

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

Rav Amnon Bazak

LECTURE 92: CHAPTER 16 (PART I)

DAVID, TZIVA AND SHIM'I BEN GERA

I. The sin

After beginning his descent from the Mount of Olives, David suddenly encounters an unexpected person, and a short drama transpires:

(1) And when David was a little past the top,^{1[1]} behold, Tziva the servant of Mefiboshet met him, with a couple of asses saddled, and upon them two hundred loaves of bread, and a hundred clusters of raisins, and a hundred of summer fruits,^{2[2]} and a bottle of wine. (2) And the king said to Tziva, “ What do you mean by these?” And Tziva said, “ The asses are for the king's household to ride on; and the bread and summer fruit for the young men to eat; and the wine, that such as are faint in the wilderness may drink.” (3) And the king said, “ And where is your master's son?” And Tziva said to the king, “ Behold, he abides at Jerusalem; for he said, ‘ Today will the house of Israel restore me the kingdom of my father.’ ” (4) Then said the king to Tziva, “ Behold, yours is all that pertains to Mefiboshet.” And Tziva said, “ I prostrate myself; let me find favor in your sight, my lord, O king.”

This is the second chapter in the complex relationship between David, Tziva, and Mefiboshet, the beginning of which we discussed at length in chapter 9 (*shiu* 76). We saw there that following Shaul's death, Tziva seized control of the properties belonging to the house of Shaul, pushing aside the lame Mefiboshet, who lived on the other side of the Jordan with Makhir ben Amiel. David, who wished to repay the kindness of Yonatan, son of Shmuel and father of Mefiboshet, corrected the situation,

1 [1] The top of the Mount of Olives.

2 [2] This refers to figs.

restored the properties to Mefiboshet, and even hosted him at his table in a permanent fashion. It was also noted there that Tziva waited for the opportune moment to restore the previous situation. That opportune moment has now arrived.

Tziva brings David rations for his journey, and when David asks him about Mefiboshet's whereabouts, he tells him that Mefiboshet stayed behind in Jerusalem in the hope of regaining the throne. David immediately rules: "Yours is all that pertains to Mefiboshet." This ruling is surprising for several reasons:

- 1) David decides the matter without hearing the other side.
- 2) David issues his ruling on the basis of the words of Tziva, who undoubtedly is an interested party, based on the account of chapter 9.
- 3) David ignores the fact that Mefiboshet is a cripple, and therefore relatively immobile and dependent upon others.
- 4) The argument that Tziva attributes to Mefiboshet is also absolutely ridiculous. Is it at all possible that Mefiboshet naively thought that Avshalom's meticulously planned rebellion was designed to restore the kingdom to the lame Mefiboshet, heir to the house of Shaul?

What, then, led to this sin? How did David make such a serious mistake? It is of course possible to connect it on the circumstances in which he found himself: David was in deep distress, and when aid was extended to him,^{3[3]} he naturally

3 [3] Tziva's gift brings to mind another gift given to David – the gift given to him by Avigayil, the wife of Naval the Karmelite: "Then Avigayil made haste, and took **two hundred loaves**, and two **bottles of wine**, and five sheep ready dressed, and five measures of parched corn, **and a hundred clusters of raisins, and two hundred cakes of figs**, and laid them **on asses**" ([Shmuel I 25:18](#)). In this way, Scripture intimates what David was feeling when he made his decision: Naval had repaid David "evil for good" (ibid. v. 21), and now David thinks that Mefiboshet is acting towards him in similar fashion.

inclined to the party who helped him, without carefully examining his motives.⁴[4] It seems, however, that the answer is more complicated, and rooted in the past – in the relationship between David and Mefiboshet's father, Yonatan the son of Shaul.

In our *shiurim* on *Shmuel I*, and especially in the *shiurim* on chapter 20 (*shiurim* 39-40), we discussed at length the complexity in the relationship between David and Yonatan. We saw there that despite the great love between the two – love that came to symbolize "love that does not depend on anything else" ([Avot 5:16](#)) – Yonatan's dream of a joint kingdom with David never materialized (see [Shmuel I 23:17](#)). We explained that despite this love, a barrier remained that Yonatan did not cross. Even at the end of [Shmuel I 20](#), where Yonatan's dedication to David reaches its climax, they still remain on opposite sides of the barricade: "And he [David] arose and departed; and Jonathan went into the city" (*Shmuel I* 21:1). Yonatan was unable to abandon his father, and thus his fate was bound to that of his father. Instead of being second to David, he fell in battle alongside Shaul.

How did David see this? Was he sympathetic to Yonatan's situation? Did he appreciate the depth of the tragic dilemma in which Yonatan was found? Or did he perhaps expect him to join him, or perhaps even more: Did he harbor the thought that despite his declarations to the contrary, Yonatan wished to remain on his father's side so that one day he would succeed him on the throne?

Yonatan's remaining with Shaul seems to have disturbed David. David laments: "Shaul and Yonatan, the lovely and the pleasant in their lives, even in their death they were not divided" (1:23). Between the lines, we hear his great pain: Had you not remained with your father during his lifetime, you would not have found with him your death!

