

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

**The Book of Shmuel
Yeshivat Har Etzion**

**Shiur #07: CHAPTER 4
THE DEFEAT AT THE HANDS OF THE PELISHTIM
AND THE DEATH OF ELI (PART I)**

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I. "WHY HAS THE LORD DONE THUS TO THIS LAND?"

Our chapter describes one of the worst defeats suffered by the people of Israel during the biblical period. Four thousand people fell already during the first stage, and there were far greater casualties during the second stage:

And the Pelishtim fought, and Israel was beaten, and they fled every man to his tent; and there was a very great slaughter, for there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers. (10)

This was in addition to the defeat connected to the taking of the ark of God by the Pelishtim. What is most difficult to understand in our chapter is the reason for this defeat. A defeat of this magnitude would be appropriate had it come in the wake of a particularly severe sin. However, not only do we not find in this or in previous chapters a particular sin which explains why the people of Israel should be so severely punished, but, on the contrary, our chapter implies that Israel acted properly. Following their first defeat, Israel did not turn to idol worship, as it had done during the period of the Judges, but rather to God, to the point that they brought His ark out to battle. What then was the cause of this great defeat?

Rashi ([Devarim 10:1](#)) maintains that the problem was taking the wrong ark. He understands that two arks were fashioned during the days of Moshe - the ark that was part of the *Mishkan*, and another ark, described in the book of *Devarim* (ibid. 1-5). About that second ark, Rashi writes: "Now this was not the ark which Betzalel made [for the *Mishkan*], because with the *Mishkan* they did not occupy themselves until after Yom Kippur, [for only] when he came down from the mountain on [that day] did He give them the command regarding [the construction] of the *Mishkan*, and Betzalel made the *Mishkan* first and afterwards the ark and the [other] articles. It follows, therefore, that this was another ark; and it was this that went forth with them to battle, while **that which Betzalel made went forth to battle only once, in the days of Eli** - and they were punished for this, for it was captured [by the Pelishtim]." According to Rashi, the ark fashioned by Betzalel was not the ark that ordinarily went out with Israel to war, and the sin in our chapter was that Betzalel's ark was taken out to battle instead of the other ark. Ramban (ad loc.), however, disagrees with Rashi, arguing that there was only one ark, and that nowhere is it mentioned that there were two arks (see also Radak's discussion of the matter).

Ralbag (v. 1) proposes a different explanation, according to which Israel's sin was that they went out to war without inquiring of God, even though they had the *Urim ve-Tumim*. It is difficult, however, to assume that this failure made them liable for such severe punishment. Surely, it happens again later that the people of Israel fail to inquire of God (see chapter 14), and we do not find that they are punished.

Our question then stands: Why were the people of Israel so severely punished?

II. "IT MAY SAVE US OUT OF THE HAND OF OUR ENEMIES"

A careful examination of our chapter leads to a clear answer to this question. Following their first defeat, the people of Israel say:

Why has the Lord smitten us before the Pelishtim? Let us fetch the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of Shilo to us, that when it comes among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies. (3)

The beginning of the verse suggests that the people of Israel wish to repent. This was the way that the tribes of Israel conducted themselves during the war against Binyamin when they found themselves in a similar situation. After each of their defeats on the first

two days of the campaign, they fasted, wept before God, and inquired of Him. In our chapter, however, it immediately becomes clear that this is not the case here. The people of Israel are not seeking a way to mend their ways, and instead of turning to God in prayer, they try to solve the problem through external means: bringing the ark of God out to battle with them, on the assumption that it enjoys independent powers. It is not God who will deliver Israel, but the ark. The ark may be likened to a very powerful weapon, whose effect is exclusively determined by him who is holding it.^{1[1]} The irony in this situation is emphasized in the next verse:

So the people sent to Shilo, that they might bring from there the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, who sits upon the *keruvim*; and the two sons of Eli, Chofni and Pinchas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God. (4)

The people of Israel bring the ark, without considering the fact that it enjoys the protection of two sinners – Chofni and Pinchas. This description illustrates Israel's failure to draw a connection between the power attributed to the ark, on the one hand, and the spiritual state of the people in general and of the priests in particular, on the other.

