

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Book of Shmuel
Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #11: CHAPTER 7 ISRAEL UNDER SHMUEL'S LEADERSHIP

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I. KIRYAT YE'ARIM

Chapter 7 is the only chapter that describes Shmuel's leadership over the people of Israel. The unique aspects of Shmuel's leadership will be discussed below, but first we wish to address an issue with which chapter 6 closes and our chapter opens, and is still connected to the story of the ark in the previous chapter:

And they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiryat-Ye'arim, saying, The Pelishtim have brought back the ark of the Lord; come you down, and fetch it up to you. And the men of Kiryat-Ye'arim came, and fetched up the ark of the Lord, and brought it into the house of Avinadav in the hill, and sanctified Elazar his son to keep the ark of the Lord. And it came to pass, from the day that the ark abode in Kiryat-Ye'arim, that the time was long; for it was twenty years. (6:21-7:2)

What was special about Kiryat-Ye'arim? Why was the ark left precisely in that location for such a long period of time? It is possible that moving the ark to Kiryat-Ye'arim has special significance owing to the unique status of the city. Kiryat-Ye'arim was one of the Givonite cities (*Yehoshua* 9:17), and apparently the site of a temple to Ba'al, as is implied by its other names – Ba'ala (*ibid.* 15:9-10), Kiryat-Ba'al (*ibid.* v. 60), and Ba'al Yehuda (II *Shmuel* 6:2).^{1[1]} In other words, the city had religious significance, and it is possible that it had special sanctity even for the people of Israel.

The city is mentioned twice in the description of the tribal territories in the book of *Yehoshua*, both as lying on the northern border of the territory of Yehuda and as lying on the southern border of the territory of Binyamin. This description is found in a unique framework, which is particularly striking in the description of the territory of Binyamin:

And their border on the north side was from the Jordan; and the border went up to the **slope** of Jericho on the north side, and went up through the mountains westward; and its terminations were at the wilderness of Bet-Aven. And the border went over from thence towards Luz to the southern **slope** of Luz, which is Bet-El... And the border was drawn, and turned about at its

^{1[1]} The multiple names seem to reflect a desire to change the idolatrous name of the city; see *Devarim* 12:2-3; *Bamidbar* 32:37-38.

western corner to the south, from the hill that lies before Bet-Choron southward; and its terminations were at **Kiryat-Ba'al, which is Kiryat-Ye'arim**, a city of the children of Yehuda: this was the west quarter... And the border came down to the end of the mountain that lies before the valley of Ben-Hinnom, and which is in the Valley of Refaim on the north, and descended to the Valley of Hinnom, to the **slope** of the Yevusi on the south, and descended to Ein-Rogel, and was drawn to the north, and went out to Ein-Shemesh, and went out toward Gelilot, which is opposite the ascent of Adumim, and descended to the stone of Bohan the son of Reuven, and passed along toward the **slope** over against the Arava northward, and went down to the Arava. And the border passed along the **slope** of Bet-Chogla northward. And the terminations of the border were at the north bay of the salt sea at the southern extremity of the Jordan: this was the south boundary. (*Yehoshua* 18:12-19)

The word "*katef* – slope" is unique to the description of the territory of the tribe of Binyamin. It stands to reason that this is not by chance, and that it alludes to another context in the Torah:

And of Binyamin he said, The beloved of the Lord; he shall dwell in safety by Him; He shall cover him all the day long, and He shall dwell between his shoulders (*ketefav*). (*Devarim* 33:12)

It stands to reason that the territory of Binyamin had been "marked" as the territory designated for the *Shekhina* already in the time of Yehoshua. This explains the repeated use of the word "*katef*," as symbolizing the outer borders of the area in which God would later choose His place. At this stage, that place was still not known, but it was known that it was found between those "shoulders." Kiryat-Ye'arim is situated precisely midway between those shoulders. Accordingly, there is good reason to assume that the transfer of the ark to a large city located between the shoulders of Binyamin was not by chance, but rather it stemmed from the sanctity that was attributed to the place. Only later did it become clear that God had chosen a place not far from Kiryat-Ye'arim, namely, Jerusalem.^{2[2]}

