

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Book of Shmuel Yeshivat Har Etzion

LECTURE 21: CHAPTER 12

SHMUEL'S LEAVE-TAKING

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I. "WHOSE OX HAVE I TAKEN?"

The renewal of the kingdom at Gilgal, with which chapter 11 concludes, consists not only of Shaul's being accepted as king over all of Israel, but also of Shmuel's parting speech from the people, a speech which takes up all of chapter 12. There are three parts to this speech. Shmuel opens by asking the people to publicly declare that he had not exploited his position as *shofet* for personal gain:

And Shmuel said unto all Israel, Behold, I have hearkened unto your voice in all that you said unto me, and have made a king over you. And now, behold, the king walks before you; and I am old and grayheaded; and, behold, my sons are with you;^{1[1]} and I have walked before you from my youth unto this day. Here I am; witness against me before the Lord, and before His anointed: whose ox have I taken? or whose donkey have I taken? or whom have I defrauded? or whom have I oppressed?^{2[2]} or of whose hand have I taken a ransom^{3[3]} to blind my eyes therewith? and I will restore it you. And they said, You have not defrauded us, nor oppressed us, neither have you taken

^{1[1]} At the beginning of chap. 8 (lecture 12), we detected in the words, "Behold, my sons are with you," a certain bitterness on the part of Shmuel, who thought that his sons should have succeeded him in his position.

^{2[2]} We are familiar with the combination, "defrauded (*ashakti*)... oppressed (*ratzoti*)," from other places in Scripture, e.g., "You shall only be oppressed (*ashuk*) and crushed (*ratzutz*) always" (*Devarim* 28:33; see also *Yirmiyahu* 22:17). The word *ratzoti* is equivalent to *ratzatzti*.

^{3[3]} The word *kofer* is used in Scripture both in the sense of monetary ransom in place of the death penalty (see *Shemot* 21:30; *Bamidbar* 35:31) and in the sense of bribe (*Amos* 5:12). Here both senses are possible.

anything of any man's hand.^{4[4]} And he said unto them, The Lord is witness against you, and His anointed is witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand. And they said, He is witness. (1-5)

Only afterwards does Shmuel reach his main point – further admonition of Israel for having asked for a king. The rebuke is directed primarily at the future, with the emphasis being placed on the fact that the people must continue to follow after God. Shmuel then performs a sign in order to prove the truth of his rebuke. He concludes with words of appeasement and guidance for the future. The structure of Shmuel's speech raises a question: Why does he need this introduction? Could he not have opened with his primary message?

It seems to have been very important to Shmuel to emphasize to the people before admonishing them regarding the monarchy that his position on the matter did not stem from personal interest but rather from ideological conviction. Shmuel brings the people to declare that his role as *shofet* brought him no personal gain. Thus, the people should pay careful attention to what he has to say, for his sole desire is to bring the people to a better place.

Shmuel's words are very reminiscent of what Moshe says in *Parashat Korach*:

I have not taken one donkey from them, nor have I hurt one of them.
(*Bamidbar* 16:15)

This parallel, which joins a whole series of parallels which were noted in previous lessons, sharpens the idea that Shmuel viewed the people's request for a king not only as a rebellion against God, but also as a vote of no-confidence in him. As Moshe had done in his day, Shmuel too emphasizes that whatever he had done, he did for the sake of heaven, he himself reaping no personal gain from leading the people.

II. THE HISTORICAL REVIEW

Shmuel bases his rebuke on a survey of various events in the history of the Jewish people, which prove his main thesis: the connection between Israel's deeds and the state of their affairs. Shmuel reviews Israel's entry into the land, and their ups and downs during the period of the *shoftim*, which depended on the people's conduct, and he exposes the

^{4[4]} Earlier in chap. 8, regarding the law of the king (lecture 13), I noted that it is stated here four times that Shmuel did not "take" anything. There, in contrast, Shmuel mentions four times that the king that the people of Israel are demanding will "take" their property.

people's primary reason for asking for a king: the fear of Nachash the Ammonite.^{5[5]}
Shmuel's fundamental position finds expression in the summation of this part of the speech:

If you will fear the Lord, and serve Him, and hearken unto His voice, and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, and both you and also the king that reigns over you be followers of the Lord your God. But if you will not hearken unto the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then shall the hand of the Lord be against you, and against your fathers.

What follows from these words is that even though God and Shmuel acceded to the people's request and appointed a king over them, essentially, nothing changed. If the people fail to walk in God's path, they will continue to be punished, even if they have a king; and if they walk in God's path, God will deliver them from their troubles, as He had done in the past, even without a king. From the perspective of what the people had expected from the establishment of a monarchy, appointing a king was meaningless.^{6[6]}

In his speech Shmuel mentions several leaders, including "Yerubaal, Bedan, Yiftach and Shmuel."^{7[7]} The question that begs to be asked is, who is "Bedan?" The commentators offer several answers:

1) *Chazal (Rosh Ha-shana 25a)* said that the reference is to Shimshon, who is "the son of Dan" (*Ben Dan*). Radak notes the chronological difficulty with this suggestion – Bedan's appearance between Yerubaal and Yiftach, whereas in the book of *Shoftim*, Shimshon appears after Yiftach. He resolves the difficulty by suggesting that while Yiftach came first, Shimshon was more important, and therefore he is mentioned first.

