

106: Chapter 23 David's Last Words and David's Warriors

- Rav Amnon Bazak

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

Rav Amnon Bazak

LECTURE 106: CHAPTER 23

DAVID'S LAST WORDS AND DAVID'S WARRIORS

I. David's Last words

Following David's song, the contents of the previous chapter, our chapter opens with another song, one that is shorter and more difficult,^{1[1]} and called "David's last words."

(1) Now these are the last words of David: The saying of David the son of Yishai, and the saying of the man raised on high, the anointed of the God of Yaakov, and the sweet singer of Israel: (2) The spirit of the Lord spoke by me, and His word was upon my tongue. (3) The God of Israel said: The Rock of Israel spoke to me, Ruler over men shall be the righteous, even

^{1 [1]} In his commentary to our chapter, the Ralbag offers a long and detailed explanation of David's last words.

he that rules in the fear of God,^{2[2]} (4) And as the light of the morning, when the sun rises, a morning without clouds; when through clear shining after rain, the tender grass springs out of the earth. (5) For is not my house established with God? For an everlasting covenant He has made with me, ordered in all things, and sure; for all my salvation, and all my desire, will he not make it to grow? (6) But the ungodly, they are as thorns thrust away, all of them,^{3[3]} for they cannot be taken with the hand; (7) But the man that touches them must be armed with iron and the staff of a spear; and they shall be utterly burned with fire in their place.^{4[4]}

At first glance, the song seems to be describing the difference between a righteous man and an ungodly one. There is nothing novel about the overall contents, apart from the difficult expressions in themselves. In any event, there is a novelty in the statement: "The spirit of the Lord spoke by me, and His word was upon my tongue." David proclaims here that he has received the word of God in direct manner – that is to say, by way of prophecy, or at the very least, by way of the holy spirit.

This can be better understood in light of the interesting parallel between these verses and psalm 89 in the book of *Tehillim*. We have already dealt at length with this psalm (see chap. 7). We saw that it is fundamentally a lamentation over the discrepancy between God's promise concerning the everlasting kingdom of the Davidic house and the reality of the loss of the kingdom in Israel following the destruction. Here we see that there is a clear parallel between the last words of David and the promise of the everlasting kingdom of the Davidic house, as it is described in that psalm, and especially in verses 20-38.^{5[5]}

2 [2] This seems to mean as was suggested by the Radak, that God said to David "that I would rule over man and He anointed me as king, provided that there would be fear of God in my kingdom and that I would be righteous."

3 [3] This seems to mean that that the ungodly are all like thorns, which fill no positive role and merely cause damage.

4 [4] The Radak explains the word "*bashavet*" – in the place where they lived. See also *Da'at Mikra* commentary.

5 [5] It is recommended that one examine [Tehillim 89](#) in its entirety. In this table, only the more striking linguistic parallels are noted.

II Shmuel 23	Tehillim 89
(1) And the saying of the man (<i>gever</i>) raised (<i>harimoti</i>) on high .	And you said, I have laid help upon one that is mighty (<i>gibbor</i>). I have exalted (<i>hukkam al</i>) one chosen out of the people.
(1) the anointed of the God of Yaakov, and the sweet singer of Israel:	(21) I have found David My servant; with My holy oil have I anointed him .
(2) The spirit of the Lord spoke by me, and His word was upon my tongue.	(20) Then You spoke in vision to Your godly ones.
(3) The Rock of Israel spoke to me.	(27) He shall call unto Me: You are my Father, my God, and the rock of my salvation.
(4) And as the light of the morning, when the sun rises.	(37) His seed shall endure forever, and his throne as the sun before Me.
(5) For an everlasting covenant He has made with me, ordered in all things, and sure (<i>u-shemura</i>).	(29) For ever will I keep (<i>eshmor</i>) for him My mercy, and My covenant shall stand fast with him.
(6) The ungodly (<i>bliya'al</i>), they are as thorns thrust away, all of them.	(23) Nor the son of wickedness (<i>ben avla</i>) afflict him

As stated, this parallelism sheds light on the meaning of David's last words. Without explicitly mentioning this, David describes here God's promise to him concerning the everlasting kingdom of his house, and he expresses his full confidence in its fulfillment. "My house" is the same royal house that was promised to him in Natan's vision: "And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before you" (7:16). The trust in God's promise is contrasted to the lack of trust in the ungodly, who will cause injury to those who touch them.

