

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

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LECTURE 98: CHAPTER 19 (PART I)

DAVID'S REACTION TO AVSHALOM'S DEATH

I. O AVSHALOM, MY SON, MY SON

When David is informed about the death of his beloved son Avshalom, he bursts out with cries of grief that are unparalleled in Scripture:

(1) And the king was much moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, thus he said, “ O my son Avshalom, my son, my son Avshalom! Would I had died for you, O Avshalom, my son, my son!” (2) And it was told to Yoav, “ Behold, the king weeps and mourns for Avshalom.” (3) And the victory that day was turned into mourning unto all the people; for the people heard it said that day, “ The king grieves for his son.” (4) And the people got by stealth that day into the city, as people who are ashamed steal away when they flee in battle. (5) And the king covered¹[1] his face, and the king cried with a loud voice, “ O my son Avshalom, O Avshalom, my son, my son!”

This account strongly emphasizes David's exceptional attitude toward Avshalom. We already noted in chapter 13 the great gap between David's

1 [1] The term "*la'at*" means "covered," as in: “ And the priest said, The sword of Golyat the Pelishti, whom you slew in the Ela valley, behold, it is here covered (*luta*) with a cloth behind the *efod*” ([I Shmuel 21:10](#)). Covering the face is a sign of mourning (see Radak). Scripture may perhaps have used this term to express criticism of David's attitude towards Avshalom in the previous chapter and of his problematic command: “**Deal gently** (*le'at*) for my sake with the young man, even with Avshalom” (18:5).

mourning over the death of Avshalom and his mourning over the death of his firstborn son, Amnon. Then too, David mourned and rent his clothing, but we do not find a lamentation over the death of the crown prince. Over Avshalom, on the other hand, David offers a dramatic lamentation, crying out over and over again: "My son, my son, Avshalom."²[2] Scripture specially emphasizes the fact that David did not weep in his house, but rather he went up to the chamber over the gate and wept and mourned in the sight of all the people. Thus, the warriors' joy of victory turned into the sorrow of mourners, as if they had just been routed in battle.³[3]

David's conduct greatly angers Yoav. Before we examine his words to David, let us note the contrast between Yoav's attitude to David's mourning and the people's attitude to the same. In the eyes of Yoav, "The king weeps and mourns **for Avshalom**," whereas the people hear that "The king grieves **for his son**." The people see the personal aspect of David's grief, but Yoav cannot identify with this mourning, because he cannot forget for even a moment who the person is whose death David is mourning.

Yoav therefore turns to David with words that are unprecedented in their causticity.

(6) And Yoav came into the house⁴[4] to the king, and said, " You have shamed this day the faces of all your servants, who this day have

2 [2] David calls Avshalom "my son" eight times. *Chazal* found symbolic significance in this: "Why is 'my son' repeated eight times? Seven to raise him from the seven divisions of Gehinnom; and as for the last, some say to unite his [severed] head to his body [Rashi: For his head was cast far off from his body] and others say to bring him into the World to Come" (*Sota* 10b).

3 [3] Scripture emphasizes this through its threefold repetition of the words, "That day" (vv. 3-4), which is an expression used both in connection with days of salvation and victory (e.g., [Shemot 14:30](#); [Yehoshua 4:14](#); *Shofetim* 5:1; and elsewhere), and in connection with days of sorrow and distress (e.g., [Devarim 31:17](#); I *Shemuel* 3:12; 8:18). In this way, Scripture expresses the turning of "that day" from a day of victory into a day of mourning.

4 [4] We learn from here that in the meantime, David had gone back into the house, following his demonstrative weeping in the chamber over the gate. This is stated in praise of Yoav; he did not immediately reproach David in public, but rather waited until he went back inside his house.

saved your life, and the lives of your sons and of your daughters,^{5[5]} and the lives of your wives,^{6[6]} and the lives of your concubines;^{7[7]} (7) in that you love them that hate you, and hate them that love you. For you have declared^{8[8]} this day that princes and servants are nought unto you; for this day I perceive, that if Avshalom had lived, and all we had died this day, then it had pleased you well. (8) Now therefore arise, go forth, and speak to the heart of your servants; for I swear by the Lord, if you go not forth, there will not tarry a man with you this night; and that will be worse unto you than all the evil that has befallen you from your youth until now.”

