

## THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

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### LECTURE 90: CHAPTER 15

#### AVSHALOM'S REBELLION

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#### I. “ SO AVSHALOM STOLE THE HEARTS OF THE MEN OF ISRAEL ”

At the end of the previous *shiur*, we noted the circumstances that preceded Avshalom's rebellion – Avshalom' s conclusion he would never ascend to the throne through legal means and his power to sway the people, both because of his unusual beauty and because of David's problematic conduct.

Our chapter opens with a lengthy description of how Avshalom exploited his special talents to gain the trust of the people of Israel:

(1) And it came to pass after this that Avshalom prepared him a chariot and horses, and fifty men to run before him.<sup>1[1]</sup> (2) And Avshalom

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1 [1] As was noted in the past (in our *shiur* on [Shmuel I 8](#), *shiur* 13, note 2), running before a chariot is an expression of honor, similar to the motorcycles that lead a presidential motorcade in our day. As Shmuel warns Israel there (v. 11): "This will be the manner of the king that shall reign over you: he will take your sons, and appoint them unto him, for his chariots, and to be his horsemen; and they shall run before his chariots." Later, Adoniyah will imitate Avshalom and do exactly as he did: "Now Adoniyah the son of Chagith exalted himself, saying, I will be king; and he prepared him chariots and horsemen, and fifty men to run before him" (*Melakhim I* 1:5). In a slightly different context, it is related about the prophet Eliyahu: "And there was a great rain. And Achav rode and went to Yizrael. And the hand of the Lord was on Eliyahu; and he girded up his loins, and ran before Achav to the entrance of Yizrael" (*Melakhim I* 18:45-46). About this, the *midrash* states: "This teaches that he showed honor to the kingdom" (*Yalkut Shim'oni, Melakhim I*, 217).

used to rise up early, and stand beside the way of the gate;<sup>2[2]</sup> and it was so, that when any man had a suit which should come to the king for judgment, then Avshalom called to him, and said, “ Of what city are you?” And he said, “ Your servant is of one of the tribes of Israel.” **(3)** And Avshalom said to him, “ See, your matters are good and right; but there is no man deputed of the king to hear you.” **(4)** Avshalom said moreover, “ Oh that I were made judge in the land, that every man who has any suit or cause might come to me, and I would do him justice!” **(5)** And it was so, that when any man came near to prostrate himself before him, he put forth his hand, and took hold of him, and kissed him.<sup>3[3]</sup> **(6)** And in this manner did Avshalom to all Israel that came to the king for judgment; so Avshalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel.

This description is rather amusing, but also difficult to understand. How could Avshalom convince both sides to a dispute that he would have found in favor of each of them? There is, however, a simple answer. Those turning to the king for judgment did not do so because of an ordinary dispute between neighbors. We are dealing with people who came to cry out about injustices committed against them by official representatives of the regime and to challenge the measures taken against them. Avshalom could indeed promise such people that he would vindicate them and remove the yoke of the kingdom from upon their shoulders.

In any event, it is clear that it was not with these smooth words alone that Avshalom succeeded in stealing the hearts of the people of Israel, and that this was made possible by the factors mentioned above. In the end, the opportunity presents itself and Avshalom decides to begin the rebellion.

## II. HEBRON

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The many horses is a difference between Avshalom and his father David, who incapacitated the horses that he captured in his wars (see *shiur* no. 74).

<sup>2 [2]</sup> As is well-known, the city gate was the site of justice (see [Devarim 15:18](#); [21:19](#); [Amos 5:15](#); [Ruth 4:1](#); and elsewhere), and Avshalom therefore went specifically to the gate.

<sup>3 [3]</sup> This behavior brings to mind the encounter between David and Avshalom at the end of the previous chapter: "And he came to the king, and bowed himself on his face to the ground before the king; and the king kissed Avshalom" (14:33). The similarity emphasizes Avshalom's ingratitude towards his father.

