

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL
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LECTURE 97: CHAPTER 18 (PART II)
THE REPORT ABOUT THE DEATH OF AVSHALOM

I. A VERY GREAT HEAP OF STONES

With the death of Avshalom, which was described at length in the previous *shiur*, the campaign comes to an end:

(16) And Yoav blew the horn, and the people returned **from pursuing after Israel**; for Yoav held back the people.

This description brings to mind another battle – the one between the armies of Yoav and Avner ben Ner by the pool at Givon (see above, chapter 2), which ended in similar fashion: "**So Yoav blew the horn**, and all the people stood still, **and pursued after Israel no more**, neither fought they any more" (2:28). The stylistic similarity, however, emphasizes the fundamental difference between the two events. In that war, Yoav was greatly responsible for the unnecessary bloodshed, as Avner ben Ner leveled the accusation against him: "Know you not that it will be bitterness in the end? How long shall it be then, before you bid the people return from following their brethren?"^[1]

Here, in contrast, it is Yoav who prevents further bloodshed, understanding that following the death of Avshalom, there is no longer any reason to continue fighting. This closes a circle for Yoav, and as we saw throughout the book of *Shmuel*, here too he is presented as David's antithesis. Here, David acted inappropriately; had his command been carried out, who knows how much more blood would have been spilled on both sides. It is Yoav who accepts responsibility for Israel's welfare, at the cost of a confrontation with David.

As the battle came to an end, Avshalom is brought to "burial:"

(17) And they took Avshalom and cast him into the great pit in the forest, and raised over him a very great heap of stones; and all Israel fled every one to his tent.

The burial is performed in a humiliating fashion. First, the very casting of Avshalom's body into the great pit, a place where wild beasts are trapped, was an act of humiliation. Second, a great heap of stones was raised over the site of his burial, just as Yehoshua had done at the burial sites of enemies of Israel – Akhan ([Yehoshua 7:26](#)),

the king of Ai (ibid. 8:29), and the kings of the south (ibid. 10:27). Moreover, the king of Ai and the kings of the south were first hanged from a tree; in similar fashion, Avshalom was caught in the terebinth before he died. All of points things illustrate Scripture's negative attitude toward Avshalom due to the evil that he perpetrated during his lifetime.

In the end, Scripture notes another detail, which completes Avshalom's punishment. Avshalom dies without children, and does not even merit to be buried in the place where he had prepared a memorial pillar for himself:

(18) Now Avshalom in his lifetime had taken and reared up for himself the pillar, which is in the king's dale; for he said, "I have no son to keep my name in remembrance;" and he called the pillar after his own name; and it is called Avshalom's monument to this day.^[2]

In chapter 14, we noted the contradiction between this verse and what it says there – that Avshalom had three sons and a daughter. In any event, our story emphasizes that Avshalom died without leaving any remembrance.^[3]

II. REPORTING THE NEWS

The final role which was left to Yoav to fill in the context of the war was to inform David of the results. Let us examine the verses that describe that report:

(19) Then said Achimaatz the son of Tzadok, "Let me now run and bear the king tidings, how the Lord has avenged him of his enemies." **(20)** And Yoav said to him, "You shall not be the bearer of tidings this day, but you shall bear tidings another day; but this day you shall bear no tidings, forasmuch as the king's son is dead." **(21)** Then said Yoav to the Kushite, "Go tell the king what you have seen."^[4] And the Kushite bowed down to Yoav, and ran. **(22)** Then said Achimaatz the son of Tzadok yet again to Yoav, "But come what may, let me, I pray you, also run after the Kushite." And Yoav said, "Why will you run, my son, seeing that you will have no reward for the tidings?"^[5] **(23)** "But come what may," [he said,] "I will run." And he said to him, "Run." Then Achimaatz ran by the way of the Plain and overran the Kushite. **(24)** Now David sat between the two gates;^[6] and the watchman went up to the roof of the gate unto the wall, and lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold a man running alone. **(25)** And the watchman cried, and told the king. And the king said, "If he be alone, there is tidings in his mouth." And he came apace, and drew near. **(26)** And the watchman saw another man running; and the watchman called unto the porter, and said, "Behold another man running alone." And the king said, "He also brings tidings." **(27)** And the watchman said, "I think the running of the foremost is like the running of Achimaatz the son of Tzadok." And the king said, "He is a good man, and comes with good tidings." **(28)** And Achimaatz called and said to the king, "All is well." And he bowed down before the king with his face to the earth, and said, "Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delivered up the men that lifted up their hand against my lord the king." **(29)** And the king said, "Is it

well with the young man Avshalom?" And Achimaatz answered, " When Yoav sent the king's servant, and me your servant, I saw a great tumult, but I knew not what it was." (30) And the king said, " Turn aside and stand here." And he turned aside and stood still. (31) And, behold, the Kushite came; and the Kushite said, " Tidings for my lord the king; for the Lord has avenged you this day of all them that rose up against you." (32) And the king said to the Kushite, " Is it well with the young man Avshalom?" And the Kushite answered, " The enemies of my lord the king and all that rise up against you to do you hurt, be as that young man is."

