

# THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

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## LECTURE 95: CHAPTER 17 (PART II)

### DAVID CROSSES THE JORDAN

#### I. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CROSSING THE JORDAN

Avshalom accepts Chushai's advice and rejects Achitofel's wicked counsel, but this does not seem to put Chushai's mind to rest:

(15) Then said Chushai to Tzadok and to Evyatar the priests, " Thus and thus did Achitofel counsel Avshalom and the elders of Israel; and thus and thus have I counseled. (16) Now therefore send quickly, and tell David, saying: ' Lodge not this night in the plains of the wilderness, but in any wise pass over; lest the king be swallowed up, and all the people that are with him.' "

What was Chushai's concern? There are two possibilities. He may have feared that Avshalom would change his mind. Achitofel's counsel had at first been accepted, and only afterwards pushed aside, and therefore Chushai was concerned that it might be accepted again. Moreover, Achitofel's advice had at first been accepted by the elders, and they were liable to convince Avshalom once again to support it. It is perhaps for this reason that Chushai emphasizes: "Thus and thus did Achitofel counsel Avshalom **and the elders of Israel.**"

A second possibility is that Chushai was unaware of Avshalom's decision. He may have taken leave from him as soon as he had finished presenting his position, thus leaving the decision in the hands of Avshalom and his men. He therefore quickly sent a warning to David, for he did not know at the time whether or not his advice had been accepted.

In any event, Chushai urges David not only to leave his place, but to cross the Jordan. To further this end, he makes use of the spy ring that had been established, as may be recalled, at the beginning of the revolt:

(17) Now Yonatan and Achimaatz stayed by En-Rogel;<sup>1[1]</sup> and a maidservant used to go and tell them; and they went and told King David; for they might not be seen to come into the city. (18) But a lad saw them, and told Avshalom; and they went both of them away quickly, and came to the house of a man in Bachurim, who had a well in his court; and they went down there. (19) And the woman took and spread the covering over the well's mouth, and strewed groats thereon;<sup>2[2]</sup> and nothing was known. (20) And Avshalom's servants came to the woman to the house; and they said, "Where are Achimaatz and Yonatan?" And the woman said to them, "They are gone over the brook of water."<sup>3[3]</sup> And when they had sought and could not find them, they returned to Jerusalem. (21) And it came to pass, after they were departed, that they came up out of the well, and went and told king David; and they said unto David, "Arise, and pass quickly over the water; for thus has Achitofel counseled against you." (22) Then David arose, and all the people that were with him, and they passed over the Jordan; by the morning light there lacked not one of them that was not gone over the Jordan.

The order of events requires explanation. We know that Chushai's counsel was in the end accepted, and that the precautionary steps that were adopted to the point of crossing the Jordan were not really necessary. Why

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1 [1] The accepted view today identifies Ein-Rogel with Bir Ayub in the southern part of the City of David, in the connection between Wadi Kidron, which passes to the east of the city, and the Ben-Hinnom valley to the south of the city. Yehonatan and Achimaatz are thus located at the edge of the city, close to the road that leads to the Judaen wilderness.

2 [2] The commentators have explained that the term "*rifot*" refers to crushed grain, as is implied by the verse: "Though you should bray a fool in a mortar with a pestle among groats ("*rifot*"), yet will not his foolishness depart from him" ([Mishlei 27:22](#)). The woman laid a board or the like on the opening of the well, upon which she placed the crushed grain, in order to hide the well in which Yonatan and Achimaatz were hiding.

3 [3] This unique expression, "*mikhal ha-mayim*," is somewhat obscure. Rashi writes: "I don't know what this means. According to its context, it is like '*shibolet ha-nahar*,' flood water." Some connect the expression to the place where the story takes place, Bachurim, the place where Palti the son of Layish left Mikhal the daughter of Shaul (see above 3:14-16).

then does Scripture decide to describe them? Why is important to relate that David quickly crossed the Jordan, even though it was not really necessary for him to do so?

In order to answer this question, let us first consider the striking and interesting parallel between the story of Yonatan and Achimaatz and the account of the spies who had been sent by Yehoshua and reached the house of Rachav. There are several parallels between the two stories:

1) In both stories, the leader of Israel sends two spies, they reach the house of a woman, and she hides them:

But she had brought them up to the roof, and hid them with the stalks of flax, which she had spread out upon the roof. ([Yehoshua 2:6](#))

And the woman took and spread the covering over the well's mouth, and strewed groats thereon; and nothing was known. ([II Shemuel 17:19](#))

2) In both cases, the woman misleads those who were in pursuit of the spies, and tells them that the spies are not in her house:

And she said, " Yes, the men came to me, but I knew not from where they were; and it came to pass about the time of the shutting of the gate, when it was dark, that the men went out; where the men went I know not; pursue after them quickly; for you shall overtake them." ([Yehoshua 2:4-5](#))

And the woman said to them, " They are gone over the brook of water." ([II Shemuel 17:20](#))

3) In both cases, the pursuers fail in their mission:

And the pursuers sought them throughout all the way, but found them not. ([Yehoshua 2:22](#))

And when they had sought and could not find them. ([II Shemuel 17:20](#))

4) In both stories, there is a surprising element: the woman who offers help seems to belong to the other camp, the enemy of the camp to which the spies belong. Rachav is a resident of Jericho, and the woman who rescued Yonatan and Achimaatz was from Bachurim – a town in the tribal territory of Binyamin, from which came the people who were most loyal to the house of Shaul, such as Shimi the son of Gera (16:5), who cursed David and threw stones at him. The Midrash further sharpens this point with its suggestion that the woman was the wife of Shimi the son of Gera (*Midrash Shemuel* 32:4 [ed. Buber, p. 71]).<sup>4</sup>[4]

5) In the two stories, the spies reach their destination, and their words lead those who had sent them to cross the Jordan:

Then the two men returned...and came to Yehoshua the son of Nun; and they told him all that had befallen them...And Yehoshua rose up early in the morning, and they removed from Shittim, and came to the Jordan...([Yehoshua 2:23-3:1](#))

And they went and told king David...Then David arose, and all the people that were with him, and they passed over the Jordan by the morning light. ([II Shemuel 17:21-22](#))

6) In both cases, the Jordan is crossed early in the morning.

It seems that the meaning of the parallel is expressed primarily in the last similarity. Both stories lead to a crossing of the Jordan, but in opposite

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4 [4] We shall consider this point at greater length below, when we encounter additional people who supported David even though they were counted among those loyal to the house of Shaul.

directions. The story of the spies sent by Yehoshua took place before Israel had entered their land – that is, from east to west – whereas David crosses the Jordan from west to east. It turns out that David's crossing of the Jordan is the very opposite of Israel's entering the land!

Now we can understand why Scripture records this step of David, even though it proved to be unnecessary. Indeed, it was not needed to frustrate Achitofel's plan, for this had already been achieved by Chushai (and we already noted that this was God's response to David's prayer). It was, however, meaningful on another level: This was one of David's punishments for the affair involving Bat-Sheva. His being forced to leave the country was a punishment of exile, and the speed with which the events unfolded intensified the humiliation.<sup>5[5]</sup>

Crossing the Jordan, however, brought Achitofel's counsel to a close. Achitofel's reaction to this development was extreme:

(23) And when Achitofel saw that his counsel was not followed, he saddled his ass, and arose, and got him home to his city, and set his house in order, and strangled himself; and he died, and was buried in the sepulcher of his father.

What brought Achitofel to take this step? Achitofel seems to have read the map correctly. He understood that having lost its momentum, the rebellion would not succeed. Achitofel identified the problematic elements in Avshalom's personality and drew the necessary conclusions: David would return to the throne. He also assumed – apparently correctly – that he would eventually pay the price for the revolt, because David would not want to hurt his son Avshalom. Like other Biblical figures who committed suicide,<sup>6[6]</sup> Achitofel did not wait until others came to kill him, but rather took his own life.

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5 [5] This point is evident in another literary expression of the contrast between the two stories. Regarding Rachav it says: "But she had **brought them up** to the roof" ([Yehoshua 2:6](#)), whereas in our story it says: "And they came to the house of a man in Bachurim, who had a well in his court; and **they went down there**" (v. 18).

6 [6] Shimshon (see [Shoftim 16:28-30](#)), Shaul ([I Shmuel 31:4](#)) and Zimri ([I Melakhim 16:18](#)) – "And it came to pass, when Zimri saw that the city was taken, that he went into the castle of the king's house, and **burnt the king's house over him** with fire, and died." (But see Radak, ad loc., who

## II. DAVID ON THE EAST BANK OF THE JORDAN

When David arrived on the east bank of the Jordan, he received the support and assistance of several local residents:

(24) When David came to Machanayim, Avshalom passed over the Jordan, he and all the men of Israel with him.<sup>7[7]</sup> (25) And Avshalom had set Amasa over the host instead of Yoav. Now Amasa was the son of a man, whose name was Itra the Israelite,<sup>8[8]</sup> who came unto Avigayil the daughter of Nachash,<sup>9[9]</sup> sister to Tzeruya, Yoav's mother.

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understands that this does not mean that Zimri killed himself, but rather that Omri burnt the castle).

7 [7] It would seem that Chushai's counsel above is realized here: "But I counsel that all Israel be gathered together unto you" (v. 11). Achitofel's suicide did not put an end to the course proposed by Chushai, and it stands to reason that Avshalom gathered the people of Israel and crossed the Jordan with them in order to pursue David.

8 [8] In *Divrei Ha-yamim* it states: "And Avigayil bore Amasa; and the father of Amasa was Yeter the **Yishmaelite**" (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 2:17). The Radak understands that Yeter was an Israelite who lived in the land of Yishmael, and he adds a sentence (in the name of his father) which is familiar to us from contemporary reality: "When he was in the land of the Yishmaelites, they called him an Israelite, and when he came from there to *Eretz Yisrael*, they called him a Yishmaelite." Nevertheless, from the fact that both sources imply that Yeter was not Avigayil's legal husband, it would seem that the reading in *Divrei Ha-yamim* should be given priority, because it explains why, in fact, he did not take her as his wife – because he was a Yishmaelite.