(7) And it came to pass at the end of forty years<sup>4[4]</sup> that Avshalom said to the king, “ I pray you, let me go and pay my vow, which I have vowed to the Lord, in Hebron. (8) For your servant vowed a vow while I abode at Geshur in Aram, saying, “ If the Lord shall indeed bring me back to Jerusalem, then I will serve the Lord.” (9) And the king said to him, “ Go in peace.” So he arose, and went to Hebron. (10) But Avshalom sent spies throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, “ As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, then you shall say: ‘ Avshalom is king in Hebron.’ ”

Why is it precisely in Hebron that Avshalom begin his rebellion? By doing so, he replays David's rise to power, for he too ruled first in Hebron over the tribe of Yehuda (chapter 2) – among other reasons, owing to the city's unique religious and historical significance. Hebron was also the city of Avshalom's birth (see 3:2-3), and presumably he knows quite a few people there. From a different perspective, however, Avshalom's act is somewhat surprising: Surely he is trying to gain the trust of all of Israel. Why, then, does he go to a southern city like Hebron, which even David left after having become the king of all of Israel?

It stands to reason that Avshalom finds a core of resentment towards David in Hebron, precisely because he had moved the seat of his rule to Jerusalem. Presumably, Avshalom promises the people of Hebron to restore

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4 [4] These words are exceedingly difficult, for in total David ruled for only forty years (see 5:4). Rashi explains, in the wake of *Chazal* (*Temura* 14b): "At the end of forty years from when Israel asked Shmuel for a king, there took place the rebellion against the kingdom." It stands to reason that the *midrash* means that Shmuel's warnings indeed came true forty years later, when there appeared a claimant to the throne who adopted all the royal behaviors against which Shmuel had warned (see above, note 1). Ralbag raised additional possibilities: "It is possible that these forty years began with the sprouting of the kingdom in Israel, that is to say, **when Shaul was anointed**, or else they started **when David was anointed**. Perhaps he was told by way of a prophecy that David's kingdom would stand for forty years, and therefore Avshalom thought that this was the time for the kingdom to be removed from David, and so he thought to kill his father in order to bring about that the kingship would be his."

In the Septuagint and in Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*, we find "four years" instead of "forty years." But this solution seems to be forced, for it assumes that not only is the word "forty" a corruption, but also the word "*shana*" ("years," as the singular form is used only from ten and up).

the city to its former standing. This fits in with the fact that, as we shall see below, many members of the tribe of Yehuda are not happy with David. David did not adopt the policy of the previous king, Shaul, who clearly showed preference to his own tribesmen, providing them with special privileges and distinguished positions.<sup>5</sup>[5] David did not show preference to his own tribe; on the contrary, we saw at length that he adopted a policy aimed at unifying the entire people. This policy embittered and disappointed many members of the tribe of Yehuda, and Avshalom exploits this resentment and disappointment to advance his own personal aspirations.

It is notable that Avshalom's going to declare himself king in the guise of going to bring a sacrifice also finds a parallel in the conduct of David, who was also anointed as king in the guise of his going to make a sacrifice (see [Shmuel I 16](#)).

The rebellion begins to gain momentum:

(10) But Avshalom sent spies throughout all the tribes of Israel, saying, “ As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, then you shall say: ‘ Avshalom is king in Hebron.’ ” (11) And with Avshalom went two hundred men out of Jerusalem, who were invited, and went in their simplicity; and they knew not any thing.<sup>6</sup>[6] (12) And Avshalom sent for Achithofel the Gilonite, David's counselor, from his city, even from Gilo, while he offered the sacrifices. And the conspiracy was strong; for the people increased continually with Avshalom.

### III. DAVID' S RESPONSE

David hears about the revolt and responds – in contrast to his conduct in the previous chapters – with resolution and clarity:

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5 [5] See *shmuel I* 22:7, and our discussion of this verse at the end of *shiur* 42 on *shmuel I*.

6 [6] This too is to Avshalom's discredit; he exploited and deceived two hundred men.

(14) And David said to all his servants that were with him at Jerusalem, " Arise, and let us flee; for else none of us shall escape from Avshalom; make speed to depart, lest he overtake us quickly, and bring down evil upon us, and smite the city with the edge of the sword." (15) And the king's servants said to the king, " Behold, your servants are ready to do whatsoever my lord the king shall choose."

David appears not to be at all surprised by what is happening, as if he had foreseen these developments. It is reasonable to assume that Avshalom's actions did not go unnoticed by David, and that his plans were not secret. But David's resolute reaction is very different from his behavior in the previous chapters. What is the basis for this resoluteness?

