

107: Chapter 24 (Part I) The Sin Involving the Census

- Rav Amnon Bazak

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

Rav Amnon Bazak

LECTURE 107 CHAPTER 24 (PART I)

THE SIN INVOLVING THE CENSUS

I. "ANd he moved David Against them"

Our chapter is the last appendix to the book of *Shmuel*. It opens with David's sin of conducting a census of the people of Israel.

(1) And again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel,^{1[1]} and He moved David against them, saying, "Go, number Israel and Judah." (2) And the king said to Yoav the captain of the host that was with him, "Go now to and fro through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan even to Be'er-

1 [1] According to most of the commentators, the word "*va-yosef*" ("and again") means in addition to the three years of famine that followed in the wake of the incident involving the Giv'onites (chapter 21). In our discussion of that incident, we noted the chiasmic structure of the appendices, according to which there is a correspondence between the first appendix (the incident involving the Giv'onites) and the last appendix, i.e., our chapter.

Sheva, and number you the people, that I may know the sum of the people.”

The story opens in a surprising manner. We are told that the cause of David's sin was God's anger, because of which David was moved to count the people of Israel. In other words, on his own, David would not have sinned – and therefore he would also not have been punished – had God not moved him to sin, in the wake of which he was also punished.

This is an exceedingly exceptional story in Scripture. The most similar account is perhaps that of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart when Israel was enslaved in Egypt, but even there the sin was that of Pharaoh, and God merely caused him to stick fast to his sin and prevented him from fixing his ways before paying the price for his evil actions. Here, on the other hand, we are told about a sin which was entirely a consequence of God's moving David to sin. How are we to understand this phenomenon?²[2]

Rashi notes in his characteristic honesty: "I do not know for what,"³[3] and the Radak adds: "Perhaps there were those in Israel who sinned in secret...for had they sinned openly, David would not have tolerated them." The Raibag, on the other hand, refuses to accept the possibility that God moved David to sin, because, among other reasons, this would negate the justification for punishing David for the sin, and so he raises two possibilities. Either this is a general statement that God rules the entire world, and so whatever happens in this world conforms with His will,⁴[4] or else the verse is

2 [2] *Chazal* saw in this a measure for measure punishment for David's problematic statement to Shaul: "If it be the Lord that has stirred you up against me, let Him accept an offering" ([I Shmuel 26:19](#)): "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to David: You call Me an inciter? I will cause you to stumble in a matter that is known even by school children..." ([Berakhot 62b](#)).

3 [3] Thus writes Rashi in several places in his commentary. See, for example, his commentary to [Bereishit 28:5](#); 35:13; [Shemot 22:28](#); 27:10).

4 [4] He does not explain why it is specifically here that Scripture attributes what happens to God.

defective, and it means: "And [David's heart] moved David,"⁵ so that God was not at all involved in the sin.⁶

According to the plain sense of the text, it would seem that indeed it was God who moved David to sin, and thus to pay the price. Why did He do this? The answer to this question may be found in the previous verse – the verse that concludes the list of David's warriors in chapter 23: "**Uriya the Chitite**. Thirty and seven in all." Scripture seems to have intentionally juxtaposed the mention of Uriya the Chitite to God's anger in order to imply that here too God's anger was connected to the incident involving Bat-Sheva. Indeed, there are various connections between our chapter and the earlier story:

1. The phrase "*charon af*" (anger) appear in both stories: "And David's anger was greatly kindled against the man" (12:5); "And again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel" (25:1).
2. In both stories, David sins, and in both of them he admits his sin using similar formulations: "And David said to Natan, I have sinned against the Lord" (12:13); "I have sinned greatly in what I have done" (24:10).
3. In both stories, we find the expression: "*ha'avarat chet*," the putting away of sin: "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die" (12:13); "But now, O Lord, put away, I ask You, the iniquity of Your servant."
4. In the story involving Bat-Sheva, it says: "But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord" (11:27). And in the passage in *Divrei ha-Yamim* that is

⁵ [5] The Ralbag compares this to a verse found earlier in the book: "And king David failed with longing for Avshalom;" (13:39), which many commentators understood as a defective verse, which means: "And the soul of king David failed with longing for Avshalom."

