

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

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LECTURE 102: CHAPTER 20 (PART III)

THE CONCLUSION OF SHEVA BEN BIKHRI'S REBELLION

I. THE WISE WOMAN FROM AVEL-MA'AKHA

With the killing of Amasa ben Yeter, the pursuit after Sheva ben Bikhri became a much easier task, and soon it reached the decisive stage:

(15) And they came and besieged him in Avel-Beit-Ma'akha, and they cast up a mound against the city, and it stood up against the wall;¹[1] and all the people that were with Yoav battered the wall, to throw it down.

Yoav's men are laying a siege on Avel-Beit-Ma'akha – the city to which Sheva ben Bikhri had fled – and it is moments before the breach of the city and the killing of its inhabitants. At this point, the story takes a surprising turn. A wise woman of the city calls upon those laying the siege to bring Yoav to her:

1 [1] Yoav and his men are following the classic approach of laying seige to a city, using mounds of earth to fill in the trenches surrounding the wall. The mound reached the "*cheil*," the outer wall (this is the meaning of the word in other places, e.g., "The Lord has purposed to destroy the wall of the daughter of Zion; He has stretched out the line, He has not withdrawn His hand from destroying; but He has made the rampart [*cheil*] and wall [*choma*] to mourn, they languish together" [*Eikha* 2:8]).

(16) Then cried a wise woman out of the city, "Hear, hear; say, I pray you, to Yoav: Come near hither, that I may speak with you."

When Yoav arrives, the woman enters into a short conversation with him before reaching her point:

(17) And he came near to her; and the woman said, "Are you Yoav?" And he answered, "I am." Then she said to him, "Hear the words of your handmaid." And he answered, "I do hear."

What is the meaning of this wordiness? It stands to reason that the wise woman knew who was standing before her, and that she had already heard about him and his hot temperament. She therefore tries first to cool down the atmosphere with prefatory remarks that would bring Yoav to listen to her, so that she would have the opportunity to persuade him to accept her position.

Even when the woman reaches her point, she still prefaces her words with two sentences of introduction:

(18) Then she spoke, saying,²[2] "They were wont to speak at first, saying: They shall surely ask counsel at Avel; and so they ended the matter. (19) We are of them that are peaceable and faithful in Israel;³[3] do you seek to destroy a city and a mother in Israel? Why will you swallow up the inheritance of the Lord?"

2 [2] This unusual phrase, "*va-tomer lemor*," seems to be an expression of the woman's desire to continue the dialogue with Yoav even before she says what she wants to say. As the *Metzudot* says: "She said and asked that he respond to her words."

3 [3] "I am from among the inhabitants of the city who are peaceable and faithful in Israel" (Rashi). Later in his comment, Rashi cites a *midrash* that identifies the woman with Serach the daughter of Asher. The Radak already expressed his astonishment: "It is astonishing that Serach the daughter of Asher should have enjoyed such longevity, even though we have seen that she lived many years, for she is counted among those who went down to Egypt and she is also counted among those who reached the land of Israel, and she was then at least two hundred and fifty years old."

Several explanations have been suggested for the first sentence.⁴[4] It seems that this is a citation of an ancient saying,⁵[5] which testifies to the importance of Avel as a city of wise men - it was the accepted practice always to first seek counsel from its people. Thus, even before the discussion with Yoav about the matter in question, the woman emphasizes that it is important to listen to what she says, and that she in particular and the residents of the city in general are faithful and peaceful people. Only afterwards does she ask, in a most concise form, that Yoav not put all of the town's inhabitants to death.

Yoav cannot ignore the wise words of the woman, and so he answers:

(20) And Yoav answered and said, “ Far be it, far be it from me, that I should swallow up or destroy. **(21)** The matter is not so; but 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; deliver him only, and I will depart from the city.”

