

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

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LECTURE 91: CHAPTER 15

AVSHALOM'S REBELLION (PART II)

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I. "HIS HABITATION"

In the previous *shiur*, we saw that when David fled from Jerusalem because of Avshalom's rebellion, he was joined by his foreign loyalists. He was later joined by others, who brought with them a most important item:

(23) And all the country wept with a loud voice, as all the people passed over; and as the king passed over the brook Kidron, all the people passed over, toward the way of the wilderness. (24) And, lo, Tzadok also came, and all the Levites with him, bearing the ark of the covenant of God; and they set down the ark of God, but Evyatar went up, until all the people had done passing out of the city.¹[1] (25) And the king said to Tzadok, " Carry back the ark of God into the city; if I shall find favor in the eyes of the Lord, He will bring me back, and show me both it, and His habitation. (26) But if He say thus, ' I have no delight in you;' behold, here am I, let Him do to me as seems good to Him."

The priests assumed that the most natural place for the ark was with David. It was David who had brought the ark from its forlorn place in Kiryat-Ye'arim (see chapter 7), and without a doubt its going with David would give

1 [1] In this verse and in the continuation of the chapter there is a striking change in the role of the High Priest: Tzadok the priest turns into the principal character, and Evyatar is pushed aside. Without a doubt, this is one further step in the realization of the prophecy of doom of the man of God to Eli in *Shemuel I* 2. See our lengthy discussin in *shiur* #5.

him both a spiritual advantage and a symbolic and moral advantage. David's reaction is surprising; he refuses to take the ark with him. David sees his forced exile as a punishment from God, but his main argument here is that the ark must remain in "His habitation." This is a critical moment: For the first time we hear that Jerusalem is the place destined for the resting of the *Shekhina*, and therefore for the ark of God. David expresses this point at a most difficult point in his life, when his life is in jeopardy owing to his rebellious son.

Until now it had not been clear that the ark's place is in Jerusalem; bringing the ark to the City of David could have been interpreted as a political step. After all, rulers had always tried to establish their rule through control of religious centers and geographical proximity to them. A clear example of this is the calves set up by Yerov'am ben Nevat in order to diminish the political power bestowed upon Rechav'am by his proximity to the Temple (*Melakhim I* 12:26-33). By bringing the ark up to Jerusalem, David strengthened the status of the city that he had chosen to serve as his capital and called by his name – the City of David (*Shemuel II* 5:6-9).

The story of Avshalom's revolt proves that David's bringing of the ark to Jerusalem was not done out of political considerations, but rather out of a deep understanding that it belongs there. Thus, for the first time in history, Jerusalem is given spiritual-religious status; David made Jerusalem not only his political capital, but also the fixed seat of the ark of the covenant of God. The ark would no longer wander from place to place. From now on, its place is in Jerusalem.

Scripture adopts a unique method to highlight this historical moment against the background of the pressing circumstances of the hour. The story of the crossing of the Kidron brook is very reminiscent of the account of the crossing of the Jordan in the days of Yehoshua. There we read:

And it came to pass, when **the people** removed from their tents, to **pass over** the Jordan, the priests **that bore the ark of the covenant** being before the people...while **all** Israel **passed over** on dry ground, **until all the nation had done passing over**^{2[2]} the Jordan.

([Yehoshua 3:14-17](#))

2 [2] And in the continuation of that same account: "Until every thing **was finished** that the Lord commanded..." ([Yehoshua 4:10](#)).

In our chapter, we read:

..as all the people passed over; and as the king **passed over** the brook Kidron, **all the people passed over**...And, lo, Tzadok also came, and all the Levites with him, **bearing the ark of the covenant** of God; and they set down (*va-yatziku*)^{3[3]} the ark of God...**until all the people had done passing** out of the city. (*Shemuel II* 15:23-24)

This correspondence sharpens the connection between the two events. Until David's action, there was only one known holy and chosen geographical area - *Eretz Yisrael*, upon which " the eyes of God are set from the beginning of the year to its end." Israel's entry into *Eretz Yisrael* brought this sanctity to its ideal state: The people of God, carrying the ark of God, enter into the land of God. David's leaving the city expresses, as stated, the spiritual standing of Jerusalem. In order to highlight the significance of David's courageous decision – precisely against the background of the difficult crisis which had arisen – Scripture compares the crossing of the Kidron to the crossing of the Jordan. Within the tragic situation in which David finds himself, there lays concealed a morsel of celebration, with the first proclamation of the special status of Jerusalem.^{4[4]}

3 [3] Here too Scripture adopts the wording found in the book of *Yehoshua* during the period of Israel's entry into the land, although in a different context: "And they laid them down (*va-yatzikum*) before the Lord" (7:23; regarding the trespass of Achan). In both cases the letter *kuf* substitutes for the letter *gimmel*: *y-tz-k* instead of *y-tz-g*.

4 [4] This might be expressed in [Tehilim 3](#), the heading of which is: "A Psalm of David, when he fled from Avshalom his son." The psalmist prays to God that He should deliver him from his enemies, but according to what we have said, one verse acquires special significance: "With my voice I call unto the Lord, and He answers me out of **His holy mountain**. Sela" (ibid. v. 5).

