

## THE BOOK OF *SHMUEL*

### LECTURE #48: NAVAL THE CARMELITE (PART II)

Rav Amnon Bazak

#### I. DAVID'S REACTION

In the previous lecture, we noted the severity of Naval's behavior; in despicable fashion, he totally disregarded the help that David's men had given his own men and conducted himself in the manner of Lavan, who repeatedly deceived Yaakov despite Yaakov's devotion to him. Let us now examine David's reaction to Naval's refusal of his request:

(13) And David said unto his men, "Gird you on every man his sword." And they girded on every man his sword, and David also girded on his sword; and there went up after David about four hundred men, and two hundred abode by the baggage<sup>1[1]</sup>...

(21) 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. (22) God do so unto the enemies of David,<sup>2[2]</sup> and more also, if I leave of all that pertain to him by the morning light so much as one male."<sup>3[3]</sup>

All of our criticism of Naval's conduct notwithstanding, David's reaction appears to be disproportionate and unjustified, for Naval's behavior does not seem to have justified the death sentence and the destruction of his entire house. It is highly doubtful that there is room to impose human punishment for immoral conduct of this type, and certainly not to decree execution and utter eradication.<sup>4[4]</sup> This is precisely Avigayil's point, her central argument being that killing Naval and his household would forever remain as a stain on David's past after he ascends the throne:

(30) "And it shall come to pass, when the Lord shall have done to my lord according to all the good that He has spoken concerning you and shall have appointed you prince over Israel (31) that this shall be no stumbling block unto you, nor offence of heart unto my lord, either that you have shed blood without cause, or that my lord has found redress for himself..."<sup>5[5]</sup>

---

Indeed, in the end, David is persuaded by the justice of Avigayil's words, he retracts his original plan, and admits to Avigayil that she had saved him from committing a serious sin:

(33) "And blessed be your discretion, and blessed be you, that has kept me this day **from blood-guiltiness**, and from finding redress for myself with my own hand."

Similarly, David says later in the story:

(39) And when David heard that Naval was dead, he said, "Blessed be the Lord, who has pleaded the cause of my reproach from the hand of Naval and **has kept back His servant from evil.**"

In any event, David's initial plan was to strike at Naval, and had it not been for Avigayil's intervention, he would have carried out his design. Scripture's negative assessment of David's initial intention is also evident when we contrast it to David's approach in the previous chapter, chapter 24, where his strength and courage manifest themselves in the fact that no harm came to Shaul when he fell into David's hands. In both chapters, David stands before a similar phenomenon: Shaul, who concedes to David – "For you have rendered unto me **good**, whereas I have rendered unto you **evil**" (24:17); and Naval, about whom David says – "And he has returned me **evil for good**" (25:21). However, whereas in chapter 24, David leaves judgment to God, asserting: "The Lord therefore be judge, and give sentence between me and you, and see, and **plead my cause**, and deliver me out of your hand" (24:15), in our chapter, David wishes to execute judgment on his own; only in the end does he thank God who had "**pleaded the cause of my reproach** from the hand of Naval" (v. 39).

Attention should also be paid to the manner in which Scripture describes the development of David's responses after hearing of Naval's refusal and his vulgar talk. His initial reaction is resolute: "And David said unto his men, 'Gird you on every man his sword'" (v. 13). Afterwards, in verses 14-20, Scripture describes what is transpiring in Naval's house, and especially Avigayil's preparations. In the end, in verse 21, Scripture goes back and relates: "Now David had said, 'Surely in vain have I kept all that this fellow has in the wilderness...'" This account presents thought that comes only after action, and perhaps also David's attempt to quiet his conscience while going down to Naval's house after having arrived at such a rash decision.

## II. THE SIMILARITY BETWEEN DAVID AND ESAV

Another way that Scripture expresses its judgment of David is by inverting the parallel to the story of Yaakov and Esav. Thus far, Scripture had described David as paralleling Yaakov, and Naval as corresponding to Lavan. Now Scripture likens Avigayil to Yaakov in the story of his encounter with Esav, whereas David is portrayed as paralleling Esav!