The woman immediately accepts Yoav's proposal, and now she must direct her wisdom to the other side and persuade Sheva ben Bikhri's men to turn him over to Yoav:

..And the woman said to Yoav, “ Behold, his head shall be thrown to you over the wall.” **(22)** Then the woman went to all the people in her

4 [4] Rashi explains (based on Targum Yonatan) that at first he should initially ("at first") have called to the city in peace; had Yoav done so, the city would have immediately made peace with him. The Rid's understanding seems much more forced: The city of Avel is so important that when the king wishes to issue a decree, he first issues it in Avel, and only afterwards does he issue it in other cities as well. The Ralbag explains that the woman argued that Sheva ben Bikhri's men tried at first to convince the people of Avel-Ma'akha to support them, but this does not mean that the people of the city agreed.

5 [5] According to this, the expression, "*daber yedabru barishona*," is similar to the expression "*mashal ha-kadmoni*" ([I Shemuel 24:13](#)) and other expressions that indicate ancient sayings, such as: "Therefore it is said, ' Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before the Lord' " ([Bereishit 10:9](#); and similarly [II Shemuel 5:8](#)).

wisdom.6[6] And they cut off the head of Sheva the son of Bikhri, and threw it out to Yoav7[7]...

6 [6] It stands to reason that the woman explained to the people of the city, including the supporters of Sheva ben Bikhri, that continued support for Sheva ben Bikhri would only result in the death of all the people of the city, whereas killing Sheva ben Bikhri would save the rest of the city's inhabitants. See next note.

7 [7] This episode served as an important source for a most important halakhic discussion: Is it permissible to kill one person in order to save the lives of a group of people? I wish to briefly review the main sources on the topic.

It was taught in *Tosefta Terumot* 6:20: "If gentiles said to a group of people: 'Hand over to us one of you, and we will kill him, or else we will kill all of you,' they should allow themselves all to be killed, rather than hand over a single soul of Israel. But if they specified [a particular person] for them, the way they specified Sheva ben Bikhri, they should hand him over and not all be killed. R. Yehuda said: When do these words apply? When he is inside and they are outside. But when he is inside and they are inside, since he will be killed and they will be killed, they should hand him over and not all be killed. And so it says: 'Then the woman went to all the people in her wisdom.' She said to them: Since he will be killed and we will be killed, hand him over to them and be not all killed. R. Shimon says: So she said to them: 'Whoever rebels against the kingdom of the house of David is liable for the death penalty.' "

The relationship between the three viewpoints in the *baraita* is not clear. Rashi in his commentary to our chapter cites the last two opinions, and this is the way he explains the viewpoint of R. Yehuda: "If he could save himself, e.g., if he was inside and they were outside, and you are in danger and he can escape, we do not set aside a life for another life and kill one person in order to save others. But now that he too will be killed with you, since the walls have been destroyed and there is no way to escape, it is better that he alone should die, and that others should not die along with him." According to this approach, when they are all in equal danger ("inside"), it is better that one person should be put to death rather than that they all die. But if the wanted person is in less danger than the others, and there is a chance that he will be saved, we do not sacrifice the life of an individual, even to save a community.

However, from the opinion of R. Shimon it would appear that we cannot learn from the story of Sheva ben Bikhri that we are permitted to kill an individual in order to save the community, as Sheva ben Bikhri was in any case liable to the death penalty, as a rebel against the king. The *Amoraim* in the *Yerushalmi* (*Terumot* 8:4) also disagree regarding whether the *Tosefta's* allowance is connected to Sheva ben Bikhri's status as a rebel, or whether it can be applied generally: "R. Shimon ben Lakish said: This is when he is liable for the death penalty like Sheva ben Bikhri. R. Yochanan said: Even though he is not liable for the death penalty like Sheva ben Bikhri."

Thus ends the short campaign, and by virtue of the woman's wisdom, great bloodshed is averted:

And he blew the horn, and they were dispersed from the city, every man to his tent. And Yoav returned to Jerusalem unto the king.