This account focuses on David's attempt to deal with reality. David deludes himself the entire time that his order was indeed fulfilled, despite the clear tension between this illusion and the knowledge that the results in fact might be different.

David's conduct is very similar to that of Eli when he waited along the way to hear the outcome of the battle against the Pelishtim ([1 Shmuel 4](#)). Let us summarize the main points of similarity:

- 1) In both cases, the leader of the people of Israel sits at the edge of the city, alongside the road, waiting to hear the results of a battle in which he did not participate.
- 2) In both cases, a father hears that his son fell in battle.
- 3) In both cases, the son is not worthy of his father's positive attitude toward him.

The main point in this correspondence is that in the two cases, the leader waits for the wrong tidings. Earlier, we dealt at length with Eli's error; he placed exaggerated emphasis on the ark, instead of the spiritual state of the people of Israel. Here too, David places the emphasis on his son, rather than on the people of Israel. The parallel to Eli, who was severely punished for not having reprimanded his sons for their corrupt behavior, serves as sharp criticism of David's attitude toward Avshalom.

In order to illustrate the problematic nature of David's conduct, Scripture describes a "contest" between Achimaatz the son of Tzadok and the Kushite; who would be the first to inform David of the results of the war? This contest seems to teach us that in the eyes of the soldiers, the news should have caused David to rejoice. While it is true that they all had heard David's explicit order not to strike at Avshalom, no one imagined that David would take so hard the news of the great victory, which was achieved with the abundant help of God.

The only one who correctly understands the situation is Yoav, who knows David better than anyone else. He understands that David is concerned about one thing only, and he wishes to make it easier for him to receive the news. Yoav apparently understands that if David sees Achimaatz, he will conclude that Avshalom is still alive, as in fact David responded when he heard that it was Achimaatz who was bringing the

tidings: "He is a good man, and comes with good tidings." Yoav therefore tries to persuade Achimaatz to bear tidings on a different day,^[8] and he sends the Kushite in his place. It stands to reason that the Kushite was sent in order to allude to David already from a distance that the tidings are not so good.

At first, Yoav succeeds in slightly delaying Achimaatz, but in the end, he yields to his pleadings and lets him run. It would seem that Yoav thought that the Kushite would arrive first, so that Achimaatz's arrival would make no difference, but Yoav did not consider the fact that Achimaatz, even if he is not faster than the Kushite, is much smarter than him. Whereas the Kushite ran in a straight line, through the mountains, until he reached Machanayyim, Achimaatz chose a longer route that was actually shorter. He took a longer route by going down to the Plain – that is, the Jordan plain (*J Melakhim 7:46*) – and only when he reached the latitude of Machanayyim did he ascend the mountain, and thus he arrived before the Kushite.

The watchman on the roof of the gate sends three messages to David, and with respect to each of them David tries to convince himself that he is dealing with good news. First, David correctly interprets the news of the arrival of a man running alone: "If he be alone, there be tidings in his mouth." The watchman is puzzled by the additional runner, but David puts his own mind and that of the watchman to rest: "He also brings tidings." And as stated, his positive feelings grow stronger when he hears that Achimaatz is the bearer of the news.^[9]

When Achimaatz reaches David, his initial actions are performed in an unusual order: "And Achimaatz called, and said to the king, ' All is well.' And he bowed down before the king with his face to the earth."^[10] This order is meant to calm David down: He opens with a general statement: "All is well," and only afterwards does he begin a series of actions in the usual order, starting with bowing down before the king.

In any event, when Achimaatz sees David, he begins to think that perhaps Yoav was right. He therefore replaces the crushing words which he had intended to say – "that the Lord has avenged him of his enemies" – with a less committing sentence: "Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delivered up the men that lifted up their hand against my lord the king." The word "delivered" (*sagar*) usually denotes capturing a person alive, rather than killing him;^[11] and instead of speaking of "enemies," Achimaatz uses the term "men." Achimaatz's conclusion is strengthened when David speaks – perhaps asserting, perhaps asking: "It is/Is it well with the young man Avshalom." Achimaatz's answer is unclear and evasive: "When Yoav sent the king's servant, and me your servant, I saw a great tumult, but I knew not what it was."

Now, when David is already riddled with doubts, the Kushite arrives, and states what Achimaatz had wanted to say from the outset: "Tidings for my lord the king; for the Lord has avenged you this day of all them that rose up against you." And David then turns to the Kushite not with an assertion, but with a question: "Is it well with the young man Avshalom?"^[12] The Kushite does not answer the question directly, but since, unlike Achimaatz, he does not fully understand the situation, his answer leaves no room for

doubt: "The enemies of my lord the king and all that rise up against you^[13] to do you hurt, be as that young man is."

(Translated by David Strauss)

^[1] In our *shiur* on that chapter, we explained how Avner, who had originally suggested, "Let the young men, I pray you, arise and play before us" (ibid. v. 14), could raise such an argument against Yoav.

