

THE BOOK OF *SHMUEL*

LECTURE 43: CHAPTER 22 (PART II) THE KILLING OF THE PRIESTS OF NOV Rav Amnon Bazak

I. DOEG THE EDMITE

The previous lecture concluded with the accusation hurled by Shaul at his servants that none of them helped him in his struggle with David. These words had an effect on one of his men – Doeg the Edomite.

(9) Then answered Doeg the Edomite, who was set over the servants of Shaul, and said, "I saw the son of Yishai coming to Nov, to Achimelekh the son of Achituv. (10) And he inquired of the Lord for him, and gave him victuals, and gave him the sword of Golyat the Pelishti."

The very fact that Doeg the Edomite did not turn to Shaul on his own initiative and tell him about what Achimelekh had done indicates that he was well aware that Achimelekh's action was not necessarily an act of treason. On the contrary, Doeg tries now to shift the guilt from himself to Achimelekh, for Doeg had been the last among Shaul's associates to see David, and thus far he had taken no action on the matter. He therefore emphasizes several details in order to find favor in Shaul's eyes and exaggerate Achimelekh's responsibility:

- 1) Doeg adopts Shaul's style and refers to David by the belittling term, "the son of Yishai."
- 2) Doeg refers to Achimelekh the son of Achituv, omitting the title "the priest," in order to lessen his importance in Shaul's eyes.
- 3) By repeating the words "he gave him," Doeg emphasizes Achimelekh's guilt.

But the most important point in Doeg's words depends on an interpretative issue connected to the continuation of the story. Doeg asserts that Achimelekh had inquired of God on behalf of David. This seems to be the most serious accusation, and therefore it is mentioned first. Indeed, when Shaul later turns to Achimelekh and accuses him of providing David with assistance, Achimelekh responds exclusively to the charge regarding inquiry of God.

(14) Then Achimelekh answered the king, and said, "And who among all your servants is so trusted as David, who is the king's son-in-law,

and gives heed unto your bidding,1[1] and is honorable in your house? (15) Have I today begun to inquire of God for him? Be it far from me;2[2] let not the king impute any thing unto his servant, nor to all the house of my father; for your servant knows nothing of all this, less or more."

Achimelekh's words can be understood in one of two ways.

1) Achimelekh might be saying that he did not begin now to inquire of God on David's behalf, but rather a while ago and on the assumption that David was loyal to Shaul. As Rashi explains: "'Have I today begun to inquire of God for him?' – this is a question. It is many days, for it is necessary for the community, for he had been appointed to take Israel out and bring them in, and from then, I have inquired of God on his behalf" (Radak interprets similarly).

2) It may also be suggested that Achimelekh is outright denying the charge that he ever inquired of God on behalf of David; about this that he says: "Be it far from me." This understanding is more persuasive, for if, in fact, Achimelekh had inquired of God on David's behalf, why was this not mentioned in the previous chapter in the account of David's stay with Achimelekh? The absence of this detail strengthens our suspicion that Doeg the Edomite made up this charge in order to strengthen his accusations against Achimelekh.3[3]

II. THE DEATH SENTENCE

Let us return now to Shaul himself. After hearing what Doeg had to say, Shaul sends for Achimelekh the priest and the members of his family:

(11) Then the king sent to call Achimelekh the priest, the son of Achituv, and all his father's house, the priests that were in Nov; and they came all of them to the king. (12) And Shaul said, "Hear now, you son of Achituv." And he answered, "Here I am, my lord." (13) And Shaul said unto him, "Why have you conspired against me, you and the son of Yishai, in that you have given him bread, and a sword,4[4] and have inquired of God for him, that he should rise against me, to lie in wait, as at this day?"

Shaul turns to Achimelekh in the same belittling manner in which he related to David and calls him "the son of Achituv;" nevertheless, Achimelekh responds with courtesy and respect – "Here I am, my lord." Shaul's charge

against Achimelekh is formulated in a manner that is very similar to the charge that he brought earlier against his own men:

Verses 7-8	Verses 12-13
And Shaul said unto his servants...	And Shaul said
"Hear now, you Binyaminites...	"Hear now, ^{5[5]} you son of Achituv...
That all of you have conspired against me...	Why have you conspired against me...
When my son made a league with the son of Yishai...	You and the son of Yishai...
That my son has stirred up my servant against me, to lie in wait, as at this day.	That he should rise against me, to lie in wait, as at this day.

What is the meaning of this correspondence? It seems that Shaul is drawing a comparison between Achimelekh and Yonatan. Expression is given thereby to Shaul's frustration that he cannot act against Yonatan – David's true helper – frustration that he takes out on the poor Achimelekh, whose innocence is emphasized by Scripture.

We already saw above Achimelekh's words of self-justification, which end as follows: "For your servant knows nothing of all this, less or more." But Shaul's heart is totally impervious:

(16) And the king said, "You shall surely die, Achimelekh, you, and all your father's house." (17) And the king said unto the guard that stood about him, "Turn, and slay the priests of the Lord; because their hand also is with David, and because they knew that he fled, and did not disclose it to me..."

