

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Book of Shmuel Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #14: CHAPTER 9 (PART I) OUR FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH SHAUL

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I. "THAT HIS HEART NOT BE LIFTED ABOVE HIS BRETHREN"

Our chapter turns sharply away from the course of events described thus far in the book of *Shmuel*. Were we not familiar with the story, we would be amazed by what we were reading. How is the story of a young man who goes out in search of his donkeys connected to the great drama described in the previous chapter? Even after the first-time reader figures out that the young man in the story is destined to rule as king over Israel, cause for astonishment still remains: Why does Scripture describe at such great length what happens to Shaul before he comes to Shmuel?

It seems that this lengthy description comes to teach us about Shaul and how appropriate he is to serve as king of Israel.^{1[1]} As we saw in previous lessons, the demands that are made of the chosen king are recorded in *Devarim* 17:14-20. The account in our chapter comes to show that Shaul meets all the requirements of an ideal king.

1) The first requirement is that he be: "One from among your brethren shall you set as king over you; you may not set a stranger over you, who is not your brother" (*Devarim* 17:15). Indeed, the chapter opens with a description of Shaul's lineage:

^{1[1]} The analysis below is based primarily on Ruth Paz, "*Bechirato shel Shaul ve-Hatamoto le-Malkhut*," *Megadim* 7, pp. 35-43.

Now there was a man of Binyamin, whose name was Kish, the son of Aviel,^{2[2]} the son of Tzeror, the son of Becorat, the son of Afi'ach, the son of a Benjamite... (1)

2) The first prohibition in the Torah with respect to a king is: "But he shall not multiply horses to himself" (*Devarim* 17:16).^{3[3]} In numerous places, Scripture censures the phenomenon of trust in the power of horses, which stands in opposition to trust in God. For example, Yishayahu says: "Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help; and depend on horses, and trust in chariots, because they are many; and in horsemen, because they are very strong; but they look not to the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the Lord" (31:1).^{4[4]} For this reason, God commands Yehoshua before he goes out to war against the northern kings (*Yehoshua* 11:6) to lame the horses that they capture, and David acted on his own in the same manner (II *Shmuel* 8:4).

Scripture seems to be emphasizing in our chapter that Shaul is not a man of horses, and that it is precisely for donkeys that he is out searching. Donkeys do not provide their riders with a sense of power, and therefore the leaders of Israel often appear riding on a donkey.^{5[5]} In particular, there is a well-known tradition according to which the Messiah will arrive riding on a donkey, based on the prophecy of Zekharya: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem; behold, your king comes to you; He is just, and victorious; humble, and riding upon a **donkey**, and upon a colt, the foal of an **donkey**. And I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the **horse** from Jerusalem" (9:9-10).^{6[6]} Riding on a donkey is presented as the

^{2[2]} As opposed to what it says in I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 8:33 and 9:39: "And Ner begot Kish, and Kish begot Shaul" – implying that Kish's father was Ner, and not Aviel; see Radak, here.

^{3[3]} In the continuation of that verse, the Torah adds: "Nor cause the people to return to Egypt, to the end that he should multiply horses; since the Lord has said to you, you shall henceforth return no more that way." The verse seems to include two separate prohibitions: a prohibition to multiply horses in and of itself, and a special prohibition to establish a connection with Egypt in order to multiply horses. As Ramban writes: "It is then possible that Scripture admonishes [the king] not to increase his numbers of horses even from his own land, or from the land of Shinar, or by way of permissible trading, in order that he should not put his trust in his chariots, because they are many, and in his horsemen, because they are exceedingly mighty, but his trust shall be in the name of the Lord. Then he admonishes the king not to cause the people to return to Egypt, to have his servants and people there as overseers of cattle dwelling in the cities for the chariots to the end that he should multiply horses."

^{4[4]} See also *Hoshea* 14:4: "We will not ride upon horses, nor shall we say any more to the work of our hands, You are our gods"; *Mikha* 5:9: "And it shall come to pass on that day, says the Lord, that I will cut off your horses out of the midst of you, and I will destroy your chariots"; *Tehillim* 20:8: "Some trust in chariots, and some in horses: but we will make mention of the name of the Lord our God"; and elsewhere.

