

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

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LECTURE 76: CHAPTER 9

DAVID AND MEFIBOSHET

I. THE KINDNESS

Our chapter opens a new unit in the book with a matter that seems quite personal:

(1) 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?” 1[1]

David's desire to perform a kindness for the descendants of Yehonatan is connected to the oath that David gave to Yehonatan ([I Shemuel 20](#)). The word kindness ("chesed") appears another two times in the chapter (vv. 3, 7), corresponding to the repeated use of the term in Yehonatan's words to David: "And you shall not only while yet I live show me the **kindness** of the Lord, that I die not; but also you shall not cut off your **kindness** from my house for ever" ([I Shemuel 20:14-15](#)). There is also another similarity between our chapter and that chapter; both of them mention the eating of bread at the king's table. There, we read: "The king sat him down to **eat bread**...therefore he is not come **unto the king's table**" ([I Shemuel 20:24,29](#)); and in our chapter: "And you shall **eat bread at my table** continually...for he **did eat** continually **at the king's table**" (vv. 7,13). In that chapter Yehonatan's devotion to David reaches a climax: he comes into direct conflict with his father and he endangers himself with the matter of the arrows. The parallels between the chapters emphasize the commitment that David feels toward Yehonatan, especially owing to Yehonatan's devotion to him.

II. TZIVA

1 [1] The motif of performing kindness in David's kingdom was discussed in Lecture 60 (section 2).

David discovers that Yehonatan has a surviving son:

(2) Now there was of the house of Shaul a servant whose name was Tziva, and they called him unto David; and the king said unto him, "Are you Tziva?" And he said, "Your servant is he." (3) And the king said, "Is there not yet any of the house of Shaul, that I may show the kindness of God unto him?" And Tziva said unto the king, "Yehonatan has yet a son, who is lame on his feet." (4) And the king said unto him, "Where is he?" And Tziva said unto the king, "Behold, he is in the house of Makhir the son of Amiel, in Lo-Devar." (5) Then King David sent and fetched him out of the house of Makhir the son of Amiel, from Lo-Devar.

It would seem that Tziva gave David the required information, and it was he who led him to Yehonatan's son. Closer examination, however, exposes a hidden layer, according to which Tziva was not quick to cooperate with David.

It is surprising that Tziva is the known figure in the house of Shaul and that he is the first address to whom David turns. Later in the chapter, it becomes clear that following the death of Shaul and his sons, Tziva took control of the assets of the house of Shaul and systematically pushed the lame Mefiboshet aside. Accordingly, it is easy to understand why Tziva did not give David a clear answer, but contented himself with a demeaning statement: "Yehonatan has yet a son, who is lame on his feet."²[2] Tziva doesn't even mention the son's name, but merely notes with derision that he is lame, as if to say that there is no reason to "invest" in him.³[3] David is not deterred, but

2 [2] Mefiboshet's lameness was mentioned above in 4:4.

3 [3] Compare with the words of Barzilai Ha-Gil'adi when David wishes to perform a kindness with him and appoint him among those who eat at his table as a reward for the help that he gave David during the Avshalom's revolt: "I am this day fourscore years old; can I discern between good and bad? Can your servant taste what I eat or what I drink? Can I hear any more the voice of singing men and singing women?" (19:35-36).

Sh. Vergon ("*Motif Ha-Ivrim Ve-Ha-Pischim Be-Sefer Shmuel*," *Hagut ba-Mikra* 5 [Tel-Aviv, 5747]) goes further and argues that David was disgusted by people with physical defects. Thus, Vergon explains the strange words in the account of the conquest of Jerusalem, which we dealt with at length in *shiur* 68: "Except you take away the blind and the lame, you shall not come in

rather asks, "Where is he?" Once again, Tziva provides a terse answer, and does not rush to do anything; David is forced to act on the matter on his own.⁴[4]

