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**The Book of Shmuel
Yeshivat Har Etzion**

**Shiur #08: CHAPTER 4 (PART II)
THE DEFEAT AT THE HANDS OF THE PELISHTIM
AND THE DEATH OF ELI (PART II)**

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In the previous *shiur*, we investigated the reason for Israel's defeat at the hands of the Pelishtim, explicit mention of which does not appear to be found in Scripture. I argued that the defeat stemmed from the fact that following their first defeat, the people of Israel did not stop to consider how they might mend their ways, but rather they thought that all they had to do to enjoy victory was to bring the ark of God out to battle with them. This account serves as an example of how an idolatrous idea could penetrate the worship of the God of Israel, turning a means into an end, and attributing to the holy vessels independent power that is detached from the spiritual state of the people of Israel. I also demonstrated that the source of this conception was Eli, Israel's spiritual leader, who is also presented in the chapter as one who was primarily concerned about the ark of God, rather than about the people of Israel and their spiritual state.

V. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE WIFE OF PINCHAS AND RACHEL

The epilog to the chapter 4 deals with the death of the wife of Pinchas and the birth of I-Khavod:

And his daughter-in-law, the wife of Pinchas was with child, near to be delivered,^{1[1]} and when she heard the tidings that the ark of God was taken, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she herself gave birth; for her pains came upon her. And about the time of her death the women that stood by her said to her, Fear not; for you have born a son. But she answered not, neither did she regard it. And she named the child I-Khavod, saying, Honor is departed from Israel, because the ark of God was taken, and because of her father-in-law and her husband. And she said, Honor is departed from Israel, for the ark of God is taken. (19-22)

This story is very reminiscent of the account of Rachel's death:

And they journeyed from Bet-El; and there was but a little way to come to Efrat; and Rachel travailed, and she had hard labor. And it came to pass, when she was in hard labor, that the midwife said to her, Fear not, you shall have this son also. And it came to pass, as her soul was departing (for she died), that she called his name Ben-Oni, but his father called him Benyamin. And Rachel died, and was buried in the way to Efrat, which is Bet-Lechem. (*Bereishit* 35:16-19)

Chazal already noted the correspondence between the two accounts. Thus, for example, we find in *Midrash Bereishit Rabba*:

Three women had difficulty during delivery and died: Rachel, the wife of Pinchas, and Michal, the daughter of Shaul. (*Bereishit Rabba* 82, 7)^{2[2]}

Indeed, we can point to six parallels between the two stories:

1) Both stories relate to a woman undergoing a difficult delivery:

And Rachel travailed, and she had hard labor. (*Bereishit* 35:17)

She herself gave birth; for her pains came upon her. (I *Shmuel* 4:19)

1[1] The word "*lalat*" in the sense of "*laledet*." The letter *dalet* being swallowed up by the letter *tof* adjacent to it is a recognized phenomenon in Hebrew, just like the feminine form of the word *echad*, "one," is *achat*, and not *achdat* (see Ibn Ezra, *Shemot* 26:8, long commentary).

2[2] See also *Midrash Shmuel* (11, 3, ed. Buber, p. 40). I have discussed this correspondence at length in my book, *Makbilot Nifgashot – Makbilot Sifrutiyot be-Sefer Shmuel*, Alon Shevut, 2006, pp. 38-50.

2) In both cases, the new mother is informed that she gave birth to a boy by women who had been present at the time of the delivery,^{3[3]} and in similar language:

The midwife said to her, **Fear not**; you shall have this son also. (*Bereishit* 35:17)

The women that stood by her said to her, **Fear not**; for you have born a son. (*I Shmuel* 4:20)^{4[4]}

3) The two names given by the two mothers express tragedy: "Ben-Oni"^{5[5]} (*Bereishit* 35:18); "I-Khavod" (*I Shmuel* 4:20).

4) In both cases the new mother dies at the end of the story (*Bereishit* 35:19; *I Shmuel* 4:20)

5) In both cases, death comes as a result of the taking of a certain article. Rachel dies in the wake of her taking her father Lavan's *terafim* (*Bereishit* 31:19), and her death is closely connected to the words of Yaakov: "Anyone with whom you find your gods, let him not live" (*ibid.* v. 32).^{6[6]} The death of Pinchas's wife stems from her shock upon hearing that the ark had been taken by the Pelishtim: "And when she heard the tidings that the ark of God was taken, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she herself gave birth...."

