

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

Rav Amnon Bazak

LECTURE 100: CHAPTERS 19 (PART III) – 20 (PART I)

THE BEGINNING OF THE REBELLION OF SHEVA BEN BIKHRI

(AND OTHER MATTERS)

I. Just reward

As we have seen, David's return to Jerusalem was not a simple matter, and it involved several mistakes on David's part: his preferential treatment (for the first time) of the tribe of Yehuda and his unjustified abuse of Mefiboshet. However, among the various incidents that follow quickly one after the other, there is one incident that is entirely to David's credit – the reward that he offers to one of his benefactors, Barzilai the Gil'adite.

(32) And Barzilai the Gil'adite came down from Rogelim; and he passed on to Jordan with the king, to bring him on the way over the Jordan. **(33)** Now Barzilai was a very aged man, even fourscore years old; and he had provided the king with sustenance while he lay at Machanayim; for he was a very great man.¹[1] **(34)** And the king said to Barzilai, "Come you over with me, and I will sustain you with me in Jerusalem." **(35)** And Barzilai said to the king, "How many are the days of the years of my life, that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem? **(36)** I am this day fourscore years old; can I discern between good and bad? Can your servant taste what I eat or what I drink? Can I hear any more the voice of singing men and singing women?²[2] Why then should your servant be yet a burden to my lord

1 [1] In other words, a rich man; see [Bereishit 26:13](#); [I Shmuel 25:2](#); [Iyyov 1:3](#).

2 [2] It stands to reason that the singing men and singing women symbolize royal pleasures, as is stated in [Kohelet 2:8](#): "I gathered me also silver and

the king? (37) Your servant would but just go over the Jordan with the king; and why should the king recompense me with such a reward? (38) Let your servant, I pray you, turn back, that I may die in my own city, by the grave of my father and my mother. But behold your servant Kimham; let him go over with my lord the king; and do to him what shall seem good to you." (39) And the king answered, " Kimham shall go over with me, and I will do to him that which shall seem good to you; and whatsoever you shall require of me, that will I do for you." (40) And all the people went over the Jordan, and the king went over; and the king kissed Barzilai, and blessed him; and he returned to his own place.

We saw earlier³[3] that one of David's most prominent characteristics is his appreciation and gratitude for the good that befalls him and his desire to repay with kindness those who have helped him. Barzilai the Gil'adite had provided David with food (see 17:26-29), and now David wishes to maintain him in his house in Jerusalem, measure for measure. Barzilai, however, refuses the offer; he argues that there is no reason for him to live in the king's house, and that he prefers to die and be buried among the members of his family. He suggests that in his place, Kimham - apparently Barzilai's son⁴[4] - should cross over with David and that he should benefit from David's reward. David parts in peace from Barzilai and keeps the reward for his descendants.

gold, and treasure such as kings and the provinces have as their own; I got me men-singers and women-singers, and the delights of the sons of men."

3 [3] See our *shiurim* to chapters 2, 9, and 10.

4 [4] As is noted by Rashi. In David's testament to Shelomo, he asks: "But show kindness unto the sons of Barzilai the Gil'adite, and let them be of those that eat at your table; for so they drew near to me when I fled from Avshalom your brother" ([1 Melakhim 2:7](#)). From here we see that Barzilai had other sons as well, and David asked Shelomo to provide for all their needs.

The name Kimham appears again in Scripture in a totally different context: Following the murder of Gedalya ben Achikam, Yochanan ben Kare'ach took the remnant of the people, "and they departed, and dwelt in Gerut Kimham, which is by Bethlehem, to go to enter into Egypt" ([Yirmiyahu 41:17](#)). Rashi and Radak write there, based on the Targum, that the reference is to the place where Kimhan lived, and it is possible that this is the place that was given to him by David, in the vicinity of David's place of birth (Bethlehem). Barzilai's descendants are also counted among those who returned from the exile: "And of the children of the priests: the children of Chavaya, the children of Hakotz, the children of Barzilai, who took a wife of the daughters of Barzilai the Gil'adite, and was called after their name" ([Ezra 2:61](#)).

II. The Rebellion

The situation continues to deteriorate:

(41) So the king went over to Gilgal, and Kimham went over with him; and all the people of Yehuda brought the king over, and also half the people of Israel. **(42)** And, behold, all the men of Israel came to the king,^{5[5]} and said to the king, “ Why have our brethren the men of Yehuda stolen you away, and brought the king and his household over the Jordan, and all David's men with him?”

The people of Israel, who noted the preference that David showed to the members of his own tribe at the beginning of the chapter, express their anger at the fact that the men of Yehuda "stole" the king and brought him over the Jordan. In their response, the men of Yehuda reveal what they had been keeping pent up in their hearts:

(43) And all the men of Yehuda answered the men of Israel, “ Because the king is near of kin to us; why then are you angry for this matter? Have we eaten at all of the king's cost? Or has any gift been given us?”

