

THE BOOK OF *SHMUEL*

LECTURE 45: CHAPTER 23 (PART II) DAVID BETWEEN THE WILDERNESS OF ZIF AND EIN-GEDI Rav Amnon Bazak

I. The final meeting between David and Yonatan

Following the incident at Ke'ila, David resumes his flight. And then, all of a sudden, while David is hiding from Shaul, Yonatan arrives on the scene and meets with David for one last time.

(15) And David saw that Shaul was come out to seek his life; and David was in the wilderness of Zif in the wood.^{1[1]} (16) And Yonatan, Shaul's son, arose and went to David into the wood, and strengthened his hand in God. (17) And he said unto him, "Fear not, for the hand of Shaul my father shall not find you, and you shall be king over Israel and I shall be next unto you; and that also Shaul my father knows." (18) And they two made a covenant before the Lord; and David abode in the wood, and Yonatan went to his house.

This is the third covenant that Yonatan makes with David (after 18:3 and 20:16). What is special about this covenant is that it is made "before the Lord." Once again, we are witnesses to a phenomenon regarding the relationship between David and Yonatan that we have seen in previous chapters. On the one hand, Yonatan appears to speak from his heart, offering to serve as David's deputy some time in the future; on the other hand, there is no record of David's response, and what is more, Yonatan's offer, as we know, was never realized.

As we saw in chapter 20, Yonatan finds himself in a very difficult situation, torn between his loyalty to his father and his love for David. Yonatan's proposal could have worked itself out as the ideal combination of the house of Shaul and the house of David, and from a wider perspective – of Binyamin and Yehuda, the descendants of Rachel and Leah.^{2[2]} In order to

^{1[1]} What is "*chorsha*?" The Radak proposes two interpretations: The first possibility is that this is a reference to a forest, *choresh*; the second is that this is a place name, perhaps the forest of Cheret (see above 22:5). The difficulty with the second explanation is the definite article – *ba-chorsha* – although there are places in Scripture where place names are preceded by a definite article (see, for example, *Devarim* 6:16 [and the Ibn Ezra, ad loc.]; *Shofetim* 8:10; I *Shemuel* 15:4). The Radak explains that the reason for this is that the word is stressed *mil'el*, on the penultimate syllable, but he doesn't explain why it is stressed in this manner.

^{2[2]} The Ramban in his commentary to the Torah (*Bereishit* 49:10) discusses the difficulty of the kingdom of Shaul in light of the promise of kingship to the tribe of Yehuda: "The staff shall not depart from Yehuda, nor the scepter from between his feet," and especially in light of the question of what would have happened had Shaul

realize this unity, however, something more than a covenant would have been necessary. Here too, as in chapter 20, Scripture emphasizes the end of the meeting: "And David abode in the wood, and Yonatan went to his house." Yonatan ties his fate to that of Shaul, rather than joining with David, and he therefore will never realize his dream. As was noted earlier (lecture no. 40), Yonatan cannot be faulted for his tragic decision to remain on his father's side, but eventually this decision will exact a heavy price.

II. The structure of the verses

We now come to the account of Shaul's pursuit of David with the help of the people of Zif. We must first understand the problem arising from the order of the verses:

(15) And David saw that Shaul **was come out to seek his life**; and David was in the wilderness of Zif in the wood. (16) And Yonatan, Shaul's son, arose, and went to David... and Yonatan went to his house.

(19) **Then came up Ziffites to Shaul to Giv'a, saying**, "Does not David hide himself with us in the strongholds in the wood, in the hill of Chachila, which is on the south of Yeshimon? (20) Now therefore, O king, come down, according to all the desire of your soul to come down; and our part shall be to deliver him up into the king's hand." (21) And Shaul said, "Blessed be you of the Lord; for you have had compassion on me. (22) Go, I pray you, make yet more sure, and know and see his place where his haunt is and who has seen him there; for it is told to me that he deals very subtly. (23) See, therefore, and take knowledge of all the lurking-places where he hides himself, and come you back to me with the certainty, and I will go with you; and it shall come to pass, if he be in the land, that I will search him out among all the thousands of Yehuda."

(24) And they arose and went to Zif before Shaul; but David and his men were in the wilderness of Maon, in the Arava on the south of Yeshimon. (25) **And Shaul and his men went to seek him**. And they told David; wherefore he came down to the rock, and abode in the wilderness of Maon. And when Shaul heard that, he pursued after David in the wilderness of Maon.

The difficulty in understanding the order of events (especially the words in bold) is striking to the eye. Scripture first (verse 15) says that Shaul went out to seek David. This is followed by the meeting between David and Yonatan, who presumably slipped away at a certain point from Shaul's camp. Afterwards (verse 19), however, it is related that the Ziffites go up to Shaul in

not sinned. He proposes three possibilities: "Had he not sinned, his descendants would have been kings in Israel, but not over all of Israel... Perhaps he would have ruled over the tribes descending from his mother, over Binyamin, Efrayim and Menashe, because Yehuda and Efrayim are regarded as two nations in Israel. **Or else he would have reigned under the king of Yehuda.**" The third possibility is supported by what Yonatan says to David in our chapter.