It is not only Achimelekh whom Shaul orders to be executed, but all the priests, because of the unverified charge that they had known that David had run away and failed to disclose this to Shaul. Shaul is not deterred by the fact that they are "priests of the Lord," and he explicitly notes their office, in order to emphasize that notwithstanding, they are liable for the death penalty. Thus, Shaul bears the responsibility for the cruel slaughter that is about to transpire.

Shaul's servants serve as foils to their master: "But the servants of the king would not put forth their hand to fall upon the priests of the Lord" (end of v. 17). Scripture explicitly states that Shaul's servants were not deterred by the unjustness of the killing, but by the fact that they were priests of the Lord. But even this did not stop Shaul.

Shaul still needed someone to carry out the decree. Here he finds a simple solution:

(18) And the king said to Doeg, "Turn you, and fall upon the priests."

Shaul exploits Doeg's weakness. As stated above, a cloud of suspicion hovered over Doeg as well; why had he failed to report to Shaul about David's presence in Nov? Were Doeg to refuse to carry out Shaul's order, he would incriminate himself even further. Doeg prefers not to raise Shaul's suspicions, and he carries out the death sentence. However, in his desire to demonstrate his loyalty to Shaul, Doeg carries out the sentence with excessive zeal:

(18) ...And Doeg the Edomite turned, and he fell upon the priests, and he slew on that day fourscore and five persons that did wear a linen ephod. (19) And Nov, the city of the priests he smote with the edge of the sword, both men and women, children and sucklings, and oxen and asses and sheep, with the edge of the sword.

III. THE FOUR CIRCLES OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE MASSACRE AT NOV

Four people were involved in the killing of the priests of Nov, each bearing a different level of responsibility for the massacre. At the highest level, the most directly responsible was, of course, Doeg the Edomite, who cruelly killed not only Achimelekh and the priests, although presumably aware of their total innocence, but even the women and the children. It is not for naught that the Psalmist has this to say about him:⁶[6]

Your tongue devises mischief; like a sharp razor, working deceitfully. You love evil more than good; and lying rather than speaking righteousness. (Sela). You love all devouring words, a deceitful tongue. (*Tehillim* 52:4-6)

On the second, wider level of responsibility stands Shaul, who ordered the execution of Achimelekh and the priests. Scripture expresses Shaul's responsibility in a special way: "Smote he with the edge of the sword, both men and women, children and sucklings, and oxen and asses and sheep, with the edge of the sword" – which, of course, brings to mind what had been said to Shaul: "Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel⁷[7] and ass" (15:3). We already mentioned in our study of chapter 15 (lecture no. 28) *Chazal's* statement on the matter:

When the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Shaul, "Now go and smite Amalek," he said: If regarding one life the Torah said, Bring an *egla arufa*, regarding all these lives - all the more so! If a person sinned, how did the cattle sin? If the great ones sinned, how did the little people sin? A heavenly voice issued forth and said to him: "Be not righteous overmuch" (*Kohelet* 7:16). And when Shaul said to Doeg:

"Turn you, and fall upon the priests" (I *Shmuel* 22:18), a heavenly voice issued forth and said to him: "Be not wicked overmuch" (ibid. v. 17). (*Yoma* 22b)

The *midrash* emphasizes the gap between Shaul's conduct in the war conducted against Amalek, where he failed to fulfill God's command, and his conduct in the Nov affair, where he ordered action against the priests, which ended in the manner that the war against Amalek was supposed to have ended.^{8[8]}

Surprisingly, the Nov affair is not mentioned among Shaul's sins in the places where those sins are listed. When the Ba'alat Ov's medium raises Shmuel from the dead, it is only the war against Amalek that he mentions to Shaul: "Because you did not hearken to the voice of the Lord, and did not execute His fierce wrath upon Amalek, therefore has the Lord done this thing unto you this day" (28:18). And in the account of Shaul's death in the book of *Divrei Ha-Yamim*, it says:

So Shaul died for his transgression which he committed against the Lord, against the word of the Lord, which he did not keep, and also for asking counsel of a medium, to make inquiry; and he inquired not of the Lord. Therefore He slew him, and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Yishai. (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 10:13-14)

Nowhere in Scripture do we find direct and explicit condemnation of Shaul's role in the Nov affair. The Radak (on v. 19) relates to this difficulty, writing:

The question arises: Wherever Scripture mentions Shaul's sins, we do not find that it mentions the sin involving Nov, the city of the priests, and [even] when it calls his house a "bloody house" (II *Shmuel* 21:1), it is "because he slew the Giv'onim," and not because he slew the priests. It seems that the priests were liable for the death penalty, even though Scripture only reveals the sin of the house of Eli. But nevertheless, Shaul was punished for [spilling] their blood, in that he and his sons fell to the sword of the Pelishtim.

According to the Radak, Shaul's sin is not mentioned because the priests were liable for the death penalty owing to their own sins. He adds, however, that the death of Shaul and his sons at the hands of the Pelishtim was a punishment for the killing of the priests of Nov and their sons.