^{5[5]} Like Avraham (*Bereishit* 22:5) and Moshe (*Shemot* 4:20).

^{6[6]} This seems to be the intention of the Midrash on what it says about Moshe (see previous note), "And Moshe took his wife and his sons, and set them upon a donkey": "Avraham rose up early in the morning, and he took with him Yishmael, and Eliezer, and Yitzchak his son, and he saddled the donkey. Upon this donkey did Avraham ride. This was the donkey, the offspring of that donkey which was created during the twilight, as it is said: 'And Avraham rose early in the morning, and saddled his donkey.' The same donkey was also ridden upon by Moshe when he came to Egypt, as it is said: 'And Moshe took his wife and his sons, and set them upon the donkey' (*Shemot* 4:20). This same donkey will be ridden upon in the future by the son of David, as it is said: 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, o daughter of Jerusalem; behold, your king comes unto you: he is just, and saved; lowly, and

antithesis of riding on a horse, and it testifies to the rider's humility. In our context, the search for the donkeys gives expression to Shaul's modesty, as opposed to excessive assertiveness and self-confidence.

3) The next requirement set by the Torah is: "Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away" (*Devarim* 17:17). The destructive influence of the phenomenon of multiple wives is from time to time mentioned in Scripture,^{7[7]} and it was especially prominent in the case of Shelomo.^{8[8]} To counter this concern Scripture brings the charming conversation between Shaul and his lad and the young maidens drawing water. Shaul and his lad ask the simplest question – "Is the seer here?" – but they receive a most complicated answer:

And they answered them, and said, He is; behold, he is before you; make haste now, for he is come today into the city; for the people have a sacrifice today in the high place. (12)

What lies behind this long and convoluted answer? *Chazal* (*Berakhot* 48b) go off in several directions, including: "Why did they make such a long story of it? Because women are fond of talking. Shmuel said: It was so that they might feast their eyes on Shaul's good looks, since it is written: 'From his shoulders and upward he was higher than any of the people' (I *Shmuel* 9:2)."^{9[9]} It stands to reason that *Chazal* were aware of the romantic potential in this meeting. Against this background, Shaul's ignoring the chatty maidens and his concentration on his mission is striking. Shaul gives us every indication that he is not a womanizer.

4) The Torah adds another requirement: "Neither shall he greatly multiply to himself gold and silver" (*Devarim* 17:17). This requirement is also very understandable in light of the negative influence of excessive wealth on decision-making in general, and that of the king in particular: "Their land also is full of silver and gold, neither is there any end of their treasures; their land is also full of horses, neither is there any end of their chariots: their land also is full of idols; they worship the work of their own hands, that which their own fingers have made: and the mean man is bowed down, and the great man is brought low; forgive

riding upon a donkey' (*Zekharya* 9:9)" (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, chap. 31; brought in abridged form in Rashi, *Shemot*, *ibid.*). The Midrash seems to be relating to "riding on a donkey" as characteristic of Jewish leaders throughout the generations.

^{7[7]} See, for example, *Mishlei* 31:1-3: "The words of King Lemuel, the prophecy, that his mother taught him, What my son? and what, son of my womb? and what, son of my vows? Give not your strength to women, nor your ways to those who destroy kings."

^{8[8]} See I *Melakhim* 11:1-3: "But King Shelomo loved many foreign women, together with the daughter of Pharaoh, Moavite, Amonite, Edomite, Tzidonian, and Hittite women; of the nations concerning whom the Lord said to the children of Israel, you shall not go into them, neither shall they come in to you: for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods: Shelomo attached himself to these in love. And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines: and his wives turned away his heart."