In the book of *Divrei Ha-Yamim* the selection of Jerusalem is described in an altogether different manner, but there too we find a parallel to verses in the book of *Yehoshua*. At the end of the story of the threshing floor of Ornan (referred to in the parallel passage in *Shemuel II* 24 as Aravna), we read: "But David could not go before it to inquire of God; for he was terrified because of the sword of the angel of the Lord. Then David said, ' This is **the house of the Lord God**, and this is the altar of burnt-offering for Israel' " (*Divrei Ha-Yamim I* 21:26-22:1). According to what is stated there, David chose Jerusalem as the site of the resting of the *Shekhina* in the wake of the angel's revelation to him at that spot; in other words, the site was chosen by God. This wording relates to the wording in the book of *Yehoshua* in the story of the conquest of the land: "**And David lifted up his eyes, and saw** the angel of

II. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ACCEPTANCE OF GOD'S JUDGMENT AND FAITH AND HOPE

We now encounter one of the interesting characteristics of David's conduct during the time of Avshalom's rebellion. Until now, we have seen that David accepts God's judgment: "If I shall find favor in the eyes of the Lord, He will bring me back, and show me both it, and His habitation. But if He say thus, ' I have no delight in you;' behold, here am I, let Him do to me as seems good to Him" (vv. 25-26). But together with acceptance of His judgment we also find preparation for the future:

(27) The king said also to Tzadok the priest, " Do you see? Return into the city in peace, and Ahima'atz your son, and Yonatan the son of Evyatar, your two sons with you.⁵[5] (28) See, I will tarry in the plains of the wilderness, until there come word from you to announce to me." (29) Tzadok therefore and Evyatar carried the ark of God back to Jerusalem; and they abode there.

David's command to Tzadok to return with the ark to Jerusalem combines two elements. On the one hand, this command, as stated, expresses David's acceptance of God's judgment. On the other hand, David establishes here a spy ring: two people in key positions – the High Priests who safeguard the ark – whose two sons can pass on critical information to David. We shall see below how David was helped in practice by these two sons.

the Lord...**having a drawn sword in his hand**...Then David and the elders...**fell upon their faces**" (ibid. v. 16); "And it came to pass, when Joshua was by Jericho, that **he lifted up his eyes and saw**, and, behold, there stood a man over against him **with his sword drawn in his hand**...And Joshua **fell on his face** to the earth" ([Yehoshua 5:13-14](#)). See at length in my book *Makbilot Nifgashot – Makbilot Sifrutiyot Be-Sefer Shemuel* (Alon Shevut, 5766), pp. 171-82.

5 [5] This verse also reflects the tendency pointed out above in note 1: Evyatar's being pushed aside by Tzadok. Even though Evyatar is also present – as is clear from the continuation of the verse – only Tzadok is addressed directly, whereas Evyatar is addressed only indirectly ("your two sons with you").

It is important to emphasize that these two elements are not contradictory, and that they express a fundamental idea regarding the relationship between providence and free choice. David is mentally prepared for any scenario, and he accepts God's judgment and acknowledges the justice of anything that will befall him. But this mental state does not lead him to passivity. David is able and must do everything in his power to save himself, with the belief that Avshalom's rebellion is a temporary trouble that will eventually pass. In short: David acts below here on earth, while at the same he is prepared to accept whatever is decreed against him above.

This is also expressed in the verses that follow:

(30) And David went up by the ascent of [the Mount of] Olives, and wept as he went up; and he had his head covered,^{6[6]} and went barefoot; and all the people that were with him covered every man his head, and they went up, weeping as they went up. **(31)** And one told David, saying: "Achitofel is among the conspirators with Avshalom." And David said, "O Lord, I pray You, turn the counsel of Achitofel into foolishness."

David expresses despair and mourning, but these feelings do not lead him to absolute passivity. When he hears that Achitofel had joined the rebellion, he does something that he did not do before, nor will he do again over the course of the rebellion: He prays to God. It stands to reason that until now, David thought that the rebellion was a passing matter; he accepted God's judgment with love, but nevertheless he assumed that it was a punishment, the end of which would eventually be reached. But Achitofel's wisdom was apparently so great that when David learns that he has joined with the rebels, he fears that this will lead to the strengthening of Avshalom's kingdom to the point of no return. For this reason, David turns to God in prayer. More than expressing specific concern about Achitofel, this expresses essential fear of the absolute success of the rebellion.

David's prayer is immediately followed by a positive response:

6 [6] That is to say, his head was covered in the manner of mourners. Compare with: "But Haman hastened to his house, mourning and having his head covered" ([Esther 6:12](#)).

