

# 108: Chapter 24 (Part II) The Punishment

- Rav Amnon Bazak

## THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

Rav Amnon Bazak

### LECTURE 108 CHAPTER 24 (PART II)

#### THE PUNISHMENT

God's response to David's confession of his sin is somewhat surprising:

(11) And when David rose up in the morning,<sup>1[1]</sup> the word of the Lord came unto the prophet Gad, David's seer,<sup>2[2]</sup> saying, (12) " Go and speak

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1 [1] Why does Scripture mention this? It seems to be alluding to the difficult night that had passed over David, a night of moral pangs: "His heart did not rest all night, and when he arose in the morning, the prophet Gad came to him with the word of God that had been revealed to him during the night" (Radak).

2 [2] It may be asked why was this episode wa overseen by the prophet Gad, referred to here as "David's seer," and not by the prophet Natan, who appears to have been a more dominant figure in David's life. Natan was active in two central episodes in David's life: the vision regarding the building of a house for God and the promise of everlasting kingdom for the house of David (above, chapter 7), and the incident involving Bat-Sheva (above, chapter 12). Gad, in contrast, appeared up until now in only one short section: When David sat himself in the stronghold when he ws running away from Shaul, "the prophet Gad said to David, ' Abide not in the stronghold; depart, and get you into the land of Judah' " ([I Shmuel 22:5](#)). Lest you say: Natan was already too old and weak – this is not true, for at the beginning of the book of *Melakhim* we find him fighting with all his strength against Adoniyahu and in support of the coronation of Shelomo.

to David: Thus says the Lord, I lay upon you three things; choose you one of them, that I may do it to you.”

As in the Bat-Sheva affair, here too God does not utterly overlook David's sin, but merely acts leniently towards him and allows him to choose one of three punishments:

(13) So Gad came to David, and told him, and said to him:

- “ a) Shall seven years<sup>3[3]</sup> of famine come to you in your land?
- b) or will you flee three months before your foes while they pursue you?
- c) or shall there be three days' pestilence in your land?

Now advise you, and consider what answer I shall return to Him that sent Me.”

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It is difficult to give a clear answer to this question. It is possible that after the difficult story of Bat-Sheva, God chose not to stand David once again against Natan, but rather to send another prophet to him to notify David of his failings.

3 [3] In the parallel passage in *Divrei Ha-yamim* it says: "Three years of famine" (I *Divrei ha-Yamim* 21:12). From a certain perspective, this reading seems more appropriate for the general structure: "Either **three years** of famine; or **three months** to be swept away before your foes, while the sword of your enemies overtakes you; or else **three days** the sword of the Lord, even pestilence in the land, and the angel of the Lord destroying throughout all the borders of Israel" (ibid.). In this way the parallel to the story of the Giv'onites is also strengthened (see below), for there too it says: "And there was a famine in the days of David **three years**" (21:1). On the other hand, seven years of famine are also found in Scripture, both in the story of Pharaoh and Yosef ([Bereishit 41:27-54](#)) and in the story of Elisha and the Shunamite woman ([II Melakhim 8:1](#)). The Radak, in his usual manner, tries to reconcile the two readings. According to him, the three years mentioned here join the three years mentioned in the story of the Giv'onites, and this being the case, there was also famine in the seventh year, at least until the harvest.

The combination of these three punishments – famine, flight before an enemy, and pestilence – is common in Scripture.<sup>4[4]</sup> They generally come together, as in the words of Yirmiyahu: "But I will consume them by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence" ([Yirmiyahu 14:12](#); and see also 24:10; 29:17; and elsewhere). It stands to reason that here too these three punishments were meant to be administered together, but because David had repented, he was offered the opportunity to choose between them.

In any event, Gad emphasizes that he must carefully consider his answer: "Now advise you, and consider what answer I shall return to Him that sent Me." Indeed, David answers:

(14) And David said to Gad," I am in a great strait; let us fall now into the hand of the Lord; for His mercies are great; and let me not fall into the hand of man."

Which punishment did David choose? It may be understood that David rejected only the second possibility: "Or will you flee three months before your foes while they pursue you?" He asks that punishment not come by way of human hands, but he does not indicate his preference between the two punishments at the hand of God – seven years of famine or three days of pestilence. The Radak understands from the expression "the hand of God" that David chooses pestilence, regarding which this term is used for the first time in Scripture: "Behold, **the hand of the Lord** is upon your cattle which are in the field, upon the horses, upon the asses, upon the camels, upon the herds, and upon the flocks; there shall be a very grievous **pestilence**" ([Shemot 9:3](#)). The Radak notes further that famine is also a punishment that involves human hands, for it makes a person dependent upon the kindnesses of others.