It seems that Scripture puts its own criticism into the mouth of Yoav, the hero in the story of Avshalom's rebellion. Yoav's words, as sharp and piercing as they may be, express the clear truth: David's men fought on his behalf with the knowledge, shared also by David, that the alternative would be that Avshalom would rule as king and kill David and all of his men. Through his heavy mourning over Avshalom, David offends his loyal soldiers and deeply disappoints them. In the continuation of his words, Yoav goes as far as to say that David's conduct is liable to drive away even his most loyal followers.

Scripture seems to side with Yoav's approach. Throughout this section, David is called "the king;" he is not mentioned by name. Scripture thereby alludes that David is acting here like a private individual, that he is ignoring his role as king, which obligates him to rise above his personal feelings and act for the good of the people, as Yoav puts it so well.

David cannot ignore the truth in Yoav's words:

5 [5] It stands to reason that he means that with his preferential attitude toward Avshalom, David brings shame to his other children.

6 [6] The preference shown to Avshalom is an insult not only to the brothers, but to their mothers as well.

7 [7] It stands to reason that Yoav is alluding here to Avshalom's sleeping with ten of his father's concubines on the roof in the sight of all of Israel.

8 [8] The term "*hagada*" denotes not only speech, but any behavior from which conclusions may be drawn, as in the verse: "And the firmament shows (*magid*) His handiwork" ([Tehillim 19:2](#)).

(9) Then the king arose and sat in the gate. And they told unto all the people, saying, " Behold, the king does sit in the gate;" and all the people came before the king. Now Israel had fled every man to his tent.

It is, however, precisely at this point that a new drama begins, which once again threatens the wholeness of David's kingdom.

II. THE CONFRONTATION

Following Avshalom's death, disagreement arises among the tribes of Israel:

(10) And all the people were at strife throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, " The king delivered us out of the hand of our enemies, and he saved us out of the hand of the Pelishtim; and now he is fled out of the land from Avshalom. (11) And Avshalom, whom we anointed over us, is dead in battle. Now, therefore, why speak you not a word of bringing the king back?"

The argument, "Why speak you not a word of bringing the king back," implies that restoring David to his kingship over all of Israel was not self-evident. It seems that this is also the way we should understand the words: "And all the people were at strife throughout all the tribes of Israel" – that they "were arguing one with the other" (Rashi). There were those who thought that there was no way back. In the end, however, the positive approach won out, and the people's gratitude for David's rescuing them from the hands of the Pelishtim and the failure of Avshalom's rebellion^{9[9]} led to the decision to restore David to his kingship over all of Israel. Here, close to the end of David's kingship, the circle could have been closed, for the unity of Judah and Israel was one of David's central goals, as we saw in the first chapters of II *Shemuel*.

9 [9] It is possible that verse 10 expresses both approaches: the approach that says that David should be restored to the throne, for "the king delivered us out of the hand of our enemies, and he saved us out of the hand of the Pelishtim," as well as the approach that scorns him: "and now he is fled out of the land from Avshalom." We already discussed in the past the phenomenon of the transition from one speaker to another without any formal note of the matter; see for example [I *Shemuel* 9:12-13](#).

It is precisely at this point, however, that we are witness to a surprising turn of events. As the tribes of Israel prepare themselves for renewing their connection to David, he himself works to strengthen the connection with the members of his own tribe:

(12) And King David sent to Tzadok and to Evyatar the priests, saying, “ Speak unto the elders of Judah, saying, ‘ Why are you the last to bring the king back to his house? For the speech of all Israel has come to the king, to bring him to his house. (13) You are my brethren, you are my bone and my flesh; why then should you be the last to bring back the king?’ (14) And say you to Amasa, ‘ Are you not my bone and my flesh?’¹⁰[10] God do so to me, and more also, if you be not captain of the host before me continually instead of Yoav.’ ” (15) And he bowed the heart of all the men of Judah, even as the heart of one man; so that they sent unto the king, “ Return you and all your servants.” (16) So the king returned and came to the Jordan. And Judah came to Gilgal, to go to meet the king, to bring the king over the Jordan.

It follows from here that word of the turn in the tribes of Israel had already reached David: "For the speech of all Israel was come to the king to bring him to his house"¹¹[11] – and now David turns to Tzadok and Evyatar, asking them to work towards a similar step on the part of Judah. Twice he repeats the words, "Why are you the last to bring the king back to his house?" And he is astonished by this behavior: "Are you not my bone and my flesh?"