II. THE WOMAN OF AVEL-MA'AKHA AND THE WOMAN OF TEKOA

This is not the first account in our book of a wise woman. In chapter 14, we encountered the woman of Tekoa, and there are several similarities between the two stories.

1. In both accounts, a story is told about a "wise woman" (14:2; 20:15).

2. In both stories, the woman tries to persuade a high-ranking person – David or Yoav – to change his position, and the request is formulated in similar terms. The woman of Tekoa says to David: "For the king will hear, to deliver his handmaid" (14:16), and the woman of Avel-Ma'akha says to Yoav: "Hear the words of your handmaid" (17).

The Rambam (*Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 5:5) rules in accordance with the view that the allowance applies only in the case where the person is otherwise liable for the death penalty: "However, if [the gentiles] single out [a specific individual] and say: 'Give us so and so or we will kill all of you,' [different rules apply]: If the person is liable to the death penalty like Sheva ben Bichri, they may give him over to them. Initially, however, this instruction is not conveyed to them. If he is not liable to the death penalty, they should allow themselves all to be killed rather than give over a single soul to [the gentiles]." The *Hagahot Maimoniyot* asks why the Rambam rules in accordance with Reish Lakish, rather than R. Yochanan, whose viewpoint is generally accepted as law. See the answer offered by *Kesef Mishneh*, ad loc. And see the rest of the discussion in the *Kesef Mishneh* and the *Lechem Mishneh*, ad loc.

3. In both stories, the woman successfully averts bloodshed. The woman of Tekoa prevents the killing of Avshalom, and the woman of Avel-Ma'akha prevents the killing of the inhabitants of her city.

4. The two women use the same wording to present the problematic nature of the planned bloodshed. The woman of Tekoa says: "For the king will hear, to deliver his handmaid out of the hand of the man that would destroy me and my son together **out of the inheritance of God**" (14:16), and the woman of Avel-Ma'akha says: "Why will you swallow up **the inheritance of the Lord?**" (v. 19).

But as we have already seen many times in this book, parallels actually sharpen the differences between two cases. From a literary perspective, the contrast is alluded to already in the framework of the stories. The woman of Tekoa was sent by Yoav to persuade David, whereas the woman of Avel-Ma'akha works against Yoav and tries to persuade him. Content-wise, the contrast is striking. The woman of Avel-Ma'akha uses her wisdom to sacrifice one person, a rebel, in order to save an entire city, whereas the woman of Tekoa persuaded David to save one person, who also deserved to die, despite the danger that this posed to a great number of people.

In chapter 14, we dealt at length with David's failure when he granted the woman's request, something which led in the end to Avshalom's rebellion and to great bloodshed in Israel. The woman of Avel-Ma'akha, in contrast, succeeded in stopping the rebellion that followed from Avshalom's rebellion, the rebellion of Sheva ben Bikhri. These two wise women stand face to face and close a circle around two rebellions: the rebellion which opened because of excessive clemency and the rebellion which ended because of the very opposite.

The contrast is expressed in Yoav's conduct as well. In chapter 14, it was Yoav who sent the woman of Tekoa in order to restore Avshalom (a step that without a doubt he later regretted), in the wake of which a long rebellion broke out, ending with: "**And Yoav blew the horn**, and the people returned from pursuing after Israel; for Yoav held back the people" (18:17). In the rebellion of Sheva ben Bikhri, Yoav listened to the woman from Evel-Ma'akha, and thus was able to end the rebellion earlier than expected: "**And he blew the horn**, and they were dispersed from the city, every man to his tent."

