

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Book of Shmuel
Yeshivat Har Etzion

LECTURE 26: CHAPTERS 13-14 THE FIRST WAR AGAINST THE PELISHTIM (PART V)

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XV. THE OATH

Following the turn of events resulting from Yehonatan's action, Shaul, who was passive during the first stages of the campaign, moves to the other extreme, becoming exceedingly active:1[1]

(24) ... But Shaul adjured the people, saying, "Cursed be the man who eats any food until it be evening, and I be avenged on my enemies." So none of the people tasted food.

Presumably, the purpose of this oath was to take advantage of the momentum created by the panic and flight of the Pelishtim – "so that they not be involved in eating but rather take revenge from the Pelishtim" (*Metzudat David*). It seems, however, that Shaul fails once again, as is evident from several points mentioned in the account:

1) The aforementioned verse opens:

And the men of Israel were distressed that day; but Shaul adjured the people...

This expression raises questions; it appears to be negative,2[2] whereas its context is positive, as it immediately follows the previous verse indicating that "The Lord saved Israel that day." Indeed, the Radak sees the distress of the people as resulting from what is described in the end of the verse: "'*Nigas*' – distressed, and so too the Aramaic translation, *idchik*, that is to say, they were hungry because Shaul had already adjured the people not to eat until evening." According to this understanding, Scripture presents a negative evaluation of the entire incident from the outset.3[3]

2) The expression, "and I be avenged on my enemies," is also a little grating on the ears, for it points to a personal, rather than a national, agenda. This expression stands

1[1] Unless otherwise specified, all the cited verses are from chap. 14.

2[2] As is stated at the beginning of the war: "When the men of Israel saw that they were in a strait - for the people were distressed (*nigas*) - then the people did hide themselves in caves, etc."

3[3] The reading of the Septuagint is entirely different: "And Shaul inadvertently committed a great sin on that day." According to the Septuagint, Scripture explicitly castigates Shaul.

out in contrast to Yonatan's words to his lad: "Come up after me; for the Lord has delivered them into the hand of Israel" (v. 12).

3) The results of Shaul's oath were negative, as "one of the people" reports to Yehonatan: "Your father charged the people with an oath, saying: 'Cursed be the man that eats food this day;'^{4[4]} **and the people are faint**" (v. 28), and as Scripture testifies later: "And the people were very faint" (v. 31).

4) Yehonatan, the hero of the story, criticizes Shaul's step with a very logical argument:

(29) Then said Yehonatan: "My father has troubled the land; see, I pray you, how mine eyes are brightened,^{5[5]} because I tasted a little of this honey. (30) How much more,^{6[6]} if haply the people had eaten freely today of the spoil of their enemies which they found? Had there not been then a much greater slaughter among the Pelishtim?"^{7[7]}

8) And, of course, the end of the story testifies about its beginning. There is undoubtedly a connection between Shaul's oath and the people's sin:

(31) And they smote the Pelishtim that day from Michmas to Ayalon; and the people were very faint. (32) And the people flew^{8[8]} upon the spoil, and took sheep, and oxen, and calves, and slew them on the ground; and the people did eat them with the blood.^{9[9]} (33) Then they told Shaul, saying, "Behold, the people sin against the Lord, in that they eat with the blood."

4[4] It should be noted that the reporter omits from the oath the problematic expression, "And I be avenged on my enemies," discussed in the previous section.

5[5] This word appears also in the description, "And he put his hand to his mouth; and his eyes brightened (*va-ta'orna*)" (v. 27). It stands to reason that it contrasts with the wording of the oath: "Cursed (*arur*) be the man that eats any food until it be evening" (v. 24).

6[6] The Scriptural term, "*af ki*," means "how much more" (*kal va-chomer*). See, for example: *Devarim* 31:27; I *Shmuel* 21:6; 23:3; II *Shmuel* 4:11; 16:11; I *Melakhim* 8:27; II *Melakhim* 5:13.

