

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

**The Book of Shmuel
Yeshivat Har Etzion**

**Shiur #09: CHAPTER 5
THE ARK OF GOD IN PELESHET**

Rav Amnon Bazak

I. INTRODUCTION

Chapter 4 concludes with Israel's defeat and the Ark of God falling into the hands of the Pelishtim. In the previous lectures, I discussed the spiritual causes that led to Israel's debacle. The resulting situation, however, gives rise to the dangerous possibility that the name of God will be desecrated. The Pelishtim – who, when the Ark first arrives in Israel's camp, declare: "Who shall deliver us out of the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods that struck Egypt with the plagues in the wilderness!" (4:8) – might now conclude that the victory is not only their victory over Israel, but also their gods' victory over the God of Israel.

Owing to this concern, it is necessary to emphasize that this is not the case: Israel's downfall has been caused by their sins, and not by the weakness of "these mighty gods." This is the objective of the events described in chapter 5: to counter the Pelishtim's mistaken conclusion that they have overcome the God of Israel.

The structure of the verses at the beginning of the chapter is a bit complex, owing to the double introduction:

- (1) **And the Pelishtim took the Ark of God, and brought it from Even Ha-ezer to Ashdod.**
- (2) **When the Pelishtim took the Ark of God, they brought it into the house of Dagon, and set it by Dagon.**

Why does Scripture state twice that the Pelishtim take the Ark of God? Furthermore, why does it mention that the Ark is brought to Ashdod, if afterwards it is stated that it is brought to the house of Dagon?

We seem to be dealing here with two different accounts. The first account, in verse 1, ends with the Ark being brought to Ashdod, and continues in verse 6, with a description of the consequences of the Ark having been brought there: "The hand of God was heavy upon the Ashdodim, and He destroyed them, and struck them..." In between, verses 2-5 present a different account: the consequences of the Ark having been brought to the house of Dagon. If this is true, then the verses should be read as follows:

- (1) And the Pelishtim took the Ark of God, and brought it from Even Ha-ezer to Ashdod.
- (2) When the Pelishtim took the Ark of God, they brought it into the house of Dagon, and set it by Dagon. (3) And when the Ashdodim arose early on the morrow, behold, Dagon was fallen upon his face to the ground before the Ark of God; and they took Dagon, and set him in his place again. (4) And when they arose early on the morrow morning, behold, Dagon was fallen upon his face to the ground before the Ark of God; and the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands lay cut off upon the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left of him. (5) Therefore neither the priests of Dagon, nor any that come into Dagon's house, tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod unto this day.
- (6) But the hand of God was heavy upon the Ashdodim, and He destroyed them, and struck them with swellings, even Ashdod and the borders thereof.
- (7) And when the men of Ashdod saw that it was so, they said, "The Ark of the God of Israel shall not abide with us; for His hand is sore upon us, and upon Dagon our god."

In this manner, Scripture describes the two-fold consequences of the Pelishtim's taking of the Ark of God. It does not result in victory over the God of Israel, but in a two-fold blow falling upon the gods of the Pelishtim and upon the Pelishtim themselves.

II. "BEHOLD, DAGON WAS FALLEN UPON HIS FACE TO THE GROUND"

Let us begin with the first account: the Ark of God in the house of Dagon.^{1[1]} Bringing the Ark to the house of Dagon symbolizes the idea that is uppermost in the Pelishtim's consciousness: the assumption that their victory over Israel stems from Dagon's superiority in relation to the God of Israel.^{2[2]} We are familiar with the phenomenon of bringing the spoils of war into the victor's temple from other contexts, even among the Jewish people. It expresses the attribution of triumph in battle to the god of the victorious side. Thus, for example, the spoils taken in the war against Midyan are brought to the Tent of Meeting (*Bamidbar* 31:54), and this seems to be the reason that Golyat's sword is brought to the *Mishkan* in Nov (below 21:10). The Pelishtim act in this manner in other contexts as well, e.g., when they bring Shaul's armor to the house of Ashtarot (below 31:10).^{3[3]}