6) Another point that connects the two stories is the fact that the messenger who arrives from the battlefield and reports the bitter news to Eli and the people is a descendant of Binyamin – the son born to Rachel at the time of her death.

^{3[3]} The phenomenon of women being present at childbirth and involved in the naming of the newborn is known also from *Rut* 4:14-17.

^{4[4]} This correspondence was noted by *Midrash Sekhel Tov*, *Bereishit* 35:17, ed. Buber, p. 201: "Fear not' – Thus one soothes a woman during childbirth and speaks to her heart. And so too you find that they spoke to the wife of Pinchas the son of Eli, 'Fear not, for you have born a son.'"

^{5[5]} Rashi understands "*Ben-Oni*" as "Son of my pain," following *Bereishit Rabba* (82, 9, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 987). Ibn Ezra understands it as "Son of my grief," for the tern "*on*" denotes grief and mourning in several places (*Hoshea* 9:4 – *lechem onim*; *Devarim* 26:14 – *lo akhalti be-oni*). See also below, note 13.

^{6[6]} *Chazal* noted this connection in several places; see *Torah Sheleima*, vol. 5, New York, 1952, p. 1236, note 75.

What do all these correspondences mean?

VI. "FOR THE TERAFIGIM HAVE SPOKEN VANITY"

As was mentioned above, it stands to reason that Rachel's death was a punishment for her taking Lavan's *terafim*. It was noted earlier that Rachel died in the wake of what Yaakov had said to Lavan. It is reasonable to assume, however, that Rachel was not punished only because of a slip of Yaakov's tongue, but rather because what she did was wrong in and of itself. This is the implication of Scripture's wording: "Now Rachel **had stolen** the images that were her father's" (*Bereishit* 31:19); "For Yaakov knew not that Rachel **had stolen** them" (*ibid.* v. 32).^{7[7]} We must ask, then: Why did Rachel steal them, and what was wrong with what she did?

Rashi explains the matter based on *Bereishit Rabba* (74, 5): "Her intention was to remove her father from idol worship." For various different reasons, however, this explanation is difficult. First of all, according to this explanation, it is difficult to understand why in the end Rachel was liable for death (assuming that her death came in the wake of her stealing the *terafim*). Second, Ibn Ezra asks: "Were this the case, why did she take them with her, rather than bury them along the way?" Moreover, did Rachel really think that her action would cause her father to stop worshipping idols? "Was it her intention to remove him from idol worship, as *Chazal* have said? It would truly have been great folly on her part to think that in his old age, his daughter would cause a change in his heart. Even if she steals his *terafim*, surely he will make other idols in their place!" (Abarbanel, *Bereishit* 31, question 11).

Radak argues that Rachel stole the *terafim* so that "her father would not be able to see through them which road they took."^{8[8]} His explanation is based on the assumption that the *terafim* served as a tool for divining the future, as is indeed implied in various places

^{7[7]} Regarding the negation in this formulation, see *Bereishit Rabba* 18, 2, ed. Theodor-Albeck, pp. 162-163: "Rabbi Yehoshua of Sikhnin said in the name of Rabbi Levi: It is written '*va-yiven*' (*Bereishit* 2:22) – he considered well (*hitbonen*) from what part to create her. He said: I will not create her from [Adam's] head, lest she be a coquette... nor from the hand, lest she be light-fingered... Yet in spite of all this, 'But you have set at nought all My counsel, and would none of My reproof' (*Mishlei* 1:25). I did not create her from the head, yet she is swell-headed... Nor from the hand, yet she is light-fingered – 'And Rachel stole the *terafim*' (*Bereishit* 31:19)." And similarly (*ibid.* 45, 5, ed. Theodor-Albeck, pp. 452-453): "Women are said to have four traits: they are greedy, eavesdroppers, slothful, and envious... Rabbi Levi said: She is also prone to steal: 'And Rachel stole the *terafim*' (*Bereishit* 31:19)."