The ark's appearance in the camp elicited the following reaction from Israel:

And when the ark of the covenant of the Lord came into the camp, all Israel shouted **with a great shout**, so that the earth trembled. (5)

This reaction is very reminiscent of another war, in which the ark of God plays a very central role, together with the great shout of the people of Israel:

So the people shouted when the priests blew with the *shofarot*; and it came to pass, when the people heard the sound of the horn, that the people shouted with a great shout, and the walls fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they took the city. ([Yehoshua 6:20](#))

^{1[1]} Recently, Steven Spielberg expressed this idea in his famous film, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, in which the Nazis try to put their hands on the ark of the covenant, believing that its capture would assist them in their wars. Many details in that film appear to be based on our chapter and on the upcoming chapters, and the biblical account of Shilo's destruction undoubtedly served as its inspiration.

But with all the similarity ☐ what a great difference between the two wars! In the battle of Jericho, Yehoshua leads the people, while minimizing the role of the ark, and emphasizing, "Shout, for the Lord has given you the city" (ibid. v. 16). In the battle of Shilo, in contrast, there was no leader to emphasize the difference between the ark and God, and the identification of the two brought about that the "great shout" (v. 5) was replaced by the "very great slaughter" (v. 10).

This is not the first time that the people of Israel seized unto some external means and saw it as an end-all, without relating to their spiritual state and the need to improve their ways. This is what happened with the *efod* of Gidon ([Shoftim 8:27](#)), and this is what will happen in the future with the copper serpent ([II Melakhim 18:4](#)). This is particularly striking in the prophets' reproaches regarding the sacrifices; they often criticized the people of Israel for the exaggerated importance that they attached to this issue, while total disregarding the spiritual state of the people.^{2[2]}

Paradoxically, bringing the ark into the camp had the opposite results. The Pelishtim did at first tremble before the ark:

And when the Pelishtim heard the noise of the shout, they said, What is the noise of this great shout in the camp of the Hebrews? And they understood that the ark of the Lord was come into the camp. And the Pelishtim were afraid, for they said, God is come into the camp. And they said, Woe to us for there has not been such a thing before now. Woe to us! Who shall deliver us out of the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods that smote Egypt with the plagues in the wilderness. (6-8)

The Pelishtim share the idolatrous belief of the people of Israel that identifies the ark with the God of Israel. After the initial shock, however, the Pelishtim return to their senses, and it is precisely the bringing of the ark into Israel's camp that strengthens the Pelishtim's resolve to emerge victorious in battle:

Strengthen yourselves and act like men, O Pelishtim, lest you fall slaves to the Hebrews,^{3[3]} as they have been slaves to you; quit yourselves like men, and fight. And the Pelishtim fought, and Israel was beaten, and they

^{2[2]} See, for example, [I Shmuel 15:22](#); [Yishayahu 1:10-17](#); [Yirmiyahu 7:21-23](#); [Hoshea 6:6](#); [Amos 5:21-25](#); [Mikha 6:6-8](#); [Tehillim 51:18-19](#).

^{3[3]} The other nations refer to Israel as *Ivrim*, "Hebrews" ([Bereishit 39:14](#); 41:12; [Shemot 2:6](#); [I Shmuel 29:3](#); and elsewhere). Israel presents itself before the nations in similar fashion ([Bereishit 40:15](#); [Shemot 5:13](#); [Yona 1:9](#)).

fled every man to his tent; and there was a very great slaughter, for there fell of Israel thirty thousand foot soldiers. (9-10)

Thus, Israel was punished measure for measure: the sin of bringing the ark into the camp, based on the belief in its independent power and without relating to the spiritual state of the people – this sin itself constituted the basis of Israel's punishment and magnified its defeat.