The correspondence between David's meeting with Avigayil and the encounter between Yaakov and Esav finds expression in the following points:

- 1) David and Esav both advance with a band of four hundred men:

And, behold, Esav came, and with him four hundred men. (*Bereishit* 33:1)

And there went up after David about four hundred men. (I *Shmuel* 25:13)

- 1) The manner in which Avigayil approaches David corresponds to the manner in which Yaakov had approached Esav:

And he said to his servants, "Pass over before me... And say, moreover, 'Behold, your servant Yaakov is behind us.'" (*Bereishit* 32:17-20)

And she said unto her young men, "Go on before me; **behold, I come after you.**" (I *Shmuel* 25:19)

- 2) Yaakov makes extensive use of the submissive term, "your servant," which stands in contrast to "my lord:"

Then you shall say, "They are **your servant's**... Behold, **your servant** Yaakov is behind us." (*Bereishit* 32:17-21)

**My lord** knows... Let **my lord**, I pray you, pass over.... (*Bereishit* 33:13-14)

This is also the wording used by Avigayil:

Upon me, **my lord**, upon me be the iniquity; and let **your handmaid**, I pray you, speak in your ears, and hear you the words of **your handmaid**. Let not **my lord**, I pray you, regard this base fellow. (I *Shmuel* 25:24-25)

- 3) Both Yaakov and Avigayil refer to the gift that each of them bring as a blessing ("*berakha*"):

Take, I pray you, **my blessing that is brought to you.** (*Bereishit* 33:11)

And now **this blessing which your servant has brought unto my lord.** (I *Shmuel* 25:27)

Without a doubt, this correspondence is not to David's credit, and it fits in with the general impression left by the chapter that David's initial reaction was inappropriate. In this reaction, David adopted "the hands of Esav," rather than "the voice of Yaakov."

It is possible that Scripture already alludes to this at an earlier stage. Scripture's first description of Esav is: "And the first came out **red**" (*Bereishit* 25:25), and this is also the first description of David – "And he brought him in. Now he was **red**, and with beautiful eyes, and goodly to look upon" (I *Shmuel* 16:12). Scripture might thereby be alluding that the beautiful-eyed and goodly to look upon David also has a heated red temperament that requires constraint. This idea seems to underlie the following *midrash*:

When Shmuel saw the red David, as it is written: "And he sent and brought him in. Now he was red" (16:12), he became afraid and said: He too will shed blood like Esav. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: "With beautiful eyes" (ibid.) – Esav killed on his own discretion, but this one will kill with the consent of the *Sanhedrin*. (*Bereishit Rabba* 63, 8)

And, indeed, eventually the difference between Esav and David becomes manifest; David knows how to stop himself in time and admit his error.

We can now return to the question with which we had opened the previous lecture. Is there a connection between the mention of Shmuel's death and the incident involving Naval? It may be possible to find the connection in this very point. As long as Shmuel was still alive, he wielded a strong influence on David's personality, as is evident from his attitude toward Shaul in chapter 24. The fact that in chapter 25 David conducts himself with respect to Naval in an entirely different manner<sup>6</sup> may stem from the fact that Shmuel had died; with his passing, David lost some of his self-restraint.

### III. AVIGAYIL

Let us now move on to another central character in this story: Avigayil. As stated, it is Avigayil who prevents David from sinning with unnecessary bloodshed. Let us now examine the stratagems that Avigayil employs in order to convince David to set aside his plans.

Let us first consider the refreshments that Avigayil prepares to bring to David:

(18) Then Avigayil made haste, and took two hundred **loaves**, and two bottles of **wine**, and five **sheep ready dressed**, and five measures of parched corn, and a hundred clusters of raisins, and two hundred cakes of figs, and laid them on asses.

The words used to describe Avigayil's present stand in contrast to those used by Naval when he refused David's request:

---

(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?

To what Naval had refused to give David, Avigayil adds parched corn, raisins, and cakes of figs. She sends a very generous gift as the first step in appeasing David.

Later, when Avigayil sees David, she quickly exercises measures that express total submission, in absolute contrast to the belittling attitude of Naval:

(23) And when Avigayil saw David, she made haste, and alighted from her ass, and fell before David on her face, and bowed down to the ground. (24) And she fell at his feet...

