

THE BOOK OF *SHMUEL*

LECTURE 47: CHAPTER 25 NAVAL THE CARMELITE (PART I) Rav Amnon Bazak

I. "AND SHMUEL DIED"

The story of Naval the Carmelite is a ramified and complex affair on several counts, as we shall see in the lectures on this chapter. Let us open with the first verse in the chapter, about which a question may be raised regarding whether or not it should be seen as part of the story that follows:

(1) And Shmuel died; and all Israel gathered themselves together and lamented him and buried him in his house at Rama. And David arose and went down to the wilderness of Paran.1[1]

The commentators attempted to understand the connection between Shmuel's death and the events that follow. The Radak sees the report of Shmuel's death as the conclusion of the previous chapter; once Shaul conceded, "And now, behold, I know that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand" (24:20), Shmuel's prophecy was completed. The *Metzudat David*, in contrast, draws a connection between the two parts of the verse. He suggests that David was afraid that among those coming to eulogize Shmuel would be supporters of Shaul, who would pass through the Ein-Gedi region, and therefore he distanced himself to the wilderness of Paran.2[2]

It is also possible that the verse is connected to the story of Naval. But in order to understand the connection between the account of Shmuel's death and the story of Naval, we must first understand the significance of that story itself.

II. NAVAL

As part of the background information provided by Scripture, Naval and his family are described in two verses:

(2) And there was a man in Maon, whose possessions³[3] were in Carmel;⁴[4] and the man was very great, and he had three thousand

sheep, and a thousand goats; and he was shearing his sheep in Carmel. (3) Now the name of the man was Naval,^{5[5]} and the name of his wife Avigayil; and the woman was of good understanding, and of a beautiful form, but the man was villainous and evil in his doings; and he was of the house of Calev.^{6[6]}

Already at the beginning of the chapter, the two central characters are described in entirely different manners. On the one hand, we learn of the harsh character of Naval, and on the other hand of his wife Avigayil, who is described in purely positive terms. Without a doubt, Scripture will be judging Naval and his behavior in the continuation of the chapter in a negative light.

David hears about Naval's festive sheep-shearing event,^{7[7]} and sends his young men to him:

(4) And David heard in the wilderness that Naval was shearing his sheep. (5) And David sent ten young men, and David said unto the young men, "Get you up to Carmel, and go to Naval, and greet him in my name. (6) And thus you shall say: 'All hail!^{8[8]} And peace be both unto you, and peace be to your house, and peace be unto all that you have. (7) And now I have heard that you have shearers; your shepherds have now been with us, and we did them no hurt, neither was there anything missing unto them all the while they were in Carmel. (8) Ask your young men, and they will tell you; wherefore let the young men find favor in your eyes, for we come on a good day; give, I pray you, whatsoever comes to your hand, unto your servants, and to your son David.'"

David turns to Naval in a most courteous manner. He opens with a detailed peace greeting and then presents the facts and describes the assistance that he and his men had provided to Naval's shepherds, adding that this assistance can be verified: "Ask your young men, and they will tell you." He concludes with a request that is formulated in a soft and humble manner: "Give, **I pray you**, whatsoever comes to your hand, unto your servants, and to **your son** David." But this request is vigorously and crudely rejected by Naval:

(9) And when David's young men came, they spoke to Naval according to all those words in the name of David, and ceased.^{9[9]} And Naval answered David's servants, and said, "Who is David? And who is the

son of Yishai?10[10] There are many servants nowadays that break away every man from his master.11[11] (11) Shall I then take my bread, and my water, and my flesh that I have killed for my shearers, and give it unto men of whom I know not whence they are?"

The vulgar language that Naval uses, together with our previous knowledge that Naval was "villainous and evil in his doings," incline us in David's favor. But a question may be raised: At the bottom line, wasn't Naval right? Was there any basis for David's request to be provided with food from Naval's sheep-shearing celebration?

The answer to this question is given by a background character in the story – the young man who heard Naval's words and turns now to Avigayil:

(14) But one of the young men told Avigayil, Naval's wife, saying, "Behold, David sent messengers out of the wilderness to salute our master; and he flew upon them.12[12] (15) But the men were very good unto us, **and we were not hurt, neither missed we any thing**, as long as we went with them, when we were in the fields. (16) They were a wall unto us both by night and by day, all the while we were with them keeping the sheep."

The words in bold are the young man's repetition of what David said to Naval. The very fact that he confirms what David had said proves the justice of David's words. Moreover, the young man adds points that David never mentioned - that David's men had served as a protective wall for Naval's people. David had asked Naval to verify his words by asking his men; had Naval acted in that manner, he could not have said, "Who is David? And who is the son of Yishai?" Naval's men had benefited from the help provided by David's people, and David's men had understood from their behavior that, in the end, they would be appropriately rewarded for this assistance.13[13]

Naval's denial of the help given by David's men was indeed a villainous act, exactly as Avigayil interpreted his name: "Naval is his name, and villainy (*nevala*) is with him" (v. 25). It should be emphasized that the meaning of the word *naval* denotes "ungratefulness," as is stated in *Parashat Haazinu*, "Do you thus requite the Lord, O people who are *naval* and unwise" (*Devarim* 32:6), and as the Ramban writes there:

In my opinion, one who practices free benevolence is called *nadiv* (generous), and **one who requites evil to one who had acted benevolently toward him is called *naval*...** And therefore it was

said about Naval the Carmelite, "Naval is his name, and *nevala* is with him." For David had practiced great benevolence toward him and cared for everything that was his, whereas he did not want to repay him in kind, but rather he flew at his messengers and put him to shame.

