

## THE BOOK OF *SHMUEL*

### LECTURE 31: CHAPTER 16 (PART II) THE EVIL SPIRIT THAT FELL UPON SHAUL

Rav Amnon Bazak

#### I. "Now the spirit of the Lord had departed from Shaul"

After describing the anointing of David in the first part of chapter 16, Scripture now goes back to Shaul and what happens to him after he hears about the expected termination of his kingdom and its being handed over to someone else:

(14) Now the spirit of the Lord had departed from Shaul, and an evil spirit from the Lord terrified him.

In the Hebrew original, the verbs in this verse - "had departed" (*sara*) and "terrified" (*u-vi'atatu*) - are in the past perfect; in other words, what is described in this verse occurred prior to what is related in the previous verses.<sup>1[1]</sup> It is not by chance that Scripture emphasizes this point. In the previous verse, we were told: "And the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward." It stands to reason that it was the spirit of the Lord which had already earlier departed from Shaul that came upon David, precisely as what occurred earlier in the case of Shaul: "And when they came there to the hill, behold, a band of prophets met him; and **the spirit of God came mightily upon him**, and he prophesied among them" (10:10); "And **the spirit of God came mightily upon Shaul** when he heard those words, and his anger was kindled greatly" (11:6).

It would appear that this spirit had always rested upon the chosen leader of Israel, as is stated with respect to Yehoshua ben Nun: "Take you Yehoshua the son of Nun, **a man in whom is spirit**,<sup>2[2]</sup> and lay your hand upon him" (*Bamidbar* 27:18); about Otniel ben Kenaz: "**And the spirit of the Lord came upon him**, and he judged Israel, and went out to war: and the Lord delivered Kushan-Rish'atayim, king of Aram, into his hand" (*Shofetim* 3:10); and about other judges.<sup>3[3]</sup> Since there is only one leader in a generation,<sup>4[4]</sup> this spirit cannot rest upon two people at the same time; Scripture therefore emphasizes that even before the spirit rested upon David, it had already departed from Shaul. In chapter 3, we noted the transition

---

regarding the role of the prophet from Eli to Shmuel, and the words of *Chazal*: "Before Moshe's sun set, Yehoshua's sun had already risen... Before Yehoshua's sun set, the sun of Otniel ben Kenaz had already risen... Before Eli's sun set, Shmuel's sun had already risen" (*Bereishit Rabba* 58, 2). In the same sense, we can say: Before Shaul's sun set, David's sun had already risen.

## II. "And an Evil Spirit from the Lord Terrified Him"

What was that evil spirit that terrified Shaul? [5] It does not necessarily refer to a spirit from God that actively caused Shaul to feel bad. The very fact that a person had once been accustomed to receive the spirit of God and reach elevated spiritual levels and now can no longer attain them would suffice to bring him to feelings of despondency and frustration, and ultimately to severe depression. A similar phenomenon is described with respect to Iyov. Iyov first mentions the good times, when he had merited God's closeness and protection:

Oh that I were as in months past, as in the days when God preserved me; when His candle shone upon my head, and when by His light I walked through darkness; as I was in the days of my youth, when God shielded my tent; when the Almighty was yet with me, when my children were about me. (*Iyov* 29:2-5)

It is precisely in light of these special memories that he finds his present situation so unbearable:

And now my soul is poured out within me; days of affliction have taken hold of me. My bones are pierced in me in the night season: and my sinews take no rest... I cry to You, and You do not answer me; I stand up, do You then regard me? You have become cruel to me; with Your strong hand You oppose Yourself against me... But when I looked for good, then evil came, and when I waited for light, there came darkness. My bowels are in turmoil, and they do not rest; days of affliction have come upon me. I go mourning without the sun; I stand up, and I cry in the congregation. I am a brother to jackals, and a companion to owls. My skin hangs down black from me, and my bones are burned with heat. Therefore, my lyre is turned to mourning, and my pipe to the voice of those who weep. (*ibid.* 30:16-30)

This description perfectly matches Shaul's present condition, and gives expression to the causes of the profound frustration that he is now experiencing. If "as for me, the nearness of God is my good," (*Tehillim* 73:28), it is easy to understand how difficult it must be for one who achieved that closeness in the past and can now no longer experience it.

