

# 96: Chapter 18 (Part I) The Death of Avshalom

- Rav Amnon Bazak

## THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

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### LECTURE 96: CHAPTER 18 (PART I)

#### THE DEATH OF AVSHALOM

##### I. "Deal gently for my sake with the young man, with Avshalom"

In the previous chapter, we saw the great support that David received from the residents of the east bank of the Jordan. Nevertheless, the state of David's army on the eve of the decisive battle against Avshalom and his men, as described at the beginning of this chapter, is quite surprising:

(1) And David numbered the people that were with him, and set **captains of thousands and captains of hundreds** over them. (2) And David sent forth the people, a third part under the hand of Yoav, and a third part under the hand of Avishai the son of Tzeruya, Yoav's brother, and a third part under the hand of Itai the Gitite. And the king said to the people, " I will surely go forth with you myself also." (3) But the people said, " You shall not go forth; for if we flee away, they will not care for us; neither if half of us die, will they care for us; but you are worth ten thousand of us: therefore now it is better that you be ready to succor us out of the city." (4) And the king said to them, " What seems you best I will do." And the

king stood by the gateside, and all the people went out **by hundreds and by thousands**.

When he fled from Jerusalem, David had with him six hundred Gittites, the servants of David, and the Kereti and Peleti (see 15:18). Here, mention is made of hundreds and thousands, and if we understand what the people said to David according to their plain sense – "Neither if half of us die, will they care for us; but you are worth ten thousand of us" - it follows that David's army numbered now about twenty thousand people. What are the reasons for the growth of David's army? Based on what we saw in previous *shiurim*, we can point to three reasons:

1) In chapter 16, we noted that it is possible that Avshalom's vulgar act – sleeping with his father's concubines on the roof – led to a decline in support, and perhaps even pushed people into David's camp.

2) It is possible that other people understood, as did Achitofel, that a change in the momentum would lead to a collapse of the rebellion, and thus they quickly shifted sides.

3) The news about Achitofel's suicide might also have led to demoralization in Avshalom's camp.

The numerical increase impacted upon David and his men's sense of confidence. David divides his army into three groups, a step that is presented in Scripture as an offensive,<sup>1</sup>[1] rather than defensive, move. Thus, David's camp is also filled with the sense that the momentum has moved over to their side, and they are all ready for the battle that will bring the campaign to a close.

In light of this, we must understand the one thing about which David is worried on

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1 [1] So we find with Gid'on ([Shoftim 7:16](#)); Avimelekh (ibid. 9:43); in Shaul's war against Amon in Yavesh-Gil'ad ([I Shmuel 11:11](#)); and in the war of the Pelishtim against Shaul (ibid. 13:17).

the eve of the battle:

(5) And the king commanded Yoav and Avishai and Itai, saying, “ Deal gently for my sake with the young man,<sup>2</sup>[2] with Avshalom.” And all the people heard when the king gave all the captains charge concerning Avshalom.

David sounds as if he is absolutely certain that victory will be his, and there is only one thing that interests him: Avshalom's welfare. He admonishes the captains of his army to deal gently with him, for knowing the people involved, he is certain that without an explicit and incontrovertible command, Avshalom would very likely suffer injury.

This is also the way to understand David's desire to personally join the campaign. This deviates from a decision that had been made in the past:<sup>3</sup>[3]

And the Pelishtim had war again with Israel; and David went down, and his servants with him, and fought against the Pelishtim; and David waxed faint. And Yishbi-Benov, who was of the sons of the giant, the weight of whose spear was three hundred shekels of brass in weight, he being girded with new armor, thought to have slain David. But Avishai the son of Tzeruya succored him, and smote the Pelishti, and killed him. Then the men of David swore unto him, saying, “ You shall go no more out with us to battle, that you quench not the lamp of Israel.” (21:15-17)

Why did David wish to stray from the earlier decision not to go out again in battle? The answer is clear: David could not rely on his men to fulfill his order not to

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2 [2] The term "young man" expresses a lenient attitude toward Avshalom: He is but a young man, who acts rashly, and should not be judged as an adult (even though he was already the father of three sons and a daughter [see 14:27]). This term is found later in the story as well (verses 12, 29, and 32).

3 [3] Textually, this story is brought later, but chronologically, it is clear that it took place earlier, for it describes a war against the Pelishtim. As we have already mentioned in the past, chapters 21-24 are appendices to the book, which records events in the life of David not in their chronological order.

strike at Avshalom, and so he wished to join the campaign in order to reinforce his command. The people, however, refused David's request, for they rightfully recognized the unnecessary danger into which the king wished to enter. Accordingly, David was forced to content himself with the command that he had issued, and it seems that even he had serious doubts whether his command would indeed be fulfilled.

## II. "the thick boughs of a great terebinth"

As was expected, Avshalom's men suffered a severe blow already at the beginning of the battle:

(6) So the people went out into the field against Israel; and the battle was in the forest of Ephraim.<sup>4</sup>[4] (7) And the people of Israel were smitten there before the servants of David, and there was a great slaughter there that day of twenty thousand men. (8) For the battle was there spread over the face of all the country; and the forest devoured more people<sup>5</sup>[5] that day than the sword devoured.