II. David's warriors

"He was most honorable of the three...but he attained not unto the first three."

We now move on to the fifth of the six appendices to the book of *Shmuel*, a list of David's warriors. The list is divided into two distinct parts: Verses 8-23 tell of five "special" warriors, who are described at length and in detail, whereas verses 24-39 list the rest of David's warriors by name only. Our primary concern will therefore be the first part of the list.

There are several problems in this part, especially the transition between the various warriors. Here are the verses, divided up as they are divided in the Masoretic text. Pay attention to the frequent use of the number three in its various forms:

(8) These are the names of the mighty men whom David had: Yoshev-bashevet a Tachkemonite, chief of the captains; the same was Adino the Etnzite;⁶^[6] [he lifted up his spear] against eight hundred, whom he slew at one time.

(9) And after him was Elazar the son of Dodo the son of an Achochite, one of the **three** mighty men with David, when they jeopardized their lives against the Pelishtim⁷^[7] that were there gathered together to battle, and

⁶ [6] *Chazal* understand that the verse refers to David, and that it means as follows: David sat at the head of the Sanhedrin, he was wise, and he is Adino the Etnzite, that is to say, "when he was sitting engaged in the [study of] Torah he rendered himself pliant as a worm, but when he went marching out to [wage] war he hardened himself like a lance" (Rashi). The plain sense of the verse, however, accords with the understanding of the Radak, that we are dealing here with the first of David's warriors, who had two names: "Yoshev-bashevet-tachkemoni," which is somewhat unclear, and seems more like a description, and "Adino the Etnzite," which seems more like a name, and it is told about him that he killed eight hundred people at one time.

In the parallel list in *Divrei Ha-yamim* the account is different, and much more easily understood: "And this is the number of the mighty men whom David had: Yashov'am, the son of a Chakhmonite, the chief of the captains; he lifted up his spear against three hundred and slew them at one time" (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 11:11). According to this verse, the name of the warrior was Yashov'am, the son of a Chakhmonite," and instead of the words, "Adino ha-Etzni," it says: "*Orer et chanito*," an expression that appears also in our chapter in connection with Avishai the son of Tzeruya (v. 18). These words can be understood in light of what it says regarding Golyat: "And the shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam" (*ve-etz chanito ki-menor orgim*) (I [Shmuel 17:7](#)). From here it may be concluded that the expression, "*orer et chanito/etzo*" parallels "*Adino ha-Etzni*," and *Divrei Ha-yamim* uses a simpler formulation. But the matter still requires further examination.

⁷ [7] The commentators disagree about the meaning of this expression. The Radak explains that they risked their lives to fight the Pelishtim, whereas the

the men of Israel were gone away; (10) he stood firm, and smote the Pelishtim until his hand was weary, and his hand did cleave unto the sword; and the Lord wrought a great victory that day; and the people returned after him only to strip the slain.

(11) And after him was Shama the son of Agei the Ararite. And the Pelishtim were gathered together into a troop, where was a plot of ground full of lentils; and the people fled from the Pelishtim. (12) But he stood in the midst of the plot, and defended it, and slew the Pelishtim; and the Lord wrought a great victory.^{8[8]}

(13) And **three** of the thirty chiefs went down, and came to David in the harvest time unto the cave of Adullam; and the troop of the Pelishtim were encamped in the valley of Refa'im. (14) And David was then in the stronghold, and the garrison of the Pelishtim was then in Bet-Lechem. (15) And David longed, and said, " Oh that one would give me water to drink of the well of Bet-Lechem, which is by the gate." (16) And the **three** mighty men broke through the host of the Pelishtim, and drew water out of the well of Bet-Lechem, that was by the gate, and took it, and brought it to David; but he would not drink thereof, but poured it out unto the Lord. (17) And he said, " Be it far from me, O Lord, that I should do this; shall I drink the blood of the men that went in jeopardy of their lives?" Therefore he would not drink it. These things did the **three** mighty men.

