

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Book of Shmuel
Yeshivat Har Etzion

LECTURE 29: CHAPTER 15

SHAUL'S WAR AGAINST AMALEK (PART III)

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VI. THE ROBE

Shmuel's pronouncement of the decree that was issued against Shaul is followed by the following epilogue:

(27) And as Shmuel turned about to go away, he laid hold upon the skirt of his robe, and it rent. (28) And Shmuel said unto him, "The Lord has rent the kingdom of Israel from you this day, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you. (29) And also the Glory of Israel will not lie nor repent; for He is not a man that He should repent."^{1[1]}

This well-known passage gave rise to an equally well-known question: Who rent whose robe? The *Amoraim* disagreed on the matter:

^{1[1]} This expression is somewhat surprising, for several verses earlier it is stated: "**I repent** that I have set up Shaul to be king" (v. 10), and the chapter ends: "And the Lord **repented** that He had made Shaul king over Israel" (v. 35). Scripture frequently describes God as repenting (*Bereishit* 6:7; *Shemot* 32:14; and elsewhere), and at length in the words of Yirmiyahu (18:7-10): "At one time I speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, or to destroy; but if that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, **I repent** of the evil that I thought to do to them. And at another time, I speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant; but if it do evil in My sight, that it obey not My voice, then **I repent** of the good, with which I said I would benefit them." It stands to reason that Shmuel means to say that Shaul should not think that if he persuades Shmuel to return with him, this will reflect God's pardon of his sin and His cancellation of the decree (see also Radak, who explains the matter differently).

The skirt of whose robe? Rav and Levi [disagreed]. One said: The skirt of Shaul's robe. And the other said: The skirt of Shmuel's robe. It stands to reason in accordance with the one who said the skirt of Shmuel's robe, for it is the way of the righteous to be distressed when their plantings do not turn out well. (*Midrash Shmuel* 18)

The *midrash* sides with the position that it was Shmuel's robe that was rent, and this was also the understanding of all the biblical commentators: "According to the plain sense, when Shmuel turned to go away from Shaul, Shaul grabbed on to the skirt of Shmuel's [robe], because Shaul wanted him to return with him until after he worshipped [God]" (Rashi). The question, however, remains: Why does Scripture leave room for speculation, rather than state this explicitly? Would it not have been possible for the verse to have been formulated more clearly, e.g.: "And Shaul laid hold upon the skirt of Shmuel's robe, and it rent"?

It seems, therefore, that the verse was intentionally formulated in an ambiguous manner that allows for two interpretations. Even though, from a practical perspective, it is more reasonable to assume that Shmuel's robe was rent, symbolically it makes more sense to say that Shaul's robe was torn, as Shmuel states explicitly: "The Lord has rent the kingdom of Israel from you this day." The linguistic ambiguity comes to express this idea.

Furthermore, even if according to the plain sense of the verse, it was Shmuel's robe that was rent on this occasion, in the future, Shaul's robe would also become rent. When he goes to relieve himself in the cave in which David and his men had hid themselves, we read that, "Then David arose, and cut off the skirt of Saul's robe privily" (24:4).^{2[2]} That action will close the circle that begins in our chapter: Two rent robes, that of Shmuel and that of Shaul, allude to the same conclusion – rending the kingdom from Shaul and giving it to David.^{3[3]}

^{2[2]} Rashi in our chapter points to the connection between the two stories: "And some say that Shmuel rent Shaul's robe, and gave him the sign that whoever rends the skirt of his robe will serve as king in his place, and this is what Shaul said to David when he rent his robe: 'And now, behold, I know that you shall surely be king' (24:8)."