---

Shaul's servants note their king's distress<sup>6</sup>[6] and propose a solution:

(15) And Shaul's servants said unto him, "Behold now, an evil spirit from God terrifies you. (16) Let our lord now command your servants, that are before you, that there be sought a man who is a skilful player on the harp; and it shall be, when the evil spirit from God comes upon you, that he shall play with his hand, and you shall be well."

How will a harp player alleviate Shaul's distress? Without a doubt, this brings us back to the beginning of Shaul's prophetic journey:

After that you shall come to the hill of God, where is the garrison of the Pelishtim; and it shall come to pass, when you are come there to the city, that you shall meet a band of prophets coming down from the high place with a psaltery, and a timbrel, and a pipe, and a **harp**, before them; and they will be prophesying. And the spirit of the Lord will come mightily upon you, and you shall prophesy with them, and shall be turned into another man. (10:5-6)

When we discussed chapter 10, we noted (in lecture 17) the role of music in arousing inspiration that can lead to prophecy. We referred to the clearest expression of this phenomenon in the words of Elisha: "But now bring me a minstrel.' And it came to pass, when the minstrel played, that the hand of the Lord came upon him" (II *Melakhim* 3:15). Music brings a person to a certain spiritual state, which is a fundamental component in the ability to receive prophecy from God.

Shaul is no longer capable of attaining the prophetic spirit. Nevertheless, harp music has a calming influence. Music brings a person to a certain spiritual experience, which under optimal conditions can set the foundations for receiving prophecy. In the problematic state in which Shaul finds himself, harp playing will not lead to prophecy, but it might at least elevate him to a certain spiritual level, at which "you shall be well."

Nevertheless, how great is the difference between the two melodies! We can almost hear the words of Iyov cited above: "Therefore, my lyre is turned to mourning, and my pipe to the voice of those who weep."

### III. Harp Player

Shaul accepts his servants' suggestion, but even before the search for a musician begins, a concrete proposal already arrives:

(18) Then answered one of the young men, and said, "Behold, I have seen a son of Yishai the Bethlehemite who is skilful in playing, and a mighty man of valor, and a man of war, and prudent in affairs, and a comely person, and the Lord is with him."

---

The young man's words are very surprising. First of all, all that was desired was a musician; instead, he lists a long series of qualities, appropriate for a much more distinguished position. Second, this description of David is very different from the figure presented in the earlier verses – a young shepherd who only with great difficulty was brought before Shmuel from out in the pasture. How did this young lad, a shepherd, ruddy with handsome eyes, suddenly turn into "a mighty man of valor, and a man of war, and prudent in affairs?"

Rabag addresses the first question:

He describes David with these qualities because someone with these traits **is more suitable to enter the king's palace**, even though all that was wanted of him at the beginning was that he should be skillful in playing.<sup>7[7]</sup>

This explains why the young man describes aspects of David that are totally unrelated to the musical talent that Shaul was seeking. It seems, however, that beyond what the Rabag says, this description comes to point out the dramatic change that had come over David. It stands to reason that the Divine spirit that rested upon David "from that day forward" (v. 13) changed his personality. Just as Shmuel had promised Shaul that with his anointing, "you shall be turned into another man" (10:6), and just as it is stated with respect to Shaul immediately following his anointing, "God gave him another heart" (ibid. v. 9) – this took place now with David. All at once, the ruddy lad turned into a mighty man of valor, a man of war, and one prudent in affairs.

Shaul immediately accepts the proposal, but the way he turns to Yishai is somewhat surprising:

(19) Wherefore Shaul sent messengers unto Yishai, and said, "Send me David your son, who is with the sheep."