10 [10] As it may be recalled, Amasa ben Yeter was David's nephew, the son of his sister Avigayil. We already saw above (5:11) that the note of a family connection is sometimes the basis of a political pact, as in the case of Israel's turning to David following the death of Ish-Boshet: "Behold, we are your bone and your flesh" (ibid.), and in the words of Avimelekh to the people of Shekhem: "Remember also that I am your bone and your flesh" (*Shofetim* 9:2).

11 [11] According to the Radak, this is a parenthetical statement, which notes that the speech of Israel came to the king. Rashi, in contrast, explains that this sentence is part of David's words, in which he tells the elders of Judah that the speech of Israel came to him. In any event, it is clear that a connection had already been made between Israel and David, and against this background he turns now to the people of Judah.

As stated, this step veers from David's approach until now. Unlike Shaul, who granted special rights to the tribe of Binyamin,¹²[12] David consistently refrained from showing preference or giving any special standing to the tribe of Judah, based on his aspiration to unite all of the people together. For this reason, among others, David moved his capital from Hebron to Jerusalem. Why then did David now change his policy?

It seems that David drew a conclusion from Avshalom's decision to start his rebellion specifically in Hebron. In chapter 15, we argued that Avshalom apparently found that the people of Hebron were disgruntled about David's evenhanded approach, an approach that, among other things, led to Hebron's losing its standing as a capital city. David therefore thought that in order to prevent another rebellion, he should develop a special relationship with the people closest to him, so that they not once again feel antagonistic towards him.

This step, however, was exceedingly dangerous from the other direction. The fierce tension between Judah and Israel was always liable to lead to a split, and a change in the status-quo in favor of one side was liable to lead to an impairment of the other side. As we shall see below, this is exactly what happens in our story. David arrives at an erroneous conclusion, and instead of calming the spirits, he lays the foundation for the next rebellion.

In any case, there is another component to this appeasing tendency: David deposes Yoav from his position as commander in chief and appoints Amasa ben Yeter, Avshalom's general, in his place. With this move, David tries to achieve two goals: First, he wishes to hurt Yoav, who contravened David's order to capture Avshalom alive;¹³[13] second, he wishes to appease

12 [12] This is what we inferred from, among other things, Shaul's words to his men during his pursuit after David: "Hear now, you Binyaminites; will the son of Yishai give every one of you fields and vineyards, will he make you all captains of thousands and captains of hundreds" ([1 Shemuel 22:7](#)).

13 [13] As noted by the Radak. It is not clear, however, whether David knew the extent to which Yoav was involved in Avshalom's killing. As the Ralbag says: "It is also possible that it was reported to him how Yoav violated his command and killed Avshalom." In any case, David could safely assume that nobody would dare to cause harm to Avshalom had Yoav not allowed him to understand that this was legitimate. The Ralbag himself offers another reason for Yoav's dismissal: "Or perhaps he was upset with Yoav for the harsh words that he had uttered about his weeping over Avshalom."

the rebels, the people of Judah, Amasa being one of their outstanding leaders.

However, this step will also prove to have been a mistake. The blow to Yoav ben Tzeruya, the military leader who had successfully put down the rebellion, is inappropriate. David did not depose Yoav for his part in the murder of Avner, for which Yoav was without a doubt guilty. Precisely now, when he did the right thing at the right time, he is deposed! On the other hand, rewarding a rebel like Amasa ben Yeter, who was Avshalom's general, is quite astonishing, and we will see below how great a mistake this step will prove to be.

In the end, the people of Judah take a very favorable view of the change in David's policy, and the results are soon evident:

(15) And he bowed¹⁴[14] the heart of all the men of Judah, even as the heart of one man; so that they sent unto the king, "Return you and all your servants." **(16)** So the king returned and came to the Jordan. And Judah came to Gilgal, to go to meet the king, to bring the king over the Jordan.

(Translated by David Strauss)

¹⁴ [14] The commentators disagree about the subject of this verb. According to the Radak, it is Amasa. But the *Metzudot* writes: "With these words David, bowed the heart of all the men of Judah, as one easily bows the heart of one man." This explanation is very understandable according to our approach.