III. "THE TEMPLE OF THE LORD, THE TEMPLE OF THE LORD"

In particular, there is room to compare Israel's sin here to another sin that stemmed from the attribution of special powers to external means. Yirmiyahu rebukes the people for their belief in the continued standing of God's temple independent of the people's spiritual state:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. Trust not in lying words, saying, The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord, The temple of the Lord,^{4[4]} are these. For if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings; if you thoroughly execute justice between a man and his neighbor... Then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, for ever and ever. Behold, you trust in lying words, that cannot profit. Will you steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense to the Ba'al, and walk after other gods whom you know not; and come and stand before Me in this house, which I called by My name, and say, we are delivered; that you may do all these abominations? Is this house, which is called by My name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, says the Lord. ([Yirmiyahu 7:3-11](#))

To prove the importance of what he is saying, Yirmiyahu explicitly recalls our chapter:

^{4[4]} On the plain level, the threefold repetition of "The temple of the Lord" reflects "the tendency of a language to repeat words in order to reinforce the idea, sometimes twice, sometimes three times" (Radak, *ibid.*). Nevertheless, the commentators tried to find symbolic meaning in the threefold repetition. Targum Yonatan, and in its wake, Rashi, see the threefold repetition as symbolic of the three pilgrim feasts, whereas Radak brings a different understanding in the name of his father: "Because there were three – the *ulam*, the *heikhal* and the *devir*."

But go now to My place which was in Shilo, where I set My name at the first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of My people Israel. And now, because you have done all these deeds, says the Lord, and though I spoke to you, from morning till night, but you did not listen; and I called you, but you did not answer; therefore will I do to this house, which is called by My name, and in which you trust, and to the place which I gave to you and to your fathers, as I have done to Shilo. (ibid. vv. 12-14)

In light of what we said above, the comparison is very understandable: the idea that the temple of the Lord will save Israel regardless of their actions parallels Israel's idea that bringing the ark will deliver them from the hand of the Pelishtim. Yirmiyahu calls upon the people of Israel to recall the destruction of Shilo in order to understand that God's ark and God's temple will not bring them salvation, because Israel has not walked in the path of God. Indeed, prior to his prophecy, Yirmiyahu received another prophecy in which a repair of the sin of Shilo is promised:

And it shall come to pass, when you multiply and increase in the land, in those days, says the Lord, **they shall say no more, the ark of the covenant of the Lord**; nor shall it come to mind, nor shall they remember it, nor shall they miss it, nor shall that be done any more. (ibid. 3:16)5[5]

It should be noted that elsewhere it is implied that Israel's defeat stemmed from a different sin. The destruction of Shilo is described at length in [Tehillim 78:56-64](#); there, however, Israel's offense is presented as a sin of idol worship:

Yet they tempted and rebelled against the most high God, and kept not His testimonies, but turned back, and dealt unfaithfully like their fathers; they were turned aside like a deceitful bow. For they provoked Him to anger with their high places, and moved Him to jealousy with their carved idols. When God heard this, He was wroth, and greatly abhorred Israel; so that He forsook the tabernacle of Shilo, the tent where He made His dwelling among men.

It stands to reason that this sin was the basis for the first punishment: the first four thousand casualties. But the book of *Shmuel* wishes to emphasize that even in the framework of serving the God of Israel it is possible to come to idolatrous ideas, and

5[5] See Rashi, ad loc.: "Nor shall that be done anymore" – what had already been done with it in Shilo, that they took it out in the war against the Pelishtim in the days of Eli."

therefore it refrains at this stage^{6[6]} from mentioning the sin of idol worship. This seems also to be the reason that the destruction of Shilo is not explicitly described in our book, for the focus here is on the problematic attitude toward the ark.

IV. "FOR HIS HEART TREMBLED FOR THE ARK OF GOD"

What brought the people of Israel to this erroneous conception? In the continuation of the chapter, we get the impression that the source of this misconception was their spiritual leader himself. Eli, as described in this chapter, is he who more than anyone else expresses the attachment of importance to the ark in and of itself, regardless of the state of the people. Scripture relates that despite his old age ("For he was an old man, and heavy"; v. 18) – "Eli sat upon a seat by the wayside watching" (v. 13). But as opposed to what one might have expected, Eli does not wait to hear the results of the battle. He does not see Israel's victory or defeat as the most significant issue, and as reflecting the truly important question – does God dwell among Israel or not. Rather than focusing on this issue, Eli's waiting is described as based on an entirely different concern: "For his heart trembled for the ark of God" (ibid.).