It is quite possible that, from a formal legal perspective, Naval was not obligated to pay David; had David sued him in court, Naval might well have won the case. But despite this, and perhaps precisely because of this, Naval's action may be seen in a particularly severe light, owing to the immorality of his disregard for what David had done for him. Indeed, this evil and villainous man deserved what happened to him, as is reported at the end of the story:

(38) And it came to pass about ten days after, that the Lord smote Naval, so that he died.

Naval's death may be viewed as recompense for his villainous action, which presumably was merely "the straw that broke the camel's back" among his sins. "Jerusalem was destroyed only because they judged in it according to the law of the Torah" (*Bava Metzia* 30b), and the house of Naval was destroyed only because he did not view himself as obligated by moral demands, even if they lack legal standing according to Torah law.

III. NAVAL AND LAVAN

Scripture expresses its negative assessment of Naval in another way as well: by drawing a parallel between the relationship between David and Naval and another relationship between a rich householder and a worker – the story of Yaakov and Lavan. Let us first point out the parallels between the two stories:

1) In both cases, one person (Yaakov/David) watches over the flocks of another person (Lavan/Naval) with great dedication:

Thus I was; **in the day** the drought consumed me, and the frost **by night**. (*Bereishit* 31:40)

They were a wall unto us both **by night** and **by day**. (I *Shmuel* 25:16)

2) In both cases, the dedicated watchman emphasizes the fact that the flocks remained whole, no animals having been lost:

Your ewes and your she-goats have not cast their young, and the rams of your flock have I not eaten. That which was torn of beasts I brought not to you... (*Bereishit* 31:38-39)

And we did them no hurt, neither was there anything missing unto them. (I *Shmuel* 25:7)

3) In both cases, the watchman complains to the owner of the flocks that he

had deprived him of his fitting salary:

And you have changed my wages ten times. (*Bereishit* 31:41)

And he has returned me evil for good. (I *Shmuel* 25:21)

4) Both quarrels reach their climax while the sheep are being shorn:

And Lavan went **to shear his sheep**. Now Rachel had stolen the images that were her father's. And Yaakov outwitted Lavan the Aramean, in that he told him not that he fled. (*Bereishit* 31:19-20)

And David heard in the wilderness that **Naval was shearing his sheep**. And David sent ten young men... (I *Shmuel* 25:4-5)

5) In both cases, God intervenes after **ten days** have passed:

And it was told Lavan **on the third day** that Yaakov was fled. And he took his brethren with him, and pursued after him **a seven days'** journey... And God came to Lavan the Aramean in a dream by night... (*Bereishit* 31:22-24)

And it came to pass **about ten days after** that the Lord smote Naval, so that he died. (I *Shmuel* 25:38)

It should be noted that *Chazal* noted this correspondence between Naval and Lavan in several places:

"On the death of Laben" (*Tehillim* 9:1) – On the death of Naval. The letters of Lavan are like the letters of Naval. And why is it written Laben and not Naval? Because he is similar in his actions to Lavan. (*Midrash Tehillim*, psalm 9, letter 17 [ed. Buber, p. 46])

Rabbi Yudan said in the name of Rabbi Simon: Naval and Lavan are the same, the letters of the one are like the letters of the other. Just as Lavan was a swindler, so Naval was a swindler. (*Midrash Tehillim*, psalm 14, letter 3 [ed. Buber, p. 57])¹⁴[14]

Among other things, this correspondence sharpens the point mentioned above. It would seem that there is a significant difference between Naval and Lavan: Lavan was obligated to pay Yaakov, for he had hired Yaakov to work for him based on an explicit agreement reached between the parties – as opposed to Naval, who apparently was in no way obligated to David. It is precisely this correspondence that teaches us that there was no moral justification for Naval's behavior, and that the relationship that developed between David and his men and Naval's men should have been no less obligating than explicit hiring. Ignoring this obligation falls into the

category of deception: "Just as Lavan was a swindler, so Naval was a swindler."

In this lecture, we dealt with Naval's conduct, but we have not yet touched upon David's behavior in the affair. The various aspects of David's conduct will be the subject of our next lecture.

(Translated by David Strauss)

15[1] According to Masoretic tradition, this verse constitutes a section of its own, one that is unconnected to what appears before and after it.

16[2] This explanation is difficult from a geographical perspective, but this is not the place to discuss the matter at greater length.

17[3] The word "*ma'asehu*" refers to agricultural labor and flocks, as in *Shemot* 23:16: "And the feast of ingathering, which is at the end of the year, when you have gathered in your labors (*ma'asekha*) out of the field;" and in *Shoftim* 19:16: "And, behold, there came an old man from his work (*ma'asehu*) out of the field at evening."

