

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Book of Shmuel
Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #06: CHAPTER 3
SHMUEL'S CONSECRATION PROPHECY

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I. THE PRESENTATION (VERSES 1-3)

The first two chapters of the book have prepared us for Shmuel's central role as a prophet and leader of the people of Israel. Chapter 3 describes Shmuel's consecration as a prophet. This description parallels the extensive descriptions of other prophets' first encounter with God (Yishayahu, Yirmiyahu, Yechezkel and others). Nevertheless, Shmuel's consecration as a prophet contains unique elements, the significance of which will be discussed below.

The framing verses of the chapter summarize the main changes that took effect in the wake of Shmuel's consecration. First and foremost, Shmuel's standing underwent a change: The chapter opens with "And **the child** Shmuel ministered to the Lord before Eli" (v. 1), and it closes with "And all Israel from Dan to Be'er-Sheva knew that Shmuel was trusted as **a prophet** of the Lord" (v. 20). This change leads to another important change – the frequency of the appearance of God's word in Israel. At the beginning of the chapter we read: "And the word of God was seldom¹[1] in those days; there was no frequent vision" (v. 1); whereas in the end of the chapter we read: "And the Lord appeared again in Shilo; for the Lord revealed himself to Shmuel in Shilo by the word of the Lord" (v. 21).

The chapter opens with three verses that serve as an exposition of what will follow. Several points come up in these verses, the significance of which I shall try to explain:

¹[1] The word "*yakar*" is used here the sense of "seldom," as in: "Let your foot be seldom [*hokar*] in your neighbor's house, lest he be weary of you, and hate you" (*Mishlei* 25:17).

1) "And the word of God was precious in those days; there was no frequent vision" – besides constituting a framework, as stated above, this fact is important because it explains why Shmuel and Eli do not immediately understand that God is calling out to Shmuel.

2) "And Eli was laid down in the place, and his eyes had begun to grow dim, that he could not see" (v. 2) – thus Shmuel has reason to believe that it was Eli who had called out to him, because he had needed his help. The word *kehot* ("dim") might possibly correspond to God's rebuke later in the chapter regarding Eli's attitude toward his sons' sins – "And he restrained (*kiha*) them not" (v. 13).

3) "And the lamp of the Lord had not yet gone out" (v. 3) – this implies that we are dealing with the wee hours of the morning, approaching dawn, but still in total darkness. For this reason as well, Shmuel has reason to believe that Eli had woken up in the middle of the night and needed his help. In homiletic manner, *Chazal* have said: "Before Eli's sun set, Shmuel's sun had already risen" (*Bereishit Rabba* 58, 2).

4) The last verse in this exposition is the most difficult of all: "And Shmuel was laid down to sleep in the Temple of the Lord where the ark of the God was" (v. 3). *Chazal* already asked: "Surely nobody may sit in the Temple courtyard other than the kings of the house of David" (*Kiddushin* 78b) – is it possible then that Shmuel laid down in the Temple as one lies down to sleep in one's bedroom? And it answers (*ibid.*) that the words of the verse are out of order, and the verse should actually be read as follows: "The lamp of the Lord had not yet gone out in the Temple of the Lord, and Shmuel laid down" – in his place. This reading also follows from the cantillation notes, for there is an *etnachta* under the word *shokhev* ("laid down").^{2[2]} This explanation is, of course, difficult according to the plain sense of the verse. It seems then that the verse is referring to the broader compound of the Temple, as suggested by *Ralbag*: "Shmuel laid down in the Temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was, in a certain office that was there." A question remains however: Why do the

^{2[2]} The passage there also has difficulty with the verse in *Yechezkel* (44:22): "Nor shall they take a widow, or a divorced woman for wives; but they shall take virgins of the seed of the house of Israel, or a widow that is the widow of a priest." This verse seems to contradict Torah law: If it is dealing with the High Priest – all widows are forbidden to him (*Vayikra* 21:14); if it is dealing with an ordinary priest, an ordinary priest is permitted to marry the widow of an Israelite! The Gemara answers: "It means as follows: 'Of the priests shall take' – other priests shall take." That is to say, Scripture means that some priests – the ordinary priests – may marry widows; and the verse means: "A widow that is a widow, [some] of the priests shall take." The difficulty with this understanding on the level of the plain meaning of the verse is striking, and therefore it seems that we should adopt *Radak's* suggestion in his commentary (*ad loc.*): "If this refers to all priests, it will be for additional holiness in the future, namely, that the widow of the High Priest and even that of an ordinary priest may be taken by a different priest." According to this, in the future there will be additional sanctity, so that even an ordinary priest will be barred from marrying a widow, unless she is the widow of a priest.

verses imply that Shmuel lay down in the Temple itself? It seems that Scripture wishes to create the impression that Shmuel laid down in the Temple as if it were his own house, and thus to intensify Shmuel's connection to God.

