

## THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

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### LECTURE 77: CHAPTER 10 (PART I)

#### DAVID AND THE DELEGATION OF COMFORTERS SENT TO AMON

##### I. “ AS HIS FATHER SHOWED KINDNESS TO ME”

The chapter opens on a surprising note:

(1) And it came to pass after this that the king of the children of Amon died, and Chanun his son reigned in his stead. (2) And David said, “ I will show kindness unto Chanun the son of Nachash, as his father showed kindness unto me.” So David sent by the hand of his servants to comfort him concerning his father. And David's servants came into the land of the children of Amon.

These verses raise two difficulties. First, it is not clear to which kindness of Nachash David is referring; we do not find such a kindness in Scripture. But the primary difficulty is David's very desire to perform a kindness to the son of Nachash the Amonite. Nachash was a cruel and bitter enemy of Israel, as may be recalled from the story relating to the people of Yavesh-Gil'ad:

Then Nachash the Amonite came up and encamped against Yavesh-Gil'ad; and all the men of Yavesh said unto Nachash, “ Make a covenant with us, and we will serve you.” And Nachash the Amonite said unto them, “ On this condition will I make it with you – that all your right eyes be put out; and I will lay it for a reproach upon all Israel.” ([I Shmuel 11:1-2](#))

Is it appropriate to repay a kindness to such a person?

Most commentators cite *Chazal's* regarding the kindness that Nachash performed for David:

For when David ran away from Shaul, he brought his father and mother to the king of Moav, because he feared Shaul, but he trusted them, as he descended from Ruth the Moavite. This is what it says: "And David went thence to Mitzpeh of Moav; and he said unto the king of Moav, ' Let my father and my mother, I pray you, come forth, and be with you, till I know what God will do for me' " ([I Shmuel 22:3](#)). And it says: "And he brought them before the king of Moav; and they dwelt with him all the while that David was in the stronghold" (ibid. v. 4)...The king of Moav killed them and none of them survived, save one brother of David, who ran away to Nachash the king of the people of Amon. The king of Moav sent for him, but he did not want to hand him over. This was the kindness that Nachash performed for David. ([Bamidbar Rabba 14:3](#))

This *midrash*<sup>1</sup>[1] is interesting. *Chazal* may be alluding here that David was punished for his part in the killing of the priests of Nov. David's lack of vigilance brought about the destruction of the family of Achimelech the priest, save for one member, Evyatar. David, in fact, admitted to his sin: "And David said unto Evyatar, ' 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**' " ([I Shmuel 22:22](#)). According to the *midrash*, David was punished measure for measure, and so his entire family was also destroyed, save for one member.<sup>2</sup>[2] Nevertheless, the entire story is missing from Scripture, and hence it is difficult to use it to explain the plain sense of our chapter.

It therefore seems that the matter should be understood differently. We have already noted on several occasions that when a person is forced to run away from his own king, he is likely to find a safe haven by an enemy. We saw that David acted in this manner in two instances – when he ran away to Achish king of Gat ([I Shmuel 21:11](#)) and when he brought his parents to the king of Moav (ibid. 22:3). Thus, there is certainly room to surmise that at some point David found refuge by Nachash the Amonite, who was Shaul's enemy –

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1 [1] In *shiur* no. 74 (chap. 8), we noted the connection between this *midrash* and David's harsh attitude toward the Moavites.

2 [2] I heard this idea from my revered teacher R. Dr. Mordechai Sabbato. David's responsibility for the Nov incident was discussed at length in *shiur* no. 43 on *I Shmuel* (chap. 22).

especially since Nachash suffered a resounding defeat at Shaul' s hands.<sup>3[3]</sup> For this reason, David wanted to perform a kindness for his son and comfort him for the loss of his father.

## II. THE RESULT

The mission, however, yielded results that were different from those that David had expected:

(3) But the princes of the children of Amon said unto Chanun their lord, “ Do you think that David honors your father, that he has sent comforters unto you? Has not David sent his servants unto you to search the city, and to spy it out, and to overthrow it?” (4) So Chanun took David's servants and shaved off the one half of their beards,<sup>4[4]</sup> and cut off their garments in the middle, even to their buttocks,<sup>5[5]</sup> and

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3 [3] It would appear that after this period, the connections between David and the royal house in Amon were strengthened. Among those who came to David's assistance during Avshalom's rebellion were "Shovi the son of Nachash of Rabba of the children of Amon" (II *Shmuel* 17:27), who was apparently another son of Nachash the Amonite. (It is interesting, in fact, that he helped David despite the war described in our chapter. It is possible that David appointed him king in the aftermath of his victory over Chanun.) Furthermore, already in David's lifetime, Shelomo married Na'ama the Amonitess, the mother of Rechav'am (see [I Melakhim 14:21](#)). (Rechav'am began to rule as king when he was forty-one years old [ibid.], and his father Shelomo ruled for forty years [ibid. 11:42], so Rechav'am was born in David's lifetime). The *Da'at Mikra* commentary ([II Shmuel 17:27](#), note 42) notes that the Septuagint implies that Na'ama was the granddaughter of Nachash the Amonite.

