
Lesson 12: The Outlaw

Text: Chapters 22-26

In his persecution of David the jealous king showed no mercy. When he heard that David had found refuge in Nob, the city of priests, he ordered the wholesale slaughter of the entire city: “both men and women, children and sucklings, and oxen and asses and sheep” (22, 19). Our sages commented on this brutal massacre and compared it with Saul’s display of mercy towards Amalek (chapter 15):

When the Holy one, blessed-be-He, said to Saul: “go and smite Amalek” (Samuel I 15, 3), Saul said: If man has sinned, what sin has the animal committed? And if the adults have transgressed, what was the sin of the children? A Divine Voice then called out: “Be not righteous overmuch” (Ecclesiastes 7, 16). And when Saul said to the Doeg: “turn then and fall upon the priests” (Samuel I 22, 18), a Divine Voice called out: “Be not overmuch wicked” (Ecclesiastes 7, 17)

- **Tanna Devi Eliyahu Rabba, 31**

בשעה שאמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא לשאול "לך והכית את עמלק" (שמואל א' טו, ג), אמר שאול: אם אדם חטא, בהמה מה חטאה? ואם גדולים חטאו, קטנים מה חטאו? יצאה בת קול ואמרה לו: "אל תהי צדיק הרבה" (קהלת ז, טז). ובשעה שאמר לו שאול לדואג "סב אתה ופגע בכהנים" (שמואל א' כב, יח), יצאה בת קול ואמרה לו: "אל תרשע הרבה" (קהלת ז, יז).

- **תנא דבי אליהו רבה לא**

Meanwhile, David adjusted to his new way of life as captain of a small troop. This kind of troop was not unusual in those times. In the book of Judges we read of a similar band of fighters who followed Jephtah when he was driven away from his family’s farm (Judges 11, 1-3).

There were two kinds of making a living in the land of Canaan: the settled inhabitants who lived in towns and villages, and the nomads who lived in tents and looted the settlements. In between these two main types there was an intermediary type of semi-nomads. Some of them were farming at times and wandering at other times. The people who joined Jephtah and David belonged to one of the intermediary types. They were essentially settlers whose place was in town or village, but for one reason or another they were compelled to leave their homesteads and live on the fringe of civilization.

Who were these people? They were men who were in debt, or were in distress for some reason, or were bitter towards their society. Some may have been run-away slaves who had rebelled against their masters - this may be the meaning of 25, 10: “there are many servants nowadays that break away every man from his master”. Others were, like David, men who were persecuted by the authorities. And then there were people like Jephtah, who had been driven away by their own clan.

These distressed and discontented people made their way to thinly populated areas. Some of them have tried to join one of the nomadic tribes, but the nomads were not keen on taking in these “foreign” elements with their different background. The nomads were poor but proud. They had close family ties and they were very keen on their noble birth. In fact, their family tree was their main possession. They looked suspiciously at the settled inhabitants. They were, of course, always willing to offer asylum to a fugitive who ran away from a settlement, but he would always remain a stranger, outside the pale of respectability. No wonder the “discontented” tended to band together in troops, like the troops of Jephtah and David. Their way of life and economy would then be practically nomadic, living in tents or caves and tending cattle, and occasionally looting a settlement. But their main occupation was fighting. They were men of the sword, and their sword was for hire by the highest bidder. They were roving professional soldiers, offering their services to clans who required aid in settling accounts with an enemy. When the people of Gilead were threatened by war, they sent for Jephtah and asked him to fight their battle (Judges 11, 4-6). Such troops were also hired by clans or settlements to act as guards against marauding nomads. The troop undertook to keep guard during the harvest, and the farmers payed them part of the harvest. This is described in chapter 25 where David is described as demanding of the farmer Nabal a share of the harvest (25, 2-8). One of Nabal’s servants explains the work of David’s troop (25, 16-17):

But the men were very good unto us
and we were not hurt
neither missed we anything, as long
as we went with them,
when we were in the fields;
they were a wall unto us
both by night and by day,
all the while we were with them
herding the sheep.

וְהָאֲנָשִׁים טָבִים לְבוֹ מֵאָדָּם
וְלֹא הִכְלַמְנוּ
וְלֹא פָקַדְנוּ מֵאוֹמֶהָ
כְּלִימָה הִתְהַלַּכְנוּ אִתָּם
בְּהִיטְנוּ בַשָּׂדֶה:
חֹמֶה הָיוּ עָלֵינוּ
גַּם לַיְלָה גַּם יוֹמָם
כְּלִימָה הָיוּתְנוּ עִמָּם
רֹעִים הַצֹּאן:

It is not surprising to find that these troops were not popular. Some of them were barely distinguishable from the nomads who frequently attacked the Israelite villages. The troops were not noted for their loyalty to Israel. After all, these were embittered outcasts who nursed a grievance against the Israelite society. When David captained his troops, he was in real danger of becoming a despised man. People were likely to forget his heroic battles against the Philistines, and look upon him as a chief of a band of outlaws who were despoiling the countryside.

David was now faced with one of the most difficult tests in his career. How could he lead a troop of embittered fighters and at the same time keep alive the image of the beloved hero and the future king chosen by God?