⁶ [6] The author of *Divrei ha-Yamim* seems to have followed a similar approach in the passage that parallels our chapter: "And Satan stood up against Israel, and moved David to number Israel" (I *Divrei ha-Yamim* 21:1), and there the Radak and the *Metzudot* explain that the reference is to the evil impulse.

parallel to our chapter it says: "And he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord" (I *Divrei ha-Yamim* 21:7).

It seems, then, that the story involving the census relates back to the story involving Bat-Sheva. Something about David's sin was still not repaired, and an additional blow was needed to complete his process of repentance.

II. "that I may know the sum of the people"

The problem with counting the people of Israel is, of course, connected to what is stated at the beginning of *Parashat Ki-Tisa*:

When you take the sum of the children of Israel, according to their number, then shall they give every man a ransom for his soul unto the Lord, when you number them; that there be no plague among them, when you number them. This they shall give, every one that passes among them that are numbered, half a shekel after the shekel of the sanctuary - the shekel is twenty geras - half a shekel for an offering to the Lord. ([Shemot 30:12-13](#))

The Torah does not forbid taking a census of the people of Israel, but it notes that the count is liable to bring plague, and there is a *mitzva* for each person to give a ransom for his soul in order to prevent this.^{7[7]}

^{7 [7]} Thus, it would seem according to the plain sense of the text, that the half-shekel comes only to prevent the plague. *Chazal* added that one should not count the people of Israel at all, but only the half-shekels (see Rashi, ad loc.) In this way they explained what is stated with respect to Shaul: "And Shaul summoned the people, and numbered them in Tela'im" ([I Shmuel 15:4](#)) – that each person took a lamb (*teleh*) and they counted the *tela'im* (see Rashi, ad loc.; but the Radak explains there that Tela'im is a place-name).

The Torah does not explain why counting the people of Israel raises concern about a plague. But the matter seems clear, especially in light of our chapter: Why did David wish to count them? The Ralbag writes: "Now the sin was ...for this shows that David put his trust in the great number of the people, when he should have put his trust exclusively in God, blessed be His name." David wanted to count the people, in the way that a person counts his money. The census was meant to provide a feeling of confidence, and to a certain degree, even pride. And it was precisely for this reason that the Torah prohibited counting the people of Israel for no reason and commanded about the giving of a half-shekel, which expresses the fact that the people of Israel belong to God, and therefore their count necessitates the payment of a ransom. When a person is counted, he becomes liable, as it were, for the death penalty, but he can save himself from this punishment by paying the ransom of a half-shekel.^{8[8]}

This understanding is supported by what is stated later that the census was limited to David's soldiers – "valiant men that drew the sword" (v. 9). A count of his troops gives a king a sense of power, something that stands in contrast to what David himself said many years earlier: "That all this assembly may know that the Lord saves not with sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's" ([1 Shmuel 17:47](#)).

This seems to be the way that we should understand the words of Yoav, who tries to dissuade David from carrying out his plan:

(3) And Yoav said to the king, " Now the Lord your God add unto the people, how many ever they may be, a hundredfold,^{9[9]} and may the eyes

8 [8] It may be added that when a person is counted, he is removed from the protection granted to the community, and judged before God as an individual, and then the concern arise that perhaps he will be judged unfavorably. This is what the *Malbim* writes in his commentary to the beginning of *Parashat Ki-Tisa*: "For as long as the people are united and all are as one person, the collective merit is very great. But when they are counted, each person being set aside by himself, and their actions are examined, then the plague attains power over them. To fix this, God commanded that each of them should give a half-shekel, which demonstrates their being bound together."

