

105: Chapter 22 The Song of David

- Rav Amnon Bazak

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

Rav Amnon Bazak

LECTURE 105: CHAPTER 22

THE SONG OF DAVID

I. THE FIRST PART

Chapter 23 is the third appendix found at the end of the book of *Shmuel* – the song of David, whose heading is:

(1) And David spoke unto the Lord the words of this song in the day that the Lord delivered him out of the hand of all his enemies and out of the hand of Shaul.

The song is clearly divided into two parts, and at first glance, the gap between them is quite surprising.

The theme of the first part is David's deliverance by the hand of God alone, with David playing no role in his own rescue. The first part opens with a heading that clarifies the main contents of the song – the belief that it was God who had saved David until now.

(2) And he said: The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer.
(3) The God who is my rock, in Him I take refuge; my shield, and my horn of salvation, my high tower, and my refuge; my savior, You save me from violence. (4) Praised, I cry, is the Lord, and I am saved from my enemies.

From here, David moves on to describe the difficult situation in which he was found, to the point of mortal danger, and how God heard his prayer:

(5) For the waves of **death** compassed me. The floods of Belial assailed me. (6) The cords of Sheol surrounded me; the snares of **death** confronted me. (7) In my distress I called upon the Lord, yea, I called unto my God; and out of His temple He heard my voice, and my cry did enter into His ears.

The next section describes how God appeared in battle. This section does not speak about David at all, but rather about God's dread and splendor, which impacts upon all the forces of nature:

(8) Then the **earth** did shake and quake, the foundations of **heaven** did tremble; they were shaken, because He was wroth. (9) Smoke arose up in His nostrils, and fire out of His mouth did devour; coals flamed forth from Him. (10) He bowed the **heavens** also, and came down; and **thick darkness** was under His feet. (11) And He rode upon a *keruv*, and did fly; yea, He was seen¹[1] upon the wings of the **wind**. (12) And He made darkness pavilions²[2] round about Him, gathering of **waters**, thick clouds of the **skies**. (13) At the brightness before Him coals of fire flamed forth. (14) The Lord thundered from heaven, and the Most High gave forth His

1 [1] The *Metzudot* explain the word "*vayera*": "He was seen (*nir'e*) coming on the wings of the wind." But Rashi writes, based on the parallel verse in [Tehillim 18](#), that this means: "He swooped down (*va-yade*) on the wings of the wind," as in "which will swoop down (*gid'e*) like the vulture" ([Devarim 28:49](#)). The letters *dalet* and *resh* are commonly interchanged in Scripture, as we have noted several times in the past; see for example our *shiur* on [I Shmuel 19](#), regarding the words "*kevir ha-izim*" (v. 13).

2 [2] In other words, God set the cloud and the darkness around Him as a screen.

voice. **(15)** And He sent out arrows, and scattered them; **lightning**, and discomfited them. **(16)** And **the channels of the sea** appeared, **the foundations of the world** were laid bare by the rebuke of the Lord, at the blast of the breath of His nostrils.

Following this description, David moves on to the section that relates to himself – how God's appearance helped save him from the difficult situation in which he had been found:

(17) He sent from on high, He took **me**; He drew **me** out of many waters; **(18)** He delivered **me** from my enemy most strong, from them that hated **me**, for they were too mighty for **me**. **(19)** They confronted **me** in the day of **my** calamity; but the Lord was a stay unto **me**. **(20)** He brought **me** forth also into a large place; He delivered **me**, because He delighted in **me**.

The personal dimension is emphasized, among other ways, by the multiple repetition of the suffix "ni" (me), which gives expression to God's acting on behalf of David. David himself is described here as being utterly passive, the deliverance being attributed exclusively to God.

We now come to a somewhat surprising argument. The next section opens and closes with a similar formulation, which expresses the structure of the section:

(21) The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands³ has He recompensed me.

(22) For I have kept the ways of the Lord, and have not wickedly departed from my God. **(23)** For all His ordinances were before me; and as for His statutes, I did not depart from them. **(24)** And I was single-hearted toward Him, and I kept myself from my iniquity.

3 [3] "*Ke-vor yada'*" – according to the cleanness of my hands (see [Bereishit 20:5](#)), in the sense of hands that are clean and pure.