7[7] Yehonatan's words do not suffice to clear himself of culpability, and it was only the people who saved him from death. It seems logical that there is implicit criticism here of Yehonatan as well; while he had not heard the oath (v. 27), he should have been more careful when he saw that "no man put his hand to his mouth; for the people feared the oath" (v. 26). Instead of admitting his error, he quickly attacked his father (see Ralbag, ad loc.). To Yehonatan's credit, it may be said that he accepted his punishment: "And Yehonatan said to him, 'I did certainly taste a little honey with the end of the rod that was in my hand; here am I: I will die'" (v. 43).

8[8] The similarity in sound alludes to a connection between *va-ya'af* – "the people were faint" – and *va-ya'at* – "the people flew."

9[9] Many explanations have been offered regarding the people's sin, especially in light of the verse, "You shall not eat anything with the blood; neither shall you use enchantment, nor observe times" (*Vayikra* 19:26), which implies that the prohibition is connected in some way to idol worship. The *gemara* (*Sanhedrin* 63a) records five opinions as to the nature of the prohibition. The Ramban, in his commentary to the Torah (ad loc.), explains the prohibition based on our story, writing that here, too, we are dealing with a sin of idolatry. The plain sense of our passage implies, however, that Israel sinned by eating improperly and in a craze, and that nothing but eating was on their minds. The Radak on our chapter offers a different explanation: "Since they prepared the meat in haste, because they were hungry, they slaughtered on the ground, and the blood did not flow out properly and it was absorbed in the meat. Therefore, Shaul commanded to roll a great stone and slaughter on it, so that the blood would flow out properly."

It seems, then, that Scripture is criticizing Shaul for this oath. It is precisely this action on the part of the Shaul that proves that he is capable of imposing his rule upon the people, if only he wishes to do so. This oath and its enforcement demonstrate retroactively that Shaul's inability to control the people at the beginning of the war did not stem from an essential problem in his ability to govern, but rather from the fact that he himself was afraid of the Pelishtim. He therefore hastened to offer the sacrifices prior to Shmuel's arrival. In the areas that he had been commanded to impose his rule, he failed to do so, owing to a lack of faith in his ability to overcome the Pelishtim. Only when the victory over the Pelishtim was clearly in sight, did Shaul suddenly find the strength to restrain the people.

XVI. THE COMPARISON BETWEEN SHAUL AND YIFTACH

In the previous lecture, I pointed out the parallel that Scripture draws between Shaul and Yehonatan, on the one hand, and the *shofet* Gid'on, on the other. In the current episode, Scripture presents a parallel between Shaul and another figure in the book of *Shoftim* – Yiftach the Giladi.

The parallel between these two figures expresses itself in several points:

- 1) In both stories, a military leader takes an oath in the course of a war. Yiftach's oath is recorded in the book of *Shoftim*:

And Yiftach vowed a vow to the Lord, and said, "If You shall deliver the children of Amon into my hands, then whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Amon, shall surely be the Lord's and I will offer it up for a burnt offering." (*Shoftim* 11:30-31)

- 2) In both stories, a son or daughter of the leader is meant to pay the price of the vow, since they had not been aware of the obligation undertaken by their father:

And Yiftach came to Mitzpeh to his house, and, behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances. (ibid. v. 34)

It is possible to understand the prohibition in a different manner based on our story. Our passage implies that the main problem with the people's conduct was that they slew the animals "on the ground." Shaul tried to remedy this situation by slaying the animals on a great stone. From here it may be inferred that the prohibition, "You shall not eat anything with (*al*) the blood," means that one is forbidden to eat **next to** (*al yad*) blood. (The word "*al*" is often used in that sense; see *Bereishit* 18:5; ibid. 41:1). A person must not eat the meat of an animal when its blood lies before him on the ground. Shaul's solution was that the blood from the slaying should be on the stone and not on the ground, in close proximity to where they were eating. If this is correct, then the prohibition should be included among those prohibitions that stem from the need for moral sensitivity even with respect to animals, and it parallels the prohibitions of cooking meat and milk together (*Shemot* 23:19) and slaughtering an animal and its offspring on the same day (*Vayikra* 22:28) or the *mitzva* of sending away the mother bird before taking its young (*Devarim* 22:7). These prohibitions teach man to control his physical desires and subjugate his passions to basic moral norms.