Now, after having taken these preparatory steps, Avigayil opens with the most important speech of her life – a speech in which she pleads for her life and the life of her family. Let us follow the tactics that Avigayil uses in her speech:

... and she said, "Upon me, my lord, upon me be the iniquity; and let your handmaid, I pray you, speak in your ears, and hear you the words of your handmaid. (25) Let not my lord, I pray you, regard this base fellow, even Naval; for as his name is, so is he: Naval is his name, and villainy is with him; but I your handmaid saw not the young men of my lord, whom you did send. (26) Now therefore, my lord, as the Lord lives, and as your soul lives,<sup>7</sup>[7] seeing the Lord has withheld you from blood-guiltiness, and from finding redress for yourself with your own hand, now therefore let your enemies, and them that seek evil to my lord, be as Naval. (27) And now this present which your servant has brought<sup>8</sup>[8] unto my lord, let it be given unto the young men that follow my lord.<sup>9</sup>[9] (28) Forgive, I pray you, the trespass of your handmaid; for the Lord will certainly make my lord a sure house,<sup>10</sup>[10] because my lord fights the battles of the Lord; and evil is not found in you all your days. (29) And though man be risen up to pursue you, and to seek your soul, yet the soul of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of life<sup>11</sup>[11] with the Lord your God; and the souls of your enemies, them shall he sling out, as from the hollow of a sling.<sup>12</sup>[12] (30) And it shall come to

---

pass, when the Lord shall have done to my lord according to all the good that He has spoken concerning you, and shall have appointed you prince over Israel (31) that this shall be no stumbling block unto you, nor offence of heart unto my lord, either that you have shed blood without cause, or that my lord has found redress for himself. And when the Lord shall have dealt well with my lord, then remember your handmaid."

In terms of content, Avigayil's words can be divided into three main themes:

- 1) Avigayil accepts upon herself responsibility, but justifies herself with the argument that she had not seen David's young men. The very bringing of the "blessing" to David is the simplest repair of what had happened.
- 2) Avigayil diminishes the image of Naval and presents him as one who is not even worthy of discussion.
- 3) Avigayil emphasizes that if David kills Naval, it will be David who, in the end, will suffer, for it is inappropriate for the eventual king to have unnecessary bloodshed recorded on his resume.

Avigayil's speech is a literary masterpiece, and among other things, attention should be paid to the following:

- 1) Avigayil refers to David as "my lord" fourteen times and seven times she mentions the name of God. In this way she expresses her submission to David, as well as the centrality of God in the framework of the moral arguments that she presents.
  - 2) Avigayil refers to herself as "your handmaid" five times.
  - 3) Avigayil refers to future events as if they had already occurred, and thus she removes the sting from the dilemma that has not yet been resolved. This is the way to understand, "Now therefore, my lord, as the Lord lives, and as your soul lives, seeing the Lord **has withheld you** from blood-guiltiness, and from finding redress for yourself with your own hand;" in other words, Avigayil relates to David as if he had already decided not to kill Naval. In order to strengthen David's resolve, she adds: "Now therefore let your enemies, and them that seek evil to my lord, be as Naval," as if Naval had already been punished.<sup>13</sup>[13] Talk of David's kingdom as a given fact adds to this atmosphere, and thus Avigayil alludes that David must relate to what is happening from a royal perspective.
-

4) Avigayil expresses veiled empathy for David's situation, being pursued by king Shaul: "And though man be risen up to pursue you, and to seek your soul." Interestingly, she uses the word "man" (*adam*), the very term that David had used on various occasions when he turned to Shaul and referred to him in this indirect manner as a show of respect to him. This is the word he used before he went out to fight Golyat, when he calmed Shaul, saying: "Let no **man's** heart fail within him," (17:32), as well as in the previous chapter: "Why do you hearken to **men's** words, saying, 'Behold, David seeks your hurt?'" (24:9).

5) Avigayil hides her main argument that killing Naval would constitute unnecessary bloodshed in the many words of respect and blessing that she heaps upon David. She does not sound this argument directly, but merely alludes to it. Thus, she avoids forcing David to face this argument head on.

Indeed, Avigayil's impressive speech succeeds in persuading David to accept her position. The conclusion of this dramatic event will be discussed in next week's lecture.

(Translated by David Strauss)

---

14[1] We have skipped verses 14-20, which relate what is happening at the same time with Avigayil, wife of Naval. These verses cut off the account of David's reaction to Naval's words. The reason for this will be discussed below.