(25) Therefore has the Lord recompensed me according to my righteousness, according to my cleanness in His eyes.

On the face of it, David is arguing that there is nothing surprising about his deliverance, for surely God merely recompensed him for his righteousness and his walking in God's path. Is there not something arrogant about this statement?

The answer seems to be simple. David does not mean to boast about his righteousness, but rather to convey an educational message. David emphasizes to his audience that one who walks in the path of God merits God's help. David's successes in his battles and in his ceaseless struggles are wholly attributed not to his own strength and bravery, but to his walking in God's path and his observance of His commandments. Indeed, this is the conclusion that he draws from the story of his rescue:

(26) With the merciful You show Yourself merciful, with the upright man You show Yourself upright. (27) With the pure You show Yourself pure; and with the crooked You show Yourself subtle. (28) And the afflicted people You save; but Your eyes are upon the haughty, that You may humble them. (29) For You are my lamp, O Lord; and the Lord illuminates my darkness.

David could have ended his song here. The message was expressed clearly, words of praise for God were uttered, and there is nothing more to add. To our great surprise, however, the song is still far from being over.

II. THE SECOND PART

The second part of the song paints an entirely different picture:

(30) For by You **I run** upon a troop;^{4[4]} by my God do **I scale** a wall. (31) As for God, His way is perfect; the word of the Lord is tried; He is a shield unto all them that take refuge in Him. (32) For who is God, save the Lord? And who is a Rock, save our God? (33) The God who is my strong fortress, and who lets my way go forth straight; (34) Who makes my feet like hinds', and sets me upon my high places; (35) Who trains my hands for war, so that my arms do bend a bow of brass. (36) You have also given me Your shield of salvation; and Your condescension has made **me** great.^{5[5]} (37) You have enlarged my steps under me, and my feet have not slipped. (38) **I have pursued** my enemies, and **destroyed them**; neither did I turn back till they were consumed. (39) And **I have consumed them**, and **smitten them through**, that they cannot arise; yea, they are fallen under my feet. (40) For You have girded me with strength unto the battle; You have subdued under me those that rose up against me. (41) You have also made my enemies turn their backs unto me; yea, them that hate me, that I might cut them off. (42) They looked, but there was none to save; even unto the Lord, but He answered them not. (43) Then **did I beat them** small as the dust of the earth, **I did stamp them** as the mire of the streets, and **did tread them** down. (44) You also have delivered me from the contentions of my people; You have kept me to be the head of the nations; a people whom I have not known serve me. (45) The sons of the stranger dwindle away before me; as soon as they hear of me, they obey me. (46) The sons of the stranger fade away, and come halting out of their close places.^{6[6]}

4 [4] "*Arutz gedud*" means: I will run with a troop, or I will run after a troop. According to the second explanation, this might relate to the battle with the Amaleki troop: "And David inquired of the Lord, saying, ' Shall I pursue after **this troop**? Shall I overtake them?' " ([I Shmuel 30:8](#)).

5 [5] Rashi explains: "You have shown me great humility." It is possible, however, to understand the word "*va-anotekha*" based on the verse: "There is not the voice of those who shout ("*anot*") for mastery" ([Shemot 32:18](#)). That is to say, God, as it were, calls out words of encouragement, and fills David with a spirit of bravery (*Da'at Mikra*).

6 [6] The words "*ve-yachgeru mi-misgerotam*" are difficult. Rashi explains that they will be made lame and crippled "from the hardship of the afflictions of the closed place with which I shall afflict them." The Ralbag writes: "And they will be in fear from the place in which they are enclosed" (like "The sword without, and terror within, shall destroy both the young man and the virgin" [[Devarim 32:25](#)]).

Here, David suddenly transforms from passive survivor to very active fighter. Here too there are verbs that relate to God and there is repeated use of the suffix "*ni*" (me, underlined), but alongside them there is an extended series of verbs relating to David (in bold). The picture painted here is that David was indeed saved with the help of God, but he acted on his own to destroy and vanquish his enemies. The main point here is not David's rescue, but his smiting of his enemies.