(32) And it came to pass that when David was come to the top of the ascent, where God was wont to be worshipped,^{7[7]} behold, Chushai the Arkhite^{8[8]} came to meet him with his coat rent, and earth upon his head. (33) And David said to him, " If you pass on with me, then you will be a burden to me;^{9[9]} (34) but if you return to the city, and say to Avshalom: ' I will be your servant, O king; as I have been your father's servant in time past, so will I now be your servant;' ^{10[10]} then will you defeat for me the counsel of Achitofel. (35) And have you not there with you Tzadok and Evyatar the priests? Therefore it shall be, that whatever you shall hear out of the king's house, you shall tell it to Tzadok and Evyatar the priests. (36) Behold, they have there with them

7 [7] The commentators disagree about the meaning of these words. According to the Radak, this means that David arrived in the place where he wished to worship God, "and he did this because he was leaving the site of the *Mikdash* and he did not know whether he would ever return, like one who parts from his friend when going out into exile." Rashi, in contrast, understands that the reference is to the place "where he was accustomed to worship when he was in Jerusalem." This seems to be closer to the plain sense of the text, for the grammatical form of the word "*yishtachaveh*" is often used to express the continuous present (e.g., "But if the cloud was not **taken up** (*ye'aleh*), then they **journeyed** (*yis'u*) not till the day that it was taken up" [[Shemot 40:37](#)]; "And as he **did** (*ya'aseh*) so year by year" [[Shemuel I 1:7](#)]; and elsewhere). If what we say is correct, this confirms what we saw above: David sanctified Jerusalem as the site of the resting of the *Shekhina* and was accustomed to worship God in a regular manner at the ascent of the Mount of Olives – an expression of his greeting the *Shekhina* in that place.

8 [8] The meaning of the term "the Arkhite" is not clear. *Midrash Tehillim 3:3* brings several explanations. According to the plain sense of the text, it would seem that "he was called by the name of his town." An area with this name is found in one other place in Scripture, in the account of the border of the tribal territory of Efrayim: "And it went out from Bet-El-Luz, and passed along unto the border of the Arkhites to Atarot" ([Yehoshua 16:2](#)).

9 [9] These words seem to imply that Chushai was elderly and he had difficulty walking, as is explained by Ralbag and the *Metzudot*; see also Radak.

10 [10] The wording of the Hebrew here is rather awkward, as noted already by Rashi. What the verse means is: "From now on I will be your servant, just as I was your father's servant in time past, and now I will be your servant" (Radak). It stands to reason that we should understand here, as we suggested in various other places (*shur* 21 in *Shemuel I* and *shurim* 73 and 88 in *Shemuel II*), that a difficult formulation sometimes attests to a difficulty on the part of a speaker to formulate his thoughts coherently: David had difficulty formulating an explanation that would justify Chushai's behavior in Avshalom's eyes. And indeed, we shall see below how Chushai in his wisdom succeeded in finding a better formulation than that proposed by David.

their two sons - Ahima'atz, Tzadok's son, and Yonatan, Evyatar's son; and by them you shall send to me every thing that you shall hear.

Who is Chushai the Arkhite? In the book of *Divrei Ha-yamim* we read: "And Achitofel was the king's counselor; and Chushai the Arkhite was the king's friend" (*Divrei Ha-yamim I 27:33*). It seems that "the king's counselor" was an official position, whereas "the king's friend" implies a more personal role,¹¹[11] a close associate and personal advisor of the king.¹²[12] Chushai's joining with David served as a heavenly sign that his prayer had been accepted. And indeed, it becomes clear in the coming chapters that sending Chushai as a spy in Avshalom's camp is what ultimately decides the campaign in David's favor and saves his life.

The chapter ends with the verse:

(37) So Chushai David's friend came into the city; and Avshalom was at the point of coming into Jerusalem.

It stands to reason that the timing of these events was also directed by heaven: Chushai manages to arrive in Jerusalem shortly before Avshalom's entry into the city, and when the latter arrives in Jerusalem he already finds Chushai among the residents who remained in the city and did not go with David. Thus, Chushai succeeds in avoiding Avshalom's suspicions.

11 [11] In Scripture, we find this role in connection with other kings as well. Regarding Shelomo it is stated explicitly: "And Zavud the son of Natan was chief minister and the king's friend" ([I Melakhim 4:5](#)); and in [Bereishit \(26:26\)](#) we find: "Then Avimelekh went to him from Gerar, and *achuzat mere'eihu*, and Fikhol the captain of his host." Rashi explains there that "*achuzat mere'eihu*" means "a band of his friends;" but Radak explains the words in their plain sense, that the reference is to a person named Achuzat, who was a friend of the king. It should be noted that it would appear from this verse that the king's friend was even closer to the king than his commanding general. See also [Mikha 4:9](#).

12 [12] Some suggest that it was for this reason that Achitofel joined Avshalom's rebellion - he desired the role of "friend of the king," and was not content with the role of "counselor."

At the end of the chapter, it becomes clear that David strengthened his own efforts to save himself. Even before Avshalom entered the city, five capable and well-positioned people were "planted" in its midst – two High Priests, Tzadok and Evyatar; their two sons, who could serve as couriers to transfer information; and Chushai, the king's friend, who could counter Achitofel's wisdom and frustrate his counsel. David did all this without deviating from his fundamental position – accepting God's judgment and bowing his head before Him, with the knowledge that he was being punished for his actions.

(Translated by David Strauss)