^{9[9]} The *Da'at Mikra* commentary suggests that the verses record the various answers provided by the young girls: One said simply, "He is"; the next added, "Behold, he is before you"; the third called out, "Make haste now"; the fourth contributed, "For he is come today into the city"; yet another one continued, "For the people have a sacrifice today in the high place"; and so on.

them not" (*Yishayahu* 2:7-9). Regarding this point as well, Shaul stands out as one for whom money does not play a major role in his life:

Then said Shaul to his servant, But, behold, if we go, what shall we bring the man? for the bread is spent in our vessels, and there is not a present to bring to the man of God; what have we? And the servant answered Shaul again, and said, Behold, I have in my hand the fourth part of a shekel of silver, that will I give to the man of God, to tell us our way. (7-8)

The lad has more money in his pocket than does Shaul!

5) The Torah makes another demand of the king: "That his heart not be lifted up above his brethren" (*Devarim* 17:20). This quality finds special expression in Shaul's attitude toward his lad. All through the journey, Shaul consults with the lad as his equal, listens to his advice, and never speaks to him with condescension. Particularly moving is Shaul's statement: "Come and let us return; lest my father leave caring for the donkeys, and become anxious **concerning us**" (v. 5).

II. "COME LET US RETURN..."

All of these expressions demonstrate how appropriate Shaul is to serve as king of Israel. In the wake of this positive description, however, a question arises: If things were so good at the beginning, why did everything go wrong later? Why weren't the high hopes that had been placed in Shaul materialized? It can, of course, be argued that every person has free will, and that while Shaul appears to be an ideal figure, he nevertheless disobeys God, and therefore loses his kingdom. The picture, however, seems to be more complex. Together with the positive elements in Shaul's personality, a certain trait of his emerges that will cause him to stumble:

When they were come to the land of Tzuf, Shaul said to his servant that was with him, Come and let us return; lest my father leave caring for the donkeys, and become anxious concerning us. And he said unto him, Behold now, there is in this city a man of God, and he is a man that is held in honor; all that he says comes surely to pass; now let us go there; perhaps he can tell us concerning our journey whereon we go. Then said Shaul to his servant, But, behold, if we go, what shall we bring the man? for the bread is spent in our vessels, and there is not a present to bring to the man of God; what have we? And the servant answered Shaul again, and said, Behold, I have in my hand the fourth part of a shekel of silver, that will I give to the man of God, to tell us our way. Beforetime in Israel, when a man went to inquire of God, thus he said, Come and let us go to the seer; for he that is now called a prophet was

beforetime called a seer. Then said Shaul to his servant, Well said; come, let us go. So they went unto the city where the man of God was. (5-10)

This description presents Shaul as one who cannot stick to his goal, and as subordinating himself to the dominant personality of the lad. Alongside the modesty that characterizes Shaul in this account, his hesitancy and attempt to avoid fulfilling the mission that had been cast upon him and upon his lad are evident. It is precisely his lad who demonstrates persistence and creativity, and refuses to reconcile himself with Shaul's readiness to return home empty handed.

It is precisely this quality of Shaul that will cause him to stumble as he tries to fulfill the function that had been cast upon him. Shaul will fail on a number of occasions, and in all of them the qualities of hesitancy, failure to stick to a mission, and lack of confidence may be seen as essential components that explain those failures. Thus, for example, he will bow to the pressure of the people and offer sacrifices without waiting for Shmuel (chap. 13), and he will not control the people with respect to eating meat with the blood (chap. 14) or with respect to taking spoils from Amalek (chap. 15).

This being the case, already in our first meeting with Shaul we see the complexity of his personality. The quality of modesty is an essential condition for the success of the idea of the monarchy, but it must be found in a person who can lead, who despite his skills, recognizes the smallness of man in relationship to God, and conducts himself with the appropriate humility. Modesty that stems from a lack of self-confidence and indecisiveness is not a quality befitting a king. At this stage the nature of Shaul's modesty is still not entirely clear. The full picture will become clear little by little.

III. "BEFORETIME IN ISRAEL"

I shall conclude this lesson by examining a relatively trivial point with respect to the story, but essential regarding the redaction of the book of *Shmuel*. The narrative is interrupted by the following comment:

Beforetime in Israel, when a man went to inquire of God, thus he said, Come and let us go to the seer; for he that is now called a prophet was beforetime called a seer. (9)

From a literary perspective, this comment undoubtedly comes to clarify what will be stated later, when Shaul and his land meet the maidens and ask them: "Is the seer here?" In

order that we should understand the question, Scripture clarifies in advance that what we call "today" a "prophet" used to be called¹⁰[10] a "seer."

