

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

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LECTURE 93: CHAPTER 16 (PART II)

CHUSHAI AND ACHITOFEL

I. The first act

We saw in the previous chapter that after David prayed to God that He should save him from Achitofel's evil counsel, David merited receiving an answer from heaven – the appearance of his friend Chushai the Arkhite. David asked of Chushai that he not stay with him, but rather that he return to Jerusalem and thwart Achitofel's plan. This was a complicated mission; in order to succeed, Chushai would have to acquire Avshalom's trust and convince him that he had indeed moved over to his camp and that he was no longer loyal to David. This tension is expressed from the very outset:

(16) And it came to pass, when Chushai the Arkhite, David's friend, came to Avshalom, that Chushai said to Avshalom, “ Long live the king, long live the king.” (17) And Avshalom said to Chushai, “ Is this your kindness to your friend? Why did you not go with your friend?” (18) And Chushai said to Avshalom, “ No; but whom the Lord, and this people, and all the men of Israel have chosen, his¹[1] will I be, and with

1 [1] The word *lo* is written (*ketiv*) with an *alef* ("not"), but read (*keri*) as if it were spelled with a *vav* ("his"). According to the plain sense of the text, the *keri* is more reasonable (as is usually the case). The Radak, in his usual manner, explains the *ketiv* as well. He suggests that the words be read as a question: Is it not clear that I will be with him who has been chosen king?

It is, however, possible that the *keri* and *ketiv* reflect the gap between what Chushai actually said (the *keri*) and what he thought in his heart (*ketiv* – I shall not be!). We find a similar phenomenon in [II Melakhim 8](#), where Elisha informs Chazael of the imminent death of Ben-Hadad, king of Aram: "And Elisha said to him, ‘ Go, say to him (*lo* – *ketiv* with an *alef*, *keri* with a *vav*), ‘ You shall surely recover; though the Lord has shown me that he shall surely die’ " (8: 10). The *keri* indicates what Chazael must actually say, whereas the *ketiv*

him will I abide. (19) And again, whom should I serve? Should I not serve in the presence of his son? As I have served in your father's presence, so will I be in your presence."

Chushai makes a clear declaration of his allegiance: Twice he calls Avshalom "king" – "Long live the **king**, long live the **king**."^{2[2]} And Avshalom, in response, twice admonishes him that he should have remained loyal to his friend, David: "Is this your kindness to your **friend**? Why did you not go with your **friend**?" But Chushai articulately presents^{3[3]} two explanations of his actions:

1) First, he sees himself obligated to his office. It his job to be loyal to the king, and the identity of the king is established by Divine selection and popular choice. This explanation is advanced as a matter of principle; Chushai argues that "the friend of the king" is not a position of personal loyalty, but rather a political office, and that he will be the friend of the king, whoever that king might be.

2) Second, he does not view Avshalom as having usurped the throne, but rather as the son and legitimate heir of the king. This explanation is advanced on the emotional level; Chushai explains why he does not feel that he is acting treacherously toward David.

Between the lines, we already get a glimpse of Chushai's wisdom. Chushai perceives Avshalom's principal weakness – his thirst for honor and his readiness to

indicates what he will feel in his heart, for he knows that Ben-Chadad will not live. It is possible that a similar phenomenon is found also in the words of Iyov: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him (*lo – ketiv* with an *alef*, *keri* with a *vav*), but I will argue my ways before Him" ([Iyov 13:15](#)); see also *Sota* 5:5.

2 [2] In Scripture, such a declaration is always found in the context of a coronation: see I *Shemuel* 10:24 (regarding Shaul); I [Melakhim 1:25](#) (regarding Adoniyahu); *ibid.* v. 34 (regarding Shelomo); II [Melakhim 11:12](#) (regarding Yoash). In most of these cases (Shaul being the exception), the declaration is made in the context of a rebellion or a struggle over the monarchy.

3 [3] In contrast to the vague proposal of David in the previous chapter: "And say to Avshalom: I will be your servant, O king; as I have been your father's servant in time past, so will I now be your servant" (see *shiur* 91, note 10).

allow himself to be convinced by words of flattery. Chushai incorporates in his words the assumption that God has chosen Avshalom. It is reasonable to assume that Avshalom found this assumption flattering, and that it lessened his natural suspicion of Chushai. Chushai's explanation that Avshalom is not an ordinary rebel against the king, but rather the son and heir of the previous king, must also have been pleasing to Avshalom, for if this is the way he was perceived by David's friend, all the more so should be seen in this manner by the rest of the people! This is why Avshalom does not reject Chushai, and in this way, Chushai passes his first test.