II. "AND ALL THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL YEARNED AFTER THE LORD"

Let us now move on to the essence of the chapter: the people of Israel under the leadership of Shmuel. Chapters 4-6 passed without mentioning Shmuel; his name is not connected in any way to the fall of Shilo or the plague in Bet-Shemesh. Twenty years have passed in the meantime, and even though nothing is mentioned about what had happened in those intervening years, the results of Shmuel's leadership are clearly evident:

^{2[2]} There is another important similarity between Kiryat-Ye'arim and Jerusalem. The selection of Jerusalem as David's capital appears to have followed, first and foremost, from the fact that it was not identified as belonging to one particular tribe, to Yehuda or to Binyamin. On the contrary, Scripture emphasizes that it belongs to the two tribes (compare *Yehoshua* 15:63 to *Shoftim* 1:21!). The same is true about Kiryat Ye'arim: In *Yehoshua* 15:60, it is included among the cities of Yehuda, but it is possible that in *Yehoshua* 18:28, it is counted among the cities of Binyamin; see *Da'at Mikra*, ad loc.

... The time was long; for it was twenty years; and all the house of Israel yearned after the Lord. And Shmuel spoke unto all the house of Israel, saying, If you do return unto the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the *ashtarot* from among you, and direct your hearts unto the Lord, and serve Him only; and He will deliver you out of the hand of the Pelishtim. Then the children of Israel did put away the *Be'alim* and the *Ashtarot*, and served the Lord only. (2-4)

It is evident from these verses that Shmuel's religious upheaval had two stages: During the first stage the people of Israel returned to the service of God, but continued to worship idols as well, and Shmuel now admonishes the people to complete the process and serve God "only," so that they will be delivered out of the hands of the Pelishtim.

The phenomenon of serving the God of Israel together with other gods is familiar to us from other places in Scripture. This stands out in particular in Eliyahu's rebuke of the people on Mount Carmel:

And Eliyahu drew near to all the people, and said, How long will you go limping between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow Him; but if Ba'al, then follow him. (I *Melakhim* 18:21)

The people of Israel did not see a contradiction between serving God and serving idols. The prophets rebuked them on this point, pointing out the contradiction between the two, and arguing that service of the God of Israel absolutely negates belief in any other god. It is not enough that Israel accept that "the Lord is our God"; they must also internalize the idea that "the Lord is one."

In the end, Shmuel succeeds in his mission, and the people totally forsake idol worship. Now a special occasion presents itself, in which the success of Israel's repentance will be tested.

III. EVEN HA-EZER

Shmuel assembles the people for what appears to be a "repentance gathering," which includes fasting and prayer:

And Shmuel said, Gather all Israel to Mitzpe,^{3[3]} and I will pray for you unto the Lord. And they gathered together to Mitzpe, and drew water, and poured it

^{3[3]} Mitzpe was an important place already in the period of the judges, and Scripture indicates that it also had religious significance. Regarding Yiftach, it says: "Then Yiftach went with the elders of Gilad, and the people made him head and captain over them; and Yiftach uttered all his words **before the Lord in Mitzpe**" (*Shoftim* 11:11). Rashi and Radak suggest several explanations for the expression "before the Lord." Among the rest, Radak writes: "There was there an altar and a house of prayer, and the men of Gilad went to that Mitzpe with Yiftach to talk with him before the Lord in Mitzpe." So too it says with respect to the war between the other tribes and Binyamin: "Then all the children of Israel went out, and the congregation assembled as one man, from Dan to Be'er-Sheva, with the land of Gilad, **to the Lord in Mitzpe**." (*Shoftim* 20:1). In the same chapter, a similar expression is used with respect to Bet-El: "And the children of Israel arose, and went up to the house of God, and asked counsel of God... Then all the children of Israel, and all the people, went up, and came to the house of God, and wept, and sat there before the Lord, and fasted that day until evening, and offered

out before the Lord,4[4] and fasted on that day, and said there, We have sinned against the Lord. And Shmuel judged the children of Israel in Mitzpe. (5-6)

