

# [The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash](#)

**The Book of Shmuel  
Yeshivat Har Etzion**

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**Shiur #04: CHAPTER 2 (PART 2)  
SHMUEL IN CONTRAST TO THE SONS OF ELI (VERSES 11-26)**

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## **I. THE STRUCTURE OF THE SECTION**

After recording Chana's prayer, Scripture resumes its account of Shmuel's life. This section uses an interesting structure to describe the contrast between Shmuel, on the one hand, and Chofni and Pinchas, the wicked sons of Eli, on the other. The section opens and closes with Shmuel, and even deals with Shmuel in the middle, splitting up the two sections that describe the sons of Eli (the verses appearing here in bold-face deal with Shmuel).

**(11) And Elkana went to Rama to his house. And the child did minister to the Lord before Eli the priest.**

(12) Now the sons of Eli were worthless men; they knew not the Lord. (13) And the priest's custom with the people was that when any man offered sacrifice, the priest's lad came, while the meat was cooking, with a fork having three teeth in his hand. (14) And he struck it into the pan, or kettle, or cauldron, or pot; all that the fork brought up the priest took for himself. So they did in Shilo to all the people of Israel who came there. (15) Also before they burnt the fat, the priest's lad came, and said to the man that sacrificed, Give some roasting meat for the priest; for he will not have boiled meat of you, but raw. (16) And if any man said to him, Let them first burn the fat, and then take as much as your soul desires; then he would answer him, No; but you shall give it now: and if not, I will take it by force. (17) Therefore the sin of the lads was very great before the Lord: for the men dishonored the offering of the Lord.

**(18) But Shmuel ministered before the Lord, being a child, girded with a linen *efod*. (19) Moreover his mother made him a little coat, and brought it to him from year to year, when she came up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. (20) And Eli blessed Elkana and his wife, and said,**

**The Lord give you seed of this woman, in place of the loan which he lent to the Lord. And they went to their own home. (21) And the Lord visited Chana, so that she conceived, and bore, three sons and two daughters. And the child Shmuel grew before the Lord.**

(22) Now Eli was very old, and heard all that his sons did to all of Israel: and how they lay with the women that assembled at the door of the Tent of Meeting. (23) And he said to them, Why do you do such things? for I hear of your evil dealings by all this people. (24) No, my sons, for it is not a good report that I hear: you make the Lord's people to transgress. (25) If one man sin against another, the judge judges him; but if a man sin against the Lord, who shall intercede before him? But they did not hearken to the voice of their father, because the Lord was minded to slay them.

**(26) And the child Shmuel grew on, and was in favor both with the Lord and also with men.**

In this manner Scripture achieves two goals: First, it creates a striking contrast between Shmuel who "grew on and was in favor" and the sons of Eli, who went from bad to worse.<sup>1[1]</sup> Second, it divides the account of the sins of the sons of Eli into two sections (we will attend to the meaning of this surprising distinction below). In any event, the main idea of this section is clear from its very structure, even before we examine the verses themselves.

## II. EFOD AND COAT

Before I analyze the central issue in this section – the sins of the sons of Eli – I wish to briefly discuss the verses that deal with Shmuel. It seems that it is not by chance that Scripture describes Shmuel's clothing at length. Shmuel is "girded with a linen *efod*," in the manner of the priests (see I *Shmuel* 22:18), and in the manner of David when he brought the ark up to Jerusalem (II *Shmuel* 6:14). The coat that Shmuel's mother made him is reminiscent of the High Priest's coat (*Vayikra* 8:7). It will accompany Shmuel for the rest of his life (see I *Shmuel* 15:9), and serve as his clearest mark of identification, as stated in the story of the *ba'alat ov*: "And he said to her, What form is he of? And she said, An old man comes up; and he is covered with a mantle. And Shaul knew that it was Shmuel" (I *Shmuel* 28:14). The combination of coat and *efod* create a feeling of holiness, which is reminiscent of the High Priest; and this sanctity characterizes Shmuel, even though he is not a priest.

