

## THE BOOK OF *SHMUEL*

### LECTURE 44: CHAPTER 23 (PART II) THE KE'ILA AFFAIR Rav Amnon Bazak

#### I. DAVID AGAINST SHAUL

Following what happened at Nov, David returns to the region of Ke'ila:

(1) And they told David, saying, "Behold, the Pelishtim are fighting against Ke'ila,<sup>1[1]</sup> and they rob the threshing-floors." (2) Therefore David inquired of the Lord, saying, "Shall I go and smite these Pelishtim?" And the Lord said unto David, "Go, and smite the Pelishtim, and save Ke'ila." (3) And David's men said unto him, "Behold, we are afraid here in Yehuda; how much more<sup>2[2]</sup> then if we go to Ke'ila against the armies of the Pelishtim?"<sup>3[3]</sup> (4) Then David inquired of the Lord yet again. And the Lord answered him and said, "Arise, go down to Ke'ila; for I will deliver the Pelishtim into your hand." (5) And David and his men went to Ke'ila and fought with the Pelishtim, and brought away their cattle<sup>4[4]</sup> and slew them with a great slaughter. So David saved the inhabitants of Ke'ila.

It is clear from this account that by dedicating all his energy to the pursuit of David, Shaul in effect abandons his people and subjects to the mistreatment of the Pelishtim. The vacuum created by Shaul's dysfunction is symbolically filled by David, who, even when fleeing from the king, does not try to evade his responsibility to help the people of Israel in their struggle against the Pelishtim.

The description of the Pelishtim's harassment of Ke'ila with the words, "and they rob (*shosim*) the threshing-floors," stands in contrast to what was stated about Shaul in the not too distant past, "And he did valiantly, and smote the Amalekites, and delivered Israel out of the hands of those that spoiled them (*shosehu*)" (14:48). While Shaul had recently occupied himself with the deliverance of Israel, now he devotes all his efforts to the pursuit of David and abandons the inhabitants of Ke'ila and their grain to be plundered by the Pelishtim.

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What is striking in these verses is the double mention of deliverance in connection with David: "Go, and smite the Pelishtim, and save (*ve-hoshata*) Ke'ila... So David saved (*va-yosha*) the inhabitants of Ke'ila." As may be remembered, the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Pelishtim was, from the outset, the goal of Shaul's appointment to serve as king: "Now the Lord had revealed unto Shmuel a day before Shaul came, saying, '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 (*ve-hoshi'a*) My people out of the hand of the Pelishtim**; for I have looked upon My people, because their cry is come unto Me'" (9:15-16). The truth is, however, that the word "deliverance" is not mentioned even once in connection with Shaul, and it is possible that Scripture intentionally emphasizes this point even when it relates favorably to Shaul's military achievements: "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 wherever he turned himself, **he put them to the worse**" (14:47). "He put them to the worse" (*yarshi'a*), but he did not deliver (*yoshi'a*) Israel.

The first lesson of our story, then, relates to David's ability to deliver Israel from the hands of the Pelishtim even when the responsibility is not cast upon him – as opposed to Shaul, who once again fails to fulfill this function.<sup>5[5]</sup>

Our chapter emphasizes another difference between David's conduct and that of Shaul. As we have seen, David inquires twice of God, and in the continuation there is a third inquiry of God: "And David knew that Shaul devised mischief against him; and he said to Evyatar the priest, '**Bring hither the ephod**'" (v. 9). This wording brings to mind what is stated with respect to Shaul's previous war against the Pelishtim: "And Shaul said unto Achiya, '**Bring hither the ark of God**'" (14:18). There, however, the story ended in a different manner: "And it came to pass, while Shaul talked unto the priest, that the tumult that was in the camp of the Pelishtim went on and increased; and Shaul said unto the priest, 'Withdraw your hand'" (ibid. v. 19). We already noted (lecture no. 24) the problematic nature of Shaul's behavior, which reflects derision of inquiries made of God. David follows a different path, repeatedly inquiring of God.<sup>6[6]</sup>

## II. THE INQUIRY OF GOD

Despite what was said above regarding Scripture's positive assessment of David in this story, especially in comparison to Shaul, when we examine the story more carefully, we find a certain complexity in David's actions as well. During the first stage, David inquires of God whether or not he

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should go out and fight against the Pelishtim, and the answer seems to be clear and unequivocal: "Go, and smite the Pelishtim, and save Ke'ila." David's men are not keen about going out to battle against the Pelishtim, and so David makes a second inquiry of God, and receives a very similar answer: "Arise, go down to Ke'ila; for I will deliver the Pelishtim into your hand." Why does David inquire of God a second time?

According to the Radak, the second inquiry was made exclusively to satisfy the need of David's men: "David asked again because of their words, and not because of himself, for he trusted [in God] after the first time and only asked again because of his men. And when his men saw that God assured him twice, they went with him." This explanation is based on the assumption that the people received the word of God in some way, or at least that they were aware that this was the word of God, but that they were only prepared to accept it and act accordingly after David received the message a second time. There is something forced about this, for it is not at all clear how the people could know this.