^{8[8]} The source for this is *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Vayetze* 12: "Why did she steal them? So that they not tell Lavan that Yaakov ran away with his wives, children and flocks." So too *Targum Yerushalmi* (*ad loc.*); *Arukh*, s.v. *taraf*; Ibn Ezra; and Chizkuni.

in Scripture.^{9[9]} According to this explanation, it is more understandable why Rachel was punished, for her action proves that she attributed certain powers to the *terafim*, and that she thought that they had the power to cancel God's plan. Stealing the *terafim* then belies a certain lack of faith in God's promise, "Return to the land of your fathers, and to your kindred, and I will be with you" (*Bereishit* 31:3).^{10[10]} Even according to this explanation, however, a certain difficulty remains, for this brings us back to Ibn Ezra's difficulty with Rashi's explanation: "Why did she take them with her, rather than bury them along the way?"

It might be proposed that Rachel intended to take the *terafim* for her own personal use, as is suggested by Sh. D. Luzzatto (Shadal):

Rachel stole them because she believed in them, even though she did not worship idols, for they were merely like lots. [The *teraf*] was composed of many parts, and the hearers would move them around in certain ways. And according to what would come out by accident by way of the movement they would judge that God had answered this and that. Whether this is idol worship depends upon the thoughts of the inquirer: if he believes that the answer comes from idols and not from the one God.

Even though Shadal softens, and rightfully so, the possibility that Rachel intended to use the *terafim* as a means of looking into the future, what she did was still viewed negatively. The Torah would later forbid the use of all divining mediums, in and of themselves, even when not employed in the service of idols:

When you are come to the land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not learn to do after the abominations of those nations. There must not be found among you anyone that makes his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that uses divination, a soothsayer, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination to the Lord: and because of these abominations the Lord your God drives them out from before you. You shall be perfect with the Lord your God. (*Devarim* 18:9-13)

^{9[9]} See at length in my article, "*Ha-Terafim ve-Khabir ha-Izim*," *Megadim* 24, 1995, pp. 53-60. For more about the way in which the *terafim* were used and Chazal's approach to the issue, see D. Sperber, *Ha-Terafim*, in: *Sefer ha-Shana le-Mada'ei ha-Yahadut ve-ha-Ru'ach*, Bar-Ilan University, 1995, pp. 371-375.

^{10[10]} It should be noted, however, that when Yaakov cites God's promise before Rachel and Leah, he says only: "And the angel of God spoke to me... I am the God of Bet-El, where you did anoint a pillar, and where you did vow a vow to Me; now rise, get out of the land, and return to the land of your birth" (31:11-13), and leaves out the concluding words, "And I will be with you."

Explicit criticism of Rachel's action is found in *Midrash Sekhel Tov* (*Bereishit* 35:2, ed. Buber, p. 198):

"Put away (*hasiru*) the strange gods" (*Bereishit* 35:2) – [the word *hasiru* is spelled in defective manner, without a *yod*. This teaches that the rest of his wives were not under suspicion about this, except for **Rachel with respect to the *terafim* of Lavan....**11[11]

"And they gave to Yaakov all the strange gods which were in their hand" (*ibid.* v. 4) – of the slaves which they had concealed from the house of Shekhem, and also **the *terafim* in the hand of Rachel.**

It is for this – together with the curse of Yaakov – that Rachel was punished. By taking the *terafim* Rachel expressed her belief in the independent power of something that is merely a means. Indeed, her punishment was severe: untimely death, and burial alongside the road, not next to her husband, Yaakov,¹²[12] and not together with the rest of the patriarchs and matriarchs.¹³[13]

VII. "HONOR IS DEPARTED FROM ISRAEL"

The story of the death of the wife of Pinchas together with the birth of her son is formulated as an addendum to the account of Israel's defeat in their battle with the Pelishtim.¹⁴[14] But this addendum sharpens the meaning of the entire chapter.

11[11] See *Torah Sheleima*, *ibid.*, p. 1337, no. 9.

12[12] *Chazal* saw in this a punishment for the incident involving the mandrakes: "Since she slighted the righteous man, therefore she did not enter with him for burial" (*Bereishit Rabba*, 72, 3, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 838).