This firmness of purpose seems to be connected to David's sense of responsibility to his men. David's caution regarding the city's welfare can be seen as a lesson learned from the incident involving Nov, the city of priests (*Shmuel I* 21-22). Then, David acted in careless fashion, deceiving Achimelekh the priest and taking from him the showbread, even though "a certain man of the servants of Shaul was there that day, detained before the Lord; and his name was Doeg the Edomite, the chief of the herdmen that belonged to Shaul" ([Shmuel I 21:8](#)). In the wake of that incident, eighty-five priests were put to death: "And he smote Nov, the city of the priests, by the edge of the sword, both men and women, children and sucklings, and oxen and asses and sheep, with the edge of the sword" (*ibid.* 22:19). David himself admitted his mistake, telling Evyatar the son of Achimelekh, the sole survivor among the priests of Nov: "I knew on that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Shaul; I have brought about the death of all the persons of your father's house" (*ibid.* v. 22). David had learned his lesson, and so when Avshalom began his rebellion, he left the city, not only out of fear that he would be trapped there, but also "lest he smite the city with the edge of the sword."

Another decision made by David soon turns out to be a tragic one:

(16) And the king went forth, and all his household after him. And the king left ten women, who were concubines, to keep the house.

This serves as an exposition for what will be related below in 16:20-23, Avshalom's sleeping with these women before the eyes of all of Israel. Here there is a return to a familiar and tragic motif: Once again, David brings upon

himself the troubles and punishments that were decreed against him in the wake of the Bat-Sheva affair.

David does not leave by himself. Many of his men join him:

(17) And the king went forth, and all the people after him; and they tarried in Bet-Merchak.<sup>7</sup>[7] (18) And all his servants passed on beside him; and all the Keretites, and all the Peletites, and all the Gittites, six hundred men who<sup>8</sup>[8] came after him from Gat, passed on before the king. (19) Then said the king to Ittai the Gittite, " Why do you go also with us? Return, and abide with the king;<sup>9</sup>[9] for you are a foreigner, and also an exile from your own place. (20) Whereas you came but yesterday, should I this day make you go up and down with us, seeing I go whither I may? Return you, and take back your brethren with you in kindness and truth." (21) And Ittai answered the king, and said, " As the Lord lives, and as my lord the king lives, surely in what place my lord the king shall be, whether for death or for life, even there also will your servant be." (22) And David said to Ittai, " Go and pass over." And Ittai the Gittite passed over, and all his men, and all the little ones that were with him.

It is interesting that many of those who joined David were not Israelites, but rather Keretites, Peletites,<sup>10</sup>[10] and Gittites. This is understandable, for

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7 [7] What is "Bet ha-Merchak"? Rashi and Radak explain that the reference is to a place far away (*rachok*) from Jerusalem. *Metzudat David* explains that the reference is to the furthest house among the houses outside the wall. It is possible (see *Da'at Mikra*) that this is a designation of the place where lepers lived, referred to also as "Bet ha-Chofshit" (see *Melakhim I* 15:5). An allusion to this may be found in [Tehillim 38:12](#): "My friends and my companions stand aloof from **my plague**; and my kinsmen stand **afar off** (*me-rachok*)."

8 [8] There is a certain symbolism in this number, for it is also the number of people that accompanied David when he fled from Shaul (see [Shmuel I 23:13](#); 26:2).

9 [9] Most of the commentators understand that when David speaks here of "the king," he is referring to Avshalom. It is, however, possible that the reference is to the king of Gat, and that David is telling Ittai to go back and abide with his own king.

10 [10] It would seem that the Keretites and the Peletites were mercenaries from Crete and Peleshet. They are also mentioned above 8:18; see what we wrote there (*shiur 75*).

these mercenaries remained loyal to those who fed them, without taking into account various national considerations. But here we are dealing with something that goes beyond simple utilitarian loyalty. Ittai the Gittite demonstrates loyalty and deep and impressive moral commitment to David. It is difficult not to be reminded of a similar situation: the story of Ruth and Naomi. Let us consider the parallels:

1. In both stories, a person who is now in dire straits is supported by someone with whom he or she had a connection in the past: Ruth supports Naomi and Ittai the Gittite supports David.