Giv'a, without any mention that Shaul had gone back there; only later (verse 25) is a report given of Shaul's going with his men to seek David. How are we to understand these verses?

The Radak explains that verse 15 refers to what happened after the Ziffites went up to Shaul, and that the words, "And David saw that Shaul was come out to seek his life," relate to Shaul's going out after him in the wake of the information that he received from the Ziffites. From a chronological perspective, then, verses 15-18 should be found in the middle of verse 25. This is the way the verses should read when arranged in chronological order:

(19) Then came up Ziffites to Shaul to Giv'a, saying, "Does not David hide himself with us..." (21) And Shaul said, "Blessed be you of the Lord; for you have had compassion on me..." (24) And they arose, and went to Zif before Shaul; but David and his men were in the wilderness of Maon, in the Arava on the south of Yeshimon. *[(15) And David saw that Shaul was come out to seek his life; and David was in the wilderness of Zif in the wood. (16) And Yonatan Shaul's son arose, and went to David into the wood... and David abode in the wood, and Yonatan went to his house.]* (25)... wherefore he came down to the rock, and abode in the wilderness of Maon. And when Shaul heard that, he pursued after David in the wilderness of Maon.

Why weren't the verses written in this order? It seems that Scripture wishes to isolate the meeting between David and Yonatan from the rest of the narrative, and therefore it records that incident before the rest of the events. In this way, Scripture achieves two objectives: First, the drama of Shaul's pursuit of David is not cut off in the middle by the account of the meeting; and second, the impression is given that Yonatan joined Shaul in his pursuit. Had the verses been arranged in the order proposed above, the fact that Yonatan did not participate in the chase after David, but rather returned home, would have stood out. From the way that the verses are actually recorded, it is certainly possible to assume that Yonatan took part in the pursuit after David; thus, the problem of Yonatan's decision to remain on his father's side is further emphasized.

III. Shaul and the Ziffites

Whereas God attests to the fact that the people of Ke'ila will hand David over to Shaul, the attitude of the people of Zif toward David is expressed in a most explicit and practical manner. Zif is located in Yehuda (see *Yehoshua* 15:55),^{3[3]} and one might have expected that its people would support David. It is reasonable to assume, however, that, like the people of Ke'ila, the people of Zif were afraid for their lives in the aftermath of what happened in Nov, and they therefore preferred to show loyalty to Shaul lest they be accused of treason. This is also implied by the twofold mention of the fact that Shaul is the king:

^{3[3]} Zif has been identified with today's Tel Zif, south-east of Hebron.

(20) Now therefore, O **king**, come down, according to all the desire of your soul to come down; and our part shall be to deliver him up into the **king's** hand.

It should be noted that Scripture does not accuse all the people of Zif of taking part in this action, and says only, "Then came up Ziffites" – without the definite article – "the Ziffites." Presumably, there were people in Zif who were not pleased by the idea of handing over one of their fellow tribesmen, who was being pursued for no reason, into the hands of his pursuer.^{4[4]}

In any event, Shaul is moved by the Ziffites' offer:

(21) And Shaul said, "Blessed be you of the Lord; for you have had compassion on me."

In the previous chapter Shaul complained to his own tribesmen that "there is none of you that is sorry for me" (22:8); and now he enjoys the "compassion" of the people of Yehuda. These words, however, reflect the weakness of Shaul, who identifies the Ziffites' fear that Shaul would treat them as he had treated the people of Nov with "compassion." Once again, the idea of compassion seems to have been understood by Shaul in a problematic manner, after he had already stumbled in its regard in the past when he showed compassion to Amalek (see 15:3, 9).

In any event, Shaul turns to the Ziffites and coordinates the conduct of the chase with them, fully aware of David's proficiency at evading capture:

(22) "Go, I pray you, make yet more sure, and know and see his place where his haunt is, and who has seen him there; for it is told me^{5[5]} that he deals very subtly. (23) See therefore, and take knowledge of all the lurking-places where he hides himself, and come you back to me with the certainty,^{6[6]} and I will go with you;

4[4] *Tehillim* 54 notes in its heading that it was recited by David "When the Ziffites came and said to Shaul, 'Does not David hide himself with us?'" (*Tehillim* 54:2). As we have noted in the past (see at length, above, chapter 2, lecture no. 3, regarding Chana's prayer), the headings in *Tehillim* do not necessarily imply that the psalm was written for that occasion, but only that it was recited then. It is possible that it had been written on a previous occasion, under similar but not identical circumstances. In any event, it is clear that the main verse in the psalm – "For strangers are risen up against me, and violent men seek after my soul: they have not set God before them. Sela" (ibid. v. 5) – fits in with David's feeling that he was being persecuted.

5[5] The verse does not say who told this to Shaul, and according to the plain sense, Shaul means that this is what he had been told, as is suggested by Rashi. The Radak proposes an interesting explanation, according to which Shaul is saying that David himself had told him in the past about his ability to evade his enemies.