There may be another reason that this sin is not explicitly attributed to Shaul. Here we come to the third level of responsibility, described at the end of the account:

(20) And one of the sons of Achimelekh the son of Achituv, named Evyatar, escaped, and fled after David. (21) And Evyatar told David that Shaul had slain the Lord's priests. (22) And David said unto Evyatar, "I knew on that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Shaul; I have brought about the death of all the persons of your father's house. (23) Abide you with me, fear not; for he that seeks my life seeks your life; for with me you shall be in safeguard."

In the previous lecture, we discussed at length David's portion in the responsibility for the deaths of the priests of Nov. Here, David expresses his remorse, but without a doubt the blood of the priests of Nov rests on his conscience. It is possible, then, that Scripture blurs Shaul's part in the affair in order to emphasize David's responsibility for what had happened.

Part of the repair finds expression in David's promise to protect Evyatar, the sole surviving scion of Achimelekh's family. At a later stage in David's life, he takes a step that appears like full-fledged repentance on his part. When David hears of the outbreak of Avshalom's rebellion, it says:

And David said to all his servants that were with him at Jerusalem, "Arise, and let us flee; for we shall not escape from Avshalom. Make speed to depart, lest he overtake us suddenly, and bring evil upon us, and smite the city with the edge of the sword." (II *Shmuel* 15:14)

Why does David behave in this manner, speedily fleeing Jerusalem with all his men? It may be that David is trying to make amends for his sin by assuming excessive responsibility for the welfare of the residents of the city. After having once been burnt at the Nov affair, where, owing to his lack of caution, Doeg the Edomite "**smote Nov, the city of the priests, with the edge of the sword**, both men and women," David is now exceedingly careful to prevent a repetition of that event: "Lest he overtake us suddenly, and bring evil upon us, and **smite the city with the edge of the sword.**"

Mention must still be made of the fourth and widest level of responsibility. As the Radak mentioned, the priests of Nov did not die as innocents. Their deaths had already been foreseen in the prophecy of the man of God to Eli:

"Behold, the days come, that I will cut off your arm, and the arm of your father's house, that there shall not be an old man in your house... and there shall not be an old man in your house for ever." (2:31-32)

Providence had already sealed the fate of the priests of Nov, the descendants of Chofni and Pinchas. It goes without saying that this does not relieve the others of their responsibility for the massacre, each in accordance with his role in what happened.

(Translated by David Strauss)

9[1] The expression "*ve-sar el mishma'tekha*" (translated here as "and gives heed unto your bidding") is not altogether clear. We already discussed the word "*sar*" in 16:32 (lecture no. 29, note 5), regarding Agag's words to Shmuel and Shaul, "*akhen sar mar ha-mavet*." There we noted the Targum, which understands "*sar*" as if it were spelled with a *sin*, rather than with a *samekh*, as "officer." *Mishma'at* refers to the group of people who hearken to the king and are particularly close to him, as is stated in II *Shmuel* 23:23 regarding Benayahu the son of Yehoyada: "And David set him over his guard (*'mishma'to*)." It is possible, then, that the words, "*ve-sar el mishma'tekha*," mean: the officer who is in charge of the unit of men who are particularly close to the king.

10[2] This may mean: Far be it from me to do anything that would constitute a rebellion against the king. Alternatively, it might mean: Far be it from *you* to suspect me of such a thing. According to this, it was out of respect for the king that Achimelekh formulated his words as he did, without casting any direct accusations at Shaul. (This is similar to Moshe's words to Pharaoh: "And all these your servants shall come down to me, and bow down themselves to me, saying, 'Get you gone, and all the people that follow you'" [*Shemot* 11:8].)

11[3] If we understand that Achimelekh is saying that there was nothing new in his inquiring of God on behalf of David, then the absence of any mention of this detail in the previous chapter proves how common and innocent such an action was; it was not an exceptional event that would have required reporting to Shaul.

12[4] Shaul does not mention the fact that the sword was Golyat's, either because he wishes to avoid mentioning David's praise, or because he would thus be conceding that by right the sword belongs to David.

13[5] The word "*na*" is certainly not being used here in the sense of "please," and its appearance here in Shaul's words to Achimelekh strengthens the connection to the earlier words of Shaul to his men.

14[6] *Tehillim* 52 opens with the words: "To the chief musician, A Maskil of David, when Doeg the Edomite came and told Shaul, and said to him, David is come to the house of Achimelekh" (vv. 1-2). It was noted in lecture no. 3 that sometimes there is no correspondence between the contents of a psalm and the heading which connects it to a specific historical event. We also noted the difficulties in connecting this psalm to the event described in our chapter (the absence of any mention of the killing of the priests of Nov, or the psalmist's words about himself, "But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God"). We explained there that the heading does not mean that the psalm was written for that occasion, but only that the psalm, which was already known earlier, was recited on that occasion. In any event, we must account for the fact that David recited this psalm in the present situation, and without a doubt the verses cited in the body of the text constitute the reason.

15[7] Only the word "camel" is missing in our chapter, and this for a simple reason: A camel is a desert animal, and therefore it was ridden by the Amalekites, but presumably not used in Nov.

16[8] There we discussed at length the direct connection between Shaul's failure in the war against Amalek and his conduct in the Nov affair.