We already find this approach in the words of *Chazal*, for they justify David's choosing the punishment of pestilence. Among other things, they understand (*Midrash Shemuel*, 31) that Gad's words, "Now advise you, and consider what answer (*davar*) I shall return to Him that sent Me," already allude to the punishment of pestilence (*dever*) that David is expected to choose. That same *midrash* mentions another factor that brings David to choose specifically this punishment:

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4 [4] More than twenty times, mostly in the books of *Yirmiyahu* and *Yechezkel*.

David thought to himself, saying: If I choose the sword, all of Israel will now say: "What does the son of Yishai care? He puts his trust in his warriors." If I choose famine, all of Israel will say: "What does the son of Yishai care? He puts his trust in his treasures." Let us pick something regarding which all are equal.<sup>5</sup>[5]

According to the plain sense of Scripture, however, it is not at all clear that David made the correct choice. After David chooses, it says:

(15) So the Lord sent a pestilence upon Israel from the morning even to the time appointed; and there died of the people from Dan even to Be'er-Sheva seventy thousand men. (16) And when the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the Lord repented Him of the evil, and said to the angel that destroyed the people, " It is enough; now stay your hand." And the angel of the Lord was by the threshing-floor of Aravna the Yevusite.

The words, "from the morning even to the time appointed," are somewhat puzzling. The simple understanding is that they mean "until the fixed time," that is to say, for three days. But if so, how are we to understand what is implied in verse 16, that the plague was interrupted at God's initiative? The commentators therefore write that the reference is not to three days, but to some other, shorter time period: until the time that the daily offering was sacrificed (Rashi), until the afternoon (Radak, following *Chazal*), or until the same time the next day (*Metzudot*).<sup>6</sup>[6]

According to the plain sense of the text, however, verse 15 describes the punishment of pestilence in its entirety, that is, three days of pestilence, whereas verse 16 teaches that the punishment had an unexpected continuation. At the end of the third

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<sup>5</sup> [5] See the continuation of the *midrash*, which suggests other considerations which guided David in his choice.

<sup>6</sup> [6] It should be noted that in the book of *Divrei Ha-yamim*, this phrase is omitted entirely: "So the Lord sent a pestilence upon Israel; and there fell of Israel seventy thousand men" (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 21:14).

day, the punishment did not come to an end, and the destroying angel continued on to Jerusalem – where it was stopped, as a measure that went beyond the requirements of justice, by God, who commanded the angel: "Stay your hand." How are we to understand the matter?

It seems that David failed in his choosing a punishment. God put David to the test. Two out of three of the punishments – famine and pestilence – were indeed in the hands of God, but they also shared another similarity. Both were punishments imposed upon all of Israel, and regarding both it says "in your land." The third punishment, in contrast, was in the hands of men, but it was a punishment directed at David alone: "Or will **you** flee three months before **your** foes while they pursue **you**," all three instances of "you" and "your" in the singular. David's request to receive punishment at the hand of God was a conscious preference for a punishment administered against all of Israel, rather than a punishment meted out only against David. "**Let us fall** now into the hand of the Lord; for His mercies are great; **and let me not fall** into the hand of man."<sup>7</sup>[7] Even if we can understand David's preference to fall at the hand of God, rather than at the hand of man, his choosing the fall of all of Israel over his own personal fall was another instance of David's moral falling.<sup>8</sup>[8]

In order to demonstrate to David how he had stumbled, God shows him the angel striking at the nation, and then stops him, thus giving David another chance to repair the situation. Here we are once again witness – for the last time in this book – to David's repentance:

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<sup>7</sup> [7] Though in *Divrei Ha-yamim* it says: "I am in a great strait; **let me fall** now into the hand of the Lord, for very great are His mercies; and **let me not fall** into the hand of man" – both in the singular – practically speaking, there is no difference between the two stories.

<sup>8</sup> [8] Our argument may be supported by David's words, "I am in a great strait." This phrase is found in only one other place in Scripture – in Shaul's words to Shmuel in the incident involving the woman diviner: "And Shmuel said to Shaul, 'Why have you disquieted me, to bring me up?' And Shaul answered, '**I am in a great strait**, for the Pelishtim make war against me, and God is departed from me, and answers me no more, neither by prophets, nor by dreams; therefore I have called you, that you may make known to me what I shall do' " ([I Shmuel 28:15](#)). In both cases, a king apologizes before a prophet about his sin, but if what we have said is correct, in both cases the apology is accompanied by an additional mistake.