15[2] This expression deviates from the fixed formula, "God do so unto me, and more also" (II *Shmuel* 3:35; 19:14; I *Melakhim* 2:23; 20:10; II *Melakhim* 6:31; *Rut* 1:17; and in the same sense, I *Shmuel* 3:17; 14:44; 20:13; II *Shmuel* 3:9), the basic meaning of which is an oath that if a person fails to fulfill a promise, God will bring "so" unto him, namely, a certain evil which the speaker did not even wish to mention owing to a cautious attitude toward speech, which is very characteristic of biblical speakers. Why then does it say here "unto the enemies of David?" The simple answer seems to be that of the *Metzudat David* – "Since, in the end, he retracted, therefore Scripture says, 'unto the enemies of David.'" In other words, David swore with the usual formulation, but since in the end he failed to fulfill his oath and evil should have befallen him, Scripture reformulated his words out of respect and wrote "unto the enemies of David."

16[3] The extremism of this expression ("*mashtin ba-kir*") is evident from the fact that outside of this story, it only appears in the prophecies of doom regarding the end of the royal houses of Yerov'am (I *Melakhim* 14:10), Basha (15:11) and Ach'av (21:21; II *Melakhim* 9:8). The meaning of this expression is not clear. Most of the commentators cite the accepted explanation that the reference is to a dog, based on the *Yerushalmi, Sanhedrin* 2:3 (20b). The Ralbag explains that it refers to a small child who does not know how to keep himself clean. See also *Da'at Mikra* on this verse.

---

17[4] The commentators try to explain why David thought that Naval should be punished so severely. The Radak writes (v. 13): "Because he rebelled against the king, and was liable for the death penalty, for all of Israel already knew that David had been anointed king, and Naval treated him with contempt and called him a servant" (see also the Ralbag). It is difficult, however, to see in Scripture that this was the problem. On the contrary, it might be argued that Naval shared the feeling that David had rebelled against king Shaul, who was pursuing him.

18[5] That is, that he has taken the law into his own hands.

19[6] As the question was formulated by the Ralbag: "It is astonishing how David agreed to kill Naval and his house, but he did not agree to kill Shaul even though he was pursuing him."

20[7] The *mesora* distinguishes between "*chai Ha-Shem*" (see, for example, above 14:39; 19:6; 20:3) and "*chey*" regarding a human being (*Bereishit* 42:15-16; I *Shmuel* 1:26; 17:55). The latter is an oath "by the life of the person," whereas the former is an oath by the fact that God lives (see also Targum Yonatan).

21[8] The word *hevi* ("brought" in the masculine) seems to be a shortened form for *hevi'a* (feminine). But Rabbenu Yeshaya explains: "This is an abbreviated verse – 'which the lad of your servant has brought.'" The Radak adds: "And it says 'your servant' without mentioning the lad, because in essence it was she who did the bringing."

22[9] The commentators note that this wording expresses respect: "Out of respect she did not say, 'let it be given unto you,' because due to his station, this would be considered very little, and so she said, 'let it be given to the young men'" (*Metzudat David*).

23[10] The words, "sure house" (*bayit ne'eman*) are evidence of Avigayil's spiritual status, for she uses a formulation that will appear later in Natan's vision: "And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever (*ve-ne'eman betcha...*)" (II *Shmuel* 7:16).

24[11] As opposed to the prevalent use of this expression (*tzerura bi-tzeror ha-chayyim*) in reference to the dead (the source being the Gemara in *Shabbat* 153b), here the plain meaning of the expression is just the opposite, protection of a person during his lifetime.

25[12] The plain meaning of this expression is: God will distance David's enemies as stones are distanced by way of a sling (similar to what David did in his battle against Golyat – see 17:49).

26[13] There is an interesting comparison to the Kushite's words to David following the death of Avshalom: "And the Kushite answered, 'Let the enemies of my lord the king, and that rise against you to do you hurt, be as that young man is'" (II *Shmuel* 18:32). There, however, the words are uttered with respect to the death of Avshalom, which already happened. The commentators to our chapter explain the wording of our verse in various ways. Rashi

---

understands Avigayil's words as words of prophecy; the Radak, on the other hand, understands them to mean that Naval no longer has the power to hurt David.