9 [9] Yoav's words are reminiscent of what Moshe said to the people: "The Lord, the God of your fathers, make you a thousand times so many more as you are, and bless you, as He has promised you" ([Devarim 1:11](#)).

of my lord the king see it; but why does my lord the king delight in this thing?"

In Yoav's words and in his attempt to persuade David that there is no reason to take a census, we can feel his concern about the expected plague. David, however, stands firm in his decision:

(4) Notwithstanding, the king's word prevailed against Yoav and against the captains of the host. And Yoav and the captains of the host went out from the presence of the king, to number the people of Israel.

III. The Census

(5) And they passed over the Jordan, and pitched in Aro'er, on the right side of the city that is in the middle of the valley of Gad, and unto Yazer; (6) then they came to Gil'ad, and to the land of Tachtim-Chodshi; and they came to Dan-Ya'an, and round about to Tzidon, (7) and they came to the stronghold of Tzor, and to all the cities of the Chivites, and of the Canaanites; and they went out to the south of Judah, at Be'er-Sheva. (8) So when they had gone to and fro through all the land, they came to Jerusalem at the end of nine months and twenty days. (9) And Yoav gave up the sum of the numbering of the people unto the king; and there were in Israel eight hundred thousand valiant men that drew the sword; and the men of Judah were five hundred thousand men.

The census began on the east bank of the Jordan, where the census-takers went from the south-eastern corner of the kingdom to the north-eastern corner; from the north-eastern corner (Dan) they continued to the north-west (Tzidon and Tzor), and from there southward to Be'er-Sheva.

It is interesting that in the parallel account in *Divrei Ha-yamim*, mention is made of a certain detail to which there is not even a hint in our chapter: "But Levi and Binyamin he did not number among them; for the king's word was abominable to Yoav" (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 21:6). Yoav refused to execute David's order to the end, and refrained from

counting the tribes of Levi and Binyamin, which for him was a red line that he was not prepared to cross. Why specifically these tribes?

As for Levi, the answer is simple: The Torah itself established that the tribe of Levi should not be counted together with the rest of the tribes of Israel: "But the tribe of Levi you shall not number, neither shall you take the sum of them among the children of Israel" ([Bamidbar 1:49](#); and see *ibid.* 26:62). But why didn't Yoav count the tribe of Binyamin? According to the commentary attributed to Rashi on the book of *Divrei Ha-yamim*, Yoav was concerned about what the expected plague was liable to do to the tribe of Binyamin, which had already been smitten in the wake of the incident involving the concubine in Giv'a; if they are smitten once again now, what would be left of them?

Another possible answer is that Yoav refrained from counting the tribe of Binyamin owing to its proximity to Jerusalem and because its territory was the territory of the *Shekhina*,¹⁰[10] something that will be explicitly stated in the continuation of the story. If this proposal is correct, it turns out that Yoav refused to count these two tribes, Levi and Binyamin, because of their elevated level of sanctity.¹¹[11]

¹⁰ [10] This finds expression first and foremost in Moshe's blessing of Binyamin: "Of Binyamin he said, The beloved of the Lord shall dwell in safety by Him; He covers him all the day, and He dwells between his shoulders" ([Devarim 33:12](#)). We already discussed in earlier *shiurim* additional aspects of this idea (see, for example, our *shiur* on [I Shmuel 7](#)).

¹¹ [11] Another difference between the two books is the tally of the people who were counted. In our chapter, the results of the census are as follows: "And there were in Israel eight hundred thousand valiant men that drew the sword; and the men of Judah were five hundred thousand men." In *Divrei Ha-yamim*, the numbers are different: "And all they of Israel were a thousand thousand and a hundred thousand men that drew sword; and Judah was four hundred three-score and ten thousand men that drew sword" (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 21:5). The count in *Divrei ha-Yamim* adds 300,000 men to Israel, and removes 30,000 men from Judah.

