

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

Rav Amnon Bazak

LECTURE 70: CHAPTER 6 (I)

I.. “FOR WE SOUGHT IT NOT”

After chapter 5 described the solidification of David's kingdom, the next two chapters move on to describe David's kingdom at its prime. Our chapter opens with David's desire to transfer the ark of God to Jerusalem:

(1) And David again gathered together all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand.¹[1] (2) And David arose and went with all the people that were with him from Ba'alei-Yehuda, to bring up from there the ark of God, whereupon is called the Name, even the name of the Lord of hosts that sits upon the *keruvim*. (3) And they set the ark of God upon a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Avinadav that was in the hill; and Uzza and Achyo, the sons of Avinadav, drove the new cart. (4) And they brought it out of the house of Avinadav, which was in the hill, with the ark of God,²[2] and Achyo went before the ark. (5) And David

1 [1] This verse appears to be a continuation of the previous chapter, for it too describes the solidification of David's monarchy over Israel.

2 [2] This verse is particularly difficult: According to its plain sense, the words, "And they brought it out of the house of Avinadav, which was in the hill," refer to the ark; but then what is meant by the words that follow, "with the ark of God"? And why does the verse repeat what was stated in the previous verse?

Rashi writes: "This is an abbreviated verse: 'And they came with the ark of God.'" But this does not provide an answer to the second question. The Radak answers both questions: "Since it said that Uzza and his brother were driving, it explains how they drove it when they carried the ark from the house of Avinadav, for his brother went before the ark, and Uzza with the ark." This explanation, however, has its own measure of difficulty.

It is interesting that the twice-repeated clause, "And they brought it out of the house of Avinadav that was in the hill," appears both times after the word "new." In this way, a certain refrain is created:

and all the house of Israel played before the Lord with all manner of instruments made of cypress-wood, and with harps, and with psalteries, and with timbrels, and with sistra, and with cymbals.

Let us remember that the situation up to this point was exceptional and far from positive. Since the destruction of Shilo (I *Shmuel* 4), the ark of God had become separated from the *Mishkan*. The *Mishkan* moved to Nov, and from there to Giv'on (see our comments on the city of Giv'on in chapter 2, lecture 61), while the ark of God remained, after it had been returned by the Philistines, in Kiryat-Ye'arim,^{3[3]} as is stated in I *Shmuel* (6:21-7:1):

And they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiryat-Ye'arim, saying, "The Philistines have brought back the ark of the Lord; come you down, and fetch it up to you." And the men of Kiryat-Ye'arim came, and fetched up the ark of the Lord, and brought it into the house of

"And they set the ark of God upon a **new** cart,

and brought it out of the house of Avinadav that was in the hill;

and Uzza and Achyo, the sons of Avinadav, drove the **new** cart.

And they brought it out of the house of Avinadav that was in the hill,

with the ark of God."

If, indeed, we relate to the repeated line as a refrain, we can omit the refrain from the verses, and thus the passage can easily be understood: "And they set the ark of God upon a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Avinadav that was in the hill; and Uzza and Achyo, the sons of Avinadav, drove the new cart... with the ark of God." Indeed, this reading is similar to the reading appearing in I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 13:7: "And they set the ark of God upon a new cart, [and brought it] out of the house of Avinadav; and Uzza and Achyo drove the cart."

This phenomenon of a refrain appearing in the middle of a description is also found in II *Melakhim* 7:13 and in *Yeshaya* 17:12-13; see also *Yehoshua* 6:13 and *Yechezkel* 44:19. In our chapter, psalms and poetry have special significance, as we shall see below.

3 [3] This is "Ba'alei-Yehuda" mentioned in verse 2 – for Kiryat-Ye'arim, which is listed in the book of *Yehoshua* among the cities of Yehuda, is also called there "Ba'ala" (*Yehoshua* 15:9) or "Kiryat Ba'al" (*ibid.*, v. 60). The reason that this city was selected to serve as the resting place of the ark for such a long time was discussed in our lecture on I *Shmuel* 7 (lecture no. 11).