The Ralbag proposed a different understanding. According to him, the first answer, "Go, and smite the Pelishtim, and save Ke'ila," was not sufficiently clear, for it might have been understood that only if David smites the Pelishtim will Ke'ila be saved; but no guarantee was given that he would in fact smite the Pelishtim. Therefore, He God clarifies in the second answer – "Arise, go down to Ke'ila; for I will deliver the Pelishtim into your hand" – after which there was no longer any room for doubt.<sup>7[7]</sup> There is, however, something forced about this answer as well, for the first response to David also seems unequivocal.

It seems, then, that according to the plain sense of the text, it was not David's men who needed support and strengthening, but rather David himself. After the cold response that he received from his men, David inquired of God a second time – perhaps based on the assumption that once it became clear that his men were not ready to go out to battle, the situation had changed. God, however, merely repeated his instructions, thus sending a message to David that his second inquiry had been out of place.

This point seems to have had an effect on what happened afterwards:

(6) And it came to pass, when Evyatar the son of Achimelekh fled to David to Ke'ila, an ephod came down in his hand.<sup>8[8]</sup> (7) And it was told to Shaul that David was come to Ke'ila. And Shaul said, "God has delivered him into my hand; for he is shut in, by entering into a town that has gates and bars." (8) And Shaul summoned all the people to war, to go down to Ke'ila,<sup>9[9]</sup> to besiege David and his men. (9) And

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David knew that Shaul devised mischief against him; and he said to Evyatar the priest, "Bring hither the ephod."

David, who had acted in a praiseworthy manner, finds himself in an embarrassing situation; saving the people of Ke'ila is liable to lead to his capture by Shaul. David, therefore, quickly inquires once again of God:

(10) Then said David, "O Lord, the God of Israel, Your servant has surely heard that Shaul seeks to come to Ke'ila, to destroy the city for my sake.<sup>10</sup>[10] (11) Will the men of Ke'ila deliver me up into his hand? Will Shaul come down, as Your servant has heard? O Lord, the God of Israel, I beseech You, tell Your servant." And the Lord said, "He will come down." (12) Then said David, "Will the men of Ke'ila deliver up me and my men into the hand of Shaul?" And the Lord said, "They will deliver you up."<sup>11</sup>[11]

Here, the inquiry directed at God is long and detailed. David asks two questions - "Will the men of Ke'ila deliver me up into his hand? Will Shaul come down, as Your servant has heard?" - and then he adds another supplication: "O Lord, the God of Israel, I beseech You, tell Your servant." The answer that David receives here seems to be reserved and incomplete: "He will come down." David is forced to repeat his question: "Will the men of Ke'ila deliver up me and my men into the hand of Shaul?" and once again he receives a laconic answer: "They will deliver you up." It is difficult not to conclude that God is expressing here a certain dissatisfaction. What, then, was the problem with the inquiry made of God?

The Gemara in *Yoma* (73a) argues that David veered from the usual rules by asking two consecutive questions of the ephod. Moreover, he asked them in a chronologically illogical order, for the question of whether Shaul would come down should have preceded the question of whether he would be handed over by the people of Ke'ila:

One must not ask two questions at once, and if one asked, he is only answered regarding one, and he is only answered regarding the first question. As it is stated: "Will the men of Ke'ila deliver me up into his hand? Will Shaul come down?... And the Lord said, He will come down." But surely you said: He is only answered regarding the first question! David asked out of order, and [God] answered him out of order. And once he understood that he had asked out of order, he asked again in order. As it is stated: "Will the men of Ke'ila deliver up me and my men into the hand of Shaul? And the Lord said, They will deliver you up."<sup>12</sup>[12]

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The Gemara, however, fails to explain why David initially presented two questions, especially if this contradicted common practice.

It seems, then, that the nature of the inquiry made of God in these verses follows from what happened at the beginning of the chapter. The fact that David inquired twice of God expressed a lack of sufficient trust and faith on his part. Therefore, despite their importance, the additional questions that he posed later in the chapter were not favorably received. The situation can be described as follows. David first asks: "Will the men of Ke'ila deliver me up into his hand?" out of a desire to receive an answer to the question that most interested him, but his question was not answered. It stands to reason that David thought that his question was problematic because it makes an assumption that has yet to be proven, and he therefore emends his question and goes back one step: "Will Shaul come down, as Your servant has heard?" But this question is also not answered. At this point David understands that there is a problem with his approach, and God is therefore not answering his questions; he thus adds a prayer: "O Lord, the God of Israel, I beseech You, tell Your servant." Only after this prayer does David receive an answer: "He will come down," which relates to the second question, and the answer: "They will deliver you up" – which answers his basic question. But even these answers, in the way that they are given, testify to a certain dissatisfaction, which gives expression to Scripture's judgment about David's mistake in this story.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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13[1] Ke'ila is mentioned in *Yehoshua* 15:44 among the cities in the coastal plain of Yehuda. The fact that it is a fortified city, as is implied by v. 7, suggests that it was situated in close proximity to the Pelishtim.