Close to thirty years have passed since David was anointed king over all of Israel, argue the men of Yehuda. Throughout that period, David took care not to show us any preference. He even moved his capital city from Chevron, our tribal capital, to the neutral city of Jerusalem. Can you not support us even this once, and allow for some minimal expression of David's roots in our tribe? Have we ever received anything from David, so that you could claim that you suffered a loss? All that we wanted was to cross David over the Jordan – and this too was wrong in your eyes!

5 [5] How can the words "all the men of Israel" be reconciled with what was stated at the end of the previous verse, "and also half the people of Israel"? The Radak explains that "half" does not necessarily mean fifty percent; the reference is to a small portion. It stands to reason that it refers to the tribes that lived on the east bank of the Jordan, who supported David (and perhaps also the thousand people who came with Shim'i from Binyamin).

The great tension between Yehuda and Israel makes it impossible for the men of Israel to respond calmly to this argument:

(44) And the men of Israel answered the men of Yehuda and said, " We have ten parts in the king, and we have also more right in David than you; why then did you despise us, that our advice should not be first in bringing back our king?"

In other words, how dare you claim that " the king is near of kin to us" ! Surely, David is king over all of Israel, and so our part in his kingship is ten times as great as yours! How dare you insult us? Were we not the first to bring him back, when you were still dallying? The chapter ends with the words:

And the words of the men of Yehuda were fiercer than the words of the men of Israel.

It is not clear what this means. It may mean that the argument of the men of Yehuda was stronger,^{6[6]} or else it may mean that they argued their case more strongly.^{7[7]} In any event, this argument has grave consequences:

(1) Now there happened to be there a base fellow, whose name was Sheva, the son of Bikhri, a Binyaminite;^{8[8]} and he blew the horn,^{9[9]}

6 [6] As Rashi writes: "That they showed them the letter that David had sent them."

7 [7] As the Radak writes: "And the men of Yehuda spoke to the men of Israel."

8 [8] The name Bikhri is a characteristically Binyaminite name. Bekher was one of the sons of Binyamin (see [Bereishit 46:21](#)). It is also possible that he was related to the family of Shaul, who was the son of "Kish, the son of Aviel, the son of Tzeror, the son of **Bekhorat**, the son of Afiyach, the son of a Binyaminite, a mighty man of valor" ([I Shmuel 9:1](#)).

9 [9] Avshalom's rebellion was also announced with the blowing of a horn (see above 15:10). Scripture is alluding here that the series of mistakes that David

and said, “ We have no portion in David, neither have we inheritance in the son of Yishai; every man to his tents, O Israel.” (2) So all the men of Israel went up from following David and followed Sheva the son of Bikhri; but the men of Yehuda did cleave to their king, from the Jordan even to Jerusalem.

In the end, David's conclusion that he must draw the men of Yehuda closer to him caused great damage and led to another rebellion – this time a rebellion of the tribes of Israel against David, who was suddenly perceived as a king who has a special connection to the tribe of Yehuda. The memory of the consistent policy of equality that David practiced during all the years of his kingship was utterly erased, and the kingdom was once again divided, as it had been during the first seven years of David's rule.

Sheva ben Bikhri's rebellion was not only the result of a political mistake, but also punishment for the spiritual error that David had made with respect to Mefiboshet, as was explained at length in the previous *shiur*. We mentioned there the words of *Chazal*:

R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav: When David said to Mefiboshet, "You and Tziva divide the land," a heavenly voice came forth and declared to him: "Rechav'am and Yarov'am shall divide the kingdom."
R. Yehuda said in the name of Rav: Had not David paid heed to slander, the kingdom of the house of David would not have been divided, Israel had not engaged in idolatry, and we would not have been exiled from our country. ([Shabbat 56b](#))

We now can see how profound these words are and how they penetrate to the root of the matter. David's twofold offense – against Mefiboshet, the last branch of the house of Shaul, and against the tribes of Israel themselves – led to the rebellion of Sheva ben Bikhri, which opened with the motto: "We have no portion in

made after Avshalom's rebellion was put down restored the situation to its previous state. It is clear, however, that practically speaking, the two rebellions were not similar. Avshalom's rebellion was planned with precision, whereas Sheva ben Bikhri's rebellion was a spontaneous outburst, as Scripture emphasizes: "Now there happened to be there a base fellow." It should be noted that the end of both rebellions was also marked by the blowing of a horn, and that in each case the blower was Yoav ben Tzeruya (18:15; 20:22).