The forest provided a certain advantage to David's camp, because it prevented Avshalom's camp from exploiting its numerical superiority. In the thick forest, Avshalom's soldiers were cut off from each other, and as we shall see below, Avshalom himself was

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4 [4] The existence of a region on the east bank of the Jordan called "the forest of Ephraim" poses a certain difficulty. Rashi, in the wake of *Chazal* writes: "From where did Ephraim have a forest on the east bank of the Jordan, which was divided between the sons of Gad and the sons of Reuven and Menashe? But because Yehoshua [divided the land] with the stipulation that people be permitted to graze their cattle in the forests, and that forest was close to Ephraim, only that the Jordan intervened, they grazed their cattle there, and it was called 'The forest of Ephraim.'" It is also possible that it was called by that name because of the presence of Ephraimites in the region, as we find in the story of Yiftach (see [Shoftim 12:4-6](#)), who killed tens of thousands of Ephraimites who lived there.

5 [5] It stands to reason that the reference here is to the beasts of the forest (Rashi). We are familiar with wild beasts in that region from the verse: "Behold, he shall come up like a lion from the thickets of the Jordan" (*Yirmiya* 49:19; 50:44).

cut off from his men. David's troops exploited the situation to strike at Avshalom's men.

If what we suggested above is correct and David's army numbered about twenty thousand soldiers, it is significant that this is also the number of casualties in Avshalom's camp. Nevertheless, Scripture emphasizes that the war was conducted on two plains: On the one hand, the people of Israel fell "before the servants of David;" on the other hand, the main blow came from heaven, by way of the forest. This account brings to mind another Biblical battle – Yehoshua's battle against the southern kings:

And it came to pass, as they fled from before Israel, while they were at the descent of Bet-Choron, that the Lord cast down great stones from heaven upon them unto Azeka, and they died; they were more who died with the hailstones than they whom the children of Israel slew with the sword.  
([Yehoshua 10:11](#))

This correspondence emphasizes the point that the participation of natural forces in the battle was controlled from above.<sup>6[6]</sup>

God's intervention is also evident in the continuation of the story:

(9) And Avshalom chanced to meet the servants of David. And Avshalom was riding upon his mule, and the mule went under the thick boughs of a great terebinth, and his head caught hold of the terebinth,<sup>7[7]</sup> and he was taken up between the heaven and the earth; and the mule that was under

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6 [6] To this parallel we should add what is stated about Shimshon: "So the dead that he slew at his death were more than they that he slew in his life" ([Shoftim 16:30](#)). This gives further support to the contrasting parallel between Shimshon and Avshalom, a phenomenon that was noted already in the past: As opposed to Avshalom, Shimshon gave his life to strike at the enemies of Israel.

7 [7] *Chazal* saw this as an instance of "measure for measure": "Avshalom gloried in his hair; therefore he was hanged by his hair" (*Sota* 1:8). According to the plain sense of the text, however, it does not say that Avshalom hung specifically from his hair, but that his head was caught in the terebinth.

him went on.

This development was also not planned ("And Avshalom chanced"), and so it too may be seen as an act of Divine intervention. The words, "And the mule that was under him went on," have symbolic meaning: As we have seen in the past, the mule was the riding animal of royalty; the mule's "going on" is an expression of the kingdom passing out of Avshalom's hands.

Scripture creates an especially interesting connection between our story and the story of *Akeidat Yitzchak*. Let us note the points of similarity and difference between the two stories:

1) In both stories, a father is about to lose his beloved son: Avraham is about to lose Yitzchak, and David, Avshalom. The two fathers, however, adopt opposite approaches. Avraham passes the test and is prepared to offer his beloved son as a burnt-offering in order to fulfill God's command, even though it is clear to him that his son has done nothing wrong. David, in contrast, refuses to accept the fact that Avshalom was guilty of murder and incest, which are capital crimes, and attempts to prevent his death.

2) In both cases, someone tries to prevent the killing of the son. An angel of God stops Avraham at the last minute:

And he said, “ **Lay not your hand upon the lad**, neither do you anything to him.” ([Bereishit 22:12](#))

And we will see below that "a certain man" tries to warn Yoav not to hurt Avshalom:

And the man said to Yoav, “ Though I should receive a thousand pieces of silver in my hand, yet would **I not put forth my hand** against the king's son; for in our hearing the king charged you and Avishai and Ittai, saying, ‘ Beware that none touch **the young man Avshalom.**’ ” ([II Shmuel 18:12](#))

The difference between the two cases is, however, clear: At the *Akeida*, it is an angel of God who turns to Avraham, and thus the trial comes to an end; in our story, the man repeats David's order, but in actuality the inappropriate order is not fulfilled.