6[6] Much has been written about the expression, "*el nakhon*" (translated here as "with the certainty"), appearing only here and in the parallel passage below 26:4. All of the commentators understand the words in the sense of something that is clear and certain, but it is possible that it is a place name (similar to "the threshingfloor of Goren" mentioned in II *Shemuel* 6:6, although it is certainly not the same place, for

and it shall come to pass, if he be in the land, that I will search him out among all the thousands of Yehuda."7[7]

Shaul reveals here great energy, in contrast to the passivity that he revealed with respect to the Pelishtim both at the beginning of this chapter and in the earlier battles. It stands to reason that Shaul can still demonstrate determination, but the only thing that drives him to act in this manner is his fear of David, and not his obligation to protect Israel and deliver them from their enemies.

This too, however, has its limits:

(26) And Shaul went on this side of the mountain, and David and his men on that side of the mountain. And David made haste to get away for fear of Shaul; for Shaul and his men compassed8[8] David and his men round about to take them. (27) But there came a messenger9[9] unto Shaul, saying, "Haste you, and come; for the Pelishtim have made a raid upon the land."

Shaul reaches here a dramatic moment of decision. Thus far, his determined pursuit of David stood in contrast to his feebleness in his battles against the Pelishtim. At this point, however, these two struggles stand in a frontal contradiction that demands a decision: What is more important to Shaul – to continue his pursuit of David, or to fulfill his responsibility to protect Israel from the Pelishtim? Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that the Pelishtim's timing of their raid was determined by Shaul's concentrated effort

there we are dealing with the area of the city of David). This interpretation clarifies several points, including the contradiction, according to the accepted explanation, between the words of Shaul in verse 23: "See therefore, and take knowledge of all the lurking-places where he hides himself, and come you back to me with the certainty, and I will go **with you**," and what is stated in verse 24: "And they arose, and went to Zif **before Shaul**." If "Nakhon" is a place name, then it turns out that Shaul's intention in verse 23 is to establish a meeting place with the Ziffites in Nakhon; when the Ziffites went off in search of David, Shaul proceeded in the direction of Nakhon towards the meeting point. This reconstruction of the order of events is reasonable, for it may be presumed that Shaul would have drawn himself closer to the arena of action. Had he meant that the Ziffites should have reported to him in Giv'a, valuable time would have been lost, during which David could have hid himself elsewhere. For more on this issue, see the article of Rav E. Samet, in *Megadim* 9 and the responses to this article in nos. 10-11.

7[7] "The thousands of Yehuda" are the families of Yehuda (see above 10:19). It would appear from here that Shaul was prepared to undertake a careful search among the people of Yehuda, based on the suspicion that it is they who will provide David with support and cover.

8[8] The word "*oterim*" means, as Rashi explains: "Encompassing from one side to the other like a crown (*ateret*) that encompasses the head."

9[9] According to Rashi, the "*mal'akh*" in question was a "real angel," and not just a messenger. This issue was disputed in *Midrash Tehillim* (18, 7): "Rabbi says: This was an angel from heaven, as it is stated: 'And He sent from above, He took me' (*Tehillim* 18:17). Rabbi Yudan says: This was a messenger."

in the south, something for which Shaul bears responsibility. Will Shaul know how to assume responsibility for the situation?

(28) So Shaul returned from pursuing after David, and went against the Pelishtim; therefore, they called that place Sela-ha-Machleket.

At this point, Shaul successfully rises to the challenge and returns to his primary responsibility. Rashi offers a persuasive explanation of the expression: "Sela ha-Machloket:" "For Shaul's heart was divided into two, whether to go back and save his land from the hands of the Pelishtim, or to pursue and seize David." While on the level of the plain sense of the text, it may be possible to propose alternative explanations,^{10[10]} this explanation fits in well with the overall thrust of the story: Shaul's ability to overcome his own passions and direct his energies to the struggle that truly falls upon him to conduct. Thus, this gloomy story ends on a bright note that returns Shaul to the days of his youth.

(Translated by David Strauss)

^{10[10]} The Radak, for example, offers several other explanations of the name: 1) "For there they separated from each other;" 2) In the name of the *midrash* (*Midrash Tehilim*, see previous note) – "For there Shaul's mighty men argued about David. Some said: Until the son of Yishai is in our hands, we will not turn from him; while others said: The war on behalf of Israel comes first, for the son of Yishai will always be with us;" 3) "For when David and his servants passed that place, he and the six hundred men who were with him at that time would separate from his forces, go down from their horses and prostrate themselves saying: 'Blessed is He who performed a miracle for us in this place.'" As we suggested several times in the past, it is possible that the place was called by this name even earlier, but in the wake of the events the place-name was reinterpreted and assigned additional meaning. If this is correct, it is possible that the place was so named for geographical reasons, because of its smooth rocky surface (like *ha-har ha-chalak* in *Yehoshua* 11:17).