This description might have yet another dimension. I dealt in chapter 1 with the comparison between Chana and the matriarch Rachel. Now a new dimension is added to this comparison: a comparison between the two sons that were born after a

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<sup>1[1]</sup>This contrast finds expression in the following pairs of verses which systematically describe the gap between the personalities: 11-12; 17-18; and 25-26.

protracted period of barrenness, Yosef and Shmuel. Both boys are called "lad" ("*na'ar*") (Yosef – *Bereishit* 37:2; 41:12; and the term is applied to Shmuel ten times in chapters 1-3). The most striking similarity between them finds expression in the special garment that each one receives:

Now Israel loved Yosef more than all his children... and he made him a striped coat. (*Bereishit* 37:3)

Moreover his mother made him a little coat, and brought it to him from year to year. (I *Shmuel* 2:19)

Here too the contrast between the two lads is striking. The problematic aspect of Yosef's conduct during his youth is in his interpersonal relations: "And Yosef brought to his father their evil report" (*Bereishit* 37:2). This stands in contrast to Shmuel, about whom it is stated at the end of the section: "And the child Shmuel grew on, and was in favor both with the Lord **and also with men.**" I shall return to this parallel below.

Let us note here an additional point. Scripture relates that "the Lord visited Chana, so that she conceived, and bore, three sons and two daughters." It seems that Scripture wishes to emphasize thereby that God did not deal with Chana with the strict measure of justice, giving her only one son in exchange for her commitment to consecrate him to God; once Chana merited being remembered by God, she merited giving birth to a number of sons and daughters.

### III. THE FIRST TWO SINS OF THE SONS OF ELI

Let us now move on to the description of the sins of the sons of Eli. As stated above, their sins are described in a split fashion: verses 12-17 describe two sins connected to the sacrifices, whereas in verse 22, which records Eli's rebuke, mention is made almost incidentally of the sin of lying with women.<sup>2[2]</sup> Let us begin with the first two sins.

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<sup>2[2]</sup>Rabbi Yonatan's words in *Shabbat* 55b are well-known: "Whoever says that the sons of Eli sinned – is in error." It is explained there that the sons of Eli did not lie with the women, but only delayed them, and "because they delayed their bird-offerings, and did not return to their husbands – Scripture relates to them as if he had slept with them." This midrashic approach, however, is the subject of dispute amongst *Chazal* and the commentators. In that same Talmudic passage, the view of Rav is brought, who disagrees and says that only "Pinchas did not sin." Nevertheless, he too is included in the expression, "worthless men," for "because Pinchas should have objected to Chofni, but failed to do so, Scripture relate to him as if he had sinned." The passage in *Yoma* 9a has some sharp things to say on

The first sin is described in a manner that parallels a Torah law, and through a comparison of the two, we can understand its significance:

**And the priest's custom with the people** was that when any man offered sacrifice, the priest's lad came, while the meat was cooking, with a fork having three teeth in his hand. And he struck it into the pan, or kettle, or cauldron, or pot; all that the fork brought up **the priest took for himself**. (13-14)

This wording is very reminiscent of the Torah law regarding the priestly gift given from unconsecrated animals:

And this shall be **the priest's allotment from the people, from those who offer a sacrifice**, whether it be ox or sheep; **they shall give to the priest the shoulder**, and the two cheeks, and the maw. (*Devarim* 18:3)

The difference between the practice of the sons of Eli and the Torah law is two-fold. First, according to the Torah, the priest does not take the gifts, but rather he is given them; second, the priest is supposed to receive defined parts – the shoulder, the cheeks, and the maw – whereas the sons of Eli created a game of chance, taking "all that the fork brought up." The sons of Eli turned the priestly gifts – which were meant to be freely handed over by the giver - into violent acts of taking that were accompanied by taunts and ridicule, thus perverting the *mitzva* altogether.<sup>3[3]</sup>

The situation gets worse with the second sin which relates, as it would appear, to the peace offerings:

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the matter: "Rabbi Yochanan ben Torta said: Why was Shilo destroyed – because there were too things therein – forbidden sexual relations and disgrace of sacrifices." The passage there brings the view of Rabbi Yonatan that the sons of Eli merely delayed their bird offerings, but the Ritva (ad loc.) brings two readings, one of them explicitly stating that Rabbi Yochanan disagrees with Rabbi Yonatan. So too Radak on our chapter explains: "How they lay' – in its plain sense. And some of our Rabbis explain it not in its plain sense."