2) Some suggest that Bedan is Avdon ben Hillel ha-Piraton, mentioned among the *shoftim* between Yiftach and Shimshon (*Shoftim* 12:13). Here too there is a chronological difficulty inasmuch as he is listed before Yiftach.

^{5[5]} In the previous chapter (lecture 20), note was taken of the relationship between this account and the account in chap. 11, according to which Nachash the Ammonite went up exclusively against Yavesh-Gilad. In chap. 8 (lecture 12), it was noted that here Shmuel exposes the true nature of Israel's request for a king, which was not directly connected to Shmuel's advanced age.

^{6[6]} Other leaders as well parted from the people with a historical overview having a similar message: Moshe describes at length what happened in the wilderness (*Devarim* 1-5, and later), and similarly Yehoshua (*Yehoshua* 23-24). The idea in all of these cases is similar: A leader comes and goes, regime systems change, but one thing stays the same – Israel's deliverance depends on their walking in the path of God.

^{7[7]} The fact that Shmuel speaks about himself in the third person is a bit strident. Other examples of this phenomenon may be found in connection with Lemekh (*Bereishit* 4:23), Devora (*Shoftim* 5:7) and Shlomo (I *Melakhim* 2:45).

3) We might be dealing with a *shofet* who is not known to us from the book of *Shoftim*. The name Bedan is mentioned in *Divrei Ha-yamim* 7:17, and so it is possible that here too we are dealing with a person named Bedan.

4) The Septuagint has here "Barak"; the transmutation of the letters *dalet* and *resh* is a known phenomenon, but it seems that we are dealing here with exegesis, rather than a variant reading.

It is possible that we should relate to the question of the identity of Bedan in a wider context, as we shall see in the next section.

III. THE WORDING OF SHMUEL'S SPEECH

Shmuel's speech is filled with unclear and problematic expressions, which stand out in sharp contrast to the clarity of his language in the rest of the book. I shall note several such expressions:

1) Already at the very beginning, we find a strident phrase:

And Shmuel said unto the people, **It is the Lord that made** (*asher asa*)
Moshe and Aharon... (6)

The commentators suggested several different interpretations for this anomalous use of the word *asa*,^{8[8]} but we are still left with a question: Why does Shmuel choose this difficult formulation? It seems that the wording of this verse is influenced by that of the next verse: "That I may plead with you before the Lord concerning all the righteous acts of the Lord, **which He did** (*asher asa*) to you and to your fathers."

2) As stated above, Shmuel emphasizes that the people's future depends on their walking in the path of God. But here too Shmuel uses obscure wording:

^{8[8]} Rashi explains that God had prepared Moshe and Aharon "to be ready for His mission." And similarly, the Radak: "who made them great and taught them." Targum Yonatan, however, writes: "Who performed wonders by way of Moshe and Aharon. And so too Metzudat David: "The wonders that He performed through them and with them."

If you will fear the Lord, and serve Him, and hearken unto His voice, and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, and both you and also the king that reigns over you be followers of the Lord your God.

This verse is formulated as a condition, but it seems to be cut short. What will happen if the condition is fulfilled, and the people of Israel hearken unto the voice of God, not rebel against His commandment and together with the king be followers of God? This difficulty leads some of the commentators to explain that the second half of the verse, "And both you and also the king that reigns over you be followers of the Lord your God," is already the result of the condition, and that it should be understood as: "You and your king shall live for a length of days" (Rashi). This explanation, however, is also difficult, for the word, "*veheyitem*," does not imply "living for a length of days."

3) The next verse is also difficult:

But if you will not hearken unto the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then shall the hand of the Lord be against you, and against your fathers.

The primary difficulty is with the phrase, "And against your fathers." We might have expected in its place, "And against your king," who is mentioned in the previous verse, and also below: "But if you shall still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king" (v. 25). The phrase, "And against your father," seems to be influenced by the twofold appearance of the word "father" in verses 7-8, though here the term is almost meaningless. Here too the commentators offered various suggestions,^{9[9]} but the difficulty still remains.

4) In his final words, Shmuel says to the people:

And turn you not aside, **for** (*ki*) after vain things which cannot profit nor deliver, **for** (*ki*) they are vain. **For** (*ki*) the Lord will not forsake His people for His great name's sake; **because** (*ki*) it has pleased the Lord to make you a people unto Himself. (21-22)

Shmuel repeats the word "*ki*" four times, but the first instance of the word is very strange. Shmuel seems to have meant to say, "And turn you not aside after vain things." The addition of the word "*ki*" changes the meaning of the words, as if he were saying: "And turn not after anything, except for vain things, after which you should turn." The commentators

^{9[9]} Rashi explains: "It shall be against you like it was against your fathers." He brings the view of *Chazal* that the reference is to their fathers who had died, who will also suffer humiliation. Radak understands that "fathers" refers here to the king – "Because the ruler vis-a-vis the nation is like a father to his son. And so too it says: 'And he has made me a father to Pharaoh' (*Bereishit* 45:8)."

worked hard to explain the verse as is.¹⁰[10] This difficulty, along with the other difficulties mentioned above, require resolution.