How are we to understand this sharp transition from the first part of the song to the second part? The answer to this question seems to be found already in the song's heading: "In the day that the Lord delivered him out of the hand of all his enemies, and out of the hand of Shaul." This heading sums up the two main chapters of David's struggles. In the first chapter – which is mentioned second in the heading – David is pursued by Shaul, against whom he is in great measure unable to strike back. The first half of the song accords with this chapter in his life, during which time he was repeatedly saved from Shaul's pursuits: his rescue from the spear that was thrown at him ([I Shmuel 18-19](#)), his rescue from Shaul's messengers who were temporarily turned into prophets (*ibid.*), his rescue in Ke'ila and in Sela-ha-Machloket (*ibid.* 23), and other rescues.^{7[7]}

This situation changed when David was anointed king, when he overcomes the Pelishtim and defeats Aram, Edom, Amon,^{8[8]} and the Anakim. This period of his life – the period of his grand military victories and achievements – accords with the second part of the song. During this period, David was indeed more active, but even so, he never for a minute forgot that God was the source of his strength.

We now come to the concluding verses of the song:

7 [7] During the days of his kingship, David returned for a short time to his situation in the days of Shaul – during the period of Avshalom's rebellion, when once again he was pursued and he had no wish to attack, but merely to survive. It seems, however, that the song was written before Avshalom's rebellion, as will be explained in the next note.

8 [8] It stands to reason that the song was written prior to the war with Amon and the episode involving Bat-Sheva, for it is difficult to assume that following that incident David would have described himself as a righteous man whom God rewarded in accordance with his righteousness. It is difficult to see how David could have said: "And I was single-hearted toward Him, and I kept myself from my iniquity," together with: "For I know my transgressions; and my sin is ever before me" ([Tehillim 51:5](#)).

(47) The Lord lives, and blessed be my Rock; and exalted be the God, my Rock of salvation. (48) Even the God that executes vengeance for me, and brings down peoples under me, (49) And that brings me forth from my enemies; yea, You lift me up above them that rise up against me; You deliver me from the violent man. (50) Therefore, I will give thanks unto You, O Lord, among the nations, and will sing praises unto Your name. (51) A tower of salvation is He to His king; and shows mercy to His anointed, to David and to his seed, for evermore.^{9[9]}

These verses summarize the two parts of the song. On the one hand, God "brings down peoples under me," while on the other hand, "You deliver me from the violent man." It is for both aspects that David offers his thanksgiving: "Therefore I will give thanks unto You, O Lord, among the nations, and will sing praises unto Your name."

III. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN "MAGDIL" AND "MIGDOL"

David's song is recorded in two different places in Scripture, in our chapter and in [Tehillim 18](#). There are dozens of differences between the two versions, most of them of little consequence, and many of them noted in tractate [Soferim \(8:1\)](#).^{10[10]} Generally

9 [9] In our *shiur* on Chana's prayer ([I Shmuel 2](#)), we noted the words that connect the three songs in the book of *Shmuel*. In her prayer, Chana voices the hope that God "will give strength to **His king**, and exalt the horn of **His anointed**" ([I Shmuel 2:10](#)); in his lamentation, David mourns "for there the shield of the mighty was vilely cast away, the shield of Saul, not **anointed** with oil" ([II Shmuel 1:21](#)); and David's song seals the book with thanksgiving to God: "A tower of salvation is He to **His king**; and shows mercy to **His anointed**" (ibid. 22:51). For additional parallels between David's song and Chana's prayer, see the summary to the explanation of that prayer in the *Da'at Mikra* commentary (p. 527).

10 [10] The most famous difference between the two songs is found in the last verse. In our chapter it says: "A tower (*migdol*) of salvation is He to His king; and shows mercy to His anointed, to David and to his seed, for evermore," whereas in *Tehillim* it says: "He gives great (*magdil*) salvation to His king; and shows mercy to His anointed, to David and to his seed, for evermore."