14[2] We have already seen (14:30; lecture 26, note 6) that the combination "*af ki*" in Scripture is used in the sense of "*kal va-chomer*," "all the more so." We have noted additional examples, e.g.: *Devarim* 31:27; I *Shmuel* 21:6; *ibid.* 23:3; II *Shmuel* 4:11; *ibid.* 15:11; I *Melakhim* 8:27; II *Melakhim* 5:13.

15[3] David's men appear here as they were described in chapter 22, as bitter and oppressed people who are not particularly interested in saving the lives of others.

16[4] What are the Pelishtim's cattle doing in the middle of a battle? The Radak writes: "Why was their cattle in the battle-[field]? Rather, when David beat them with a mighty blow, he chased after those who fled to the land of the Pelishtim, and brought away their cattle." According to the plain sense of Scripture, however, it seems that the Pelishtim brought their cattle along in order to feed them of the grain in the threshing floors, as it is stated above: "And they rob the threshing-floors." This behavior is familiar to us from what is related about the Midyanim: "And so it was when Israel had sown, that Midyan and Amalek and the children

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of the east came up against them; and they encamped against them, and destroyed the produce of the earth as far as Aza, and left no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep, nor ox, nor ass. For they came up with their cattle and their tents, and they came like locusts for multitude; for both they and their camels were without number; and they entered into the land to destroy it" (*Shoftim* 6:3-5).

17[5] The root *yod-shin-ayin* also appears later with respect to David. See II *Shmuel* 8:6, 14.

18[6] David's inquiries of God are mentioned again below 30:8; II *Shmuel* 2:1; 5:19, 23.

19[7] The Ralbag proves his point from what is related in the war against Binyamin (*Shoftim* 20:17-35), where the second question receives the answer: "Go up against him" (v. 23), although the next day they are beaten, and only the third time is a clear answer received: "Go up; for tomorrow I will deliver them into your hand" (v. 28). This story is indeed difficult, and the commentators offer many different interpretations.

20[8] a) This verse is difficult for several reasons: First, the end of the previous chapter implies that Evyatar fled to David even before David went with his men to Ke'ila, when they were still deeper in the land of Yehuda. Second, why is this point mentioned here, and not before; already in the earlier verses, David inquired of God. The *Metzudat David* explains that "Ke'ila" means here "the territory of Ke'ila" and that the verse is brought here in order to explain what was stated above: "Since it was stated above: 'Therefore David inquired of the Lord,' therefore it says that Evyatar brought with him the ephod, and with that he made the inquiry." This is difficult, for verses which come to explain other verses usually appear before the explained verse and not after it; moreover, this verse seems to explain v. 9, in which Evyatar is explicitly mentioned.

It is possible that Evyatar is mentioned here because in verses 7-12 it will be explained how David was saved by virtue of the ephod, and therefore, in the end, the killing of the priests of Nov only hurt Shaul. This may be alluded to by the words "to David to Ke'ila;" as it were, Evyatar's entire coming down to Ke'ila was for the purpose of saving David.

b) The Radak explains that the combination, "an ephod came down in his hand," emphasizes the chance happening: "That is to say, the ephod came down by accident in his hand. Even though he brought it down, he did not do so intentionally, but rather when he took his things with him when he ran away, he was not careful about what he took and what he left, like a person who is running away. And God caused it that the ephod was by chance among his things. Therefore it says: 'it came down,' rather than 'he brought down.'"

21[9] This verse also seems to express irony regarding Shaul. It was also said in connection with the obligatory war against Amalek: "**And Shaul summoned** the people, and numbered them in Telaim..." (15:4). The use of the same word in our verse creates the impression that Shaul is going out once again in an obligatory war in defense of his people – "And Shaul summoned all the people to war, to go down to Ke'ila." Very quickly, however, it becomes clear that Shaul's measure was directed in an entirely different direction: "to besiege David and his men."

22[10] David's words clearly indicate a repair of his behavior in the Nov affair. David expresses concern that, once again, a city's inhabitants will suffer on his account, even though they extended him no assistance whatsoever.

23[11] This point also seems to be connected to the previous chapter (see previous note). God's answer seems to present the people of Ke'ila in a very negative light: If a fight breaks

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out in Ke'ila between Shaul and David, the people of Ke'ila will hand over David, who had delivered them from the Pelishtim, to Shaul, who had done nothing to save them. It seems, however, that this assumption is based on the fact that following what happened in Nov, the people of Ke'ila were afraid that they, too, would be accused of collaborating with David; therefore, were things to come to that point, they would hand David over to Shaul out of concern for their own lives.

24[12] In the continuation, the Gemara adds: "If the two questions are necessary, the two questions are answered. As it is stated: 'And David inquired of the Lord, saying, Shall I pursue after this troop? Shall I overtake them? And He answered him, Pursue; for you shall surely overtake them, and shall without fail recover all' (I *Shmuel* 30:8)." On the level of the plain sense of Scripture, however, the difference between that case and our case is not clear.

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