It seems that the various difficulties¹¹[11] can be resolved if we look at them from an overall perspective. As we saw, most of the difficulties stem from the repetition of a word, whose proper setting is elsewhere in the story. This phenomenon commonly occurs when a person is in an especially excited state, and his words do not issue forth in a fluent manner. Scripture appears to be using a very special technique to describe Shmuel's mental state at the time when he delivered this speech. Preserving the exact formulation of Shmuel's words greatly enhances their dramatic effect – precisely because of the strange wording that appears time and time again. Thus we learn that Shmuel did not deliver a cold and distant speech, planned out in advance in an orderly fashion, but rather he spoke from the depth of his heart, with the unique emotionality of a worried leader, who fears that his entire life's project will be lost.

This is not the only place where Scripture makes use of this technique. David's emotional words of thanksgiving following the vision of Natan (II *Shmuel* 7:18-29) and the words of the Tekoa woman before David (*ibid.* 14:13-17) also demonstrate this phenomenon. In both of those passages, where the contents testify to heightened emotionality, Scripture preserves the precise and unconventional formulations that were used, with the aim of intensifying thereby the reader's sense that indeed we are dealing with a particularly emotional passage. In this way, Scripture preserves not only the words that were uttered, but also the feelings of the speakers, in a direct and unmediated manner.

IV. RAIN DURING THE DAYS OF THE WHEAT HARVEST

Toward the end of his speech, Shmuel turns to the people and proclaims a sign that will demonstrate the justice of his rebuke:

Now therefore stand still and see this great thing, which the Lord will do before your eyes. Is it not wheat harvest today? I will call unto the Lord, that He may send thunder and rain; and you shall know and see that your wickedness is great, which you have done in the sight of the Lord, in asking you a king. (16-17)

¹⁰[10] Radak proposes two explanations: 1) And turn you not aside from God, because if you turn aside from Him and turn after vain things, i.e., idols, which cannot profit nor deliver, for they are vain. 2) And turn you not after vain things because they cannot profit nor deliver.

¹¹[11] Perhaps we can also add the difficulties regarding Bedan and Shmuel's reference to himself by name.

What is the meaning of this sign? Rashi notes that rain during the period of the wheat harvest signifies a curse.^{12[12]} It might perhaps be added that the curse stems from the poor timing - whereas rain that falls during the appropriate season is regarded as a great blessing – and that this is an allusion to Israel's request for a king. As was already noted in chapter 8, the Torah does not absolutely negate a monarchical regime; fundamentally, such a form of government has certain advantages from the perspective of walking in the path of God. The main problem, as Shmuel now makes clear, is that the request was based on the wrong motivations and incorrect timing: "And when you saw that Nachash the king of the children of Ammon came against you, you said unto me: Nay, but a king shall reign over us...." Rain during the harvest season demonstrates that the problem in Israel's request lay in the timing, and not necessarily in the very idea.

At the end of his speech, Shmuel says: "Only fear the Lord, **and serve Him in truth with all your heart**; for consider how He has done great things for you" (v. 24). This wording brings to mind what the Torah says in the second section of *Shema*: "And it shall come to pass, if you hearken diligently to My commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, **and to serve Him with all your heart** and with all your soul" (*Devarim* 10:12). In the very next verse it says: "And I will give you the rain of your land in its due season" – once again a sign of the connection between the service of God and the fall of rain during its due season. From here it may also be inferred that an impairment of the worship of God will lead to rainfall not its due season – that which Shmuel symbolizes in the sign that he performs.

Nevertheless, Shmuel concludes on a pacified note:

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 instruct you in the good and the right way.
(23)

Indeed, in a highly unusual manner, Shmuel continues to serve as an important figure in Israel even after he finishes his role as leader and *shofet*. Shmuel accompanies Shaul, reproaches him, tells him that he will be replaced, anoints David, and accompanies him in his first steps as king. Thus, Shmuel is the only leader in Scripture who continues to serve his people even after he has finished his role – precisely as he had obligated himself at this farewell gathering.

^{12[12]} The curse that lies in this phenomenon is also evident from the combination of thunder and rain in the plagues in Egypt: "And Moshe stretched out his rod toward heaven; and the Lord sent **thunder** and hail, and the fire ran down upon the ground; and the Lord **rained** hail upon the land of Egypt... And Moshe went out of the city from Pharaoh, and spread out his hands to the Lord; and the **thunder** and hail ceased, and **the rain** was no longer poured upon the earth" (*Shemot* 9:23, 33).

(Translated by David Strauss)

