

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Book of Shmuel
Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #10: CHAPTER 6 THE ARK'S RETURN TO ISRAEL

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I. "WHY THEN DO YOU HARDEN YOUR HEARTS?"

In the previous chapter I discussed the obstinacy of the Pelishtim, who, despite the plagues which they suffer, do not immediately concede that it is the God of Israel who stands behind what is happening. Following the blows suffered by the three Pelishti cities, the Ark seems to be transferred to an open area, as we find in the beginning of chapter 6:

(1) And the Ark of God was in the country [lit., field] of the Pelishtim seven months.

However, even when the Ark is in the Pelishti countryside, it continues to bring punishment upon the Pelishtim.^{1[1]} An argument appears to arise among the lords of the Pelishtim about what to do with the Ark, and so they turn to their wise men for advice:

(2) And the Pelishtim called for the priests and the diviners, saying, "What shall we do with the Ark of God? Tell us: with what we shall send it to its place."

The wording here might possibly reflect two schools of thought among the Pelishtim. The first group is still struggling with the question, "What shall we do with the Ark of God?" The second group, to whom it is clear that the Ark must be returned to Israel, deals more with the question, "With what we shall send it to its place?" At first, the priests and the diviners do not decide the first question, but they take a firm stand regarding the second question:

(3) And they said, "If you send away the Ark of the God of Israel, send it not empty-handed; but in any case return Him a guilt-offering; then you shall be healed, and it shall be known to you why His hand is not removed from you."

The Pelishtim ask also: "What shall be the guilt-offering which we shall return to Him?" Their advisors first offer them a substantive answer: "Five golden swellings, and five golden mice, according to the number of the lords of the Pelishtim, for one

^{1[1]} As it would appear from verse 3 – "and it shall be known to you why His hand is not removed from you," and from verse 5 – "images of your swellings and images of your mice that devastate the land."

plague was on you all and on your lords."^{2[2]} At the same time, the priests and the diviners state their own opinion as to what should really be done:

(5) "You shall make images of your swellings, and images of your mice that devastate the land; and you shall give glory unto the God of Israel; perhaps He will lighten His hand from you from your gods and from your land. (6) Why then do you harden your hearts, as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts?^{3[3]} When He had wrought among them, did they not let the people go, and they departed?"

Here the diviners give additional meaning to the comparison between the plagues that strike the Pelishtim and the plagues that struck Egypt, which was noted in the previous chapter. The stubbornness of the Pelishtim is reminiscent of the stubbornness of Pharaoh, which only caused more plagues to fall upon Egypt. Indeed, the comparison to the story of Israel in Egypt continues in this chapter as well:

- 1) The consultations with the priests and the diviners are reminiscent of the consultations with Pharaoh's magicians (*Shemot* 7:11, 22; 8:3, 14-15).
- 2) The words of the diviners, "for one plague (*maggefa*) was on you all and on your lords," parallel what Moshe says to Pharaoh in the name of God, "For I will at this time send all My plagues (*maggefotai*) upon your heart" (*Shemot* 9:14).
- 3) In both cases, the enemy does not send off that which had been demanded of them empty-handed. At the burning bush, God promises Moshe: "And it shall come to pass, that, when you go, you shall not be **empty-handed**" (*Shemot* 3:21); and the priests and diviners advise the Pelishtim: "If you send away the Ark of the God of Israel, send it not **empty-handed**" (v. 3). Here too we find the root *sh-l-ch*, which, as was noted in the previous lecture, appears more than twenty times in the story of the plagues in Egypt (*Shemot* 7-11).
- 4) In both cases, the release is accompanied by, among other things, gold: "But every woman shall ask of her neighbor, and of her that sojourns in her house, vessels of silver and **vessels of gold**" (*Shemot* 3:22); "Five **golden** swellings, and five **golden** mice... And take the Ark of God, and lay it upon the cart; and put the **vessels of gold**" (vv. 4-8). It might also be suggested that the combination of five golden swellings and five golden mice correspond to the ten plagues of Egypt.
- 5) There is also a similarity between the two descriptions: "And in all the land of Egypt, **the land was devastated** (*tishachet*)" (*Shemot* 8:20); "You shall

^{2[2]} This verse seems to be saying that even though only three of the Pelishti cities were smitten, as was described in the previous chapter, nevertheless the plague was upon all of the Pelishtim, and therefore atonement must be achieved for all five lords of the Pelishtim.