^{3[3]} This phenomenon repeats itself in a surprising manner in another biblical story: the rending of the garment at the meeting between Yarov'am and Achiya the Shiloni. There, the ambiguity is total, and there is no way to know whose garment was rent: "And it came to pass at the time when Yarov'am went out of Jerusalem, that the prophet Achiya the Shiloni found him in the way; and he had clad himself with a new garment; and they two were alone in the field. And Achiya caught the new garment that was on him, and rent it in twelve pieces: and he said to Yerov'am, 'Take you ten pieces; for thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Behold, I will rend the kingdom out of the hand of Shlomo, and will give ten tribes to you'" (I *Melakhim* 11:29-31). Who wore the new garment? Linguistically, there is no way to know. However, based on the parallel to our chapter, we can resolve our uncertainty. On a symbolic level, it is more reasonable that the garment was Achiya's, for Yarov'am receives ten pieces, which symbolize his portion of the kingdom of Israel, and it does not seem reasonable

It is precisely this episode that leads to a certain change. After having heard in absolute terms that his kingdom would be rent from him, Shaul manages to rise above the news and confess his sin without casting blame on others:

(30) Then he said, "I have sinned; yet honor me now, I pray you, before the elders of my people, and before Israel, and return with me, that I may worship the Lord your God."

Here, too, however, Shaul's repentance is incomplete; together with his confession of guilt, Shaul puts forward an interesting request, which raises doubts as to whether his confession was genuine, or if merely intended to appease Shmuel and persuade him to return with him before the elders and before the people. Shaul did, however, confess his sin, and, therefore, Shmuel acceded to his request:

(31) So Shmuel returned after Shaul; and Shaul worshipped the Lord.

Shmuel was then free to complete God's command:

(32) Then said Shmuel, "Bring you hither to me Agag, the king of the Amalekites." And Agag came unto him in chains.^{4[4]} And Agag said, "Surely the bitterness of death is at hand."^{5[5]} (33) And Shmuel said, "As your sword

that he should receive pieces of a garment that belongs to him. In light of this, it seems that in reality the garment belonged to Yarov'am, for had it belonged to Achiya, there would be no need for ambiguity. In order to better express the idea that Yarov'am will eventually receive the ten tribes, Scripture creates ambiguity, which allows for the understanding that the garment belonged to Achiya.

^{4[4]} Various explanations have been offered regarding this term – *ma'adanot*, three of which are brought by the Radak: "1) Like the Aramaic translation, *mefanka*, that is to say, he walked towards him in the manner of a king with delight, that is to say, even though he was close to death, he walked toward him with **pride**. 2) Alternatively: he walked toward him with **delight and joy**, for he preferred death to life; 3) Some explain *ma'adanot*, tied up,... that is to say, he walked toward him **bound in iron chains**." Rav Yeshaya and the Ralbag also follow the third explanation. The Septuagint translates: "afraid and frightened" (the *Da'at Mikra* commentary suggests that according to the Septuagint, the word *ma'adanot* implies that "his feet faltered [*ma'adu*] because of his fear and trembling").

^{5[5]} This term – *sar* - is also a difficult expression. Rashi understands the word *sar* in the sense of "arrive:" "I truly know that the bitterness of death is close upon me." Rav Yeshaya understands the word in the sense of "passed:" "The bitterness of death has already passed from me and from my heart, for I have already despaired of living and I regard myself as dead" (see also Ralbag, who also explains the term in this sense, although in a different direction). Targum Yonatan goes off in another direction,

has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women."
And Shmuel hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord in Gilgal.

In previous lectures, it was noted that it was not humanistic motivations that brought Shaul to spare Agag. Here we see the flip side: Shmuel does not act out of cruelty, but in fulfillment of the Divine command, which for him constitutes absolute truth. Agag was not only a scion of the Amalekites, but also followed in their ways, continuing to kill young men and make their mothers childless.^{6[6]}

VII. THE REDUNDANCY IN THE ACCOUNT OF SHAUL'S LOSS OF HIS KINGDOM

Now that we have completed our discussion of this chapter, there is room to inquire about the relationship between this chapter and the previous two chapters. The main question that stands before us is why Shaul lost his kingdom: Was it because of his failure during the war against the Pelishtim in chapter 13, or was it on account of his failure in chapter 15 regarding the blotting out of Amalek? The question becomes sharpened in light of the difference between Shmuel's reactions in the two cases. In chapter 13, we read:

(10) And it came to pass that, as soon as he had made an end of offering the burnt-offering, behold, Shmuel came; and Shaul went out to meet him, that he might salute him. (11) And Shmuel said, "What have you done?" And Shaul said, "Because I saw that the people were scattered from me, and that you came not within the days appointed, and that the Pelishtim assembled themselves together against Michmas; (12) therefore said I: Now will the Pelishtim come down upon me to Gilgal, and I have not entreated the favor of the Lord; I forced myself, therefore, and offered the burnt-offering." (14) And Shmuel said to Shaul, "You have done foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the Lord your God, which He commanded you; for now would the Lord have established your kingdom upon Israel for ever. (14) But now your kingdom shall not continue; the Lord has sought him a man after His own heart, and the Lord has appointed him to be prince over His people, because you have not kept that which the Lord commanded you." (13:10-14)

This account suggests that it was on his own initiative that Shmuel told Shaul that he lost his kingdom – even before God spoke to him about the matter. Shmuel informs Shaul that

understanding the term in the sense of "officer:" Agag pleaded for his life saying that death is bitter. This understanding is supported by Shmuel's response.

6[6] The image of the Amaleki murderer stood before the eyes of the president of the State of Israel, Yitzchak Ben Tzvi, when the Nazi criminal Adolf Eichmann applied for pardon from the death penalty imposed upon him by an Israeli court. The president rejected his request, and concluded with the words: "As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women."

in the future God will appoint another person in his place as prince over His nation, and it seems that he absolutely identifies with the harsh words that he casts against Shaul.

In our chapter, Shmuel reacts in an entirely different manner:

(10) Then came the word of the Lord unto Shmuel, saying, (11) "I repent that I have set up Shaul to be king; for he is turned back from following Me, and has not performed My commandments." And it grieved Shmuel; and he cried unto the Lord all night.

This passage is puzzling. First of all, surely Shaul already lost his kingdom; why then is it necessary for him to lose it again in our chapter? Second, why does Shmuel cry unto God, when he himself already informed Shaul that the kingdom would be taken away from him?

Another difficulty arises already at the beginning of the chapter. If Shaul already lost his kingdom in the previous chapters, why is that fact totally ignored in the beginning of our chapter?

The Radak proposes two solutions to the redundancy connected to the loss of the kingdom:

- 1) It is possible that that the [first] sin would have been pardoned through repentance and good deeds, but since he sinned again, he was told: "The kingdom is rent from you this day."
- 2) It may further be suggested that at the first sin, he was told: Your kingdom shall not continue. That is to say, it will not continue for him and his sons after him. But it was possible that his kingdom would last a long time. Now he was told that he, too, would not remain for a long time as king.^{7[7]}

On the level of the plain sense of Scripture, however, these answers appear far-fetched. It seems then that to resolve these serious difficulties, we must go back to the method of reconciling contradictions that we have used in the book of *Shmuel* beginning in chapter 8.

^{7[7]} *Tosafot Yeshanim* in *Yoma* (22b, s.v. *Shaul be-achat*) suggested the reverse: For the first sin, "God intended only to remove [the monarchy] from him, but not from his sons, but owing to the deed involving Agag, he repented even with respect to his sons."

In previous chapters, we noted that Scripture describes the establishment of the monarchy in Israel from two perspectives: One describes the process from a negative perspective, as we saw in God's words to Shmuel in chapter 8; the other presents a positive picture of the monarchy, as we saw beginning in chapter 9. We argued that this method resolves all the contradictions, for this is Scripture's way of expressing the complexity of the monarchy in Israel: presenting two parallel accounts, which do not constitute a single continuum. This is the way we outlined chapters 8-12 in light of these two perspectives:^{8[8]}

The Negative Perspective	The Positive Perspective
8 – The people ask for a king, a request that is understood as a rejection of God.	9 – God informs Shmuel of His appointment of Shaul as king, so that he might deliver Israel from the Pelishtim.
	10:1-16 – The signs and the resting of God's spirit upon Shaul.
10:17-27 – The appointment of Shaul as king by way of the lottery, and Shaul's appearance before the people.	
[The account that does not appear – the victory over Amon as part of the objective of appointing a king on Israel's initiative.]	11:1-11 – The victory over Amon and Shaul's appearance before the people.
11:12-15 – The consequences of the war against Amon: the acceptance of Shaul as king over all of Israel.	
12 – Shaul's second appointment as king.	