(17) And David spoke to the Lord when he saw the angel that smote the people, and said, “ Lo, I have sinned, and I have done iniquitously; but these sheep,<sup>9[9]</sup> what have they done? **Let Your hand, I pray You, be against me, and against my father's house.**”

Only now does David understand the mistake that he had made when he chose a punishment for all of Israel. Only now can he ask that the punishment be directed against him and his father's house, and not at the people of Israel. But in order that his prayer be accepted, he must take some additional steps. As we shall see below, God tells David to build an altar on the threshing-floor of Aravna the Yevusite, and David fully executes the command. During all this time the pestilence continues to strike at the people, even though the three days had already come to an end. Only when David finishes building the altar does the pestilence cease:

(25) And David built there an altar to the Lord, and offered burnt-offerings and peace-offerings. So the Lord was entreated for the land, **and the plague<sup>10[10]</sup> was stayed from Israel.**

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9 [9] Referring to the people of Israel as "sheep" is especially touching. David started out as a devoted shepherd, as he told Shaul at the time of the war against Golyat and the Pelishtim: "Your servant kept his father's **sheep**; and when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb out of the flock, I went out after him, and smote him, and delivered it out of his mouth; and when he arose against me, I caught him by his beard, and smote him, and slew him" ([I Shmuel 17:34-35](#)). When David was anointed king over all of Israel, he was explicitly told: "You shall **shepherd** My people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel" ([II Shmuel 5:2](#)). We have already noted that the term "*naggid*" (translated here as prince) can also be used in the sense of "shepherd," and that the reference is to God's words to David in Natan's vision: "I took you from the sheepcote, from following **the sheep**, that you should be **prince** (*naggid*) over My people, over Israel" (ibid. 7:8). Thus Scripture emphasizes that David moved from tending sheep to tending the people of Israel. In our story, David repents and assumes once again his basic stance toward his people – serving as a dedicated shepherd for his flock.

10 [10] As we saw in the previous *shiur*, the term "*magefa*" (plague) is connected to the sin itself, for the reason that each individual is supposed to give a half-shekel when the people of Israel are counted is: "Then shall they give every man a ransom for his soul to the Lord, when you number them; that there be no **plague** (*negef*) among them, when you number them" ([Shemot 30:12](#)). The plague here may be seen as a punishment that is meted out measure for

This transition is even more pronounced in *Divrei ha-Yamim*. There it says at the beginning: "And David lifted up his eyes, and saw the angel of the Lord standing between the earth and the heaven, **having a drawn sword in his hand stretched out over Jerusalem**" (I *Divrei ha-Yamim* 21:16). And only after David's words of repentance, the command to build an altar on the threshing-floor of Aravna,<sup>11</sup>[11] and the execution of this command, is the threat removed from Jerusalem: "And David built there an altar to the Lord, and offered burnt-offerings and peace-offerings, and called upon the Lord; and He answered him from heaven by fire upon the altar of burnt-offering. And the Lord commanded the angel; **and he put up his sword back into the sheath thereof**" (ibid. vv. 26-27).

It stands to reason then that even though God had stopped the angel when he was about to smite Jerusalem, this was not the end of the story, but only an opportunity that allowed David to examine his decision. It was David's second answer that brought the affair to its fitting conclusion.

This sharpens the similarity between our chapter – the last appendix to the book of *Shemuel* – and the story of the Giv'onites, which was the first appendix to the book (chapter 21). Let us first note some of the substantive and linguistic parallels between the two chapters:

1. As stated, in both stories, mention is made of a famine lasting several years. In the story of the Giv'onites, Israel suffered three years of famine, and in our chapter one of the punishments posed to David was seven years of famine (and according to the book of *Divrei ha-Yamim*, there too it was three years of famine [see above note 3]).

2. There is a linguistic similarity in the description of the sin: "Now the Giv'onites were not of the children of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites; and the children of Israel had sworn unto them; and Shaul sought to slay them in his zeal **for the children of**

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measure: David counted the people so that he could enjoy the sense of power that would follow from his knowing the precise number of his people, and corresponding to that there came a great plague which wiped out seventy thousand people.

<sup>11</sup> [11] In the book of *Divrei Ha-yamim* he is called Ornan.

**Israel and Judah**" (21:2) – "And again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and He moved David against them, saying, ' Go, number **Israel and Judah**' " (24:1).

3. Both stories have a positive ending, and both endings are worded in a similar fashion: "And after that God was entreated for the land" (21:4) – "So the Lord was entreated for the land" (21:25).

An additional parallel emerges from what was stated above. Both episodes conclude in two stages. In chapter 21 we saw that it was not enough to fulfill the wishes of the Giv'onites, and God was entreated for the land only after there was an improvement in the attitude toward the corpses of the members of the house of Shaul. And as stated, also in our chapter, it was not enough that Israel was smitten with pestilence, and David had to take another step in order that God should be entreated for the land.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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