At the very same time, however, things begin to stir in the camp of the Pelishtim, who have begun to wonder about this strange gathering:

And when the Pelishtim heard that the children of Israel were gathered together to Mitzpe, the lords of the Pelishtim went up against Israel. And when the children of Israel heard it, they were afraid of the Pelishtim. (7)

What happens here is surprising: the people of Israel assemble to engage in a process of repentance, but the Pelishtim interpret this gathering as a declaration of war, and quickly prepare to attack. It seems, however, that this mistake was part of a plan, the purpose of which was to see how the people of Israel would react, and whether they had learned their lesson from the fall of Shilo. Indeed, Israel's reaction is exemplary:

And the children of Israel said to Shmuel, Cease not to cry unto the Lord our God for us, **that He save us** out of the hand of the Pelishtim. (8)

This wording is part of the repair of Israel's unfortunate mistake in chapter 4, when they said: "Let us fetch the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of Shilo to us, that when it comes among us, **it may save us** out of the hand of our enemies" (v.3). Whereas in chapter 4, Israel relied on the ark to deliver them from hands of the Pelishtim, now they turn to God to save them by virtue of their prayers and supplications. Shmuel responds favorably to their request, he offers a sacrifice and is answered from heaven, and then Israel go out to battle and the Pelishtim are routed.

Particularly striking is a certain literary expression that ties our chapter to chapter 4, thereby closing the circle:

And as Shmuel was offering up the burnt-offering, the Pelishtim drew near to battle against Israel; but the Lord thundered with a great thunder on that day upon the Pelishtim, and discomfited them; and they were smitten down before Israel. And the men of Israel went out of Mitzpe, and pursued the Pelishtim, and smote them, until they came under Bet-Car. Then Shmuel took a stone, and set it between Mitzpe and Shen, and called the name of it **Even Ha-ezer**, saying, Hitherto has the Lord helped us. (10-12)

burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord" (ibid. vv. 18-26). But in any event it seems that Mitzpe had a special status among the people of Israel during that period.

4[4] The significance of the pouring of the water is not clear. Rashi cites *Targum Yonatan*, who understood this in a symbolic manner: "Yonatan translated: 'And they poured their hearts out in repentance like water before the Lord.' So too the *Metzudot*: 'And they drew water' – that is to say, they stirred themselves up to draw and shed the water of tears, and pour it in prayer before the Lord." Rashi, however, writes: "According to the plain sense, it is a sign of submission: I am before You like this poured water." Radak suggests: It is possible to explain that they poured water before the Lord as a sign of atonement of sins, like: "And remember it as waters that pass away" (*Iyov* 11:16). We find the pouring of water as a religious act in connection with David (II *Shmuel* 23:16), but there it appears to have specific symbolic meaning. There is also room to consider a connection between Shmuel's act and the mitzva to offer a water libation.

The name "Even Ha-ezer" is mentioned also in ch.4, but there it refers to an entirely different place:

Now Israel went out against the Pelishtim to battle, and camped by **Even Ha-ezer**; and the Pelishtim pitched in Afek. (4:1)

The Even Ha-ezer in chapter 4 is located near Afek in the territory of Efrayim, in the area of present-day Rosh Ha-ayin, whereas in our chapter we are dealing with the region of Mitzpe in the territory of Binyamin. There is no doubt, however, that from a literary perspective, Scripture alludes to a connection between the two stories by using the same place-name (which is not mentioned anywhere else in Scripture!); the fact that we are dealing with different places only strengthens the argument.

There is yet another linguistic connection between the two stories. In chapter 4, the people of Israel put their trust in the ark, and when it arrived in their camp, it says: "All Israel **shouted** (*va-yari'u*) with a great shout, so that the earth **trembled** (*va-tehom*)" (4:5) – a shout that in the end led to their defeat. Now, when Israel trusts in God, they merit true victory, that is formulated in strikingly similar terms:

...But the Lord **thundered** (*va-yar'em*) with a great thunder on that day upon the Pelishtim, and **discomfited them** (*va-yehumem*); and they were smitten down before Israel. (10)