^{3[3]} This is another example of the play on the words *kaved* and *kal* in the opening chapters in the book of *Shmuel*: "And you shall give glory (*kavod*) unto the God of Israel; perhaps He will lighten (*yakel*) His hand from you... Why then do you harden (*tekhabbedu*) your hearts, as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened (*kibbedu*) their hearts?" I noted this phenomenon above in connection with 2:29-30: "And why do you honor (*va-tekhabbed*) your sons above Me... Far be it from Me; for them that honor Me I will honor (*mekhabbedai akhabbed*), and them that despise Me shall be lightly esteemed (*yekallu*)."

make images of your swellings, and images of your mice **that devastate** (*hama-shchitim*) **the land**" (v. 4).4[4]

This perspective completes the picture: the plagues that strike the Pelishtim are meant to rehabilitate the name of God that has been desecrated by Israel's defeat, by way of a "reworking" of the plagues of Egypt upon the Pelishtim. Like the Egyptians in their day, the Pelishtim as well do not immediately reach the correct conclusions. It is only the persistence of the plagues that brings them to recognize that they must return the Ark to Israel and admit the superiority of the God of Israel.

II. THE TEST

In order to persuade the rest of the people, the diviners propose the test of the cows:

(7) Now, therefore, take and prepare a new cart and two milk cows on which there has come no yoke, and tie the cows to the cart, and leave their calves behind them at home. (8) And take the Ark of God, and lay it upon the cart; and put the vessels of gold, which you return Him for a guilt-offering, in a box by its side; and send it away, that it may go. (9) And see, if it goes up by the way of its own border to Beit Shemesh, then He has done us this great evil; however, if not, then we shall know that it is not His hand that struck us, but it was a coincidence that happened to us.

Let us summarize the difficulties that the Pelishtim heap upon this sign:

- 1) A new cart, that has never been tested in the field.
- 2) Use of cows that are not riding animals.
- 3) The cows are called "*alot*," about which the Radak says:

Nursing, as it is rendered by the Targum.^{5[5]} They are called *alot*, because of their young which are called *olim* and *olalim*. They order that nursing cows be taken in order to show that they do not go back even for their young.

- 4) "On which there has come no yoke" - Radak writes: "They said this owing to the sanctity of the Ark, that no other work had been performed with them, just as they said 'a new cart.'" However, Rashi's understanding seems to be preferable, namely, that with cows of this sort, that had never been trained to pull wagons, the test would be even greater.
- 5) Sending the calves home, which should naturally have caused the cows to follow after them.
- 6) The ascent to Beit Shemesh – the least logical course.
- 7) The phenomenon must occur simultaneously with both cows.

4[4] In the previous lecture (note 1), we noted that Dagon is the Canaanite grain god. Thus, the devastation of the land has special significance with respect to the idea of the God of Israel's superiority in relation to Dagon.

5[5] Compare Yaakov's words to Esav: "And the flocks and herds giving suck (*alot*) are a care for me; and if they should overdrive them one day, all the flock will die" (*Bereshit* 33:13); see also *Yeshayahu* 40:1.

It should be added that in actual practice, the cows "lowed as they went" (v. 12), which demonstrates that they proceed as if forced to go.^{6[6]} Nevertheless, in an almost ironic manner, Scripture describes how the Pelishtim follow after the cows: "And the lords of the Pelishtim went after them **up to the border of Beit Shemesh.**" The doubts of the Pelishtim are not put to rest even when the cows go off, against all logic, in the direction of Beit Shemesh, and they continue to accompany them until they see the people of Beit Shemesh lowering the Ark from the cart and offering sacrifices to God. Only then: "And when the five lords of the Pelishtim had seen it, they returned to Ekron the same day" (v. 16).^{7[7]}

III. "BECAUSE THEY HAD GAZED UPON THE ARK OF THE GOD"

When the Ark arrives in Israel, mention is made of the people's joy, everything appearing fine and good:

(13) And they of Beit Shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley; and they lifted up their eyes, and saw the Ark and rejoiced to see it. (14) And the cart came into the field of Yehoshua of Beit Shemesh, and stood there, where there was a great stone; and they cleaved the wood of the cart, and offered up the cows for a burnt-offering unto God. (15) And the Levites took down the Ark of God, and the box that was with it, wherein the vessels of gold were, and put them on the great stone; and the men of Beit Shemesh offered burnt-offerings and sacrificed sacrifices to God the same day.