According to Scripture's description, the anonymous messenger to Eli was also seized by the same misconception, and he listed the series of calamities that had occurred in the campaign in such a manner that they seem to proceed from bad to worse with respect to Eli:

And the messenger answered and said, [1] Israel is fled before the Pelishtim, [2] and there has been also a great slaughter among the people, [3] and your two sons also, Chofni and Pinchas, are dead, [4] and the ark of God is taken.^{7[7]} (17)

Eli's reaction is not surprising: "And it came to pass, when he made mention of the ark of God, that he fell from off the seat backwards by the side of the gate, and his neck was broken, and he died" (v. 18). Israel's defeat did not shock Eli and cause him to die; neither did the death of his own two sons, which also served as a sign that the prophecy of doom

^{6[6]} At a later stage we do find an allusion to the sin. At the end of the twenty-year long process of repentance, Scripture states: "And Shmuel spoke to all the house of Israel, saying, If you return to the Lord with all your hearts, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtarot from among you, and direct your hearts to the Lord, and serve Him only; and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Pelishtim. Then the children of Israel put away the Be'alim and the Ashtarot, and served the Lord only" (7:3-4).

^{7[7]} The term *nilkecha*, "taken," in the feminine with respect to the *aron*, "ark," in the masculine is strange. *Chazal* interpreted (*Midrash Shmuel* 11:2, ed. Buber, p. 40): "The quality of justice became weak like a female." Radak notes another use of the feminine in connection with the ark – "To which the ark of the Lord has come [*ba'a*]" (*II Divrei Ha-yamim* 8:11) (and in contrast to the Rid's assertion that "the term *aron* does not appear in the feminine anywhere else in Scripture").

concerning the house of Eli (see 3:34) was being realized. The taking of the ark – the external sign, the solely symbolic expression of the resting of God's *Shekhina* – is what did that. Despite all our appreciation of Eli's devotion to the ark, the taking of which touched him even more so than did the death of his own sons,^{8[8]} this description also harbors within it criticism of Eli, that his entire interest lies exclusively in the ark.

This story closes the circle that began in chapter 1 and characterized Eli throughout the chapters that deal with him. Already in chapter 1, in the context of his negative attitude toward Chana, we noted that Eli is most pedantic about the order of the Divine worship in the *Mishkan*, even though he wrongfully injures Chana in the process. His world of values also stands out in chapter 2, where he presents the Divine service as the most important issue, and attaches only secondary importance to interpersonal relationships ("If one man sin against another, the judge judges him"; 2:25). And once again in our chapter we encounter an outlook that emphasizes perspectives connected exclusively to the worship of God, detached from the spiritual state of the people. This circle has a tragic literary expression. We first met Eli as he "sat upon a seat" (1:9); and here "he fell from off the seat." Thus, we can say that the first four chapters of the book describe the process of Eli's falling from his seat.

This account fails to mention one person – Shmuel.^{9[9]} As Israel's leader, Shmuel will yet repair their misguided approach, and bring Israel to victory over the Pelishtim, as we shall see below in chapter 7.

^{8[8]} As Ralbag notes: "This points to his great piety, that he was not worried about his sons despite what had been revealed to him by the man of God that the two of them would die on the same day. Nor was he shocked when he heard of the deaths of Chofni and Pinchas, until he heard that the ark of God had been taken, for it was then that he fell backwards from his seat, owing to his great fright, and because of this fall he broke his neck owing to his great weakness, and he died because of the weight of his body and because of his old age."

^{9[9]} At the beginning of the chapter it says: "And the word of Shmuel came to all Israel. Now Israel went out against the Pelishtim to battle, and camped by Even-ha-Ezer; and the Pelishtim pitched in Afek" (4:1). This description, however, is difficult, for Shmuel is not connected in any way to what is related in the chapter. Rashi is forced to explain: "That which was told to Shmuel and came to all of Israel happened. How was the calamity? 'Now Israel went out against the Pelishtim to battle.'" It is possible that the beginning of the verse is

Next week, we shall relate to the story's epilogue – the death of Eli's daughter-in-law.

(Translated by David Strauss)

actually the conclusion of the previous chapter: 'For the Lord revealed Himself to Shmuel in Shilo by the word of the Lord – And the word of Shmuel came to all of Israel.' Thus we find in the Vulgate and in the Peshiteta. The Koren edition has a space in the middle of the verse (following the words, "And the word of Shmuel came to all of Israel"), indicating a new section, but that space does not appear in Rav Breuer's edition.