If this approach is correct, it is only natural to expect that the failure of Shaul's kingdom would be described from these two perspectives. Indeed, the difference between chapters 13-14 and our chapter well reflects the difference between the two perspectives as described thus far, and this redundancy fits in perfectly with the entire process. As we shall immediately see, chapters 13-14 are a continuation of the perspective which views the kingdom in a positive light (that is: a continuation of chapter 11), whereas chapter 15 continues the perspective which views it negatively. Since the two accounts do not form a single continuum, but rather each one continues a different perspective, all the objections fall away.

^{8[8]} It is highly recommended that those readers who joined the series only from chapter 13 and on, as well as those who do not remember the discussion, review the lectures on chapters 8-12, in order to understand what will be presented here.

What we must still prove, then, is the connection between the two accounts and the two perspectives. The connection between chapters 13-14 and the positive perspective is clearly evident:

- 1) The simplest proof is from what it says in 13:8: "And he tarried seven days, according to the set time that Shmuel had appointed; but Shmuel came not to Gilgal..." This verse directly relates to Shmuel's command in 10:8, which is found in the realm of the positive perspective: "And you shall go down before me to Gilgal... seven days shall you tarry, till I come unto you, and tell you what you shall do."
- 2) In chapters 13-14, Israel fights against the Pelishtim. As stated, Israel's primary enemy according to the positive perspective on the monarchy is the Pelishtim, and the whole purpose of the king is to deliver Israel from their hands: "Tomorrow about this time I will send you a man out of the land of Binyamin, and you shall anoint him to be prince over My people Israel, and he shall save My people out of the hand of the **Pelishtim**; for I have looked upon My people, because their cry is come unto Me" (9:16).
- 3) As we have seen, according to the positive perspective, Shaul was appointed as "prince" (*nagid*: 9:16; 10:1), and not as "king." In chapters 13-14, the root *m-l-kh* does not appear at all,^{9[9]} but we do find the word "*nagid*" (13:14).

In similar fashion, it is possible to prove that chapter 15 continues the negative perspective on the kingdom:

- 1) As opposed to chapters 13-14, in chapter 15 Shaul is referred to as "king" several times (vv. 1, 11, 17, 23, 26).
- 2) The root, "*ma'os*," which fills an important role in the negative perspective – and especially in the verse, "for they have not **rejected** you, but they have **rejected** Me, that I should not be king over them" (8:7; and see 10:19) – repeats itself in chapter 15 four times in two verses, both of which make double use of the root: "Because you have **rejected** the word of the Lord, He has also **rejected** you from being king" (v. 23); "For you have **rejected** the word of the Lord, and the Lord has **rejected** you from being king over Israel" (v. 26).

^{9[9]} Except for the first verse – "Saul was a year old when he began to reign (*be-molkho*); and two years he reigned (*malakh*) over Israel" – which is not an integral part of the chapter.

- 3) In chapter 12, in Shmuel's parting speech, Shmuel warns the people about the importance of **hearkening to the voice** of God on the part of the king and the people:

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. (12:14-15)

It is only natural that Shaul's failure from this perspective would be described as failure to **hearken to the voice** of the Lord. Indeed, this motif repeats itself over and over again in chapter 15:

And Shmuel said unto Shaul, "The Lord sent me to anoint you to be king over His people, over Israel; now therefore **hearken you unto the voice** of the words of the Lord... (19) Wherefore then did **you not hearken to the voice** of the Lord, but did fly upon the spoil, and did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord?" (20) And Shaul said unto Shmuel, "Yea, I have **hearkened to the voice** of the Lord..." (22) And Shmuel said, "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as in **hearkening to the voice** of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams..." (24) And Shaul said unto Shmuel, "I have sinned; for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord, and your words; because I feared the people, **and hearkened to their voice.**"

As it may be recalled, Shaul's failure is further highlighted when he admits that he had hearkened to the voice of the people and as a result he failed to hearken to the voice of God.

From all that was stated above, it becomes clear that Shaul stumbled twice – once according to each perspective: From the positive perspective on the monarchy, Shaul failed in that he did not obey the prophet's command; from the negative perspective, he failed in that he did not hearken to the voice of God.

This is the last lecture to be delivered in the framework of this year's lecture series on the book of *Shmuel*. I wish to thank all the readers, and especially those who actively participated by submitting comments and questions, orally and in writing. I will, of course, be happy to relate to all such comments and questions in the future as well.

(Translated by David Strauss)