II. The Second Act

At this point, Avshalom turns to his counselors and asks for their advice:

(20) Then said Avshalom to Achitofel, " Give your counsel what we shall do." (21) And Achitofel said to Avshalom, " Go in to your father's concubines, that he has left to keep the house; and all Israel will hear that you are abhorred of your father; then will the hands of all that are with you be strong."

Avshalom's complex attitude towards Chushai at this time is evident here. It is only Achitofel whom Avshalom addresses directly, but he nevertheless asks for his advice in the plural,^{4[4]} implying that Chushai was also present and that this was a test of his loyalty.

From Achitofel's answer, we can understand why Avshalom turned to his advisors and what his concern was. It stands to reason that Avshalom saw that the people of Jerusalem were not rushing to show him open support; he assumed that the primary reason for this was that they were worried that in the end, his quarrel with

4 [4] The Radak, however, explains: "A term of honor; or else it means: You and the other wise men with you." The Radak may have thought that it is impossible that Chushai the Arkhite was present and yet remained silent. But according to the plain sense of the text, it seems that Chushai was indeed there. The reason for his silence will be explained below.

David would be resolved, David would return to the throne, and whoever publicly supported Avshalom would have to pay for his crime.^{5[5]}

Achitofel therefore suggests to Avshalom that he take a drastic step that would convince the people that the process was irreversible: "Go in to your father's concubines, that he has left to keep the house." The significance of this step is clear: We already saw^{6[6]} that when a person takes his master's concubines, this attests to the fact that he has succeeded his master. By doing this already in David's lifetime, Avshalom attests that he is absolutely determined in his decision and that nothing will stop him.

Avshalom, however, takes Achitofel's advice one step further:

(22) So they spread Avshalom a tent upon the top of the house; and Avshalom went in to his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel.

Achitofel's advice did not include the element that Avshalom should do the deed "in the sight of all Israel," but only that he should do it, and then word of his action will spread: "And all Israel will hear." Avshalom decides to take an even more resolute action, and so he lies with David's concubines in a tent on the roof, in the plain sight of all Israel.

There is a strong similarity between what happens here and the story of Amnon and his friend Yonadav, which we dealt with at length in chapter 13. There too Amnon takes Yonadav's advice to the extreme, and in great measure seals his fate thereby. Amnon does not content himself with establishing an intimate encounter with Tamar, as would have occurred in the scenario planned by Yonadav. Rather, he

^{5 [5]} Thus writes Rashi: "Because now they are too weak to help you, for they say in their hearts, The son will reconcile with his father and we will be hated by the king."

^{6 [6]} *Shiur* no. 63 on chapter 3. This is how we explained Ish-Boshet's anger about Avner's having slept with Ritzpa bat Aya, the concubine of Shaul. We also added that this is the way to understand Shelomo's anger about Adoniyahu's request to take Avishag the Shunamite woman as his wife ([I Melakhim 2:13-25](#)), and this also seems to be the meaning of Reuven's sleeping with Bilha, his father's concubine ([Bereishit 35:22](#)).

rapes her, thus stirring up Avshalom's hatred and bringing his own death upon himself. Here, Avshalom takes Achitofel's advice one step further, and it seems that he too suffers injury as a result. At the beginning of chapter 18, we read: "And David numbered the people that were with him, and set captains of thousands and captains of hundreds over them." Where did David all of a sudden find hundreds and thousands of soldiers? It stands to reason that many in Israel who had reservations about Avshalom returned to their senses and actively joined David's camp. It is very possible that this tendency – which in the end brought to the victory of David's camp over Avshalom and his people – had its roots in this crude and shameless act of Avshalom.

In any event, Avshalom's action was a clear realization of God's word in Natan's prophecy at the time of the incident involving Bat-Sheva:

“ Thus says the Lord: Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house, and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun." ([II Shemuel 12:11-12](#)).

This is an instance of "double causality" – in other words, the convergence of two independent courses: on the one hand, God's word, and on the other, human action, the two being driven by altogether different motives.^{7[7]}

This may explain why the chapter ends with the following verse:

Now the counsel of Achitofel,^{8[8]} which he counselled in those days, was as if a man inquired of the word of God; so was all the counsel of Achitofel both with David and with Avshalom.

7 [7] A classic example of the principle of double causality is the story of Yosef and his brothers. The conflict between Yosef and his brothers and everything that came in its wake can be explained in human terms, but they are also part of God's plan that was first articulated in the Covenant Between the Pieces, according to which the people of Israel would be exiled from their land for an extended period of time.