(18) And Avishai, the brother of Yoav, the son of Tzeruya, was chief of the **three**. And he lifted up his spear against three hundred and slew them, and had a name among the **three**. (19) He was most honorable of the **three**; therefore he was made their captain; but he attained not unto the first **three**.

Ralbag writes: "It seems that they taunted the Pelishtim, boasting that they could not defeat them in battle, just as Golyat had taunted the armies of Israel."

8 [8] For some reason, Shama the son of Agei is not mentioned at all in the parallel list in *Divrei Ha-yamim*, and the deed is attributed in part to Elazar the son of Dodo. The Radak argues that we are dealing with two stories, for here we are told about a plot full of lentils, while there it is a plot full of barley.

(20) And Benaya the son of Yehoyada, the son of a valiant man of Kavtze'el,9[9] who had done mighty deeds, he smote the two altar-hearths of Moav;10[10] he went down also and slew a lion in the midst of a pit in time of snow; (21) and he slew an Egyptian, a goodly man;11[11] and the Egyptian had a spear in his hand; but he went down to him with a staff, and plucked the spear out of the Egyptian's hand, and slew him with his own spear. (22) These things did Benaya the son of Yehoyada, and had a name among the **three** mighty men. (23) He was more honorable than the thirty, but he attained not to the first **three**. And David set him over his guard.

Let us first understand the word "thirty," which appears here at least twice (vv. 13, 23). It seems that it refers to the body of David's warriors as a whole. Although in fact the list includes thirty seven warriors (as is explicitly stated in v. 39), since five of them enjoy special status, the rest can be referred to as "the thirty."12[12]

Now what about the "three"? On the face of it, we are faced here with a surprising phenomenon: Both Avishai the son of Tzeruya and Benayahu the son of Yehoyada are counted among the three (Avishai was "most honorable of the **three**" and Benayahu "had a name among the **three** mighty men"), but at the same time it says about the two of them: "But he attained not unto the first **three**." How are we to understand this internal contradiction?

9 [9] Kavtze'el is a city in the tribal territory of Yehuda (see [Yehoshua 15:21](#)).

10 [10] The reference seems to be to two Moavite warriors. See Radak.

11 [11] The parallel passage in *Divrei Ha-yamim* reads: "A man of great stature, five cubits high" (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 11:23).

12 [12] According to this it seems that the remark about Yoshev-bashevet the Tachkemonite/Yashov'am son of a Chakhmonite (see note 6) that he is head of the three (*rosh ha-shalishi*) should be understood as "head of the thirty (*ha-sheloshim*)." The Radak, however, writes that it should be understood as "*rosh ha-shalishim*" (as in the *keri* in *Divrei Ha-yamim*): "head of the captains" (see "And his chosen captains (*shalishav*) are sunk in the Red Sea " [[Shemot 15:4](#)]).

It stands to reason (see the Radak) that we are dealing with two different sets of three. The first three are the three heads of the army, listed in order of their status: Adino the Eznite, and "after him" Elazar the son of Dodo, and "after him" Shama the son of Agei the Ararite. Afterwards we are told about the three warriors who brought the water to David. They constitute the second set of "three," distinguished in its own right, though not at the same level as the first set, as is stated about Benayahu the son of Yehoyada: "He was most honorable of the **three**...but he attained not unto the first **three**."

This list makes explicit mention of Avishai and Benayahu, but it does not spell out who was the third warrior. There is, however, reason to think that he was Elazar the son of Dodo, the second member of the first set of three, about whom it says that he was "one of the three mighty men with David." If what we say is correct, it turns out that Elazar the son of Dodo was a member of both sets of three warriors.

Water for King David

Let us now go back to the story of the three warriors. When the garrison of the Pelishtim was in Bet-Lechem, David expressed a wish: "Oh that one would give me water to drink of the well of Bet-Lechem, which is by the gate." Scripture testifies that this took place in the hot days of the harvest, and it stands to reason that David, who was thirsty, remembered his youthful days in Bet-Lechem and the cold water in the well that stood near the gate, and he wanted to drink (see Radak). While it is true that David did not actually order anyone to bring him water, the mere expression of his desire encouraged the daring among them to jeopardize themselves, and three of them succeeded in penetrating the Pelishti garrison and bringing water from the well to David.