Avinadav in the hill, and sanctified Elazar his son to keep the ark of the Lord.

The *Mishkan* continued to be an important center; it was there that sacrifices were brought, it was there that the priests lived, and it was there that people came on pilgrimage.⁴[4] The ark, in contrast, was left in its isolation in Kiryat-Ye'arim, far away from the *Mishkan*.

David saw the problematic nature of this situation, and he decided to transfer the ark to a more central location – Jerusalem – as is related in the parallel chapter in *Divrei Ha-yamim*:

And David said unto all the assembly of Israel, "If it seem good unto you, and if it be of the Lord our God, let us send abroad everywhere unto our brethren that are left in all the land of Israel, and with them to the priests and Levites that are in their cities that have open land about them, that they may gather themselves unto us; and let us bring back the ark of our God to us; for we sought it not in the days of Shaul." (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 13:2-3)

This event was meant, of course, to be a special and festive occasion, and indeed, the great feeling of joy that accompanied the transfer of the ark is evident. To our great surprise, however, the celebration ended even before it began, owing to a tragic turn that brought it to an end:

(6) When they came to the threshing-floor of Nachon, Uzza put forth his hand to the ark of God, and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. 5

4 [4] As may be learned from the story of David in Nov, where Doeg the Edomite was present because he was "detained before the Lord" (I *Shmuel* 21:8); and as we saw in chapter 2 (lecture 61) regarding the significance of control over Giv'on.

5 [5] In *Megadim* 26, Z. Ehrlich argues that it is possible to identify the precise location of the threshing-floor of Nakhon. From our chapter, it appears that it is found on the boundary between Binyamin and Yehuda, between Kiryat-Ye'arim and Jerusalem on the east-west axis. In the story of Shaul and the Ziffites, Scripture notes a place called Nakhon along a road running on a north-south axis: "See therefore, and take knowledge of all the lurking-places where he hides himself, and come you back to me to Nakhon (*"el Nakhon"*) (I

[5] (7) And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzza; and God smote him there for his error (*al ha-shal*);⁶[6] and there he died by the ark of God. (8) And David was displeased because the Lord had broken forth upon Uzza; and that place was called Peretz-Uzza unto this day. (9) And David was afraid of the Lord that day; and he said, "How shall the ark of the Lord come unto me?" (10) So David would not remove the ark of the Lord unto him into the city of David; but David carried it aside into the house of Oved-Edom the Gittite.

It is not entirely clear from the story what exactly happened: Did the ark begin to move in the wake of the oxen's stumbling, and Uzza took hold of it so that it should not fall from the cart?⁷[7] Or perhaps it was Uzza who slipped, and he took hold of the ark of God in order to break his own fall. Either way, this event raises questions: Was Uzza's behavior really so severe that he was punishable by death? Why was the ark's transfer – a process which appears to have been a positive endeavor – delayed as a result of what happened?

II. "REJOICE WITH TREMBLING"

Shmuel 23:23; for the various explanations of these words, see lecture 45 on I *Shmuel*). The meeting point of these two axes is in the area of Katef-Hinom (where the Begin Center presently stands). Indeed, graves from the First Temple period were found there, and they may be the graves of the kings Menashe and Amon, which were in "the garden of Uzza" (II *Melakhim* 21:18, 26).

6 [6] This expression is difficult. Rashi explains: "'*Al ha-shal*' – on his unintended offense," for Uzza's offense was committed unintentionally. The parallel verse in I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 13:10 reads, however, "And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzza, and He smote him, because **he put forth (*shalach*) his hand** to the ark." The commentary attributed to Rashi states there: "'And He smote him, because he put forth his hand' – this is what is stated in *Shmuel*: 'And God smote him there *al ha-shal*,' that is, '*al ha-shalach*,' for having seized hold of the ark. This is like: 'And of Izevel also spoke the Lord, saying: The dogs shall eat Izevel in the moat (*be-chel*) of Yizra'el' (I *Melakhim* 21:23), and another verse reads: 'In the portion (*be-chelek*) of Yizra'el shall the dogs eat the flesh of Izevel' (II *Melakhim* 9:36). So too we can explain here '*al ha-shal*' – '*ha-shalach*.'"