The consequences are not long in coming: "And when the Ashdodim arose early on the morrow,^{4[4]} behold, Dagon **was fallen upon his face to the ground** before the Ark of God" (v. 3). We are dealing here with an expression of submission, similar to the manner in which the brothers fall before Yosef following the incident of the goblet:

And Yehuda and his brethren came to Yosef's house, for he was still there, and **they fell before him to the ground**... And Yehuda said, "What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how shall we clear ourselves? God has found out the iniquity of your servants: behold, we are my lord's slaves. (*Bereishit* 44:14-15)

However, the Pelishtim's obstinacy, so striking from here until the end of the story in the next chapter, causes them to see the occurrence as a matter of chance. The consequences at the next stage are, therefore, far more severe:

^{1[1]}Following *Chazal*, Rashi explains that Dagon is called by that name because it has the form of a fish (*dag*). This, however, is difficult, for it would appear from the continuation of the story that Dagon has arms and legs. Today it is generally assumed that the name derives from the word *dagan* (grain), Dagon being the Canaanite god of grain. This point is of considerable importance, as we shall see in the next chapter.

^{2[2]}*Midrash Shmuel* (*Parasha* 11) brings the view of Rabbi Yochanan, that the Ark is brought before Dagon out of respect for the Ark: "They showed it respect, saying, 'This is a god, and this is a god; let the one god come and dwell alongside the other god.'" Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish, however, disagrees (*ibid.*): "Rather, they said, 'This one is victorious, and this one is defeated; let the defeated one come and serve the victorious one.'"

^{3[3]}It is related with respect to David's battle with the Pelishtim: "And there they left their images, and David and his men bore them" (*II Shmuel* 5:21). David's intention may have been to bring them to the *Mishkan*. The author of *Divrei Ha-yamim*, however, understands this differently: "And they left their gods there, and David gave the command that they should be burned with fire" (*I Divrei Ha-yamim* 14:12).

^{4[4]}The Pelishtim may have risen early in the morning in the hope that the very opposite would happen, namely, that the Ark would fall before Dagon.

Behold, Dagon was fallen upon his face to the ground before the Ark of God; and the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands lay severed upon the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. (v. 4)

Severing Dagon's head and hands is an act of humiliation, as in other cases where the vanquished are humiliated. David cuts off the head of Golyat (17:51), and the Pelishtim the head of Shaul (31:9). We find the cutting off of hands in the incident involving Rekhav and Ba'ana (II *Shmuel* 4:12), and it is particularly striking in the story of Adoni Vezek:

But Adoni Vezek fled and they pursued him, and caught him, and they cut off his thumbs and his big toes. And Adoni Vezek said, "Seventy kings, having their thumbs and their big toes cut off, gathered food under my table: as I have done, so God has requited me." (*Shoftim* 1:6-7)

An interesting epilogue is appended to this story:

(5) Therefore neither the priests of Dagon, nor any that come into Dagon's house, tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod unto this day.

There may be an allusion to this practice in *Tzefanya* 1:9: "And on the same day I will punish all those who leap over the threshold." As Rashi writes there:

As Yonatan explains, they follow in the ways of the Pelishtim, who did not tread on the threshold of Dagon, as it is stated: "Therefore neither the priests of Dagon, nor any that come into Dagon's house, tread."

According to Rashi, the practice of leaping over the threshold evolved from the incident described in our chapter. Alternatively, the verse in *Tzefanya* might be testifying to an ancient practice – a rite of veneration observed in the pagan temples. If this is correct, then our verse can be understood as relating with irony to this custom, which from now on bears additional meaning owing to Dagon's defeat. According to this suggestion, the word

"therefore" introduces an interpretation of the practice, as it does in other contexts in connection with the giving of names and the like.⁵[5]

III. THE ATTACKS ON THE CITIES OF THE PELISHTIM

Let us now proceed to the second account: the blows that the cities of the Pelishtim suffer because of the Ark. The second half of the chapter describes the punishments, which gradually increase in their severity from city to city. Standing out once again is the stubbornness of the Pelishtim, who are not easily convinced that a guiding hand is at work here. The punishments become increasingly harsh as we move from Ashdod to Gat and from Gat to Ekron. Regarding Ashdod, Scripture states:

(6) But the hand of God was heavy upon the Ashdodim, and He destroyed them, and struck them with swellings (*ba-techorim*, *be-afolim ketiv*),⁶[6] even Ashdod and the borders thereof.