But Yehonatan heard not when his father charged the people with the oath; and he put forth the end of the rod that was in his hand, and dipped it in the honeycomb, and put his hand to his mouth. (I *Shmuel* 14:27)

3) In both stories, the leader says to his child that he/she is to die:

And it came to pass, when he saw her that he rent his clothes and said... "For I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot go back." (*Shoftim* 11:35)

And Shaul said, "God do so and more also; you shall surely die, Yehonatan." 10[10] (I *Shmuel* 14:44)

4) When the leader's son or daughter is informed of the significance of the father's act, he/she accepts the consequences:

And she said to him, "My father, if you have opened your mouth to the Lord, do to me according to that which has proceeded out of your mouth; seeing the Lord has taken vengeance for your of your enemies, from the children of Amon." (*Shoftim* 11:36)

And Yehonatan told him, and said, "I did certainly taste a little honey with the end of the rod that was in my hand; here am I: I will die." (I *Shmuel* 14:43)

5) There are also linguistic similarities between the two stories. For example:

Alas, my daughter! **You have brought me very low**, and you have become the **cause of trouble to me**. (*Shoftim* 11:35)

My father **has troubled** the land. (I *Shmuel* 14:29)

6) In both wars, mention is made of passing over Gilad:

Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Yiftach and **he passed over Gilad**. (*Shoftim* 11:29)

Now some of the Hebrews **had gone over** the Jordan to the land of Gad and **Gilad**. (I *Shmuel* 13:7)

What is the significance of this parallelism?

XVII. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PARALLELISM

10[10] The Ramban explains that the death penalty in this case is based on the verse: "None devoted of men, which shall be doomed to death, shall be redeemed; but shall surely be put to death" (*Vayikra* 27:29), as he writes in his commentary to that verse: "From this verse they derived the law that any king of Israel or great Sanhedrin... if they ban a city to fight against it, and so, too, if they ban something, one who violates [the ban] is liable for the death penalty. This is the [basis of the] liability of the men of Yavesh-Gilad, and of Yehonatan, whose father said to him: 'God do so and more also; you shall surely die, Yehonatan.' From where did they become liable for the death penalty if not from here?"

The significance of the parallelism seems to focus on three points. First, the very parallel between Shaul's oath and the oath taken by Yiftach intensifies Scripture's criticism of Shaul's oath. Scripture presents both deeds as superfluous. Yiftach's oath is mentioned immediately after it is noted that the spirit of God had rested upon him:

Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Yiftach and he passed over Gilad, and Menashe, and passed over Mitzpeh of Gilad, and from Mitzpeh of Gilad he passed over to the children of Amon. And Yiftach vowed a vow to the Lord, and said... (*Shoftim* 11:29-30)

Not only does the oath have no positive value, but its non-specific formulation also led to essential damage. *Chazal* likened Yiftach's oath to another act of Shaul:

Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: Three [people] entreated [God] improperly. To two He responded properly; to one He responded improperly. And these are they: Eliezer the servant of Avraham, and Shaul the son of Kish, and Yiftach the Giladi... Shaul the son of Kish, as it is written: "And it shall be that the man who kills him, the king will enrich him with great wealth, and will give him his daughter" (I *Shmuel* 17:25). He could even have been a slave [or] even a *mamzer*. [Nevertheless] He responded to him properly, and David chanced to come to him. Yiftach the Giladi, as it is written: "And it shall be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house" (*Shoftim* 11:31). It could even have been an unclean thing. He responded to him improperly, [and] his daughter chanced to come [out] to him. And this is what the prophet said to Israel: "Is there no balm in Gilad? Is there no physician there" (*Yirmiyahu* 8:22. And it is written: "Which I did not command, and I did not speak, and did not come into my heart"^{11[11]} (*ibid.* 19:5)... "And I did not speak" – this is Yiftach. (*Ta'anit* 4a)

Second, attention should be paid to the difference in the reactions of the two people when they learned who was to pay the price of the words that had issued forth from their mouths:

And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he rent his clothes, and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of trouble to me: for I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot go back." (*Shoftim* 11:35)

And Shaul said, "God do so and more also; you shall surely die, Yehonatan." (I *Shmuel* 14:44)

Yiftach's reaction seems natural and it arouses our compassion, whereas Shaul's cold response is very surprising. The most logical explanation of Shaul's composure in face of the possibility that his firstborn son would die is that the

^{11[11]} This verse relates to human sacrifices: "And say, Hear the word of the Lord, O kings of Yehuda, and inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Behold, I will bring evil upon this place... Because they have forsaken Me, and have estranged this place, and have burned incense in it to other gods... they have built also the high place of the Ba'al, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings to the Ba'al, which I commanded not, nor spoke it, neither came it into My mind" (*Yirmiyahu* 19:3-5).

difference in the functioning of the two during the course of the war (as was discussed at length in the previous lectures) created a certain spiritual rift between them, to the point of frustration on Shaul's part. It is possible that here Shaul finds room to reestablish his rule and rehabilitate his public standing, which had been impaired.

The third difference between the two stories is, of course, the ending. As opposed to the tragic end of Yiftach's daughter, Yehonatan is saved by the people. This difference stems, of course, from Yehonatan's positive personality:

(45) And the people said to Shaul, "Shall Yonatan die, who has wrought this great salvation in Israel? Far from it; as the Lord lives, there shall not one hair of his head fall to the ground; for he has wrought with God this day." So the people redeemed Yehonatan, and he died not.¹²[12]

The people employed an argument based on a principle that had been established by Shaul himself:

And the people said to Shmuel, "Who is he that said, 'Shall Shaul reign over us?' Bring the men, that we may put them to death." And Shaul said, "There shall not a man be put to death this day; **for today the Lord has wrought deliverance in Israel.**" (I *Shmuel* 11:12-13)

If wicked people who deserve to die are not put to death on the day that God brought deliverance to Israel, all the more so one who brought the great deliverance "with God" must not be put to death.

XVIII. "AND WHERESOEVER HE TURNED HIMSELF, HE PUT THEM TO THE WORSE"

As an epilogue to the war against the Pelishtim, Scripture records several facts about Shaul (vv. 47-22), among which we find the following surprising expression:

(47) So Shaul took the kingdom over Israel, and fought against all his enemies on every side, against Moav, and against the children of Amon, and against Edom, and against the kings of Tzova, and against the Pelishtim; **and wheresoever he turned himself, he put them to the worse (*yarshi'a*).**

What is the meaning of the term "*yarshi'a*"? The Radak writes "will terrify and confuse." The Ralbag adds: "He will find his enemies guilty and destroy them." These explanations and others like them (see Rid) are understandable, but they fail to answer one question: Wouldn't it have been more appropriate to write, "Wheresoever he turned himself, he would deliver (*yoshi'a*)"?¹³[13]

It seems that Scripture intentionally uses a term similar to the word "*yoshi'a*," but different from it. Nowhere in the book is an act of deliverance attributed to Shaul.

¹²[12] The Ramban explains the possibility of redeeming Yehonatan as follows (see above, note 10): "Corresponding to what the Torah said, 'He shall not be redeemed; but shall surely be put to death,' it says there: 'So the people redeemed Yehonatan, and he died not.' Since a miracle had been performed through him, they knew that he had acted inadvertently."

¹³[13] This, indeed, is the reading of the Septuagint.

Thus, Scripture expresses Shaul's failure to realize the goal for which he had been crowned as king: "And he shall deliver My people out of the hand of the Pelishtim" (9:16). The term "deliverance" is, however, used with respect to other people who replaced Shaul in the wars against the Pelishtim: Yehonatan – in our chapter (v. 45), and David – in his various wars (see 19:5; 23:5; I *Shmuel* 8:6, 14). Shaul also accomplished in his wars, but these accomplishments are described at best with the term "*yarshi'a*" - never with the word "*yoshi'a*."

(Translated by David Strauss)