4 [4] It stands to reason that not only was half the length of their beards removed, but also half their width, and this is an even greater humiliation. There is a certain similarity between shaving **half** the beards and cutting off **half** the garments, on the one hand, and the removal of "every right eye" that Nachash the Amonite suggested to the people of Yavesh-Gil'ad.

5 [5] "*Madveihem*" = garments; "*shetoteihem*" = the pubic region or the buttocks, as in: "So shall the king of Assyria lead away the captives of Egypt, and the exiles of Ethiopia, young and old, naked and barefoot, and with buttocks (*shet*) uncovered, to the shame of Egypt" (*Yeshayahu* 20:4). In the parallel verse in *Divrei Ha-Yamim*, we find: "So Chanun took David's servants, and shaved them, and cut off their garments in the middle, even to their hips, and sent them away" (I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 19:4).

sent them away. (5) When they told it unto David, he sent to meet them; for the men were greatly ashamed. And the king said, "Tarry at Jericho<sup>6</sup> until your beards be grown, and then return.

The princes of Amon questioned David's intentions, their arguments reflecting simple logic: What are the agents of an enemy king doing in their land, if not spying? It is reasonable to assume that the princes would have preferred to execute the agents, the usual punishment of spies. But Chanun contents himself with humiliating the agents; he shaves off half their beards, cuts off half their garments,<sup>7</sup> and expels them from his land. It seems that Chanun was in doubt about the mission's motives, and therefore chose an intermediate path, shaving off only half their beards.

Why did David's good intentions elicit the opposite response? *Chazal* saw in these results criticism of David's actions:

"And David said, 'I will show kindness unto Chanun the son of Nachash.' " The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Do you transgress My words? I wrote: "You shall not seek their peace nor their prosperity" ([Devarim 23:7](#)), and you perform kindness for them! "Be not righteous overmuch" ([Kohelet 7:16](#)) - a person should not add to the Torah, and this one sends to comfort the children of Amon and perform a kindness for them! In the end, it led to disgrace: "So Chanun took David's servants and shaved off the one half of their beards, and cut off their garments in the middle, even to their buttocks, and sent them away." And it led to war with Aram-Naharayyim, and the kings of Tzova, and the kings of Ma'akha, and with the children of Amon - four nations. As it is written: "Now when Yoav saw that the battle was set against him" ([II Shmuel 10:9](#)). What caused this to David? For he wished to perform a kindness for one about whom the Holy One,

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6 [6] Even though Jericho had been totally destroyed and its rebuilding forbidden (see [Yehoshua 6:24-26](#); [I Melakhim 16:34](#)), it seems that an unwalled settlement nevertheless remained. This is apparently the city mentioned in the book of *Shofetim* by the name of "city of dates" (*Shofetim* 3:13), which is the name of Jericho (see [Devarim 34:3](#)). Nevertheless, it seems that this was a distant and isolated settlement, and it is for this reason that David sent the humiliated messengers specifically there.

7 [7] The Radak makes an interesting comment here: "He did not say to shave the other half, for it was not their custom to shave their beards, even with scissors, but only the mustache...and shaving the beard is a disgrace, **only that this is the custom in these lands in which we live.**"

blessed be He, said: "You shall not seek their peace." It is therefore written: "Harass [the Midyanites, and smite them]" ([Bamidbar 25:17](#)). ([Bamidbar Rabba 21:5](#))

According to *Chazal's* approach, the criticism was for the very maintenance of connections with Amon and Moav. We, however, raised a more specific problem earlier: David wanted to perform a kindness for someone who was not at all worthy of it. Nachash the Amonite helped David not because he wished to realize God's prophecy to Shmuel that David would rule as king over Israel, but rather because he wished to create unrest and instability in Israel. David is no longer a private citizen, but rather the king of Israel, and in his actions he represents the people of Israel as a whole. It was, therefore, unfitting to send agents to comfort Chanun the son of Nachash, whose father was such a bitter enemy of Israel.

What led David to make this mistake? It seems that we come back here to one of the central characteristics of David's kingdom: the performance of acts of kindness. In the previous *shiur*, we mentioned the value of acts of kindness in David's kingdom, and we already discussed this point at length in our comments on the words that he directed to the people of Yavesh-Gil'ad (chap. 2, *shiur* 60). It stands to reason that David's feeling of obligation to Nachash the Amonite was so strong, and his sense of gratitude was so deeply ingrained in his personality, that they blurred the national considerations.