Tziva's answer that Mefiboshet is in the house of Makhir the son of Amiel in Lo-Devar also teaches us that he had taken control of the house of Shaul. We will once again meet Makhir the son of Amiel as one of those helping David on the east bank of the Jordan at the time of Avshalom's revolt (see 17:27), and it appears that Lo-Devar is the same as Lidvir, located in the tribal territory of Gad ([Yehoshua 13:26](#)).⁵[5] Tziva, the servant, is apparently living in relative comfort on the lands of the house of Shaul in Binyamin, while

hither; thinking, David cannot come in hither...And David said on that day, Whosoever smites the Yevusites and gets up to the gutter, and takes away the lame and the blind, that are hated of David's soul--. Wherefore they say, There are the blind and the lame; he cannot come into the house" (5:6,8). According to Vergon, the Yevusites placed blind and lame people on the wall in order to take advantage of David's disgust with people with physical defects and thus deter him. He continues, "Tziva, who knew about David's famous weakness, tried to deter him from his act of kindness by emphasizing Mefiboshet's lameness. But Scripture stresses that David overcame his weakness when he brought Mefiboshet into his house...despite the fact that Mefiboshet was lame in both legs" (Vergon, p. 154). Later, Vergon explains that in David's judgment of Mefiboshet in chapter 19, his original disgust revealed itself anew. In my humble opinion, Vergon's theory is very far-fetched.

4 [4] Some argue that Tziva was actually trying to protect Mefiboshet because he was afraid that David meant to do him harm. This argument is based on the accepted practice of kings destroying all members of the previous royal house. For example, Ba'asha destroyed the house of Yerov'am ([I Melakhim 14:14](#); 15:27-30), and Yehu destroyed the house of Achav ([II Melakhim 9:6-10](#); 10:11). Furthermore, there were, indeed, members of the house of Shaul, such as Shimi ben Gera (below, chapter 16), who accused David of wiping out the house of Shaul. As was noted in *shiur* no. 65 (chapter 3), it is reasonable to assume that this claim was based on the death of Avner ben Ner and on the killing of the five sons of Ritzpa bat Aya, Shaul's concubine. According to this approach, Tziva wished to minimize the personality of Mefiboshet in David's eyes, so that he not view him as a threat. However, the continuation of the chapter indicates that Tziva's intentions were negative, and this is absolutely proven from the development of the relationship between Tziva and Mefiboshet in the coming chapters.

5 [5] This in itself is not surprising, for we find many connections between the tribe of Binyamin in general, and the house of Shaul in particular, and the residents of the east bank of the Jordan. We already dealt with this issue at length in *shiur* no. 60, as well as *shiur* no. 19 on I *Shmuel*.

Mefiboshet is living as a refugee at the table of a rich man on the east bank of the Jordan.

III. DAVID' S MEETING WITH MEFIBOSHET

In the end, Mefiboshet comes to David:

(6) And Mefiboshet, the son of Yehonatan, the son of Shaul, came unto David, and fell on his face, and prostrated himself. And David said, " Mefiboshet!" and he answered, " Behold your servant!"

In this verse, one can actually feel Mefiboshet's fear as he stands before David. He doesn't know whether David's intentions are good or bad, for the one who actually brought him was not Tziva, to whom David had explicitly stated that he wished to perform a kindness for Mefiboshet, but rather an agent of David. Accordingly, the moment that David utters a single word, "Mefiboshet!" the latter is quick to answer, "Behold, your servant!" David senses this fear, and therefore sees a need to calm Mefiboshet:

(7) And David said unto him, " Fear not; for I will surely show you kindness for Yehonatan your father's sake..."

David then tells Mefiboshet about this kindness, which includes two elements:

- 1) And I will restore you all the land of Shaul your father;
- 2) and you shall eat bread at my table continually.

The first element requires explanation: What happened to "all the land of Shaul" that it requires restoration to Mefiboshet? The prevalent view among the commentators is that these assets came into David's possession, and they propose several explanations of how this happened:

1) According to the Radak, David succeeded in attaining all of Shaul's assets, "because Ish-Boshet and the house of Shaul were regarded as having rebelled against the king, for everyone knew that following Shaul's death, David was king, as he had been anointed by God, and one who rebels against the king, he and his assets are liable...And since everything was his, and he had acquired it by right, but nevertheless he ordered that it all be restored to Mefiboshet, it was regarded as a great kindness."

2) The *Metzudat David* writes that David inherited Shaul's assets as his son-in-law – husband of Mikhal – for nobody knew of any other closer relative.