Nothing in this description prepares us for the tragedy that is soon to follow. And it is good that this is so, for at this stage the Pelishtim are still observing the scene, and had they seen that even the people of Israel are struck, the whole effect of the plagues connected to the Ark would have been lost. Only after the Pelishtim leave (v. 15: "And when the five lords of the Pelishtim had seen it, they returned to Ekron the same day") does the tragedy occur:

^{6[6]} In the description of the Pelishtim's execution of the sign, it is stated: "And they put upon the cart the Ark of God, the box with the mice of gold and the images of their swellings" (v. 11). It is interesting to note that here already the *ketiv* is *techorim*, rather than *afolim*, as the word appears up to this point in the chapter. (I discussed the substitution of *techorim* for *afolim* in the previous chapter.) It stands to reason that already at the time of the redaction of the Book of *Shmuel*, there existed two terms for the phenomenon, and only later did a difference between them develop.

^{7[7]} Verse 18 is difficult to understand from a grammatical perspective: "And the golden mice, according to the number of all the cities of the Pelishtim, belonging to the five lords, from fortified cities to country villages (*kofer ha-perazi*), even to the great *avel* (*ve-ad avel ha-gedola*), upon which they set down the Ark of God, which remains to this day in the field of Yehoshua of Beit Shemesh." It seems that *kofer ha-perazi* refers to the unfortified cities; the Pelishtim sent to Israel not only five golden mice corresponding to the five lords, but also corresponding to their settlements, from fortified to unfortified cities.

At first glance, the continuation of the verse continues with the same issue, but on further examination it seems to open a new topic. "*Ve-ad avel ha-gedola*" seems to mean: *Ve-od ha-even ha-gedola* (still the great stone). We find "*ad*" and "*od*" interchanged in *Iyyov* 1:18 and *Yona* 4:2; the interchange of the letters *lamed-mem-nun-reish* is also common in Scripture, as in "*gan na'ul... gal na'ul*" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 4:12), or *nishka* in place of *lishka* (*Nechemya* 13:7); the word *avel* might have been influenced by the word *evel*, mourning, in the next verse (v. 19). In any event, the second half of the verse notes that the great stone upon which the Ark of God is placed (mentioned in v. 15) still stands in the field of Yehoshua.

(19) And He struck of the men of Beit Shemesh, because they had gazed upon the Ark of God, even He struck of the people seventy men, fifty thousand men; and the people mourned, because God struck the people with a great slaughter.

How are we to understand this sin? It would appear that the people of Israel gazed upon the Ark (and according to the Radak, they looked into the Ark). Gazing upon the Ark of God is forbidden by Torah law:

Do not cut off the tribe of the families of the Kehati from among the Levites. Rather, thus do to them, that they may live and not die, when they approach the most holy things: Aharon and his sons shall go in, and appoint them every one to his service and to his burden. And they shall not go in to see when the holy things are covered up, lest they die. (*Bamidbar* 4:18-20)8[8]

What happened, all of a sudden, to cause this sin? It seems that like the Pelishtim, the Jewish people reach the opposite extreme in their attitude toward the Ark. If at the time of the defeat in Shilo the people of Israel saw the Ark of God as an instrument invested with independent power, they have now lost the awe that it requires. The joyous atmosphere intrudes upon the quality of fear and brings lightheadedness. Now, in hindsight, it is possible that this attitude already finds expression in the words: "And they of Beit Shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley; and they lifted up their eyes, and saw the Ark, **and rejoiced to see it.**" As Rashi says: "Owing to their joy, they acted lightheartedly, for they did not look upon it with dread and respect."9[9]

8[8] See Rashbam (ad loc.) who writes: "When the Sanctuary is taken apart, it becomes revealed, and if they see it, they will die, as we find with respect to the people of Beit Shemesh, 'because they had gazed upon the Ark of God.'"

9[9] This idea finds expression in the Talmud (*Sota* 35a):

"And He struck of the men of Beit Shemesh, because they had gazed upon the Ark of God" – because they gazed, He struck them?