Special attention should be paid to the similarities between our chapter and the previous chapter. In both chapters David wishes to perform a kindness for a person by virtue of the kindness performed for David by the father of that person (who died in the meantime). But it is precisely this similarity that highlights the difference between the two fathers. Yehonatan's actions were indeed good, but this was not the case regarding the acts of Nachash the Amonite.<sup>8[8]</sup>

David's mistake – which stemmed from traits that were good themselves – was that he focused on the personal connection between him and Nachash and ignored the fundamental relationship between the king of Israel and the king of the people of Amon. Scripture gives this idea literary expression in the striking difference between the terms used to describe

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<sup>8 [8]</sup> The connection between the chapters is also evident in the opening words of our chapter: "And it came to pass after this..."

David in the account of his kindness in our chapter and the terms used in the account of his kindness in the previous chapter:

9:2-5	10:2-5
<p>Now there was of the house of Shaul a servant whose name was Tziva, and they called him unto David; and the <b>king</b> said unto him, “ Are you Tziva?” And he said, “ Your servant is he.” And the king said, “ Is there not yet any of the house of Shaul, that I may show the kindness of God unto him?” And Tziva said unto the <b>king</b>, “ Yehonatan has yet a son, who is lame on his feet.” And the <b>king</b> said unto him, “ Where is he?” And Tziva said unto the <b>king</b>, “ Behold, he is in the house of Makhir the son of Amiel, in Lo-Devar.” Then <b>king</b> David sent and fetched him out of the house of Makhir the son of Amiel, from Lo-Devar.</p>	<p>And <b>David</b> said, “ I will show kindness unto Chanun the son of Nachash, as his father showed kindness unto me.” So <b>David</b> sent by the hand of his servants to comfort him concerning his father. And <b>David's</b> servants came into the land of the children of Amon. But the princes of the children of Amon said unto Chanun their lord, “ Do you think that <b>David</b> honors your father, that he has sent comforters unto you? Has not <b>David</b> sent his servants unto you to search the city, and to spy it out, and to overthrow it?” So Chanun took <b>David's</b> servants, and shaved off the one half of their beards, and cut off their garments in the middle, even to their buttocks, and sent them away. When they told it unto <b>David</b>, he sent to meet them; for the men were greatly ashamed.</p>

In chapter 9, where David acted in a commendable manner, he is referred to over and over as "the king." In contrast, in the opening verses in our chapter, he is repeatedly referred to as David, and in this way Scripture alludes to the fact that David acted in accordance with his emotions as a private citizen, while ignoring his standing as king of Israel, who must represent the entire nation.

Even though, as stated, David acted out of good intentions, his mistake nevertheless had very tragic consequences. Had David not sent comforters to Chanun the son of Nachash, the Amonites would not have humiliated them, and Israel would not have gone out to war against them, and Yoav the son of Tzeruya and Uriya the Chitite would not have left Jerusalem, and ...

### III. “ IN THE DAY WHEN I PUNISH I WILL PUNISH”

The negative results of this story may have yet further significance. For the people of Amon claimed that David had sent the messengers "to search the city, and to spy it out, and to overthrow it." This is not the first time that such a claim was made during the period of David's rule regarding a peace-seeking mission. It was not so long before that Yoav the son of Tzeruya made such a claim regarding Avner the son of Ner, who tried to bring all of Israel into David's kingdom after he had a fall-out with Ish-Boshet the son of Shaul. As may be recalled, David was happy about this turn of events, and sent Avner off in peace (3:21). But when Yoav, who had not been present at that meeting, returned to David, he forcefully argued:

What have you done? Behold, Avner came unto you; why is it that you have sent him away, and he is quite gone? You know Avner the son of Ner, that he came to deceive you, and to know your going out and your coming in, and to know all that you do. (ibid. vv. 24-25)

David did not respond to Yoav's words, and we already noted in that context (*shiur* no. 65) the problematic nature of this silence, which could have been interpreted by Yoav as tacit agreement to what he was planning - Avner's murder.<sup>9[9]</sup> David was immediately punished for his silence. He was initially perceived as the one who had instigated the murder, and he had to work very hard to convince the people that he had nothing to do with Avner's death (see *shiur* no. 64).

The similarity to our story raises the possibility that since David was being punished for the mission itself, he was also punished at this point – in the manner of "in the day when I punish, I will punish" – for his thunderous silence in the Avner affair. David did not respond to Yoav's false accusations that Avner's eyes were not directed at peace, but at spying, and he was punished measure for measure - his messengers, who came in peace, were perceived as having come to spy against Amon and humiliated.

Toward the end of this short incident, the term used to describe David suddenly changes, and he is called "the king" for the first time: "And the **king** said, 'Tarry at Jericho until your beards be grown, and then return.' " It seems that David recognized his mistake, and the instructions that he sent to his agents were already part of his preparations for the retaliatory measure to be taken against Amon. Indeed, the next verse opens with the words: "And

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9 [9] Even though it is clear that David was not interested in such a step, for it greatly complicated matters for him. See *shiur* no. 64.

when the children of Amon saw that they were become odious to David..!" (v. 6). The Amonites understood that their interpretation of David's intentions was wrong, and that they had needlessly offended him and raised his wrath against them. War was now inevitable.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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