

THE BOOK OF *SHMUEL*

LECTURE 39: CHAPTER 20 (PART I)

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YONATAN AND DAVID

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I. The Difficulty in Understanding the Sequence of Events

There is a serious difficulty in understanding the sequence of events described in chapter 19 and the beginning of chapter 20. By the skin of his teeth, David has just slipped away from the messengers that had been sent by Shaul to arrest and execute him. Together with Shmuel, he ran away to Nayot in Rama, and there the episode discussed in the previous lecture took place - the prophesying of Shaul and his messengers, in the wake of which their attempts to capture David failed. After all this, David runs away to Yonatan, with the understandable argument on his lips:

(1) And David fled from Nayot in Rama, and came and said before Yonatan, "What have I done? What is my iniquity? And what is my sin before your father, that he seeks my life?"

Yonatan responds in a surprising manner:

(2) And he said unto him, "Far from it; you shall not die. Behold, my father does nothing either great or small, but that he discloses it unto me; and why should my father hide this thing from me? It is not so."

Yonatan is presented here as utterly surprised by the notion that his father Shaul would try to kill David, especially because his father is accustomed to inform him of all his decisions. How does this fit in with what was stated in the previous chapter (19:1-2): "And Shaul spoke **to Yonatan his son**, and to all his servants, that they should slay David...And Yonatan told David, saying, '**Shaul my father seeks to slay you...**'"? And how do they fit in with David's response to Yonatan's words in our chapter:

(3) And David swore moreover, and said, "Your father knows well that I have found favor in your eyes; and he says, 'Let not Yonatan know this, lest he be grieved;' but truly as the Lord lives, and as your soul lives, there is but a step between me and death."

How can David argue that Shaul intentionally concealed his plans from Yonatan, when in the previous chapter Shaul explicitly told Yonatan that he planned on killing David?

Furthermore, David suggests to Yonatan a way to check Shaul's attitude toward David – his intentional absence from the Rosh Chodesh feast:

(5) And David said unto Yonatan, "Behold, tomorrow is the new moon, when I should sit with the king to eat; so let me go, that I may hide myself in the field unto the third day at evening.¹[1] (6) If your father misses me at all, then say, 'David earnestly asked leave of me that he might run to Bethlehem his city; for it is the yearly sacrifice²[2] there for all the family.' (7) If he say thus, It is well; your servant shall have peace. But if he be angry, then know that evil is determined by him."

According to this suggestion, the king was expected to question David's absence from the Rosh Chodesh feast, in which he was supposed to participate. How does this suggestion fit in with the fact that in the previous chapter David ran away in a most cunning manner, after Shaul had tried to kill him? Was he really supposed to come back to dine with Shaul, as if nothing had happened just a short time before? Would it not be expected, after what was related in the previous chapter, that the minute that Shaul sees David, he would order his immediate execution?

The Radak proposed a solution to these difficulties:

Yonatan thought that his father did not intend to kill him after he had promised him saying, "As the Lord lives, he shall not be put to death" (19:6). And the fact that he cast his spear at him after the oath, and he sent messengers to his house to arrest and kill him, and he pursued him until Nayot in Rama in order to kill him – Yonatan thought that, owing to the evil spirit that was terrifying him, he wanted to kill him while the evil spirit was upon him... Therefore, Yonatan promised him, that he could

protect himself from him while the evil spirit was upon him. And even though he served him at that time as a musician, nevertheless he could protect himself from him by not standing before him. Shaul, however, wanted to kill him even when the evil spirit was not upon him, only that he didn't show this owing to the oath that he had taken to Yonatan, or in order not to sadden Yonatan. And David was told by servants of Shaul who loved him that Shaul intended on killing him, for he had told them, but concealed it from Yonatan. Therefore, David swore, saying, "But truly as the Lord lives, and as your soul lives, there is but a step between me and death." It seems that Yonatan brought him back to his father after the incident at Nayot, and that he was at his father's table as usual, as he says, "when I should sit with the king to eat," that is to say, it is my custom to sit with him every day at his table. But nevertheless, David was afraid, and he said to Yonatan that this would be the test: if his father misses him when he is not there, and says, "It is well," then your servant shall have peace, i.e., those who spoke to me had lied.

The Radak proposes an intricate solution for the two difficulties. According to him, Yonatan thought that Shaul would not harm David after having sworn, "As the Lord lives, he shall not be put to death," and that the attempts on David's life in the previous chapter stemmed exclusively from the evil spirit³ and would not be repeated in its absence. Yonatan therefore tried to allay David's concerns, saying that even when the evil spirit rests upon his father, David is capable of protecting himself from the attempts on his life. Shaul, on his part, intended to bring harm to David irrespective of the evil spirit, but this he hid from Yonatan, and told only to his servants. This information was leaked to David, who therefore tried to persuade Yonatan that Shaul wants to kill him even in the absence of the evil spirit. The Radak resolves the second problem by arguing that Yonatan had brought David back to the house of Shaul, and it was therefore expected that David be present at the Rosh Chodesh feast, but David was concerned about the peril inherent in the situation.