Who mentioned the name David? And how could Shaul have understood from the young man's description that David was but a shepherd?

Without a doubt, Scripture is not giving us the full story. It is reasonable to assume that the "young man" later told Shaul that Yishai's son is David, and that in day-to-day life he is a shepherd. What is important for our purposes, however, is the difference between the two attitudes toward David. It seems that Scripture wishes to emphasize that despite the impressive picture painted by the young man, Shaul does not perceive David as a threat at this point. Shaul already knows that his kingdom will pass from him "to a neighbour of yours, who is better than you" (15:28), but even the words, "a mighty man of valor, and a man of war, and prudent in affairs, and a comely

---

person, and the Lord is with him" do not arouse any concern within him. At this stage, Shaul prefers to see one thing – that the musician is a shepherd – and to ignore the rest of David's unique qualities.

In any event, we must not ignore the hand of Providence that is overseeing the events. Thus, it happens that after the spirit of God departs from Shaul and passes to David, David is brought to Shaul in order to alleviate the difficulties he is experiencing as a result of the removal of God's spirit from him. The spirit of God that rested on David will eventually be part of the way that Shaul acclimates himself to the new situation, in which the spirit of God no longer rests upon himself.

#### **IV. Armor-Bearer**

When Shaul addresses Yishai, he offers no explanation whatsoever as to why he wants David sent to him. The reason for this may be understood from the continuation of the story:

(20) And Yishai took an ass laden with bread,<sup>8[8]</sup> and a bottle of wine, and a kid,<sup>9[9]</sup> and sent them by David his son unto Shaul. (21) And David came to Shaul, and stood before him; and he loved him greatly; and he became his armor-bearer. (22) And Shaul sent to Yishai, saying, "Let David, I pray you, stand before me; for he has found favor in my sight." (23) And it came to pass, when the [evil] spirit from God was upon Shaul, that David took the harp, and played with his hand; so Shaul found relief, and it was well with him, and the evil spirit departed from him.

From here we see that there were two stages to David's being brought to Shaul. During the first stage, no mention is made of his music. Shaul wished to see David before casting upon him the intimate mission of playing before the king when the spirit of God is terrifying him. Shaul wanted first to examine the character of the potential musician and to know him up close. Here, too, the hand of Providence is evident: Shaul is overcome with feelings of love toward the young man with the attractive eyes who is standing before him. David is first appointed as Shaul's armor-bearer, and only afterwards – apparently after it has become established that David has properly filled his role and that Shaul's feelings toward him have remained unchanged – does Shaul turn to Yishai and ask that David be allowed to permanently remain with Shaul. This feeling seems to soften Shaul's personality; when he addresses Yishai a second time, he already adds a term of request – "I pray you" (*na*) - that had been missing in his earlier words: "Let David, I pray you, stand before me; for he has found favor in my sight."<sup>10[10]</sup>

---

Now that David permanently resides in Shaul's house, the time has come to introduce David to the role for which he had originally been brought there. The combination of the music's influence and its being played by a person who is exceedingly loved by Shaul leads to the desired result: "And it was well with him, and the evil spirit departed from him."

(Translated by David Strauss)

---

11[1] Were the events recorded in chronological order, Scripture would have used the regular inverted past form, "*va-tasar*" and "*va-teva'atehu*." This phenomenon is very common in Scripture, and was already pointed out by Rashi on the verse, "And the man knew Chava his wife" (*Bereishit* 4:1): "And the man knew – already before the events related above took place – before he sinned and was driven out of the Garden of Eden. So, too, the conception and birth of Cain took place before this. Had it been written, "*va-yeda ha-adam*," it would imply that after he was driven out children were born to him."

12[2] As Onkelos and Yonatan translate (ad loc.), the reference is to a prophetic spirit from God; this is in contrast to Rashi's understanding (ad loc.). See also *Devarim* 34:9.