III. THE WOMAN OF AVEL-MA'AKHA AND THE WOMAN OF TEVETZ

Yet another woman is similar to the woman of Evel-Ma'akha - the woman of Tevetz who killed Avimelekh ([Shoftim 9](#)). Let us note the lines of similarity between the two stories:

1) In both stories, we are dealing with a group of people who are subject to a siege and are in danger of being destroyed. In the story of Avimelekh, it is the people of Tevetz who entered into the tower in the city: "And Avimelekh came unto the tower, and fought against it, and went close unto the door of the tower to burn it with fire" ([Shoftim 9:52](#)). In our chapter, it is the people of the city of Evel-Ma'akha: "And all the people that were with Yoav battered the wall, to throw it down" ([II Shmuel 20:15](#)).

2) In both stories, a certain woman saves all of the besieged people by killing the person who is endangering the city: in Tevetz - Avimelekh, and in Evel-Ma'akha - Sheva ben Bikhri.

3) The killing of the man is described in similar terms: "And a certain woman **threw** an upper millstone upon Avimelekh's **head**" ([Shoftim 9:53](#)); "And they cut off the **head** of Sheva the son of Bikhri, and **threw** it out to Yoav" ([II Shmuel 20:22](#)).

4) In the two stories, the death of the man brought an end to the war: "And when the men of Israel saw that Avimelekh was dead, they departed every man unto his place" ([Shoftim 9:55](#)); "And they were dispersed from the city, every man to his tent" ([II Shmuel 20:22](#)).

These parallels also sharpen the differences between the two stories, but here the difference is not between the women, but between the situations. The contrast underscores the wisdom of the woman of Evel-Ma'akha. In Tevetz, the enemy was outside the besieged city, and the woman could resolve the problem in a relatively easy manner - by throwing the millstone on his head. It would appear that the woman of Evel-Ma'akha could have done the same to Yoav when he would come near the wall. But she, in her wisdom, understood the difference between the cases; she realized that the real enemy of Evel-Ma'akha was not the one laying siege to the city, but someone who was inside the city. She therefore chose not to throw a millstone of Yoav's head, but rather to throw to him the head of Sheva ben Bikhri, and in

that way she saved the city and brought an end to this unfortunate and unnecessary episode.

IV. CONCLUDING VERSES

The chapter ends with verses that are similar to those at the end of chapter 8:

(23) Now Yoav was over all the host of Israel; and Benaya the son of Yehoyada was over the Keretites and over the Peletites; (24) and Adoram was over the levy; and Yehoshafat the son of Achilud was the recorder; (25) and Sheva was scribe; and Tzadok and Evyatar were priests; (26) and Ira also the Yairite was chief minister unto David.

In chapter 8, we explained why these verses appear already there, even though the story of David's reign continues for many more chapters. In our chapter, these verses are in their proper place, as they conclude the series of events described in the book of *Shmuel*. The last four chapters of the book are appendices, relating various matters from different periods of David's life, which are not directly connected to each other and which do not constitute a single continuum.^{8[8]} The continuation of the concluding verses of our chapter is found at the beginning of the book of *Melakhim*.

We will focus on one particular difference between this list and the list appearing at the end of chapter 8:

And Yoav the son of Tzeruya was over the host; and Yehoshafat the son of Achilud was recorder; and Tzadok the son of Achituv, and Achimelekh the son of Evyatar, were priests; and Seraya was scribe; and Benayahu the son of Yehoyada was over the Keretites and the Peletites; and David's sons were chief ministers. ([II Shmuel 8:16-18](#))

^{8 [8]} We shall deal with this at great length at the beginning of the next *shiur*.

There, Benayahu ben Yehoyada is mentioned toward the end as in charge of the Keretites and the Peletites,^{9[9]} whereas in the list in our chapter, he is raised in rank, and is mentioned immediately after Yoav. It seems that over the course of time, David advanced Benayahu so that he could be a trusted force against the capricious Yoav, and in order to train him to one day in the future be the one who would strike at Yoav ben Tzeruya at the command of King Shlomo. It is he who will become Shlomo's general in place of Yoav.

(Translated by David Strauss)

^{9 [9]} Regarding the Keretites and the Peletites, see our *shiur* on chapter 8.