3) In the two cases, the one who ultimately dies is caught in a thicket:

And Avraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught **in the thicket** by his horns. And Avraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt-offering in the stead of his son. ([Bereishit 22:13](#))

And Avshalom chanced to meet the servants of David. And Avshalom was riding upon his mule, and the mule went under **the thick boughs** of a great terebinth, and his head caught hold of the terebinth. ([II Shmuel 18:9](#))

4) Avraham, who was ready to sacrifice his son, merited that a ram be offered in his place:

And Avraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt-offering **in the stead of his son**.

Whereas David, who was not prepared to "sacrifice" his son, could but lament:

Would I had died **in your stead**, O Avshalom, **my son, my son!** ([II Shemuel 19:1](#))

5) Avraham acted properly, and passed the test:

Because you have done this thing, and have not **withheld** (*chasakhta*) your son, your only son. ([Bereishit 22:16](#))

David, however, did not pass the test, and thus he put the people in danger. The one who acted properly in this case was Yoav, who prevented further bloodshed, as is described with a term similar to that used in the story of the *Akeida*:

And Yoav blew the horn, and the people returned from pursuing after Israel; for Yoav **held back** (*chasakh*) the people.

This correspondence reinforces the criticism of David's attitude toward Avshalom that we already saw in previous chapters. Without a doubt, it is exceedingly difficult to judge a person who must face the death of his beloved son. Nevertheless, the comparison between David and Avraham highlights the greatness of Avraham, who conducted himself with such devotion in especially tragic circumstances, and emphasizes the fact that David was unable to rise above his love for Avshalom, love that was so undeserved.

III. "And he took three darts in his hand, and thrust them through the heart of Avshalom, while he was yet alive in the midst of the terebinth"

Let us go back to where we left off. Avshalom is hanging between heaven and earth, but he is still alive. One of the soldiers catches sight of this spectacle and quickly reports to Yoav:

(10) And a certain man saw it, and told Yoav, and said, " Behold, I saw Avshalom hanging in a terebinth." (11) And Yoav said to the man that told him, " And, behold, you saw it, and why did you not smite him there to the ground? And I would have had to give you ten pieces of silver, and a girdle." 8[8] (12) And the man said to Yoav, " Though I should receive a

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8 [8] The practice of rewarding exemplary soldiers is found in various places in Scripture, e.g., with Othiel ben Kenaz (see [Yehoshua 15:15-17](#)); with David in the

thousand pieces of silver in my hand, yet would I not put forth my hand against the king's son; for in our hearing the king charged you and Avishai and Ittai, saying, ' Beware that none<sup>9</sup>[9] touch the young man Avshalom.' (13) Otherwise if I had dealt falsely against my own life – and there is no matter hidden from the king<sup>10</sup>[10] – then you yourself would have stood aloof." (14) Then said Yoav, " I may not tarry thus with you." And he took three darts in his hand and thrust them through the heart of Avshalom, while he was yet alive in the midst of the terebinth.

This conversation indicates the atmosphere in David's camp. It is clear from Yoav's words that he had promised a reward to whoever kills Avshalom, and thus the soldiers had to deal with two contradictory orders - the one given by David, and the other by Yoav. The man's words seem to reflect the general feeling among the people, for he viewed himself as subject to David's commands, and he was ready to stand up to Yoav and explain to him why he had not followed his order.

In the end, Yoav indeed strikes at Avshalom, but he does so with caution. He brings Avshalom to an irreversible condition, but he is careful not to actually kill him. He thrusts three darts into Avshalom's heart, but he leaves him alive in the terebinth tree. He leaves his men the task of finishing the job:

(15) And ten young men<sup>11</sup>[11] that bore Yoav's armor compassed about

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battle against Golyat ([I Shmuel 17:25](#)); and with Yoav in the conquest of Jerusalem (I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 11:6).

9 [9] The wording in the Hebrew, "*shimru mi ba-na'ar be-Avshalom*," is difficult. Rashi explains: "Anyone into whose hand he falls must protect him."

10 [10] As was mentioned in the previous note, the wording of the man is a bit awkward, but the meaning is clear: If he attempts to lie and to ignore the order that he had heard from the king, in the end it will become known and Yoav will not protect him. Thus, he brings a serious charge against Yoav – that he is ordering others to disobey David's orders – and he intimates to him that if he wishes to defy an explicit order of David, it is better that he do it himself. In any event, the awkward wording is a sign of excitement, as we have ready seen in several places in the book.

11 [11] *Chazal* saw the killing of Avshalom as an instance of "measure for measure" in several ways: "Avshalom gloried in his hair; therefore he was

and smote Absalom, and slew him.

Yoav thought that in this way David would not be able to blame him for killing Avshalom, but at the same time the young men could rest assured that their actions would be "covered."

(Translated by David Strauss)

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hanged by his hair. And because he cohabited with the the concubines of his father, therefore he was stabbed with ten lances, as it is said, 'And ten young men that bore Yoav's armor compassed about.' And because he stole three hearts, the heart of his father, the heart of the court of justice, and the heart of Israel, as it is said: 'So Avshalom stole the heart of the men of Israel,' therefore three darts were thrust through him, as it is said: 'And he took three darts in his hand, and thrust them through the heart of Avshalom" (*Sota* 1:8).