2. The person who is now in distress attempts to persuade the other person not to join him or her, because that other person is a foreigner:

“ Go, **return** each of you to her mother's house... **Turn back**, my daughters; **why will you go with me?**” ([Ruth 1:8-11](#))

“ **Why do you go** also with us? **Return**, and abide with the king; for you are a foreigner, and also an exile from your own place.” ([Shmuel II 15:19](#))

3. Naomi explains to Ruth that her future with her is unclear:

“ Turn back, my daughters, go your way; for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say: I have hope, should I even have an husband tonight, and also bear sons; would you tarry for them till they were grown? Would you shut yourselves off for them and have no husbands? Nay, my daughters; for it grieves me much for your sakes, for the hand of the Lord is gone forth against me.” ([Ruth 1:12-13](#))

David says the same thing to Ittai in brief:

“ Whereas you came but yesterday, should I this day make you go up and down with us, seeing I go whither I may? Return you, and take

back your brethren with you in kindness and truth." ([Shmuel II 15:20](#))<sup>11</sup>[11]

4. In both stories, the foreigner refuses to leave the person who is now in distress, and the refusal is formulated in terms of absolute loyalty until death:

And Ruth said, " Entreat me not to leave you, and to return from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; **where you die, will I die**, and there will I be buried; the Lord do so to me, and more also, **if anything but death part you and me.**" ([Ruth 1:16-17](#))

And Ittai answered the king, and said, " As the Lord lives, and as my lord the king lives, surely in what place my lord the king shall be, whether **for death** or for life, even there also will your servant be." ([Shmuel II 15:21](#))

5. In both stories, the person who is in distress agrees in the end to accept the help that is being offered:

And when she saw that she was steadfastly minded to go with her, she left off speaking to her. ([Ruth 1:18](#))

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11 [11] David concludes here with words that are difficult to understand: "Return you, and take back your brethren **with you in kindness and truth.**" What do these words mean? Rashi explains: "I owe you for the kindness and truth that you performed for me." According to Targum Yonatan, David asked of Ittai that he should act kindly towards his brethren after he returns with them to Gat. This expression is also reminiscent of Naomi's words to Ruth and Orpa: "Go, return each of you to her mother's house; may the Lord deal kindly with you" ([Ruth 1:8](#)). According to this, it is possible that David is speaking here in abbreviated fashion, and that he means to say: "Return you, and take back your brethren **with you**; may God deal **with you** in kindness and truth." This is, in fact, the formulation found in the Septuagint and in the Vulgate.



And David said to Ittai, “ Go and pass over.” And Ittai the Gittite passed over, and all his men, and all the little ones that were with him. ([Shmuel II 15:22](#))

6. In both stories, the person who is in distress is saved in no small measure by virtue of the foreigner who joined him or her. Ruth greatly helped Naomi, and in the end, when she has a baby, the neighbors say to Naomi: "And he shall be unto you a restorer of life, and a nourisher of your old age; your daughter-in-law, who loves you, who is better to you than seven sons, has borne him" ([Ruth 4:15](#)). Ittai was one of the three commanders of the forces that led David's army into the decisive battle in which Avshalom was killed ([Shmuel II 18:2](#)); the other two generals were Yoav and Avishai the sons of Tzeruya, the two most important generals in David's army, and the placement of Ittai as their equal attests to his standing.

To this correspondence, we must of course add the fact that David descended from Ruth. What is the meaning of this? It seems that Scripture returns here to the connection between the lovingkindness of the book of Ruth and the Davidic monarchy. *Chazal* famously said about the book of Ruth:

R. Zeira said: For he tied his fate to the fate of David, and even took part in delivering David from his troubles... This book has neither impurity nor purity, neither prohibition nor allowance. Why was it written? To teach you how good is the reward of those who perform acts of lovingkindness. ([Ruth Rabba 2:14](#)).

In the chapters dealing with David's kingdom we saw that David adopted his grandmother's way of lovingkindness.<sup>12</sup>[12] Ittai's action serves as reward for Ruth's acts of lovingkindness. In reward for the kindness that Ruth performed for Naomi when she tied her fate to the fate of her mother-in-law, despite the risk involved, and as a result of which salvation reached Naomi, her grandson merited that at a time that he found himself in distress, he too was aided by a foreigner.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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12 [12] See especially *shiur* 60, and also *shiurim* 76-77.