3) It is also possible that David acquired the property of the house of Shaul because a new king inherits the old king.

The problem with the last approach is that nowhere in Scripture do we find an allusion that David inherited the property of Shaul, and in light of his positive attitude toward the house of Shaul, which we discussed at length in earlier chapters in the book of *Shemuel*, it is difficult to assume that he would have taken such a step. Thus, there is room to suggest that David did not mean to return property that had come into his own possession, but rather property that had come into the possession of someone who took control of them - that is, Tziva.

It seems, then, that at the beginning of the story David himself did not know what kindness he would do for Mefiboshet, and he apparently was going to ask Mefiboshet himself what he needed.⁶[6] But in the course of events, David learned two things: First, that the person who had taken charge of the house of Shaul was Tziva, and second, that Mefiboshet was eating at the table of Makhir the son of Amiel. He therefore proposed to resolve both problems: to restore control over the assets of the house of Shaul to Mefiboshet and to have him eat at the table of the king.⁷[7]

6 [6] Just as, for example, Elisha asked the Shunamite woman: "What is there to be done for you? Would you be spoken for to the king, or to the captain of the host?" (II *Melakhim* 4:13).

7 [7] The practice of honoring people by allowing them to eat at the royal table is mentioned in several places in Scripture. See, for example, [I *Shmuel* 20:24-25](#); [II *Shmuel* 19:34-35](#); [II *Melakhim* 25:27-30](#); [Daniel 1:5](#), and elsewhere.

Mefiboshet humbly responds to David's proposal:

(8) And he bowed down, and said, “ What is your servant, that you should look upon such a dead dog⁸ as I am?”

The king now turns also to Tziva, and it is clear from his words that Tziva was not happy with the change in circumstances:

(9) Then the king called to Tziva, Shaul's servant, and said unto him, “ All that pertained to Shaul and to all his house have I given unto your master's son. (10) And you shall till the land for him, you, and your sons, and your servants; and you shall bring in the fruits, that your master's son may have bread to eat; but Mefiboshet your master's son shall eat bread continually at my table.” Now Tziva had fifteen sons and twenty servants.

David tells Tziva that from now on, "you shall till the land for him" – which implies that until now, Tziva had been tilling the land for himself! David reminds Tziva that Mefiboshet is "your master's son," and therefore he inherits his father's assets, including his servant, Tziva. Until now, Tziva had managed to rise to a high station, and it seems that it is not for naught that the verse ends: "Now Tziva had fifteen sons and twenty servants."

Tziva apparently accepts David's words with submission:

8 [8] His words are reminiscent of David's words to Shaul: "After whom is the king of Israel come out? After whom do you pursue? After **a dead dog**, after a flea" (1 *Shmuel* 24:14). Scripture seems to be creating a contrast between two people who diminished themselves by way of this expression when they spoke before the king: David did this in order to explain to Shaul why the latter has no reason to pursue him, whereas Mefiboshet, Shaul's grandson, did this in order to say that he is not worthy of the kindness that David, who had been pursued by his grandfather, wishes to bestow upon him. The use of this expression intensifies David's lovingkindness.

(11) Then said Tziva unto the king, " According to all that my lord the king commands his servant, so shall your servant do; but Mefiboshet eats at my table as one of the king's sons."

The commentators disagree about who said the second half of the verse: "But Mefiboshet eats at my table as one of the king's sons." Rashi explains that these are the words of David, and that there is a transition here from one speaker to another without explicit mention.^{9[9]} This seems a bit forced, especially since David's promise to Mefiboshet was already mentioned twice, both in his words to Mefiboshet (v.7) and in his words to Tziva (v.10). Accordingly, the Radak seems to be right in his understanding that this is a continuation of the words of Tziva: "Even though Mefiboshet eats at my table as one of the king's sons, so that he will not need any of this, nevertheless I shall do as you have commanded me to till all the land for Mefiboshet and his sons." According to this explanation, attention should be paid to Tziva's formulation: "But Mefiboshet eats at **my table**" - as it were, Tziva, the servant, hosts Mefiboshet!