<sup>3[3]</sup>In this context we should note the interesting use that Scripture makes of the two-fold meaning of the word "*mishpat*." In the verse in the *Devarim*, the word means "law," as in: "And if a man committed a sin subject to the law (*mishpat*) of death" (*Devarim* 21:22), and elsewhere. In *Shemuel* the word means "practice, custom," as in: "And you shall deliver Pharaoh's cup into his hand, after the former manner (*mishpat*) when you were his butler" (*Bereishit* 40:13); "Thus did David, and this was his practice (*mishpat*) all the time he dwelt in the country of the Pelishtim" (*I Shemuel* 27:11); and elsewhere. The **practice** of the sons of Eli stood in opposition to the **law** of the Torah.

Also before they burnt the fat, the priest's lad came, and said to the man that sacrificed, Give some roasting meat for the priest; for he will not have boiled meat of you, but raw. And if any man said to him, Let them first burn the fat, and then take as much as your soul desires; then he would answer him, No; but you shall give it now: and if not, I will take it by force. Therefore the sin of the lads was very great before the Lord: for the men dishonored the offering of the Lord. (15-17)

Here too there are two aspects to the sin. First, the order of events stands in opposition to the Torah's command that first the fat must be burnt on the altar and only then should the meat be given to the priests: "And the priest shall burn the fat upon the altar: but the breast shall be Aharon's and his sons" (*Vayikra* 7:31). This is a fundamental difference: the Torah's commandment expresses the idea that the priests eat the breast and the shoulder from God's table, as a gift from Him to them. Taking the meat too early in the process nullifies this idea and takes the *mitzva* of receiving a gift from God and turns it into an act of taking from Israel. Second, Scripture describes the process as connected to threats and violence, whereby "the men dishonored the offering of the Lord."

The picture painted thus far points to a very serious situation: the sons of Eli turned the *Mishkan* into a means of furthering their economic interests. The people of Israel who brought their choice offerings to the *Mishkan* out of a desire to fulfill God's command were coerced to give considerable portions to the sons of Eli and their corrupt henchmen.

#### **IV. "AND HOW THEY LAY WITH THE WOMEN THAT ASSEMBLED AT THE DOOR OF THE TENT OF MEETING"**

The story, however, does not end here. Interestingly, Scripture separates between the first two sins, connected to the world of sacrifices, and the third sin, which appears only after the verses dealing with Shmuel. Moreover, this sin is not mentioned directly, but only indirectly, as part of what Eli had heard about his sons' disgraceful conduct.

Now Eli was very old, and heard all that his sons did to all of Israel: and how they lay with the women that assembled at the door of the Tent of Meeting. (22)

What is the nature of this sin? Like the first sin, here too the description of what happened is based on the wording of the verse in *Shemot* (38:8): "And he made

the laver of brass, and its pedestal of brass, of the mirrors of the women **assembling**, who assembled at the door of **the Tent of Meeting**." This is the reason that the verse uses the term "the Tent of Meeting," which is very rare in the books of the Prophets (and does not appear at all in the book of *Shofetim*, and in *Shmuel* – it appears only here, whereas the usual term is "*heikhal Hashem*," sanctuary of the Lord – above 1:10, 3:3). We are talking then about lying with women who were accustomed to work in the vicinity of the Temple ("*tzovot*" – in the sense of work, as in: "All that enter in to perform the service ("*litzvo tzava*"), to do the work in the Tent of Meeting" ; *Bamidbar* 4:23). Not only did they turn the *Mishkan* into a place of gluttonous eating accompanied by violent actions – the sons of Eli included in this hedonistic spree systematic violations of sexual prohibitions.

This description gives rise to the following question: Why is this sin mentioned only now, and indirectly? Should it not have been mentioned at the very head of the list of sins?