This is the only story that Scripture relates about Shmuel as leader of the people of Israel. This story, however, contains within it an entire revolution that was led by Shmuel and that brought about total repair – from a sin that led to a rout, to repentance that led to a great victory:

So the Pelishtim were subdued, and they came no more within the border of Israel; and the hand of the Lord was against the Pelishtim all the days of Shmuel. And the cities which the Pelishtim had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron even unto Gat; and the border thereof did Israel deliver out of the hand of the Pelishtim. And there was peace between Israel and the Emorim. And Shmuel judged Israel all the days of his life.^{5[5]} And he went from year to year in circuit to Bet-El, and Gilgal, and Mitzpe^{6[6]}; and he judged Israel in all those places. And his return was to Rama, for there was his house; and there he judged Israel; and he built there an altar unto the Lord. (13-17)

IV. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SHMUEL AND MOSHE

^{5[5]} It is true that in Shmuel's lifetime, Shaul already ruled as king, but this verse is referring to spiritual leadership, which remained in Shmuel's hands even after Shaul ascended the throne, as is evident from Shmuel's various appearances in the book after Shaul became king. Even at the occasion of Shaul's assuming the kingship, Shmuel explicitly expressed his commitment to continue leading Israel in the future: "Moreover as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you: but I will teach you the good and the right way" (I *Shmuel* 12:23).

^{6[6]} These cities were important centers during the period following Israel's entry into the land: Gilgal was the site of the *Mishkan* and the symbol of the miracle of crossing the Jordan (*Yehoshua* 4:20). As for Mitzpe and Bet-El, see above, note 3. These cities are also located in the territory of Binyamin, and serve as an additional expression (besides the matter of Kiryat Ye'arim, with which we opened this lesson) of the importance attached to this territory.

Already in chapter 3, I noted the parallel drawn by Scripture between Shmuel and Moshe. This chapter adds several elements to this correspondence:

- 1) The two prophets led their people through difficult struggles with their enemies, Divine assistance ensuring their victories. Here too there is linguistic correspondence. In the story of the parting of the sea of Suf, it says: "And he **brought confusion** (*va-yaham*) into the camp of Egypt... Thus the Lord saved Israel **that day** (*ba-yom ha-hu*) out of the hand of Egypt" (*Shemot* 14:24-30); and similarly, it is stated in our chapter: "But the Lord thundered with a great thunder **on that day** upon the Pelishtim, and **discomfited them** (*va-yehumem*); and they were smitten down before Israel" (v. 10).
- 2) Both men served in the role of priest, even though they were "only" Levites. Regarding Moshe, it says: "And Moshe burnt the whole ram upon the altar; it was a burnt sacrifice for a sweet favor, an offering made by fire to the Lord" (*Vayikra* 8:21), and about Shmuel it says in our chapter: "And Shmuel took a sucking lamb, and offered it for a whole burnt-offering unto the Lord" (v.9). Both of them also built altars following their military victories. After Israel emerged victorious over Amalek, it says: "And Moshe built an altar" (*Shemot* 17:15), and after the victory over the Pelishtim, it is stated in our chapter: "And he built there an altar unto the Lord" (v.17).
- 3) Besides providing spiritual and political leadership, both leaders also served as judges: "And Moshe sat down **to judge** the people" (*Shemot* 18:13); "And Shmuel **judged** Israel all the days of his life" (v.15).

The role of this correspondence in this chapter is very clear. Shmuel is painted as an ideal leader, who leads Israel to spiritual and military success. The parallels to Moshe in this chapter express the high esteem that Scripture has for him.

This correspondence has, however, also another meaning. The next chapter describes a historic turn taken by the people of Israel, when they ask that a monarchical regime be established. This request is met with harsh criticism, both that of Shmuel and that of God, the significance of which will be discussed in the next lesson. In any event, the parallel between Shmuel and Moshe prepares us for this criticism. The people of Israel have a leader similar in his qualifications to Israel's greatest leader. This proves that changing the form of the regime was unnecessary, and that the people of Israel could easily have managed under the rule of a person like Shmuel, who brought Israel success in all areas, even though he was not a king, and maybe even because he was not a king.

(Translated by David Strauss)