Rabbi Abahu and Rabbi Elazar disagreed: one said, "They harvested and bowed;" the other said, "They also spoke words – 'Who angered you when you became angry, and who came [now] to appease you?'"

According to the first opinion, the derision expresses itself in the fact that, despite their joy, they continue to harvest. This is similar to the sin committed at Mount Sinai: "And upon the nobles of the children of Israel He laid not His hand; and they beheld God, and they did eat and drink" (*Shemot* 24:11), as explained by Rashi (ad loc.): "They peered at Him intimately amidst eating and drinking."

This direction may be developed in light of the correspondence between additional points in the two stories. First, already with respect to the sin, both stories talk about seeing God ("they gazed upon the Ark of God;" "they beheld God"). Second, both stories speak of a punishment in relation to seventy people: at Mount Sinai, it says, "And upon the nobles of the children of Israel He laid not His hand," and as Rashi explains there:

"And upon the nobles" – these are Nadav and Avihu and the elders [mentioned there in v. 9].

"He laid not His hand" – this implies that they well deserved that God should stretch forth His hand against them.

In our chapter as well, a blow is mentioned against "seventy men, fifty thousand men," an expression that the Sages interpret as referring to the Sanhedrin (see below).

It should be further noted that Nadav and Avihu, Aharon's two eldest sons, participate in this sin, and the story in our chapter ends with: "And they brought it into the house of **Avinadav** on the hill, and they sanctified **Elazar** his son to keep the Ark of God" (7:1). The name Avinadav brings to mind Nadav and Avihu, and the sanctification of Elazar (the namesake of Aharon's third son, who becomes his chief deputy) seems to be a repair of the sin common to the Jews here and to Nadav and Avihu there – the lack of appropriate awe.

Just as the Pelishtim first express their fear of God with the words, "Who shall deliver us out of the hand of these mighty gods?" (4:8), so too the people of Israel reach the fear of God after suffering their blow: "Who is able to stand before God, this holy God?" (6:20). To the credit of the Jewish people, it should be said that, in contrast to the Pelishtim who stubbornly clung to their beliefs, the Jews immediately come to the right conclusion and recognize their sin.

The lesson that Israel should have learned from the fall of Shilo is not a change in their fear of the Ark. The desired lesson is a change in the conception that was discussed in previous lectures, according to which the Ark is invested with independent power, unconnected to doing the will of God. The two extremes reached by the people of Israel should in the end have brought them to the middle path: faith in God, rather than in external means, but with fear and respect for those means.

IV. "SEVENTY MEN, FIFTY THOUSAND MEN"

We must still clarify the expression "seventy men, fifty thousand men." The commentators suggest a number of directions: Rashi cites the Targum Yonatan, according to whom seventy elders die, along with fifty thousand ordinary people. Rashi also cites the two variations found in the words of the Sages:

Our rabbis said: "Seventy men, each of whom was equivalent to fifty thousand people; or else fifty thousand people, each of whom was equivalent to the seventy members of the Sanhedrin."

The Radak writes: "Missing the copulative *vav* – 'and fifty thousand men.'" All these explanations seem, however, to be forced, and aside from this, they fail to answer a no less difficult question: Is it possible that in Beit Shemesh there are fifty thousand people?

It is possible¹⁰[10] that the verse should be read as follows:

And He struck of the men of Beit Shemesh, because they had gazed upon the Ark of God	even He struck of the people
seventy men	fifty thousand men

According to this proposal, the verse is written in the form of A-B-A-B,¹¹[11] and it means to say that of the men of Beit Shemesh seventy people died, and of the people of Israel as a whole, fifty thousand died. If we understand the verse in this manner, it might also be suggested that the high number of casualties does not relate to this specific incident, in which presumably far fewer people participated. It is much more reasonable to assume that this number includes the thirty-four thousand

¹⁰[10] This explanation is proposed by Mazal Eskin in her article in *Megadim* 23; see also the rejoinder of my revered teacher, Rav Yaakov Medan in *Megadim* 24.

¹¹[11] We find this structure in various scriptural passages, e.g.: "Who is like God our God: enthroned on high/ looking down/ in heaven/ and upon earth" (*Tehillim* 113:5); see also I *Shmuel* 15:9 and elsewhere, and in Rav Medan's article cited in the previous note.

people who died in chapter 4, so that in this specific incident only sixteen thousand people died.

(Translated by David Strauss)
