

THE BOOK OF *SHMUEL*

LECTURE 57: CHAPTER 31 THE DEATH OF SHAUL

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I. "THEREFORE SHAUL TOOK HIS SWORD, AND FELL UPON IT"

Shaul courageously goes out to a war, the dire results known to him already from the outset. And indeed, the fighting does not go well for Israel, blow follows blow, and the battle comes to a quick and tragic end:

(1) Now the Pelishtim fought against Israel,^{1[1]} and the men of Israel fled from before the Pelishtim, and fell down slain in mount Gilboa. (2) And the Pelishtim followed hard upon Shaul and upon his sons; and the Pelishtim slew Yonatan, and Avinadav, and Malkishua, the sons of Shaul. (3) And the battle went sore against Shaul, and the archers overtook him;^{2[2]} and he was in great anguish by reason of the archers. (4) Then said Shaul to his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword, and thrust me through therewith; lest these uncircumcised come and thrust me through, and make a mock of me." But his armor-bearer would not; for he was sore afraid. Therefore Shaul took his sword and fell upon it. (5) And when his armor-bearer saw that Shaul was dead, he likewise fell upon his sword and died with him. (6) So Shaul died, and his three sons, and his armor-bearer, and all his men, that same day together.

The account begins by describing how the men of Israel fled from the Pelishtim; it continues with the fact that many of them were slain; then it reports about the death of the three sons of Shaul; and finally the war reaches Shaul himself.^{3[3]} The archers find Shaul, "and he was in great anguish (*va-yache*) by reason of the archers." The word "*va-yache*" can be understood in two ways. It may be related to the word "*chalchala*," "fear" (*Metzudat Zion*); but it seems more probable that it is related to the idea of "*choli*," "sickness." In other words, Shaul had already been hit by one of the archers' arrows, so that he knew that death was near. This also explains his fear that he would be abused by the uncircumcised, for he had been wounded. This is precisely what happened to Ach'av in his final battle:^{4[4]} "And a certain man drew a **bow** at a venture, and smote the king of Israel between the joints of the

armor. So he said to the driver of his chariot, 'Turn your hand, and carry me out of the host; for I am **badly wounded** (*hachaleti*)'" (I *Melakhim* 22:34).5[5]

This explanation changes the way we understand Shaul's final act. This was not a desperate act of running away and committing suicide, but rather a calculated act undertaken by one who knows that his fate has been sealed, not only on the spiritual level, but also on the practical level. Shaul's falling on his sword, knowing that the alternative was death involving severe abuse at the hands of the Pelishtim, was an act of courage.

Similarities have been pointed out between Shaul's death and the death of Avimelekh the son of Gid'on; in particular, the account in our chapter recalls what is stated there: "Then he called hastily to the lad, his armor-bearer, and said to him, 'Draw your sword, and slay me, so that men should not say of me, A woman slew him.' And his lad pierced him, and he died" (*Shofetim* 9:54). There is, however, a striking difference between the two stories: Whereas Avimelekh's armor-bearer did not hesitate to do as commanded, Shaul's armor-bearer refused to carry out the order and kill Shaul.

This point sharpens a central lesson emerging from our chapter. We first met Shaul in chapter 9, when he went out with his lad in search of his father's lost asses. We discussed at length Shaul's character as it is portrayed in that story – both the positive aspects and the problematic ones - his lack of resolution and his being drawn after his lad. It was Shaul's lad who persisted in the search and brought Shaul to Shmuel, and the rest, as we all know, is history. Symbolically, it might be suggested, that the first time that Shaul manages to display stronger leadership and greater courage than his lad was also the last time – at the hour of his death. How very tragic for a person to be in a situation in which he must display courage by falling on his sword; but in these circumstances, this act involved a repair.

Of course, this repair was part of a broader process of repair, which we already noted at the end of chapter 28 (lecture no. 54). From the moment that Shaul was informed by Shmuel in Ein-Dor that he would die in war, he did not abandon the campaign, even though he already knew the outcome. Shaul's last day was then a day of repair and courage.