The people of Ashdod understand that they are being struck on account of the Ark:

(7) And when the men of Ashdod saw that it was so, they said, "The Ark of the God of Israel shall not abide with us; for His hand is sore upon us, and upon Dagon our god."

Here the Pelishtim's attitude toward the Ark undergoes its first change: whereas at the beginning of the war the Pelishtim referred to the Ark as "God" (see 4:7-8), from now on they refer to it in the coming five verses (six times!) as "the Ark of the God of Israel."

⁵[5] Compare: "And he called it Shiva; therefore, the name of the city is Be'er Sheva, to this day" (*Bereishit* 26:33) – even though the name of the place is mentioned already in the time of Avraham in the context of his oath to Avimelekh (*ibid.* 21:31). See also *Bereishit* 11:9; 25:30; and elsewhere.

⁶[6] The *keri* – the way the word is read – and the *ketiv* – the way the word is written – of *techorim* and *afolim*, which appear five times in our story (5:6, 9, and 12; 6:4 and 5), appear also in *Devarim* 28:27. This substitution is part of the general tendency to use "clean language" for the *keri*. See also *Devarim* 28:30; II *Melakhim* 6:25; 10:27; 18:27. These changes stem from the desire to avoid language deemed offensive to the community, as stated in the Tosefta, *Megilla* 3:39-40, ed. Lieberman, pp. 363-364 (cited in the Talmud, *Megilla* 25b): "All passages written in a disgraceful way are read in a praiseworthy way... Wherever it is written *afolim*, we read *techorim*." In the continuation of chapter 6, however, we find the word *techorim* already in the *ketiv* (vv. 12 and 17), according to the masoretic text. See M. T. Segel, *Sifrei Shmuel*, p. 52.

As for the word *techorim*, it seems to refer to the disease called by that name in our time, hemorrhoids. It may possibly refer to certain vermin, as is suggested by the verse below (6:5): "And you shall make images of your *techorim* and images of your mice that ravage the land."

The bitter consequences in the house of Dagon and in Ashdod bring the Pelishtim to call an emergency assembly:

(8) They sent therefore and gathered all the lords^{7[7]} of the Pelishtim to them, and said, "What shall we do with the Ark of the God of Israel?"

At this stage, however, the lords of the Pelishtim refuse to accept the message:

And they answered, "Let the Ark of the God of Israel be brought round to Gat." And they brought the Ark of the God of Israel there.

Moving the Ark to a different place stems from the idolatrous conception that gods have particular places in which their power is greatest. This, for example, was the argument presented by the Arammim following Achav's first victory over them:

And the servants of the king of Aram said to him, "Their gods are gods of the hills; therefore they were stronger than we: but let us fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they." (I *Melakhim* 20:23)

The Pelishtim quickly realize their mistake. In Gat the situation is much worse:

(9) ...the hand of God was against the city with a very great panic; and He struck the men of the city, both small and great, and they were inwardly struck with swellings.

The Pelishtim now suggest that the Ark be moved to Ekron. Once again their stubbornness is evident; the only ones to oppose this policy are those who understand that they will be paying the price for it:

^{7[7]} "Sarnei" refers to Pelishti officers. See below 29:2-3.

(10) So they sent the Ark of God to Ekron. And it came to pass, as the Ark of God came to Ekron, that the Ekronim cried out, saying, "They have brought the Ark of the God of Israel to me, to slay me and my people."

The main speaker in this verse seems to be the lord of Ekron, who speaks in the singular. This ruler reconvenes the council of the Pelishti lords, and presents an explicit proposal:

(11) They sent therefore and gathered together all the lords of the Pelishtim, and they said, "Send away the Ark of the God of Israel, and let it go back to its own place, that it not slay me and my people."