7 [7] This is implied by the commentators, and stated explicitly in *Metzudot David*.

It seems that the Uzza affair was indeed only the last "straw," and that his action was merely a symptom of a much broader phenomenon, which finds expression already at the beginning of the story. If indeed it was the ark which began to fall, it is clear that its falling was caused by the very fact that it was being transferred by cart. This stands in total contradiction to the Torah's command that the holy vessels should not be moved in carts, but rather carried on the shoulders. This is the way the Torah explains why Moshe gave the carts donated by the tribal princes only to the children of Gershon and the children of Merari, and not to the children of Kehat: "And Moshe took the carts and the oxen, and gave them unto the Levites... But unto the sons of Kehat he gave none, because the service of the holy things belonged unto them: they bore them upon their shoulders" (*Bamidbar* 7:6-9). There were problems, then, from the very beginning of the story, and Uzza merely paid the price.

This mistake was joined by another one. It is not clearly stated in these verses who put the ark onto the cart, but it is clear that the cart was driven by Uzza and his brother, the sons of Avinadav, who were residents of Kiryat-Ye'arim in Yehuda, and it stands to reason that they were not Levites. This is stated explicitly in the book of *Divrei Ha-Yamim*, in the account of the second attempt to transfer the ark, following the Uzza affair:

And David called for Tzadok and Evyatar the priests, and for the Levites, for Uriel, Asaya, and Yo'el, Shemaya, and Eliel, and Aminadav, and said unto them, "You are the heads of the fathers' houses of the Levites; sanctify yourselves, both you and your brethren, that you may bring up the ark of the Lord, the God of Israel, unto the place that I have prepared for it. For because you [bore it] not at the first, the Lord our God made a breach upon us, for that we sought Him not according to the ordinance." So the priests and the Levites sanctified themselves to bring up the ark of the Lord, the God of Israel. (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 15:11-14)

And, indeed, the next verse summarizes the two changes that were made:

And the **children of the Levites** bore the ark of God **upon their shoulders** with the bars thereon, as Moses commanded according to the word of the Lord. (ibid. v. 15)

We see, then, that the story was problematic from the very beginning on two counts: The ark was transferred by way of a cart, and not by Levites. This phenomenon must, of course, be explained. How could David have made two such fundamental mistakes? Why were the Torah's commandments not fully observed?

The key to understanding this story seems to lie in verse 5:

And David and all the house of Israel played before the Lord with all manner of instruments made of cypress-wood, and with harps, and with psalteries, and with timbrels, and with sistra, and with cymbals.

The extensive detailing regarding the musical instruments, together with the playing before God, create a sense of great celebration – perhaps too great. In all the joy and excitement, several basic rules of reverence were forgotten. In such an atmosphere, it is no wonder that Uzza does not instinctively recoil from coming into contact with the ark, but rather he takes direct hold of it. It was Uzza who paid the price, but his sin was a direct consequence of the atmosphere that accompanied the entire process, one that incorporated a fair measure of levity and lightheadedness.

This also follows from David's words following the death of Uzza:

And David was afraid of the Lord that day; and he said, "How shall the ark of the Lord come unto me?"

It was only on "that day" that David feared the Lord; the implication is that prior to this event, there was something lacking in his fear of God.^{8[8]} In the second attempt to transport the ark, there was then not only a practical correction – carrying on the shoulders by the Levites – but first and foremost a spiritual correction - the creation of a framework of solemnity and fear of God.

^{8 [8]} Compare with above 3:36: "So all the people and all Israel understood **that day** that it was not of the king to slay Avner the son of Ner." As we saw (lecture 64), there too the expression comes to teach us that the people arrived at their understanding as a result of David's actions, and it stood in contrast to their earlier feeling.