This also explains the interesting phenomenon that the root *a-h-v* ("love") is used only to describe Yonatan's relationship to David.⁵[5] Nowhere does it say that David loved Yonatan. Even in his lamentation over Yonatan's death, David says: "Wonderful was your love to me, passing the love of women" ([Shmuel II 1:26](#)). David

4 [4] Tziva shows himself here to be an especially shrewd person; he "bets" on David's returning to the throne and keeping his promises. It is doubtful whether many people in Israel were sufficiently far-sighted to believe in David's ability to restore his kingship.

5 [5] See [Shmuel I 18:1](#), 3; 20:17 (three times in the verse!).

certainly had deep feelings toward Yonatan ("Very pleasant have you been to me" [ibid.]), but the absence of the term "love" – seen against the frequent use of the term by Yonatan – demands explanation. This seems to follow from a certain measure of disappointment that David experienced when Yonatan failed to join him in his wanderings.^{6[6]}

It is therefore possible that the report that Mefiboshet had stayed in Jerusalem and was hoping to receive the kingdom awakened in David – perhaps unconsciously – that feeling of disappointment and frustration with Yonatan's conduct in the past, when he fled to the Judean desert the previous time. He identifies similar patterns of behavior in the father and the son, and this makes it even more difficult for him to consider the matter rationally. He can no longer judge the issue objectively, and so he quickly proclaims: "Behold, yours is all that pertains to Mefiboshet."

This complicated story is not over. We shall return to it in chapter 19, and see its tragic ending.

II. The Punishment

David is quickly punished for his action:

(5) And when king David came to Bachurim, behold, there came out thence a man of the family of the house of Shaul, whose name was Shim'i, the son of Gera;^{7[7]} he came out, and kept on cursing as he came. (6) And he cast stones at David, and at all the servants of King David; and all the people and all the mighty men were on his right hand and on his left. (7) And thus said Shim'i when he cursed, " Begone, begone, you man of blood, and base

6 [6] There is a certain similarity here to David's relationship with Yonatan's sister, Mikhal the daughter of Shaul, as we pointed out at length in our *shiurim* on the chapters dealing with Mikhal.

7 [7] This name is common in the tribe of Binyamin. Shim'i is the name of Shlomo's governor in the land of Binyamin (*Melakhim I* 4:18), and also of the grandfather of Mordechai (*Esther* 2:5). Gera was the name of one of the sons of Binyamin (*Bereishit* 46:21), and this was also the name of the father of Ehud, one of the judges from the tribe of Binyamin (*Shofetim* 3:15).

fellow; (8) the Lord has returned upon you all the blood of the house of Shaul, in whose stead you have reigned; and the Lord has delivered the kingdom into the hand of Avshalom your son; and, behold, you are taken in your own mischief, because you are a man of blood.”

It is difficult not to see the connection between the sin and the punishment. When he ruled in favor of Tziva, David dealt a blow not only to Mefiboshet, but also to the entire house of Shaul. Immediately afterwards, he encounters "a man of the house of Shaul" who curses and stones him.

As for the incident itself, Shim'i ben Gera's claim is clearly unjustified. Shim'i accuses David of having killed off the members of the house of Shaul, as is the custom of kings to destroy the previous royal house.^{8[8]} It is reasonable to assume that Shim'i accused him in particular of killing Ish-Boshet the son of Shaul^{9[9]} and Avner ben Ner,^{10[10]} Shaul's cousin and general, and perhaps he also blamed him for the deaths of the seven descendants of Shaul who were hung by the Givonites (see below, chapter 21).^{11[11]} We have already seen, however, that David had no intention of hurting any of these people; on the contrary, he always conducted himself with extreme caution, both with respect to Shaul himself, whom he had opportunity to kill on two different occasions (see *Shmuel I*, chapters 24 and 26), and with respect to his descendants. Yoav ben Tzeruya killed Avner, and Rekhev and Ba'ana killed Ish-Boshet; they acted on their own, and not as David's agents, and he was greatly dismayed by their actions.^{12[12]}

8 [8] Just as Basha destroyed the house of Yerov'am (*Melakhim I* 14:14; 15; 27-30), and Yehu destroyed the house of Achav (*Melakhim II* 9:6-10; 10:11).

9 [9] See above, chapter 4, and *shiurim* 66-67.

10 [10] See above, chapter 3, and *shiurim* 64-65.

11 [11] This story is found later in chapter 21, but chapters 21-24 are appendices to the book, and not found in their chronological order; it is possible that the events described in them occurred earlier in David's life. In any event, it is absolutely clear that David is not to be blamed for the deaths of these people, as everything was done there on God's command as a means to stop the famine.

12 [12] At worst, one can accuse David of a lack of caution with respect to the leanings of these people, as we noted there. But it is clear that this indirect responsibility is very far from the negative intentions attributed to him by Shim'i ben Gera.