Scripture emphasizes that the strike against the Ekronim has already begun, and that it is even more severe than the previous blows landed upon the other cities:

...for there was a deadly panic throughout all the city; the hand of God was very heavy there. (12) And the men that died not were struck with the swellings; **and the cry of the city went up to heaven.**

Here the circle is closed. The Pelishtim find themselves in precisely the same situation that Israel had been in following their defeat (4:13):

And when the man came into the city and told it, **all the city cried out.**

Thus, it is no longer possible to talk about the Pelishtim's victory over Israel. Both nations were struck by the same power, and each one experiences the hand of God and His sovereignty over the entire world.

IV. THE PARALLEL TO THE PLAGUES IN EGYPT

It is interesting that many expressions in this chapter remind us of formulations found in connection with the exodus from Egypt:

- 1) Both accounts describe plagues that landed upon an enemy of Israel, and they use similar wording. Regarding the plagues in Egypt, the term *va-yakh* appears twice: "And he struck (*va-yakh*) the dust of the earth" (*Shemot* 8:13), "And the hail struck (*va-yakh*) throughout all the land of Egypt" (*ibid.* 9:25), and in our chapter it also appears twice: "And He struck them (*va-yakh*) with swellings... and He struck the men of the city" (v. 6, 9). Moreover, in both stories, the plagues are referred to as *maggefot*: "For I will at this time send all My plagues (*maggefotai*) upon your heart" (*Shemot* 9:14), "For one plague (*maggefa*) on you all and on your lords" (*I Shmuel* 6:4).
- 2) Both stories tell us that the plagues come from the hand of God: "Behold, the hand of God is upon your cattle" (*Shemot* 9:3), "The hand of God was heavy upon the Ashdodim" (*I Shmuel* 5:6).
- 3) In both cases, the plagues strike not only the people, but also their gods. Above, the two-fold blow was discussed, described at length in our chapter: against the Pelishtim and against their god Dagon. A parallel phenomenon is found with respect to the plagues in Egypt: "And against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments" (*Shemot* 12:12).
- 4) In both stories, the time is mentioned in a similar fashion: "Rise up early in the morning, and stand before Pharaoh" (*Shemot* 8:16; 9:13); "And when they arose early on the morrow morning" (v. 4).
- 5) Both accounts stress the cries of the nations in response to the plagues: "And there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there never was before, nor shall there ever be like it again" (*Shemot* 11:6); "And the Ekronim cried out... and the cry of the city went up to heaven" (vv. 10-12). This wording brings to mind another formulation found in the story of Egypt that describes the cry of Israel: "And the children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried out, and their cry rose up to God by reason of their bondage" (*Shemot* 2:23).
- 6) The root *sh-l-ch* appears twice in verse 11: "**They sent** (*va-yishlechu*) therefore and gathered together all the lords of the Pelishtim, and they said, '**Send away** (*shalechu*) the Ark of the God of Israel.'" It stands to reason that the use of this root – which appears more than twenty times in the account of the plagues in Egypt – is not merely coincidental.

It is possible that even the words of the Ekronim: "They have brought the Ark of the God of Israel to me, to slay **me and my people**" (v. 10), and "Send away the Ark of the God of Israel, and let it go back to its own place, that it not slay **me and my people**" (v. 11) allude to the similar wording used by Pharaoh: "I have sinned this time; God is righteous, **and I and my people** are wicked" (*Shemot* 9:27; see also 8:4).

This correspondence fits in well with what was explained above: the need to neutralize the damage caused by Israel's defeat at the hands of the Pelishtim. When the Ark first arrives in the Israelite camp, the Pelishtim exclaim: "Woe to us! Who shall deliver us out of the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods that struck Egypt with all the plagues in the wilderness!" The deterrent effect is lost to a certain degree following their victory: the Pelishtim feel that they have defeated God and overcome the power that struck Egypt so severely. It is, therefore, necessary to teach them that this is not the case, and this lesson is learned through a sort of reenactment of the plagues of Egypt upon the Peleshet. The fate of the Pelishtim is similar to the fate of the Egyptians, and thus they learn that Israel's defeat is not a result of God's losing His power.

This parallelism continues in the next chapter, which concludes the story and adds another dimension to it.

(Translated by David Strauss)