18[4] The Radak suggests two possible ways of understanding the word "Carmel:" 1) A place that is sown or planted with trees, a sense in which the word is used in several places (e.g., *Yeshayahu* 32:15, "And the wilderness be a fruitful field [*carmel*], and the fruitful field [*carmel*] be counted as a forest"). 2) The name of a place located near Maon, as stated in *Yehoshua* 15:55: "Maon, Carmel, and Zif and Yuta."

19[5] The name "Naval" is strange: it clearly does not have the meaning that Avigayil assigned to it later in the story - "Naval is his name, and villainy (*nevala*) is with him" (v. 25) – for it is not Scripture's practice to designate its characters with typological names. It seems, therefore, that the original meaning of the name is "sage, noble" (like the Arabic name Nabil).

20[6] Various explanations have been offered for this term, *Kalibi*, some that follow the plain sense and some that are homiletic in nature. Rashi suggests that Naval was a descendant of Kalev (his source is *Midrash Shmuel*); the *Metzudat David* writes that the reference is to Kalev the son of Yefuneh, but it is possible that the reference is to Kalev the son of Chetzron, who is also called *Keluvi* (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 2:9) and whose descendants also included Maon (ibid. vv. 42-45). The Ralbag proposes a more homiletic explanation: "Owing to his cruelty, he had the quality of dogs (*kelev*), who hate the other members of their species and bark at them whenever they come close and will not allow them to eat of what is found in the house, even though this will not detract from their own food. This shows that Naval's evil stemmed from his miserliness." According to this explanation, there is special significance to what David says below in verse 22: "If I leave of all that pertain to him by the morning light so much as **one who urinates against a wall**." See also the Radak.

21[7] Sheep-shearing was accompanied by festive rejoicing, as is evident from our chapter, which speaks of a "good day" (*yom tov*) (v. 8) and of "a feast... like the feast of a king" (v. 36). The celebrations that accompanied this day are also evident in the story of Avshalom and Amnon (see II *Shmuel* 13:23-28).

22[8] Even though this expression, "*ko le-chai*," is very common, its meaning is somewhat obscure, and the commentators have proposed various ways in which to understand it. As for the plain sense of the text, the Radak offers a most convincing explanation: "May you have good like this all the days of your life."

23[9] The word "*va-yanuchu*" is quite surprising. Rashi explains that even though they were exhausted from the trip, they quickly reported David's words, and only afterwards did they stop to rest. There is a difficulty with this explanation, for Naval's harsh response implies that they would not have been given the opportunity to rest in his house. The Radak suggests that Scripture means that they ceased talking until they received Naval's response. This, too, is difficult, for what does this word add? Surely at the end of their words, they ceased to talk! The Ralbag suggests that the order of events was just the opposite. Owing to their familiarity with Naval's negative personality, "they didn't speak these words immediately upon their arrival, but rather they rested and waited for the proper time to speak to him of this matter, and then they told him everything that David had put in their mouths." Of course, this explanation is also difficult, for the word, *va-yanuchu*, appears after their report to Naval, not before.

24[10] We have already noted in the past that calling a person by the name of his father ("the son of Yishai") expresses scorn. See above 20:26, 30, 31; 22:7, 8, 9, 13.

25[11] This is also an expression of vulgar contempt for David. David had delivered Israel from the hands of Golyat, he had saved the people of Ke'ila, and he was known to and loved by the entire nation – "But all Israel and Yehuda loved David; for he went out and came in before them" (18:16). Had Naval related harshly to David out of loyalty to King Shaul, it might have been possible to judge him favorably. But Naval does not relate to this at all (and as a man of Yehuda, it may be presumed that he did not have a particularly strong feeling of loyalty to Shaul). Rather, he expresses scorn for David, alluding to his distress and without relating to the difficult situation in which he was found owing to no fault of his own.

26[12] This word, *va-ya'at*, is also difficult. It is clear from the context that it means that he sent them away in a crude and vulgar manner. The *Rishonim* offered several suggestions as to the precise meaning of the verb, *va-ya'at*: sending away, scolding, falling upon, and the like.

27[13] This is also evident from David's reaction to Naval's words: "Now David had said, 'Surely in vain have I kept all that this fellow has in the wilderness, so that nothing was missed of all that pertained unto him; and he has returned me evil for good'" (v. 21). David notes here the special protection that he had provided to Naval's men and the expectation that he would be rewarded for this assistance. The words, "*le-sheker* have I kept," can be understood in the sense of "in vain," but it can also be understood in a more literal sense; in other words, the protection was granted on the basis of a promise, explicit or implied, that David would be rewarded, and in the end it became clear that this promise was a lie.

28[14] The correspondence between Lavan and Naval is based, among other things, on the fact that the two names are comprised of the same letters arranged in the opposite order. We find already in the Torah that names are interpreted on the basis of words spelled in the opposite order. For example, "But Noach found favor (*chen*) in the eyes of the Lord" (*Bereishit* 6:8); "And Er, Yehuda's firstborn was wicked (*ra*) in the eyes of the Lord" (*Bereishit* 38:7).