From the perspective of the book's redaction, however, this statement presents a certain problem, for it implies that the book was written a long time after the events related therein. The narrator relates to the events as having occurred in ancient times, "beforetime in Israel," to the point that he must explain the expression, which had changed over the course of the generations from "seer" to "prophet." This seems to contradict the tradition of *Chazal* that "Shmuel wrote his book" (*Bava Batra* 15a)¹¹[11] – which implies that the book was written soon after the events described therein!

Radak struggles with this question and proposes that the expression, "beforetime in Israel," does not come to explain what was common only at that time, but rather what was common in ancient times **and also** during the period under discussion; the only difference is that at the time of the writing of the book the word "prophet" had **also** entered into circulation, and the editor notes that in his period as well, both words were common. This explanation, however, appears a bit forced.

We are left with two possible approaches. The more radical approach emerges from the commentary of Rabbi Yosef Kra, disciple of Rashi, on this verse:

What this generation calls a "prophet," earlier generations used to call a "seer." What follows is that when this book was written, they had already started calling a seer "prophet," which implies that this book was not written during the period of Shmuel... Our Rabbis of blessed memory said that Shmuel wrote his book. May He who illuminates the world make darkness light and crooked things straight.

It seems, however, that it is unnecessary to go this far, and argue that the book was written at a much later time than the events described therein. It suffices to say that notes were inserted into the book, and that they alone were written at a later stage, but the basic narrative was written shortly after the events took place. This is suggested by R. Yitzchak Abarbanel:

¹⁰[10] "*Lefanim*" in Scripture refers to the past, whereas "*le'achor*" refers to the future, as in *Yishayahu* 41:23: "Declare the things that are to come hereafter (*le'achor*), that we may know that you are gods." Conceptually, this is of great significance: when a man stands on a time-line - he faces the past, so that what he sees is "before him," whereas the future, which is still concealed and unknown, lies "behind him."

¹¹[11] According to the continuation of the Gemara there, the chapters which describe what happened after Shmuel died were completed by Gad the Seer and Natan the Prophet. This might also be implied by *I Divrei Ha-yamim* 29:29: "Now the acts of David the King, first and late, behold, they are written in the book of *Shmuel* the Seer, and in the book of Natan the Prophet, and in the book of Gad the Seer."

This verse indicates that it was not written by Shmuel, but rather by Yirmiyahu or some other prophet who arose much later... Or that the verse was added by Ezra.12[12]

If we accept this assumption, that the verse was written at some later point, we can also answer another question: It would seem that this note should have appeared one verse later, immediately preceding verse 11, which records the question raised by Shaul and his lad regarding the "seer." The late date of the note might explain why it is not found in the more natural place, where it would most certainly have been found had it been inserted by the chapter's author himself.

(Translated by David Strauss)

12[12] Abarbanel refers to what he says in his introduction to the Early Prophets (brought at the beginning of his commentary to the book of *Yehoshua*), where he deals at length with such problems in the book of *Shmuel* and elsewhere (among other things he relates to another expression that appears several times in the book – "until this day" [see, for example, above 5:5; 6:18] - which also seems to indicate distance in time from the events). He writes there: "What I believe to be correct on this matter is that Shmuel wrote what happened during his time, and Natan the Prophet also wrote on his own, and Gad the Seer also wrote on his own, each of them writing all that happened in their time. Yirmiyahu the Prophet collected these writings and joined them together and arranged the entire book according to them. For Scripture does not say that these prophets wrote one after the other, but rather that each of them wrote his own book. It seems that when Yirmiyahu wanted to write the book of *Melakhim*, he prepared the book of *Shmuel* which is close to it, and collected the words of the prophets mentioned therein. And without a doubt he added words to clarify matters as he saw fit. This is the meaning of 'until this day.' And this is the meaning of 'beforetime in Israel... for he that is now called a prophet was beforetime called a seer.'"