13[13] The word "*Ben-Oni*" might derive from the word "*aven*," which means "sin, wickedness" (*Yishayahu* 10:1; 31:2; 32:5, and elsewhere), and thus Rachel gives expression to the fact that her son was born in circumstances in which she must pay the price for her transgression – her sin of stealing the *terafim*. Support for this suggestion may be brought from the juxtaposition of *aven* and *terafim* in several places in Scripture: "And stubbornness is like idolatry (*aven*) and *terafim*" (*I Shmuel* 15:23); "For the *terafim* have spoken vanity (*aven*)" (*Zekharya* 10:2). If this is so, on her deathbed Rachel recognized her sin, and acquired her place in the world-to-come in a moment; see D. Hakohen, "*Ve-Aviv Kara lo Binyamin*," *Bet Mikra*, 73, 1978, pp. 239-241.

14[14] This follows also from the structure of the chapter: the entire story is brought only after the verse that concludes the period of Eli's judgeship – "And he had judged Israel for forty years" (4:18) – a verse that is similar to the concluding verses in the book of *Shoftim*, which always come at the end of sections (*Shoftim* 3:11, 30; 5:31; 8:28-32; 12:7; 16:31).

Pinchas's wife also shares Eli's erroneous understanding, and she too believes that the most serious consequence of the defeat – "Honor is departed from Israel" – is that the ark was taken:

And she named the child I-Khavod, saying, Honor is departed from Israel, **because the ark of God was taken**, and because of her father-in-law and her husband. And she said, Honor is departed from Israel: **for the ark of God is taken**.

It seems that the entire comparison between Rachel and the daughter of Pinchas comes to draw a parallel between Rachel's taking of the *terafim* and the taking of the ark of God by the people of Israel. Two women die in the wake of the taking of some article based on the belief that it has independent power. Comparing the ark to the *terafim* teaches us that the idea of attributing independent powers to objects is not necessarily connected to idolatrous beliefs; on the contrary, even a holy vessel – even the ark of the covenant of God – can be turned into idol worship, if one disregards the fact that it merely symbolizes the resting of God's *Shekhina*, and that God's desire is set in accordance with the spiritual state of the people. In this, Rachel and Pinchas's wife operated on the basis of precisely the same outlook.^{15[15]}

VIII. "OF THE PRIESTS WHO WERE IN ANATOT"

In the coming chapters I shall examine the manner in which Shmuel led the people of Israel and the way in which he uprooted their idolatrous ideas. At this point, let it merely be noted that in the end an antidote to this sin emerged even from the wife of Pinchas. The grandson of Pinchas and his wife was Achimelekh the son of Achitov (Achitov was the older brother of I-Khavod; see 14:3), and his son Evyatar served as King David's priest, until he was replaced by Tzadok (as we saw in chapter 2, in the context of the realization of the prophecy of the man of God regarding the house of Eli). In the end, King Shlomo sent Evyatar home:

And to Evyatar the priest the king said, Get you to Anatot, to your own fields.
(I *Melakhim* 2:26)

^{15[15]} Rachel, however, died in the wake of her own taking of the *terafim*, whereas the wife of Pinchas died as a result of the taking of the ark of God by others (and its consequences). It is clear that Pinchas's wife died as part of the realization of the prophecy of doom regarding the house of Eli (2:27-36; 3:11-14), but her tragic story, which reflects the outlook of her family and her generation, indeed parallels the idea of taking the *terafim*.

We later meet someone from a priestly family living in Anatot:

The words of Yirmiyahu the son of Chilkiyahu, of the priests who were in Anatot in the land of Binyamin. (*Yirmiyahu* 1:1)

There is room then to assume that Yirmiyahu is a descendant of Evyatar and Eli.^{16[16]} In the previous lesson I noted Yirmiyahu's reproach of Israel for their clinging to the ark of God and the temple of God. Significantly, it is precisely Yirmiyahu who admonishes the people to learn the lesson from the story of Shilo:

But go now to My place which was in Shilo, where I set My name at the first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of My people Israel. And now, because you have done all these deeds, says the Lord, and though I spoke to you, from morning till night, but you did not listen; and I called you, but you did not answer; therefore will I do to this house, which is called by My name, and in which you trust, and to the place which I gave to you and to your fathers, as I have done to Shilo. (*Yirmiyahu* 7:12-14)

Thus the descendants learned the lesson from the sins of their forefathers.

(Translated by David Strauss)

^{16[16]} My thanks to R. Yoshi Fargun, who pointed this out to me.