When David saw the water that his warriors brought him, he felt ashamed and embarrassed: "He regretted that these three warriors had put themselves into danger because of his desire for water" (Radak). David understood that because he had expressed his desire as he did, he was responsible for having endangered the lives of the warriors, and therefore he was unable to drink the water. Accordingly, he assigned to them a holy role: "But he would not drink thereof, but poured it out unto the Lord. And he said, ' Be it far from me, O Lord, that I should do this; shall I drink the blood of the men that went in jeopardy of their lives?' Therefore he would not drink it." Deep down, argued David, this water is nothing but blood, for the warriors had endangered their lives for it, and as we know blood is life (see [Devarim 12:23](#)). If so the libation of water here is

not the same as the water libations known to us in other contexts, 13[13] for the symbolic meaning of this libation is a libation of blood – the blood of those who had jeopardized their lives. Perhaps thereby David also sought atonement for the mistake that he had made with his very declaration.

Thirty Seven?

As stated, following the detailed list of the five warriors, there is a long list of the names of the other warriors, which ends: "Uriya the Chitite. Thirty and seven in all" (v. 39). This conclusion raises several questions. First, according to the simple reading, after the first five warriors, there are another thirty one warriors, so that in total there are thirty six warriors. What happened to the thirty seventh warrior? Several answers to this question have been suggested:

1) Rashi (v. 39) suggests that the words "of the sons of Yashen, Yehonatan" (v. 32) refer to more than one warrior.

2) Another passage which might be referring to more than one warrior is v. 34, which speaks of: "Elifelet the son of Ahasbai, the son of the Maakatite." According to the simple understanding, we are dealing with a single person. However, in light of the fact that in no other case is mention made of a warrior's grandfather, there is room to suggest that "the son of the Maakatite" is a different person. In fact, the parallel passage in *Divrei Ha-yamim* reads "Chefer the Mekheratite" (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 11:36).

3. Earlier, we suggested that Elazar the son of Dodo belonged to both sets of three warriors mentioned in the first part of the list. If we reject that proposal and say that there is no overlapping of the sets of three warriors, and that the second set included some anonymous warrior, it turns out that the first part of the list includes six warriors, and so in total – together with the thirty one warriors in the second part – there are thirty seven warriors.

13 [13] E.g., the water libation on Sukkot (see *Sukka* 4:9), and perhaps also the water poured by Shmuel at Mitzpeh (see [I Shmuel 7](#), and our *shiur* there).

4. The list of warriors is missing one exceedingly important person, so important that we would have expected to find him heading the list: Yoav the son of Tzeruya. Why is Yoav not mentioned here? The Radak writes (in his commentary to v. 38): "Yoav did not have to be listed, as he was the head of the army." It is, however, possible that Yoav the son of Tzeruya did indeed appear in the original list, but because of the problematic relationship that he had with David and his house, his name was intentionally removed, and all that is left is a hint to his presence in the sum of the warriors.

As stated, the list ends with the words: "Uriya the Chitite. Thirty and seven in all." In the parallel list in *Divrei Ha-yamim*, however, many more warriors are recorded after Uriya (see I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 11:41-47), and there is no mention of the number thirty seven. How are we to understand this difference?

It seems that it is not by chance that the list ends specifically with Uriya the Chitite. It stands to reason that the redactor of the book of *Shmuel* wished to cut off the list at the most surprising point. In the story of David and Bat-Sheva, Uriya the Chitite does not seem to enjoy special standing, but here it says that he was one of David's warriors. This darkens the shadow cast upon the entire episode (if we disregard the possibility that Uriya was granted this honor only after his death). Not only did David send an entirely innocent man to his death only in order to hide the fact that his wife had conceived a child with David, now it becomes clear that Uriya was not an ordinary soldier, but rather one of David's warriors. Since apparently the rest of the list contained nothing of particular importance, the redactor of the book chose to cut off the list here, and leave the reader astounded with this new information that has reached us in such an unexpected manner.

(Translated by David Strauss)
