**, that you should this day be adversaries unto me?" (19:23).

We should not, however, overlook the positive sides of the two sons of Tzeruya, traits that well explain why David could not have established his kingdom without them. In one of David's fiercest battles, when the fighting was taking place on two fronts, at the fore and in the rear, against Amon and against Aram, it was the sons of Tzeruya who saved the people from utter defeat, with an impressive demonstration of great faith, on the one hand, and courage and bravery, on the other:

Now when Yoav saw that the battle was set against him before and behind, he chose of all the choice men of Israel and put them in array against the Arameans; and the rest of the people he committed into the hand of Avishai his brother, and he put them in array against the children of Amon. And he said, "If the Arameans be too strong for me, then you shall help me, but if the children of Amon be too strong for you, then I will come and help you. Be of good courage, and let us prove strong for our people, and for the cities of our God; and the Lord do that which seems Him good." (10:9-12)

5 [5] David had addressed his curse specifically at Yoav, but now, when he explains why he must leave Yoav and Avishai in their positions, he does not mention Yoav separately, but rather he speaks of "the sons of Tzeruya."

6 [6] It is possible that David thought that there was room to show understanding for their actions, for from their perspectives they were avenging their brother's death. It is reasonable to assume that had Yoav and Avishai murdered someone for no reason at all, he would have responded in much sharper fashion.

Yoav and Avishai were both very complex characters, and Scripture conceals neither their virtues nor their faults. Knowing full well their positive sides, David could not remove them from their positions.^{7[7]} A complicated relationship developed between him and Yoav, one that we shall discuss again later in the book.

Nevertheless, Avner's murder continued to disturb David until his dying day, and he never forgot the damage that Yoav caused David when he killed Avner. In his testament to Shlomo, David says, "Moreover you know also what Yoav the son of Tzeruya did **unto me**, even what he did to the two captains of the hosts of Israel, unto Avner the son of Ner and unto Amasa the son of Yeter, whom he slew, and shed the blood of war in peace, and put the blood of war upon his girdle that was about his loins, and in his shoes that were on his feet" (I *Melakhim* 2:5). David emphasizes that Avner caused harm not only to Avner, but also to David himself – "did unto me." Accordingly, David commands Shlomo, "Do therefore according to your wisdom, and let not his hoar head go down to the grave in peace" (ibid. v. 6). Shlomo already has the power that David was lacking: to strike at Yoav and establish his kingship without him.

Shlomo instructs Benayahu ben Yehoyada to strike at Yoav, even though the latter had seized hold of the horns of the altar. He explains this command as follows:

And the king said unto him, "Do as he has said and fall upon him and bury him; that you may take away the blood that Yoav shed without cause from me and from my father's house. And the Lord will return his blood upon his own head, because he fell upon two men more righteous^{8[8]} and better than he, and slew them with the sword, and my father David knew it not: Avner the son of Ner, captain of the host of Israel, and Amasa the son of Yeter, captain of the host of Yehuda. (ibid. vv. 31-32)

7 [7] At a certain stage, however, after Yoav smote Avshalom in opposition to David's explicit orders, David could no longer work with him, and therefore he removed him from his position and appointed Amasa ben Yeter in his place (see 19:14). Shortly thereafter, however, it became clear that Amasa ben Yeter had failed in mustering an army against Sheva ben Bikhri, and once again David was in need of Yoav's help to quash the rebellion.

8 [8] In Biblical Hebrew, the term "*tzadik*" does not usually refer to one with exalted character traits, as it does in modern Hebrew, but simply the side that was vindicated in judgement. E.g.: "If there be a controversy between men, and they come unto judgment, and the judges judge them, by justifying the righteous (*ha-tzadik*), and condemning the wicked" (*Devarim* 25:1). Here too, Shlomo means to say that Avner was right, and that his murder at the hands of Yoav was unjustified.

Shlomo emphasizes two points. First, he notes that as long as Yoav lives, Avner's blood falls upon the house of David. For the Torah says, "And no expiation can be made for the land for the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it" (*Bamidbar* 35:33) – and as long as the blood of the killer is not shed, the blood of his victim cries out from the ground. It is cast upon anyone who has the authority to punish the killer, but fails to do so. Now, says Shlomo, the responsibility for the death of Avner will be removed from the house of David for once and for all.

Second, Shlomo does not forget to note, "And my father David knew it not." Decades have passed, but the trauma of Avner's death is still running after David and Shlomo. Shlomo once again emphasizes that Yoav had acted without his father's knowledge, and this is part of the severity of the act that now justifies his execution, even when he is holding onto the horns of the altar.

III. THE PRICE

Even though we can understand why the sons of Tzeruya were left untouched, this was still a complicated step, which extracted a certain price. In the end, at least three people understood that David stood behind Yoav's action, or at the very least, did not think to punish him for it.

The first two are Rechav and Ba'ana, with whom we shall deal at length in the next lecture. However, echoes of our story can also be heard in the words of Shimi ben Gera cited above:

And thus said Shimi when he cursed, "Begone, begone, you man of blood, and base fellow; the Lord has returned upon you all the blood of the house of Shaul, in whose stead you have reigned; and the Lord has delivered the kingdom into the hand of Avshalom your son; and, behold, you are taken in your own mischief, because you are a man of blood." (16:7-8)

Which blood is Shimi ben Gera referring to? Surely there is no reason to cast upon David the responsibility for the deaths of Shaul and his three

sons on Mount Gilboa! It seems then that he is referring to the story in our chapter, for Avner was a member of the house of Shaul,^{9[9]} as the *Metzudot* explains (ad loc.):

As if he said: On your advice **Avner** and Ish-Boshet were killed.^{10[10]}

Shimi was wrong in his criticism of David: David had no interest in the deaths of any member of Shaul's house, and he certainly did not directly cause them any harm. But nevertheless, David's stoning at the hands of Shimi ben Gera can be seen as a punishment for his responsibility – if only indirect – for Avner's death, and for keeping Yoav ben Tzeruya in his position as commander of Israel's army even after the murder he committed.

This story is then a sad one, involving the deaths of two of Israel's army commanders: Avner dies in our chapter – and from the perspective of Biblical justice, he is punished for his responsibility for the split in the kingdom and its ramifications; and years later, Yoav is killed in punishment for Avner's murder. Even David, who aspired to unite his kingdom through peaceful means, paid a certain price for his inability to control Yoav and prevent him from acting in accordance with his personal agenda.

(Translated by David Strauss)

^{9 [9]} Avner was the son of Ner, brother of Kish, who was the father of Shaul (based on I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 9:35-39).

^{10 [10]} This may also refer to the seven descendants of Shaul who were hung in order to appease the Givonites (see chap. 21). We will expand upon this matter when we reach chapter 16.