David, neither have we inheritance in the son of Yishai; every man to his tents, O Israel." Sheva ben Bikhri's rebellion was quashed even before it began to gather momentum,¹⁰[10] but the consequences of the rupture did not disappear; the damage was merely pushed off to the next generation, until after Shelomo's reign, when the kingdom was finally divided. The direct responsibility for this outcome falls on Shlomo himself, but when the rebellion broke out under the leadership of Yarov'am ben Nevat, a motto was pulled out from the previous generation – from the rebellion of Sheva ben Bikhri:

And when all Israel saw that the king hearkened not to them, the people answered the king, saying, “ **What portion have we in David? Neither have we inheritance in the son of Yishai; to your tents, O Israel;** now see to your own house, David.” So Israel departed to their tents. ([I Melakhim 12:16](#))¹¹[11]

We see, then, that the events of our chapter had a decisive impact on what happened in a later period. Our chapter exposes the tension that prevailed between Israel and Yehuda. During most of the years of his reign, David was successful in his handling of this tension, but toward the end of his rule, he reopened with his own hands the wound of division by way of a combination of a political and a moral failure. The wound closed up for a certain period, but a series of events that took place in the next generation opened it once again, and after that, it never succeeded in healing until the end of the era of the prophets.¹²[12]

¹⁰ [10] It is reasonable to assume that the rebellion failed because of the negative character of Sheva ben Bikhri, who is called "a base fellow."

¹¹ [11] It seems that Scripture draws another connection between the rebellion of Sheva ben Bikhri and that of Yarov'am. Even though Sheva was a Binyaminite, later in our chapter it is noted that "a man of the hill-country of **Efrayim**, Sheva the son of Bikhri by name, has **lifted up his hand against the king**, even against David" (v. 21). Similar wording is used in connection with Yarov'am: "And Yarov'am the son of Nevat, an **Efrayimite** of Tzereda, a servant of Shelomo, whose mother's name was Tzeruya, a widow, he also **lifted up his hand against the king**" ([I Melakhim 11:26](#)).

¹² [12] Nevertheless, the prophet tells us that the circle will yet be closed under the rule of David: "Say to them: Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will take the stick of Yosef, which is in the hand of Efrayim, and the tribes of Israel his companions, and I will put them and it together with the stick of Yehuda, and make them one stick, and they shall be one in My hand...And I will make them one nation in the land, upon the mountains of Israel, and one king shall be king to them all; and they shall be no more two nations, neither shall they

III. Widows with a living husband

At this point, Scripture interrupts its account of the rebellion of Sheva ben Bikhri and describes in a single verse what was happening with David upon his return to Jerusalem:

(3) And David came to his house at Jerusalem; and the king took the ten women his concubines, whom he had left to keep the house, and put them under guard, and provided them with sustenance, but went not in to them. So they were shut up¹³[13] until the day of their death, in widowhood, with their husband alive.

The meaning of this verse is unclear. As may be recalled, Avshalom had relations with the concubines that David had left in his house (see above 15:16). Now David puts these women "under guard." R. Yeshaya of Trani explains: "So that they not marry others, but he did not have relations with them, as they were abhorrent to him because his son had had relations with them."¹⁴[14] David provided for their

be divided into two kingdoms any more at all...And My servant David shall be king over them, and they all shall have one shepherd" ([Yechezkel 37:19-24](#)).

13 [13] The Radak explains the word "*tzerurot*:" "Tied up, for they were never again permitted [to others]," but he notes that the Targum renders the term as "*netirin*," i.e., "guarded."

14 [14] Rashi cites the disagreement in *Chazal* about the question of whether David was indeed forbidden to have relations with them or whether this was a stringency that he accepted upon himself: "Our Rabbis, of blessed memory, disagree: Some say that they were permitted to him, but he overcame his passion for them. After having satiated his passion with what was forbidden to him, he now withdrew from what was permitted to him. Others say that they were forbidden to him. They say: If the vessel of an ordinary person that was used by the king is now forbidden to the ordinary person, is it not right that the vessel of a king that was used by an ordinary person should be forbidden to the king?" According to the first understanding, David accepted the prohibition upon himself as penitence for his sin with Bat-Sheva. According to the second understanding, since a king's widow is forbidden to an ordinary person, all the more so is a king's wife who had relations with an ordinary person forbidden to the king. According to both explanations, David acted properly, as opposed to what is implied by the words of the Rid. (Rashi does not consider the matter from the women's perspective.)

sustenance, but they remained "widows with their husband alive." In other words, even though they had a husband, they were regarded like widows, for David was not intimate with them and no longer treated them as his wives.

What does Scripture mean to teach us here? It seems that the primary feeling that arises within us as we read this verse is that of compassion and empathy for these unfortunate women. It should be remembered that it was David who brought about this difficult situation, for he had left them "to keep the house" when he fled from Jerusalem on account of Avshalom. Now, following the miserable experience that these women had lived through – when Avshalom had relations with them on the roof in the plain sight of all of Israel – they were assigned to a sort of house arrest. There they were maintained, but they remained in a state of artificial widowhood and unending wretchedness. This action of David joins with the series of mistakes that David made in the aftermath of Avshalom's rebellion.

(Translated by David Strauss)