9 [9] These words are difficult, for the book of *Divrei Ha-yamim* implies that Avigayil was David's sister: "And their sisters were Tzeruya and **Avigayil**. And the sons of Tzeruya: Avishai, and Yoav, and Asael" (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 2:15). Chazal ([Shabbat 55b](#)) expounded that Nachash is Yishai, and that he was called by that name because he was one of the four people who died "in the wake of the serpent (*nachash*)" – that is, who were perfectly righteous, and there was no reason that they should die, were it not for the decree pronounced upon all men that they should die as a result of the primal sin. An explanation that is closer to the plain sense of the text as to why Yishai was also called "Nachash" can be found in the name of one of Yishai's more famous ancestors, Nachshon the son of Aminadav (see I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 2:10). The *Metzudat Zion* suggests that Avigayil was indeed the daughter of Nachash, but after his death, her mother married Yishai, and therefore she

(26) And Israel and Avshalom pitched in the land of Gilad. (27) And it came to pass, when David came to Machanayim, that Shovi the son of Nachash of Rabba of the children of Amon, and Makhir the son of Amiel of Lo-Devar, and Barzilai the Giladite of Rogelim (28) brought beds, and basins,<sup>10</sup>[10] and earthen vessels,<sup>11</sup>[11] and wheat, and barley, and meal, and parched corn, and beans, and lentils, and parched pulse,<sup>12</sup>[12] (29) and honey, and curd, and sheep, and cheese of cows,<sup>13</sup>[13] for David and for the people that were with him to eat; for they said, “ The people are hungry, and faint, and thirsty in the wilderness.”

Like the woman in Bachurim, here too the people that extend help to David are connected by virtue of their location and their genealogy to the house of Shaul. First, David reached Machanayim, the town in which Ish-Boshet the son of Shaul ruled as king. Earlier in chapter 2, we noted the special connections between the people of Gilad and Shaul. Against this background, the assistance given to David by Barzilai the Giladite – who might even have been a member of Shaul's extended family, if we assume that he was the father of Adriel the son of Barzilai the Mecholite, husband of Meirav (see below 21:8) – is striking. Another prominent figure from the circle of the house of Shaul was Makhir the son of Amiel from Lo-Davar, in whose house Mefiboshet, the crippled son of Yonatan, stayed for an extended period

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was the sister of the other sons of Yishai through marriage. It is interesting that the name "Nachash" is mentioned again below, v. 27; there the reference is to the father of Shuvi, one of the people who came to David's aid.

10 [10] The commentators explain that the reference is to certain household utensils. Compare with [1 Melakhim 7:50](#): "**And the cups** (*ve-ha-sipot*), and the snuffers, and the basins, and the pans, and the fire-pans, of pure gold."

11 [11] I.e., earthenware cooking pots. See *Yeshayahu* 54:17; [Tehillim 2:9](#).

12 [12] The twofold mention of "*kali*" (parched) in this verse is connected to the ways in which the various products mentioned here were served. The wheat and barley were brought both as flour and parched, i.e., the kernels were roasted in fire; the beans and lentils were served in their natural state and also parched.

13 [13] The commentators explain that the reference is to cheese from cow milk. The word "*shefot*" appears in only one other place in Scripture: "And they built it, and set up the doors thereof, the bolts thereof, and the bars thereof, and a thousand cubits of the wall unto the dung (*ha-shefot*) gate" (*Nechemya* 3:13). Thus, it is possible that the source of the name "Dung Gate" (*Sha'ar ha-Ashpot*) is *Sha'ar ha-Shefot*, which was a gate at which they made and sold cheeses. Indeed, the valley that is close to the *Sha'ar ha-Ashpot* of today is called by Josephus "the valley of the cheesemakers."

of time (9:4-5). The help that all of these people offered to David proves that not all of Shaul's close associates viewed David with cynicism, as did Shimi the son of Gera. Many, in fact, valued the caution that he observed regarding Shaul's honor when the latter was trying to kill him and were not inclined to blame him for the blood of the house of Shaul that was spilled on various occasions. These people are another literary expression of the rightness of David's path.

This might also be the way to understand the help given to David by Shuvi the son of Nachash. It is reasonable to assume that Shuvi was the son of Nachash, the king of Amon, to whose son, Chanun, David had tried to repay kindness, sending him a delegation of comforters following his father's death (above, chapter 10). As may be recalled, Chanun viewed the gesture with cynicism, and accused the delegation of attempted espionage. Thus, just as Shaul's supporters here serve as an antithesis to Shimi the son of Gera, Shuvi the son of Nachash – who values David and helps him – serves as an antithesis to his brother Chanun.

The chapter ends here, and its conclusion prepares us for what is yet to happen. David receives support and finds himself surrounded by friends. The road is now open to enlarging his camp and enjoying victory.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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