In any event, Shim'i's action was a punishment for David – not only for his role in the Bat-Sheva affair, but also for his erroneous ruling regarding Tziva and Mefiboshet.

At this point an argument develops in David's camp:

(9) Then said Avishai the son of Tzeruya to the king, “ Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over, I pray you, and take off his head.” (10) And the king said, “ What have I to do with you, you sons of Tzeruya? So let him curse, because the Lord has said to him, ‘ Curse David;’ who then shall say, ‘ Why have you done so?’ ” (11) And David said to Avishai and to all his servants, “ Behold, my son, who came forth of my body, seeks my life; how much more¹³[13] this Binyaminite now? Let him alone, and let him curse; for the Lord has bidden him. (12) It may be that the Lord will look on my eye,¹⁴[14] and that the Lord will requite me good for his cursing of me this day.

This argument is very characteristic of the relationship between David and the sons of his sister Tzeruya. This is not the first argument that David had with Avishai regarding the latter's desire to kill somebody. The previous argument took place at the time that Shaul was pursuing David. The two went down to Shaul's camp, which had been overcome by a deep sleep of God ([Shmuel I 26](#)):

So David and Avishai came to the people by night; and, behold, Shaul lay sleeping within the barricade, with his spear stuck in the ground at

13 [13] The phrase "*ve-af ki*" is used in the sense of "*kal va-chomer*" ("how much more so"), as we noted in the past (see our *shiurim* to *Shmuel I*, *shiur* 26, note 6; *shiur* 41, note 5; and *shiur* 44, note 2; and our *shiurim* to *Shmuel II*, *shiur* 67, note 3).

14 [14] The Radak explains that according to the way the word is written, "*be-oni*," the meaning is that God sees the affliction of David (similar to [Bereishit 29:32](#): "And Leah conceived, and bore a son, and she called his name Reuven; for she said, Because the Lord has looked **upon my affliction** (*be-onyi*); for now my husband will love me.") As for the way the word is read, "*be-eini*," the commentators disagree: Rashi explains "the tears in my eyes;" Radak explains: "Like *be-inyani*, 'my affairs;'" and Ralbag proposes: "For my eyes, i.e., for what my eyes see from these humiliations which I suffer for the glory of God, blessed be He."

his head, and Avner and the people lay round about him. Then said Avishai to David, “ God has delivered up your enemy into your hand this day; now therefore let me smite him, I pray you, with the spear to the earth at one stroke, and I will not smite him the second time.” And David said to Avishai, “ Destroy him not; for who can put forth his hand against the Lord's anointed, and be guiltless?” And David said, “ As the Lord lives, nay, but the Lord shall smite him; or his day shall come to die; or he shall go down into battle, and be swept away. The Lord forbid it me, that I should put forth my hand against the Lord's anointed.” ([Shmuel I 26:7-11](#))

Attention should be paid to the similarity between the two stories: In both cases Avishai seeks David's permission to kill an enemy ("Let me go over;" "Let me smite him"), and in both cases David refuses – even though he recognizes that his enemy deserves to die – and he leaves judgment to God. He does, however, offer different reasons for his objections: He objects to killing Shaul because he is the "anointed of God," whereas he refuses to strike at Shim'i because he sees him as God's agent to punish him.

The term "the sons of Tzeruya" refers also to Yoav, and David already used it with respect to another violent act on the part of the sons of Tzeruya – the killing of Avner ben Ner, which was also unjustified and which came at a particularly bad time (see chapter 3 and *shurim* 63-65): "And these men **the sons of Tzeruya** are too hard for me; the Lord reward the evildoer according to his wickedness" (3:39). There, too, David says that God should be the judge, but there he refers to God being the judge of the sons of Tzeruya themselves. Thus, David sees the words of Avishai here as part of the general phenomenon of "the sons of Tzeruya," who are unable to control themselves in a situation where restraint is called for.

In any event, David is prepared to suffer the affliction, and Shim'i ben Gera does not let up:

(13) So David and his men went by the way; and Shim'i went along on the hill-side over against him, and cursed as he went, and threw stones at him, and cast dust. (14) And the king, and all the people that were with him, came weary; and he refreshed himself there.

Like the story of Tziva and Mefiboshet, so too this story has a continuation at the end of Avshalom's revolt in chapter 19, and we shall discuss it there. Here we will

note that while at this time David did not want to strike a blow at Shim'i, this does not mean that he excused his actions. On the contrary, David seems to have born for the rest of his life the shame and humiliation that he suffered at the hands of Shim'i ben Gera, and the latter is therefore given a special place in David's testament to Shlomo:

"And, behold, there is with you Shim'i the son of Gera, the Binyaminite of Bachurim, who cursed me with a grievous curse in the day when I went to Machanayyim...and you will know what you ought to do to him, and you shall bring his hoar head down to the grave with blood." (*Melakhim I 2:8-9*)

This command sharpens David' s acceptance of God's judgment at this time. Shim'i's curse hurt David very much, but he accepted his suffering with love and full understanding that it was God's punishment for his sins.

(Translated by David Strauss)