This verse is a parenthetical statement speaking of Achitofel's great wisdom and explaining why Avshalom turned to him and accepted his advice. But why is this parenthetical statement inserted here, and not above, where the text relates how Achitofel joined with Avshalom and David's concerns about that development? In light of what we have argued, it is possible that the verse was written here in order to give special importance to the correspondence between Achitofel's counsel and seeking the word of God. This correspondence further expresses the principle of "double causality," for in the end Achitofel's action brought about the realization of God's word.

We can now go back to the figure who is the focus of this *shiur*: Chushai the Arkhite. Why did Chushai remain silent and not speak out against Achitofel's shocking counsel? It seems that Chushai's self-restraint at this stage is additional proof of his profound wisdom. Had Chushai come out against this advice, he would almost certainly have lost Avshalom's trust, and would certainly have forfeited the opportunity to oppose Achitofel the next time he offered counsel. Chushai therefore preferred to remain silent at this time, assuming that even if Avshalom follows this advice, this will not decide the matter, and at the same time, his silence will earn him points, which will allow him to oppose Achitofel's counsel at a more critical moment. And indeed, that moment was soon to come.

III. The Third Act

It didn't take long before Achitofel turned to Avshalom with a practical suggestion about bringing the rebellion to a decisive stage:

(1) Moreover, Achitofel said to Avshalom, " Let me now choose out twelve thousand men, and I will arise and pursue after David this night; (2) and I will come upon him while he is weary and weak-handed, and will make him afraid; and all the people that are with him shall flee; and I will smite the king only; (3)

8 [8] This verse is the source of the expression "the counsel of Achitofel." The common expression, however, is generally used in a negative sense, as referring to evil and illogical counsel, while in Scripture, it is used in the opposite sense, referring to wise and insightful counsel.

and I will bring back all the people to you; when all shall have returned, [save] the man whom you seek, all the people will be in peace." 9[9]

Achitofel's counsel was based on three points:

1) The selection of an elite unit that was large enough to ensure victory, but also small enough to enable a very quick recruitment. It seems that the number of soldiers in this unit – twelve thousand – has also symbolic meaning. This number expresses representation of all the tribes of Israel, a thousand from each tribe, as we find in the war against Midyan: "Of every tribe a thousand, throughout all the tribes of Israel, shall you send to the war. So there were delivered, out of the thousands of Israel, a thousand of every tribe, twelve thousand armed for war" ([Bamidbar 31:4-5](#)).

2) Exploiting the momentum of the rebellion: Avshalom's supporters are still at the height of their strength, whereas David and his men had endured a lengthy journey from Jerusalem to the Judean wilderness and are surely tired and weary.

3) Striking only at David, while scaring off his supporters and causing them to flee, and after David is killed, restoring the people to Avshalom.

Achitofel's counsel was exceedingly logical, and also very dangerous to David. At first, it enjoys full agreement:

(4) And the saying pleased Avshalom well, and all the elders of Israel.

9 [9] This verse is quite difficult. Rashi explains: "'The man whom you seek' – your wish will be done and he will be killed, 'and afterwards all the people will be in peace;' and this verse is abridged." The Radak, however, punctuates the verse differently: "'And I will bring back all the people to you; as all is returned' – as everything that someone wants to have returned is returned, so it is easy for me to bring back all the people to you; 'the man whom you seek' – after I kill the person whose destruction you seek, i.e., David, as he says, 'And I will smite the king only' – 'all the people will be in peace.'"

But now the story takes an unexpected turn:

(5) Then said Avshalom, “ Call now Chushai the Arkhite also, and let us hear likewise what he says.”

What suddenly happened? Why does Avshalom also want to hear what Chushai the Arkhite has to say, in the form of a second opinion? What raised his concern? Let us reread Achitofel's counsel, taking note of a striking point in his words – the repeated use of verbs in the first person singular:

Let me now **choose out** twelve thousand men, and **I will arise and pursue** after David this night; and **I will come upon** him while he is weary and weak-handed, and **will make him afraid**; and all the people that are with him shall flee; and **I will smite** the king only.

Over the course of these three verses, Achitofel highlights himself seven times! It stands to reason that Achitofel, no less than Avshalom, suffered from an inflated ego; without even noticing it, he placed himself in the center. After some reflection, perhaps even unconscious, Avshalom took notice of this, and thus sought out another opinion, if only to show Achitofel who is really the king.

Now comes Chushai's great moment, towards which he had been working. Will Chushai succeed in saying what Avshalom wishes to hear? Will his wisdom succeed in thwarting Achitofel's evil designs? We will try to answer these questions in the next *shiur*.

(Translated by David Strauss)