## V. INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS

An examination of Eli's approach to the entire issue might provide us with an answer to this question. Eli rebukes his sons, saying: "If one man sin against another, the judge judges him: but if a man sin against the Lord, who shall intercede before him?" According to this understanding, sins committed against God are more severe than sins committed against one's fellow man, for interpersonal difficulties can be resolved by appearing before a judge ("the judge judges him"), whereas sins committed against God have no atonement. This mistaken approach greatly constricts the realm of interpersonal relations, to which much less importance is attached than to sins committed against God. This, of course, stands in contrast to *Chazal's* approach, which places special emphasis on the severity of the sins between man and his fellow.<sup>4[4]</sup>

This approach takes us back to Eli's problematic attitude toward Chana in the first chapter. Out of excessive concern about what appeared to him as a slight to the decorum of the *Mishkan*, Eli sharply reproaches Chana, in a manner lacking charity and sensitivity. Now it is clear that Eli's conduct fits in well with his approach that gives critical standing to the sanctuary, its order and its vessels, and disregards interpersonal matters. This approach will be evident in the coming chapters as well.

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<sup>4[4]</sup> As is implied by the famous Mishna in *Yoma* (8:9): "Transgressions between man and God – Yom Kippur atones; transgressions between man and his fellow, Yom Kippur does not atone until he appeases his fellow." See Rosh at the beginning of his commentary to *Pe'a* (1:1): "Because the Holy One, blessed be He, has greater desire for those *mitzvot* through which the desires of people are also achieved than the *mitzvot* between man and God."

In light of all this, it stands to reason that by describing the sexual offense last, Scripture wishes to say that Eli awoke to rebuke his sons precisely for this sin, and not for the first sins, even though they included an interpersonal dimension. What brought Eli to reproach his sons was the injury to the atmosphere of the sanctuary, but the injury to those coming to visit it, he was ready to forgive. This stands in contrast to the position of Scripture, which sees the first sins as the main ones – apparently because they express not only a derision of the sacrificial order, but also injury to people.<sup>5[5]</sup>

## VI. "HE RESTRICTED THEM NOT"

It is not only the content of Eli's words to his sons that is problematic; his rebuke is formulated in gentle language, and seems to be of little value. Three times Eli repeats the term "hear" (*sh-m-a*):

And he said to them, Why do you do such things? for I **hear** (*shome'a*) of your evil dealings by all this people. No, my sons, for it is not a good **report** (*shemu'a*) that I **hear** (*shome'a*): you make the Lord's people to transgress.

This wording implies that we are dealing merely with rumors, and Eli makes no effort to verify their truth. It is no wonder then that the result of this mild rebuke was that "they did not **hearken** (*yishme'u*) to the voice of their father."

And furthermore, not only was the rebuke very weak, it was also too late, after Eli's son's fate had already been sealed – "because the Lord was minded to slay them." The sons of Eli had already passed the threshold of severe iniquity before Eli rose to rebuke them, and they were denied the opportunity of repentance, like Pharaoh and Sichon, each in his own time.

In light of this, we can understand why, when God reveals Himself to Shmuel, He describes Eli's attitude toward his sons as follows: "For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever, for the iniquity, seeing that he knew that his sons were

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<sup>5[5]</sup>The man of God's prophecy of doom about Eli, which we will discuss in next week's lesson, also mentions only the sins related to the sacrifices while ignoring the sexual offense.

blaspheming, and he restricted them not" (3:13). Eli rebuked his sons, but in a way that was regarded in heaven as if "he restricted them not" at all.

## VII. SHMUEL

Like our passage, this lecture opened with Shmuel and will also close with him.

This section gives a very gloomy picture of the spiritual authorities among the people of Israel. The judge Eli is a tragic figure, who set his worry about the sanctuary and the sacrifices much higher than interpersonal relationships. His sons, who inherited from him his disregard for the dignity of man, severely worsened their conduct in this realm. Moreover, the sons of Eli also proved that disregard for the dignity of one's fellow man will eventually lead to disregard for the honor of heaven, and thus they destined their family to the severest punishment cast upon any family in Scripture.

Nevertheless, this somber passage ends on a positive note. In contrast to the erroneous approach of Eli with respect to his attitude toward interpersonal obligations, and the destructive influence that it had upon his sons, we encounter Shmuel "who grew on, and was in favor **both with the Lord and with men**" (v. 26).

(Translated by David Strauss)

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