In his true and genuine desire to act with kindness towards Yehonatan's descendants, David enters into a messy affair: A servant in the royal house took control of all the royal assets, and pushed aside the true heir, a cripple who could not stand up for his own rights. Tziva tries at first to prevent David from carrying out his plan, but after David promises to do a kindness for Mefiboshet and orders Tziva to execute that promise, Tziva tries to paint himself as a humble servant of David and as a devoted servant of the house of Shaul, who lovingly accepts the "new order" that David imposes upon the house of Shaul.

9 [9] This is also the viewpoint of the Ramban in his commentary to [Bereishit 24:32](#). This phenomenon is found in several places, but its existence always depends upon interpretation. See, for example, [I Melakhim 20:34](#): " And [Benhadad] said unto [Achav], ' The cities which my father took from your father I will restore; and you shall make streets for you in Damascus, as my father made in Samaria.' [And Achav responded:] ' And I will let you go with this covenant.' So he made a covenant with him, and let him go." This also seems to be the way to understand [I Shmuel 21:4](#): [The words of David to Achimelekh priest of Nov] "Now therefore what is under your hand?" [Achimelekh's response:] "Five loaves of bread." [David's retort:] "Give them in my hand, or whatsoever there is present" (see *shiur* no. 41 on [I Shmuel](#), and note 4, ad loc.). Some also understand the conversation between Avimelekh and Fikhol, the commander of his army, and Avraham in [Bereishit 21:26](#) in this manner: "And Avimelekh said [to Avraham], ' I know not who has done this thing;' [Avimelekh turns to Fikhol:] ' Neither did you tell me,' [Fikhol's response:] ' Neither yet heard I of it, but today.' "

But all this is only temporary – until the time arrives to introduce changes and restore the previous situation. The window of opportunity will arrive with the beginning of Avshalom's revolt, as we shall see later in chapters 16 and 19, when Tziva reveals himself as a true scoundrel.

In the previous *shiur*, we saw that chapter 8 concludes a unit of chapters that deals with David's kingdom in its heyday. From chapter 10 on, the picture changes entirely. In chapters 10-12, we read about the Bat-Sheva affair, and in chapters 13-20, we encounter its consequences – the slew of troubles that befall David one after the other. Chapter 9 serves, then, as an exposition for what will follow, and it comes now in order to give us the necessary background for the events described in chapters 16 and 19.

In any event, this chapter itself ends on a positive note – the improvement in the situation of the last survivor of the house of Shaul:

(12) Now Mefiboshet had a young son whose name was Mikha. And all that dwelt in the house of Tziva were servants unto Mefiboshet. (13) But Mefiboshet dwelt in Jerusalem; for he did eat continually at the king's table; and he was lame on both his feet.

Let us not underestimate this young son. One day this young son will give rise to a large family:

And the son of Yehonatan was Meriv-Ba'al;¹⁰[10] and Meriv-Ba'al begot **Mikha**. And the sons of Mikha; Piton, and Melekh, and Ta'area, and Achaz. And Achaz begot Yehoada; and Yehoada begot Alemet, and Azmavet, and Zimri; and Zimri begot Motza; and Motza begot Bin'a; Rafa was his son, El'asa his son, Atzel his son. And Atzel had six sons, whose names are these: Azrikam, Bokhru, and Yishmael, and She'arya, and Ovadya, and Chanan. All these were the sons of Atzel. And the sons of Eshek his brother: Ulam his firstborn, Ye'ush the

10 [10] We already noted (*shiur* no. 60, note 7) that the redactor of the book of Shmuel changed all the names containing the idolatrous component "*Ba'al*" and replaced that component with the word "*Boshet*" - Eshsba'al became Ish-Boshet, Yeruba'al became Yeruboshet, and the like.

second, and Elifelet the third. And the sons of Ulam were **mighty men of valor, archers; and had many sons, and sons' sons, a hundred and fifty**. All these were of the sons of Binyamin. (I *Divrei ha-Yamim* 8:34-40)

From the last scion of the house of Shaul – the young Mikha, son of the lame Mefiboshet – there arose in the end a large family, whose descendants continued the grand tradition of Yonatan, the famous archer (see above 1:22), and they too were men of valor, archers, and had many sons and grandsons.

(Translated by David Strauss)