II. THE REVELATION

The fact that God revealed Himself in such a way that it was only after the third time that Eli and Shmuel understood that it was God calling to Shmuel gives rise to great difficulty. Why did God reveal Himself in such a manner, which seems almost comic? What does Scripture wish to teach us through this story?

It seems that Scripture wishes to illustrate the failure of Eli's spiritual leadership. Eli bears the responsibility for the fact that "there is no frequent vision." He does not even consider the possibility that we are dealing with a Divine revelation, and that this is the source of the call to Shmuel.^{3[3]} It stands to reason that Eli also failed to properly appreciate the unique personality of Shmuel, the devoted servant, and that he did not understand his elevated level that made him fit for Divine revelation. Scripture is also telling us something about Shmuel's humility, for he too did not entertain the possibility that it was God who was calling to him.^{4[4]}

It is interesting to consider several linguistic differences between God's three calls to Shmuel. The first time it says:

...and he answered, Here I am. And he ran to Eli, and said, Here I am, for you did call me. And he said, I called not; lie down again. **And he went and lay down.**" (4-5).

In contrast, the second time it says:

^{3[3]} In this regard, there is a certain similarity between Eli and Bilam (*Bamidbar* 22), who also does not understand until the third time that something is happening that is exceptional and has spiritual significance.

^{4[4]} This story is very important for understanding prophecy. Shmuel is unable to distinguish between the voice of God and the voice of Eli, which seems to imply that God's voice when He calls out to a prophet is perceived by the prophet as an ordinary external voice. It is not at all clear, however, that this is the situation in all cases of prophecy.

And Shmuel arose and went to Eli, and said, Here I am, for you did call me. And he answered. I called not, my son; lie down again. (6)

The first time, Shmuel quickly declares, "Here I am," and only then does he go over to Eli. It would appear that he wants to set Eli's mind at ease immediately. The verse notes that Shmuel runs to Eli (*va-yaratz*), and therefore it also mentions at the end that Shmuel walks (*va-yelekh*) in order to emphasize the contrast. The second time, on the other hand, Shmuel approaches Eli more slowly and with hesitation; Eli on his part adds the words, "my son," because he is moved by Shmuel's concern and does not want him to feel uncomfortable.

It was only the third time that Eli understands what is going on, and he guides Shmuel to say as follows: "Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening" (v. 9). It stands to reason that Shmuel is afraid to say this, and therefore he says only: "Speak, for Your servant is listening" (v. 10). But after Shmuel receives the word of God, it becomes clear that Eli is the hesitant one, for he turns to Shmuel saying: "What is the thing that He said to you?" (v. 17), without mentioning God's name.

III. MOSHE AND SHMUEL

Another aspect of God's revelation to Shmuel is the similarity between it and His revelation to Moshe. The similarity between Shmuel and Moshe is broad, and extends to other chapters as well. First of all, Scripture itself draws a comparison between Shmuel and Moshe in two places: In Yirmiyahu's prophecy it says: "Then said the Lord to me, Though Moshe and Shmuel were to stand before Me, My mind could not decline towards this people; send them out of My sight, and let them depart" (*Yirmiyahu* 15:1). And in *Tehillim* (99:6) it says: "Moshe and Aharon among his priests, and Shmuel among those who call upon His name; they called upon the Lord, and He answered them."

Moshe and Shmuel are the only prophets, whose lives Scripture spells out in detail, from birth to death. Both of them grew up outside their parents' home, until suddenly God appeared to them. The descriptions of these revelations exhibit substantive and linguistic similarities. Substantively, God appeared to each of them in a surprising manner, and they failed to understand at first who was speaking to them. About Moshe it is stated: "Now Moshe kept the flock of Yitro... And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. And he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, but the bush was not consumed. And Moshe, said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight why the bush is not burnt. And when the Lord saw that He turned aside to see, God called to him out of the midst of the bush, and said, **Moshe, Moshe**. And he said, **Here I am**" (*Shemot* 3:1-4). To

Shmuel as well, God calls out, "**Shmuel, Shmuel**" (v. 10), and he too answers, "**Here I am,**" the first three times. To this similarity, we can add several points of linguistic similarity:

1) The description of the revelation itself, "And the Lord, came, and stood, and called" (v. 10), is reminiscent of the revelation to Moshe at the crevice of the rock: "And the Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and called the name of the Lord" (*Shemot* 34:5).