It is for this reason that in the account of the second attempt, there is no detailed description of the musical instruments, but only:

So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting, and with the sound of the horn. (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 15:15)

The dimension of joy stands out in the second attempt as well, as is stated in the next verse: "And she saw king David leaping and dancing before the Lord." Joy is an important element in the service of God, and the Torah frequently commands about it.^{9[9]} Nevertheless, joy is appropriate only after the fear of God has set clear boundaries, and only in the framework of these boundaries, with no breach into forbidden areas. This idea would later be concisely expressed by the psalmist:

Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. (*Tehillim* 2:11)

And as *Chazal* say: "In the place where there is rejoicing there should also be trembling" (*Berakhot* 30b).

This is not the first time in Scripture that an excess of joy on a festive day leads to a breach of the boundaries of fear, and consequently to a tragedy that takes a toll of human life. It is not by chance that our chapter serves as the *haftara* for *Parashat Shemini*, which tells of the deaths of the two sons of Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, after they offered a "strange fire" (*Vayikra* 10:1) on the very day that the *Shekhina* rested on the *Mishkan*. There too, the root of the problem was an excess of joy, as *Chazal* said: "They too in their joy, when they saw the new fire, rose to add love to love" (*Torat Kohanim Shemini, parasha* 1). There might be an allusion to this in the name of the father of Uzza and his brother Achyo – Avinadav - which includes the names of Nadav and Avihu.^{10[10]}

9 [9] See, for example, *Devarim* 12:7, 12, 18; 14:26; 16:1; and especially 28:47 – "Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joyfulness, and with gladness of heart, by reason of the abundance of all things."

10 [10] A similar phenomenon is found in the story of the blow that struck the people of Bet-Shemesh, when the ark was returned by the Philistines. There too, at the height of the joy over the return of the ark, the boundaries of fear were breached and the people of Israel "saw the ark of the Lord" (I *Shmuel*

III. DAVID'S RESPONSE

Scripture divides David's response to the death of Uzza into two. Initially he reacts as follows:

(8) And David was displeased, **because the Lord had broken forth upon Uzza**; and that place was called **Peretz-Uzza**, unto this day.

This reaction parallels David's reaction in the previous chapter to his victory over the Philistines:

(5:20) And David came to Ba'al-Peratzim, and David smote them there; and he said, The Lord has **broken** mine enemies before me, like the **breach** of waters. Therefore the name of that place was called Ba'al-**Peratzim**.

There is, of course, a striking difference between the two chapters. As we saw in our lecture on the previous chapter, Scripture there wishes to emphasize that David inquired of God and obeyed him, and therefore merited that God broke the enemies of Israel. In our chapter, on the other hand, David did not inquire of God, and his behavior was deficient in the fear of God, and therefore God broke the people of Israel.

In any event, following his initial reaction, David changed his tune and arrived at the necessary conclusions:

(9) And David was afraid of the Lord that day; and he said, "How shall the ark of the Lord come unto me?" (10) So David would not remove the ark of the Lord unto him into the city of David; but David carried it aside into the house of Oved-Edom the Gittite.

6:19), and many of them died. We dealt with this at length in our lecture on that chapter (lecture no. 10 on the book of I *Shmuel*, and especially note 9).

The fact that David halted the moving of the ark teaches that he understood that the problem lay not only in Uzza's action; rather, the entire process was defective, and it therefore had to be freshly considered, and an investigation had to be conducted as to the best way of repairing the defects in the first stage. For the time being, the ark would remain in the house of Oved-Edom the Gittite, who was a Levite,¹¹[11] and he would watch over it until it could be clarified whether perhaps God disapproved of the entire process of moving the ark, or whether the process itself was viewed favorably, and it was only the means of carrying it out that was a problem.

(Translated by David Strauss)

¹¹ [11] As is stated explicitly in I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 15:21. According to this, the term "the Gittite" relates to Oved-Edom's geographical origins, rather than his ethnic roots.