This difference gave rise to the novel explanation of the author of the *Torah Temima*, R. Barukh Halevi Epstein (in his book, *Barukh She-Amar*) for why we

speaking, it may be said that the version found in *Tehillim* appears to be more edited than the version found here in various senses:

1) The song in *Tehillim* contains various additions that complete the version in our chapter. Here are several examples: In our chapter it says: "And out of His temple He heard my voice, and my cry into His ears," whereas in *Tehillim* it says: "Out of His temple He heard my voice, and my cry **came before Him** unto His ears" (v. 7). In our chapter it says: "And He made darkness pavilions round about Him," whereas in *Tehillim* it says: "He made darkness **His hiding-place**, His pavilion round about Him" (v. 12). In our chapter it says: "For You are my lamp, O Lord," whereas in *Tehillim* it says: "For You do **light** my lamp, O Lord" (v. 29).

2) The chapter in *Tehillim* varies its wording in places where in our chapter the same word is repeated. Thus, already in the first verse, in our chapter it says: "In the day that the Lord delivered him out of **the hand** (*kaf*) of all his enemies, and out of **the hand** (*kaf*) of Shaul," whereas in *Tehillim* it says: "In the day that the Lord delivered him from the hand (*kaf*) of all his enemies, and from the hand (*yad*) of Shaul." Similarly, in verse 7, in our chapter it says: "In my distress I called (*ekra*) upon the Lord, yea, I called (*ekra*) unto my God," whereas in *Tehillim* it says: "In my distress I called (*ekra*) upon the Lord, and cried (*ashave'a*) unto my God."

say in the weekday *Birkat ha-Mazon* "*Magdil*," whereas on Shabbat we say "*Migdol*": "One of the copyists wrote in the margin '*be-sh-b migdol*,' and his intention was to say that 'in *Shmuel Bet* the reading is *migdol*,' and one of the copyists after him erroneously deciphered the abbreviation '*be-sh-b*' as 'on Shabbat.' And from there the error continued from one copy to the next, and from there to the printed version until today."

This explanation is very astonishing. The custom to say on Shabbat "*migdol*" already appears and is explained in the *Abudraham* (*Birkat Ha-Lechem, zimmun*): "And it seems to me that the reason is that on Shabbat he is a greater king in comparison to a weekday. And '*migdol*' is plene with a *vav*, and a *cholam* with a *vav* indicates a great king. And '*magdil*' lacks a *yod*, and a *chirik* without a *yod* indicates a small king. And furthermore, '*magdil*' is in *Tehillim*, when David was not yet king, whereas '*migdol*' is in the Prophets, when he was already king." The *Rishonim* were not familiar with the division of the book of *Shmuel* into two books (R. David Abudraham lived in the 14th century), and never made use of it, and so the *Torah Temima's* explanation, with all its originality, is not at all reasonable.

3) In several places in *Tehillim*, a verb is written out in full form, whereas in our chapter, it appears in an abridged form. For example: "The cords of Sheol surrounded me (*sabuni*)" – "The cords of Sheol surrounded me (*sevavuni*)" (v. 6); "With the pure You show Yourself pure (*titavar*), and with the crooked You show Yourself subtle (*titapal*)" – "With the pure you show Yourself pure (*titbarar*), and with the crooked You show Yourself subtle (*titpatal*)" (v. 27); "For You have girded me (*va-tazreni*) with strength unto the battle" – "For You have girded me (*va-te'azreni*) with strength unto the battle" (v. 40).

4. The version in *Tehillim* seems to contain emendations of problematic readings in our chapter. In our chapter, it says: "For all His ordinances were before me; and as for His statutes, **I did not depart from it** (*asur mimena*)" (v. 23). All the commentators deal with the issue of why it does not read: "I did not depart from them" (*meihem*).¹¹[11] In contrast, in *Tehillim*, the reading is smooth: "For all His ordinances were before me, **and I put not away His statutes from me** (*asir meni*)."¹¹ Furthermore, regarding the five places in our chapter where we find a *keri* and a *ketiv* (except for the one in the concluding verse: verses 8, 15, 23, 33, 34), in *Tehillim* we find what seems to be the better version (in verses 8 and 15, like the *ketiv* in our chapter, and in the rest of the verses, like the *keri*).

It seems then that in the process of redacting the book of *Tehillim*, several changes were made in the song in order to arrive at a superior version.

(Translated by David Strauss)

¹¹ [11] Several suggestions have been offered, e.g., Rashi: "from any commandment or statue," or the Ralbag: "from the Torah."