2) The very wording which Scripture uses to describe God's call to Shmuel – "And the Lord called Shmuel" (v. 4) – parallels the expression – "And the Lord called Moshe up to the top of the mountain" (*Shemot* 19:20), and appears nowhere else in Scripture.

3) At the end of the chapter, it says: "Shmuel was trusted as a prophet of the Lord" (v. 20) – wording that we find with respect to Moshe as well: "My servant Moshe is not so, for he is the trusted one in all My house" (*Bamidbar* 12:7).

In light of this comparison, we can now understand what Scripture means at the beginning of the chapter: "Eli was laid down in the place, **and his eyes had begun to grow dim**, that he could not see" (v. 2). This description stands in contrast to the description of Moshe in his old age: "And Moshe was a hundred and twenty years old when he died; **his eye was not dim**, nor his natural force abated" (*Devarim* 34:7). Eli, the leader who had failed both with respect to his sons and in his leadership of the people, and had not reached the level of Moshe, is now being replaced by a prophet who will hopefully be similar to the greatest of prophets.

Iv. "I WILL DO A THING IN ISAREL"

We can now proceed to the content of the prophecy. Surprisingly, the prophecy itself hides more than it reveals. The prophecy is comprised of two sections. The first section speaks of a dramatic event that will transpire in the future, without explaining what that will be:

And the Lord said to Shmuel, Behold, I will do a thing in Israel, at which both the ears of every one that hears it shall tingle. (11)

The second section assumes a personal dimension – when that "thing" will take place, the punishment of the house of Eli will begin:

In that day, I will perform against Eli all things which I have spoken concerning his house from beginning to end.^{5[5][5]} For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever, for the iniquity, seeing that he knew that his sons belittled themselves,^{6[6]} and he restrained them not. And therefore I have sworn to the house of Eli, that the iniquity of Eli's will not be purged with sacrifice nor offering forever.^{7[7]} (12-14)

What is the "thing" that will take place? A hint to what this means may be found in the expression, "at which both the ears of every one that hears it shall tingle." In Scripture, this expression is always associated with destruction, as in II *Melakhim* 21:12-13:

Therefore thus says the Lord God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing such evil upon Jerusalem and Yehuda **that whoever hears of it, both his ears shall tingle**. And I will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line of Shomron, and the plummet of the house of Achav. And will wipe Jerusalem as a man wipes a dish, wiping it, and turning it upside down.

5[5] The expression "*hachel ve-kale*" means: "That day will mark the beginning of My decree against the house of Eli, that Chofni and Pinchas shall die, and from then on I will complete My decree from generation to generation" (Rashi).

6[6] This expression, "his sons belittled themselves" (*mekalelim lahen banav*)" raises difficulty. Chazal included this expression in a list of eighteen cases of "*kina ha-katuv*" or "*tikkun soferim*," in which a Scriptural reading was changed in order not to violate God's honor. According to this, the basic meaning of the expression is "his sons belittled Me" (*mekalelim li banav*), i.e., Eli's son belittled God. *Mekalelim* is used here in the sense of "belittling" (Rashi), and there is here a play on the expression, "them that honor Me I will honor, and they that despise Me shall be lightly esteemed (*yekalu*)" (2:30). [Editor's comment: My revered teacher, Rav Medan, suggested that the *tikkun soferim* here is the omission of the letter *alef*. The verse means: "His sons belittled God" (*mekalelim Eloheim banav*).] The two names given to the phenomenon ("*kina ha-katuv*" and "*tikkun soferim*") reflect two different way of understanding it. In the halakhic *midrashim* (see, for example, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, Beshalakh, Massekhta de-Shira, parasha 6*), the term used is "*kina ha-katuv*," which seems to imply that Scripture itself made the emendation. In the aggadic *midrashim*, on the other hand, we find the term "*tikkun soferim*" (see, for example, *Shemot Rabba, parashot 13 and 41*), which implies a later emendation. This is stated explicitly in *Midrash Tanchuma (Beshalakh, parasha 16)*: "A *tikkun soferim* of the men of the *Keneset Ha-gedola*." An extensive discussion of the matter is found in *Minchat Shai* on *Zekharya* 10:12, who absolutely rejects the possibility that we are dealing with a later emendation. It should be noted that Ibn Ezra argues that there is no need for any emendations (see his introduction to his commentary to the Torah, fifth path). According to him, all these verses can be understood according to their plain sense. Here too the verse means: "His sons belittled the people of Israel." According to this, once again Scripture emphasizes the sins between man and his fellow man.