13[3] *Gid'on* (*Shoftim* 6:34); *Yiftach* (ibid. 11:29); *Shimshon* (ibid. 13:5; 14:6, 19; 15:14).

14[4] Following *Sanhedrin* 8a: "Rabbi Yochanan said: Moshe said to Yehoshua: You and the elders of the generation with them. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: Take your rod and hit their heads – a generation must have one leader, but not two."

15[5] Of the six instances of "evil spirit" in Scripture, five are connected to Shaul's state of mind in these chapters. Only once does this expression appear in a different context, but there it has a different meaning – not a phenomenon affecting a particular person, but an "evil spirit" between two parties: "Then God sent an evil spirit between Avimelekh and the men of Shekhem; and the men of Shekhem dealt treacherously with Avimelekh" (*Shoftim* 9:23).

16[6] Those who are close to the king know him well, and he cannot conceal his distress from them. In other places as well, we find that those who are close to the king and are familiar with his problems propose solutions. We find that this is the case with David in his old age and with Achashverosh following his decree concerning Vashti. Interestingly, there are also other similarities between these three figures, including the proposal of advisors to "seek" (*yevakshu*) someone who will help the king: "Now king David was old, advanced in yeas; and they covered him with clothes, but he could not become warm. So his servants said to him, 'Let there be sought (*yevakshu*) for my lord the king a young virgin, and let her stand before the king, and be an attendant, and let her lie in your bosom, that my lord the king may become warm.' So they sought for a fair maiden throughout all the territory of Israel, and found Avishag the Shunamite, and brought her to the king" (I *Melakhim* 1:1-3); "After these things, when the wrath of king Achashverosh was appeased, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her. Then the king's servants who ministered to him said, 'Let fair young virgins be sought (*yevakshu*) for the king'" (*Esther* 2:1-2); and here: "That there be sought (*yevakshu*) a man who is a skilful player on the harp."

---

Regarding the significance of the parallel between Esther and our chapter from the perspective of the book of *Esther*, see my article, "*Ve-ka'asher Avadti Avadti – bein Bat Sheva Le-Esther*," in *Hadasa hi Esther – Sefer Zikaron Le-Hadasa Esther (Dasi) Rabinowitz* (Alon Shevut, 1997), pp. 44-46.

17[7] Rashi, in the wake of *Chazal*, understands that this young man was Do'eg the Edomite, "whose entire intention was to set Shaul's evil eye upon David so that he be jealous of him." According to the plain sense of Scripture, this understanding is difficult, for had this advisor wanted to harm David, he could have avoided mentioning his name altogether, thus preventing his arrival in Shaul's house, which eventually paved his way to the throne. It stands to reason that *Chazal* wanted to point out the problem arising from the excessive singing of another person's praise.

18[8] The Radak offers two explanations for this strange expression, "*chamor lechem*:" Either this was an ass laden with loaves of bread or, alternatively, a pile of bread (*chamor* = heap, as in: "And they gathered them together in heaps [*chomolim chomolim*]" [*Shemot* 8:10]; "With the jawbone of an ass, heaps upon heaps [*chamor chamoratayim*]" [*Shoftim* 15:15]).

19[9] There is an interesting similarity between the presents that Yishai sends to Shaul, which include bread, wine and a kid, and what was carried by the three people whom Shaul met at the beginning of his career – "And there shall meet you three men going up to God to Bet-El, one carrying three **kids**, and another carrying three loaves of **bread**, and another carrying a bottle of **wine**" (10:3). This parallel joins the series of parallels between our chapter and chapter 10 noted in the body of the lecture. They all give expression to the closing of the circle that began with the beginning of Shaul's prophecy and the resting of the spirit of God upon him and ended with the end of his prophecy and the removal of God's spirit from him.

20[10] It is, of course, possible that the use of the word "*na*" ("please") follows from the nature of the request: At first Yishai was merely asked to send David to Shaul for a one-time visit, whereas now Shaul is asking that David remain with him on a permanent basis with a special role to play.

---