^[2] The structure in the Kidron valley known today as "Yad Avshalom" is totally unrelated to Avshalom. It was built during the Second Temple period by the priests of the Chazir watch, close to their burial cave. Nevertheless, at least conceptually, Avshalom's shame continued to be attached to this structure in later generations. There are reports that Jews in the Middle Ages used to throw stones on Yad Avshalom, thus forming a great heap of stones.

^[3] A "yad" is a monument meant to perpetuate a military victory (as by Shaul; see [I Shmuel 15:12](#)) or to memorialize a person who died without children, there being no one to mention his name. The latter meaning is implied by the verse: "To them will I give in My house and within My walls a monument (*yad*) and a memorial better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting memorial, that shall not be cut off" (*Yeshayahu* 56:5).

^[4] In previous cases in which Yoav sent a messenger to the king, he was careful to formulate the message himself, as in the story of the death of Uriya the Hittite (11:18-21) and in the story of the Tekoan woman (14:3-9). Here, in contrast, he leaves the precise formulation to the Kushite, so that he not involve himself personally in the tidings regarding Avshalom's death and his responsibility for what happened.

^[5] Rashi explains that this means that he would not receive a reward for delivering these tidings. This is also the way that Rashi explains David's words to the Amaleki lad who reported the death of Shaul: "When one told me, saying: 'Behold, Shaul is dead,' and he was in his own eyes as though he brought good tidings, I took hold of him and slew him in Tziklag, instead of giving a reward for his tidings" (4:10). Rashi writes there: "Who thought that he would make me happy, so that I would give him a reward for his tidings."

^[6] The Radak explains that the reference is to the area between the outer and inner gates of the city. Indeed, in the archaeological excavations conducted at Dan, Megido, Gezer, and Lakhish, we find that people would enter the city through a double gate, and that between the two gates there was a plaza, which apparently was the place where the judges held court. The gate was covered with a roof which served as a lookout – this is the "roof of the gate to the wall" that is mentioned here. Above the gate there were also additional rooms, such as "the chamber over the gate" mentioned below (19:1).

^[7] It is interesting that both of these leaders led Israel for forty years (see [I Shmuel 4:18](#); [II Shmuel 5:4](#)).

^[8] It is possible that Achimaatz wished to bring David the news because he had before delivered bad tidings to him – the report about Achitofel's counsel. If a good man delivers good tidings, it stands to reason that bad tidings testify to the problematic nature of the person delivering them! Accordingly, Achimaatz wished to remove from himself this "label" by reporting good news.

^[9] We find a similar phenomenon regarding Achimaatz's partner in espionage in Jerusalem, Yonatan ben Evyatar the priest, at the time that Adoniyahu crowned himself as king, a move that Evyatar supported ([I Melakhim 1](#)). The event is cut short when David crowns Shlomo, and Yonatan reports to Adoniyahu about what had happened: "While he yet spoke, behold, Yonatan the son of Evyatar the priest came; and Adoniyahu said, 'Come in; for you are a worthy man, and bring good tidings.' And Yonatan answered and said to Adoniyahu, 'Verily our lord King David has made Shlomo

king' " (ibid. vv. 42-43). In both stories, the son of the High Priest comes to report about an event that ends a rebellion, and in both stories the person to whom the tidings were brought thought that they would be good tidings, but it turned out that they were bad tidings for him. Achimaatz, however, was the son of the chosen High Priest, Tzadok, and he reported tidings that were in fact good – the end of Avshalom's revolt; Yonatan was the son of the High Priest who had been deposed, and he reports the tidings to the leader of the rebellion, for whom the tidings were indeed bad.

^[10] Usually, bowing down before the king is the first thing that one does when he appears before him, preceding any verbal address (see [I Shmuel 25:23-24](#), regarding Avigayil; above 1:2-3, regarding the Amaleki lad; and below 19:19-20, regarding Shim'i ben Gera; and elsewhere).

^[11] As in David's question to God: "Will the men of Ke'ila deliver up (*hayasgiru*) me and my men into the hand of Shaul?" ([I Shmuel 23:12](#)); see also [Amos 1:6](#).

^[12] Elsewhere in Scripture, we find this phenomenon in the reverse order: When Yaakov disguises himself as Esav, Yitzchak is suspicious, and thus he first asks: "Come near, I pray you, that I may feel you, my son, whether you are (*ha-ata*) my very son Esav or not" ([Bereishit 27:21](#)). Afterwards, Yitzchak calms down a little, and in his next question it seems that he is merely trying to verify what he had learned from his first question: "And he discerned him not, because his hands were hairy, as his brother Esav's hands; so he blessed him. And he said, ' You are (*ata*) my very son Esav.' And he said, ' I am' " (ibid. vv. 23-24) – this time without the interrogative *heh*.

^[13] This expression, "all that rise up against you," is connected to [Tehillim 3](#), whose heading is: "A psalm of David, when he fled from Avshalom his son," after which is stated: "Lord, how many are my adversaries become! Many are they **that rise up against me.**"