The Radak's approach is difficult for several reasons. First of all, according to the Radak, we might have expected Yonatan to mention Shaul's oath - on which this explanation is based - but the oath is nowhere mentioned. The idea that Yonatan would advise David to go back and play for Shaul when the evil spirit rests upon him and have faith that he would know how to protect himself in the future also seems difficult and bizarre. The idea that David had returned to Shaul's house is also forced. Scripture relates that David fled from Nayot in Rama to Yonatan, and there conducted the conversation recorded in the beginning of our chapter; it is very difficult to see in these lines a point at which David returned to Shaul's house.

II. The Complexity of the Relationship Between Yonatan and David

It seems that Scripture intentionally leaves the problem of the sequence of events in the two chapters in place, even though practically speaking it is difficult to read the two chapters as a single continuity.^{4[4]} Why did Scripture choose to take this approach? It seems that we are forced to resolve this problem in a manner that is similar (although not identical) to the way we resolved the problem of continuity in chapters 8-17. It is reasonable to assume that Scripture wishes to express a certain duality. The best way to do this is to present the material from different perspectives, without necessarily creating substantive continuity. Only in this way will the reader understand that we are not dealing with a story reported from a single perspective, but rather with a story reported from different perspectives.

What duality is Scripture trying to impress upon us here? What is the goal of presenting the story in such a way that emphasizes the complexity of the matter?

It seems that the main objective of this two-fold description is to present the duality in the relationship between Yonatan and David. In chapter 19, Yonatan was the primary factor in the attempt to influence Shaul's attitude toward David. It was he who told David to hide in the field, it was he who initiated the conversation with Shaul in order to persuade him not to harm David, and it was he who brought David back to Shaul's house – "And he was in his presence, as beforetime" (19:7). In chapter 20, David is the initiator, and Yonatan follows after him. Yonatan's love for David is evident in this chapter as well, but here we are presented with the split in Yonatan's soul between his love for David and his duty toward his father. David is aware of this complexity, and it is apparently this awareness that gives rise to the sharp argument:

(8) "Therefore, deal kindly with your servant; for you have brought your servant into a covenant of the Lord with you. But if there be in me iniquity, **slay me yourself; for why should you bring me to your father?**"

This observation sheds light on the rest of the conversation between Yonatan and David. As stated, David proposes that he be absent from the Rosh Chodesh feast, and Shaul's reaction to his absence will reveal his true feelings for David. One detail, however, still needs to be arranged: if Shaul reacts in a positive manner, this will prove that there is no problem; but if Shaul becomes angry, and it becomes clear that he wishes to kill David – how will Yonatan inform him of the matter? A convoluted dialogue between David and Yonatan develops around this issue:

(9) And Yonatan said, "Far be it from you; for if I should at all know that evil were determined by my father to come upon you, then would not I tell it to you?"^{5[5]} (10) Then said David to Yonatan, "Who shall tell me if perchance your father answers you roughly?"^{6[6]} (11) And Yonatan said unto David, "Come and let us go out into the field." And they went out both of them into the field. (12) And Yonatan said unto David, "The Lord, the God of Israel - when I have sounded my father about this time tomorrow, or the third day, behold, if there be good toward David, shall I not then send unto you, and disclose it unto you?"^{7[7]} (13) The Lord do so to Yonatan, and more also, should it please my father to do you evil, if I disclose it not unto you, and send you away, that you may go in peace; and the Lord be with you, as He has been with my father."

David's question regarding how he will learn of Shaul's reaction and Yonatan's repeated declaration that he will relay it to him and that the alternative is unthinkable only emphasizes the fissure in the trust between the two. Yonatan's need to repeat himself, and in the end to confirm his promise with an oath,^{8[8]} proves that he felt a certain lack of trust on the part of David.

As we shall see in the continuation, in this chapter Yonatan finds it more difficult to stand absolutely and openly against his father and in support of David, and in the end he makes a tragic decision that leaves him on Shaul's side until the bitter end. Indeed, it is hard not to feel Yonatan's enormous difficulty in uttering a sentence such as, "And the Lord be with you, as He has been with my father," and we certainly can not judge Yonatan for failing to decide between his relationship with David and his relationship with his father. Scripture merely wishes to turn our attention to the drama transpiring before our eyes.