The Radak tries, in his usual manner, to reconcile the verses. He brings in the name of *Chazal* the suggestion that the difference follows from the previous difference – that is, that in the book of *Shmuel*, the sum is smaller because it does not include Levi and Binyamin. But he raises a difficulty, that Yoav's refraining from counting these two tribes is mentioned precisely in *Divrei Ha-yamim*, and so we would have expected that the smaller number should be found there.

IV. The repentance

After the results came in, something happened to David that is most characteristic of him the entire length of the book of *Shmuel* – recognition of his sin and seeking its repair.

(10) And David's heart smote him after that he had numbered the people. And David said to the Lord, I have sinned greatly in what I have done; but now, O Lord, put away, I beseech You, the iniquity of Your servant; for I have done very foolishly. 12[12]

We already encountered this phenomenon¹³[13] in the days of Shaul: Immediately after David tore the corner of Shaul's skirt, we find the same wording as in our chapter: "**It came to pass afterward, that David's heart smote him**, because he had cut off Shaul's skirt" ([I Shmuel 24:5](#)). In the next chapter, David tried to kill Naval and his entire household, but after the persuasive words of Avigayil, he admitted: "And blessed be your discretion, and blessed be you, that have kept me this day from bloodguilt, and from

The Radak brings another explanation in the name of *Baraita de-Sheloshim u-Shetayim Middot* of R. Eliezer the son of R. Yose ha-Gelili, which resolves the problem using the rule of two verses that contradict each other and a third verse comes and reconciles them. The third verse is chapter 27 in I *Divrei ha-Yamim*, where it is related that David had 12 divisions, with 24,000 men in each division, for a total of 288,000; another 12,000 princes in Israel; for a total of 300,000 men.

As for the 30,000 men who are missing from the count of Judah, the Radak writes that these may be those of Judah who died in the plague (out of the 70,000 who died in total), and the book of *Divrei Ha-yamim* deducted them from the outset from the count.

12 [12] It is interesting that David's answer is presented in the book of *Divrei ha-Yamim* in a less impressive manner. There it first says: "And God was displeased with this thing; therefore He smote Israel" (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 21:7), that is to say, David recognized his sin only after God smote Israel.

13 [13] Regarding the examples brought here, it is recommended that the reader review the *shiurim* on the chapters under discussion.

finding redress for myself with my own hand" (ibid. 25:33). Following the mistakes that were made during the first attempt to move the ark, David understood that something was wrong: "And David was afraid of the Lord that day; and he said, ' How shall the ark of the Lord come to me?' " (II *Shmuel* 6:9). And above all else, the words of David here, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done," bring to mind what he said following the parable of the poor person's lamb offered by Natan the prophet – "I have sinned to God" (ibid. 12:13). Here too David does not hesitate to fix the mistake. He recognizes his sin and does not try to justify his actions after the fact.

This trait of David is especially striking when we compare him to Shaul, who, as may be recalled, had particular difficulty in this area. Even in our verse, there is a hint to Shaul's difficulty, David concluded on his own, "for I have done very foolishly," whereas Shaul was forced to hear this from Shmuel the prophet, together with the announcement that he would be replaced: "And Shmuel said to Shaul, ' **You have done foolishly**; you have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which He commanded you; for now would the Lord have established your kingdom upon Israel for ever. But your kingdom shall not continue; the Lord has sought him a man after His own heart, and the Lord has appointed him to be prince over His people, because you have not kept that which the Lord commanded you" ([I *Shmuel* 13:13-14](#)).

Indeed, more than anyone else, David is worthy of what *Chazal* have said about him:

R. Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of R. Yonatan: What is the meaning of the verse: "The saying of David the son of Yishai, and the saying of the man raised on high" ([II *Shmuel* 22:1](#)) - the saying of David the son of Yishai, the man who elevated the yoke of repentance.

(Translated by David Strauss)