7[7] Here too there is measure for measure, as we saw at length in the previous chapter: Since the sons of Eli sinned by "kicking at My sacrifice and at My offering" (2:29), their sins will not be expiated with "sacrifice or offering for ever."

And similarly in the prophecy of Yirmiyahu (19:3-8):

And say, Hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Yehuda, and inhabitants of Jerusalem; Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, **which whoever hears it, his ears shall tingle...** And I will make this city desolate, and a hissing; every one that passes by it shall be astonished and hiss because of all its disasters.

It stands to reason then that the intended "thing" is the destruction of Shilo. Surprisingly, the book of *Shmuel* totally ignores this destruction (which followed from Israel's utter defeat at the hands of the Pelishtim, as is described in the next chapter), even though it is described in detail in other places in Scripture, as in *Tehillim* 78:60-64:

So that He forsook the tabernacle of Shilo, the tent where He made His dwelling among men; and delivered His strength into captivity, and His glory into the enemy's hand. He gave His people over also to the sword; and was wroth with His inheritance. The fire consumed their young men; and their virgins had no marriage song. Their priests fell by the sword; and their widows made no lamentation.

It would seem that from the perspective of Shmuel's consecration prophecy the destruction of Shilo is not a major disaster. The primary message in that prophecy consists of the punishment of the house of Eli. Shmuel, who grew up in Eli's household and ministered before him, acquires for the first time clear knowledge of the severe punishment that will befall the house of Eli. And at the same time, he hears through this about his consecration as a prophet.

V. ELI'S ROLE

We must still understand Eli's role in this prophecy of consecration. It was Eli's fate that he himself unknowingly prepared Shmuel for his mission. It was Eli who prepared Shmuel to receive the word of God, and he also turned Shmuel into a real "prophet," that is, into a person who passes on the word of God to the people:

And Shmuel lay until the morning and opened the doors of the house of the Lord. And Shmuel feared to show Eli the vision. Then Eli called Shmuel and said, Shmuel my son, and He answered, Here am I.⁸[8] And he said, What is the thing that the Lord said to you: I pray you hide it not from me; God do so to you, and more also, if you hide any thing from me of all the things that He said to you. And Shmuel told him everything, and hid nothing from him... (15-18)

Eli also served another purpose:

And he said, It is the Lord: let Him do what seems good in His eyes. (18)

With these words Eli, who had already heard about the impending punishment from the man of God in the previous chapter, confirms that indeed it was God who revealed Himself to Shmuel, and thus he removes all possible doubt regarding God's revelation to Shmuel.

On the one hand, Eli's acceptance – "Let Him do what seems good in His eyes" – appears impressive and tragic; Eli, who was prophet, priest, judge and leader, but unable to teach his sons to follow in his path, is severely punished for their sins. On the other hand, this acceptance constitutes a continuation of Eli's flawed path. Eli did not understand Chana, who prayed for a change in her situation, and even rebuked her severely. It was also Eli who determined that there is no atonement for someone who sins against God: "If a man sin against the Lord, who shall intercede for him" (2:25). Consistent with his own approach, Eli makes no effort to pray to God and change the decree. He accepts the judgment, without seeking pardon or forgiveness. Rather, he reconciles himself with the current situation in fatalistic manner. Eli contemplates the disaster that will befall his house and cause his own death with the same tragic consistency that marked his entire life.

However, this chapter as well concludes on an optimistic note:

And all Israel from Dan to Be'er-Sheva knew that Shmuel was trusted as a prophet of the Lord. And the Lord appeared again in Shilo: for the Lord revealed Himself to Shmuel in Shilo by the word of the Lord. (20-21)

⁸[8] Here we see the virtue of Shmuel: even after he heard the prophecy of doom concerning the house of Eli, he did not change his respectful attitude towards Eli, but rather he continued to serve him as before.

The memory of the awful failure of the house of Eli is about to fade into the past. Eli will be replaced by a trusted prophet, through whose merit the word of God will once again circulate widely in Israel.

(Translated by David Strauss)