III. The Covenant and the Oath

In the continuation, Yonatan strengthens the commitment between him and David:

(14) "And you shall not only, while yet I live, show me the kindness of the Lord, that I die not; (15) but also you shall not cut off your kindness from my house for ever; no, not when the Lord has cut off the enemies of David

every one from the face of the earth." (16) So Yonatan made a covenant with the house of David. The Lord even require it at the hand of David's enemies.9[9]

The language continues to be exceedingly vague, both in the words of Yonatan and those of Scripture. Between the lines, Yonatan seems to be raising a concern that when David ascends the throne he will punish the house of Shaul, including his descendants, and for this reason he enters into a covenant with the house of David.10[10] It is difficult to ignore the atmosphere of the concern raised here by Yonatan, and especially the repeated use of the word "*lo*" (no) five times in verses 14-15.

Moreover, in the two verses (15-16) the root *kof-resh-tof* repeats itself three times in three different senses: "But also you shall not **cut off** (*takhrit*) your kindness from my house forever" – in the sense of cancellation and forgetting; "not when the Lord has **cut off** (*be-hakhrit*) the enemies of David every one from the face of the earth" – in the sense of destruction; "So Yonatan **made a covenant** (*va-yikhrot*) with the house of David" – in the sense of entering into a covenant. It seems that the triple use of this root expresses the connection between Yonatan's concerns about the cancellation of David's kindness toward him and the making of a covenant with David, which is described as stemming, to a certain degree, from Yonatan's personal interest.11[11]

Nevertheless, Scripture immediately describes another aspect of this relationship:

(17) And Yonatan caused David to swear again, for the love that he had to him; for he loved him as he loved his own soul.

We can conclude by saying that the relationship between David and Yonatan is represented by the two dimensions mentioned here: covenant and oath. The making of the covenant was accompanied by a certain amount of suspicion, which stemmed naturally from the tragic triangle of David-Yonatan-Shaul. The oath, on the other hand, flowed from Yonatan's pure love for David, which was founded, as was mentioned in previous chapters, on Yonatan's deep identification with David and his faith. These two dimensions will continue to accompany this special relationship, which unfortunately will not endure very much longer.

(Translated by David Strauss)

12[1] The term, "*ha-erev ha-shelishit*," as well as the similar expression in v. 12 ("*ka-et machar ha-shelishit*") means "until the third day." In other words, David will conceal himself from now until the third evening, the evening following the second day of Rosh Chodesh.

13[2] "*Zevach ha-yamim*" refers to the sacrifice that a family would bring once a year, as mentioned earlier in the book (1:21): "And the man Elkana, and all his house, went up to offer unto the Lord the yearly sacrifice, and his vow" (and see also 2:19).

14[3] On this point, Ralbag agrees with the Radak, but he does not relate to the other difficulties.

15[4] While the chapter opens with the words: "And David fled from Nayot in Rama, and came and said before Yonatan," which create a connection between this chapter and the preceding one, it seems that this introduction comes merely to tell us that we are dealing with a single story, without going into detail and without addressing the question of the relationship between the contents of the two chapters.

16[5] Rashi and the Radak explain that Yonatan is saying that David should not think that Yonatan will know that Shaul was planning to hurt David and not tell him. The words could also be understood as a question: Is it imaginable that Yonatan will know the answer and not inform David?

17[6] The wording is difficult, but the general intent is clear. The Radak writes: "This means: 'whether he will answer you favorably or roughly.' From the end of the verse, we learn of the lacuna at the beginning." See the Radak, who brings another verse that is similarly structured.

18[7] The Radak understands these words as a question.

19[8] Attention should be paid to the fact that in his oath Yonatan uses the Tetragrammaton – "The Lord do so to Yonatan, and more also" – as opposed to all the other instances in this book, and in the books of the Prophets in general, which all use the phrase "God (*Elokim*) do so.." (see [I Shmuel 3:17](#); 14:44; 25:22; [II Shmuel 3:9](#), 35; 19:14; [I Melakhim 2:23](#); [II Melakhim 6:31](#)). This testifies to a need for special emphasis, the likes of which we find only in the words of Ruth to Naomi: "Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried: the Lord (the Tetragrammaton) do so to me, and more also, if anything but death part you and me" ([Ruth 1:17](#)).

20[9] This seems to be a euphemism, and the words mean: "The Lord even require it at the hand of David if he violates this covenant" (see Rashi and the Radak).

21[10] Yonatan's concern stems from the common practice in which a new leader would destroy the family of the previous leader, as in the case, for example, of Avimelekh ([Shoftim 9:5](#)) and Yehu ([II Melakhim 10:6-7](#)).

22[11] As we know, *Chazal* described the love between David and Yonatan as "a love that is not dependent upon anything else" ([Avot 5:15](#)). Such a dimension does indeed exist, but it does not reflect the entire picture.