With the conclusion of the story of king Shaul, I wish to cite what Josephus says about his courage, words that are particularly meaningful precisely in light of the author's own biography:

But I shall speak further upon another subject, which will afford me all opportunity of discoursing on what is for the advantage of cities, and people, and nations, and suited to the taste of good men, and will encourage them all in the prosecution of virtue; and is capable of showing them the way of acquiring glory and everlasting fame; and of

imprinting in the kings of nations, and the rulers of cities, great inclination and diligence of doing well; as also of encouraging them to undergo dangers, and to die for their countries, and of instructing them how to despise all the most terrible adversities. And I have a fair occasion offered me to enter on such a discourse by Saul the king of the Hebrews; for although he knew what was coming upon him, and that he was to die immediately, by the prediction of the prophet, he did not resolve to fly from death, nor so far to indulge the love of life as to betray his own people to the enemy, or to bring a disgrace on his royal dignity; but exposing himself, as well as all his family and children, to dangers, he thought it a brave thing to fall together with them, as he was fighting for his subjects, and that it was better his sons should die thus, showing their courage, than to leave them to their uncertain conduct afterward, while, instead of succession and posterity, they gained commendation and a lasting name. Such a one alone seems to me to be a just, a courageous, and a prudent man; and when any one has arrived at these dispositions, or shall hereafter arrive at them, he is the man that ought to be by all honored with the testimony of a virtuous or courageous man. For as to those that go out to war with hopes of success, and that they shall return safe, supposing they should have performed some glorious action, I think those do not do well who call these valiant men, as so many historians and other writers who treat of them are wont to do... But those only may be styled courageous and bold in great undertakings, and despisers of adversities, who imitate Saul... But when men's minds expect no good event, but they know beforehand they must die, and that they must undergo that death in the battle also, after this neither to be affrighted, nor to be astonished at the terrible fate that is coming, but to go directly upon it, when they know it beforehand, this it is that I esteem the character of a man truly courageous. Accordingly, this Saul did, and thereby demonstrated that all men who desire fame after they are dead are so to act as they may obtain the same. (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book VI, 340)

Little needs to be added, except for what we noted above: Even when Shaul fell on his sword, he continued in his bravery; on the verge of death, Shaul regained his early strengths. Tragically, it was too late for these strengths to do anything else but help him die with dignity.

II. EPILOGUE

Shaul's fall in battle has an epilogue, which is connected to a certain degree with what was stated above. Scripture first records the results of the war:

(7) And when the men of Israel that were on the other side of the valley and they that were beyond the Jordan saw that the men of Israel fled and that Shaul and his sons were dead, they forsook the cities, and fled; and the Pelishtim came and dwelt in them.

These verses express the failure of Shaul's kingdom. Prior to his ascending the throne, at the end of the period of Shmuel, Scripture had emphasized: "And the hand of the Lord was against the Pelishtim all the days of Shmuel. And the cities which the Pelishtim had taken from Israel were restored to Israel" (I *Shmuel* 7:13-14). Now it becomes clear that Shaul's kingdom ended with the people of Israel in a worse state than when it began. This is objective reality, which all of our respect for the way in which Shaul ended his life cannot change.

Nevertheless, the story ends with a certain sense of relief. Shaul's death does not bring an immediate end to Israel's troubles, for the Pelishtim abuse his body and the bodies of his sons:

(8) And it came to pass on the morrow, when the Pelishtim came to strip the slain, that they found Shaul and his three sons fallen in mount Gilboa. (9) And they cut off his head,^{6[6]} and stripped off his armor, and sent into the land of the Pelishtim round about, to carry the tidings unto the house of their idols^{7[7]} and to the people. (10) And they put his armor in the house of the Ashtarot; and they fastened his body to the wall of Bet-Shan.^{8[8]}

But after reaching this low point, things begin to look up:

(11) And when the inhabitants of Yavesh-Gil'ad heard concerning him that which the Pelishtim had done to Shaul, (12) all the valiant men arose, and went all night, and took the body of Shaul and the bodies of his sons from the wall of Bet-Shan; and they came to Yavesh, and burnt them there.^{9[9]} (13) And they took their bones, and buried them under the tamarisk-tree^{10[10]} in Yavesh, and fasted seven days.

The people of Yavesh-Gil'ad remembered Shaul's kindness, when he was the only one to succeed in marshalling the nation to help them in their difficulties when Nachash the Amonite rose up against them (above, chap. 11).^{11[11]} That incident was the high-point of Shaul's career, when he acted out of faith and with determination, bringing Israel a great victory over their enemies. After Shaul's death, it becomes clear that his mark on the history of the Jewish people was not only one of failure, especially in everything related to Israel's struggle with the Pelishtim. There were those who remembered

Shaul for his great victory over Nachash the Amonite, and felt a moral need to express their gratitude for Shaul's having come to their rescue. In the end, Shaul merited to be buried in a Jewish grave, and a "*shiva*"¹²[12] was even held on his behalf and fasts were observed for his death.¹³[13]

We hereby conclude this series of lectures on the book of I *Shmuel*. The division of the book of *Shmuel* into two is rooted in the Septuagint, and has no Jewish source. The division into two books does not even seem to have been made in the right place; the first chapter of II *Shmuel* is a direct continuation of our chapter, and if we are to divide the book, the second part should start with chapter 2 of II *Shmuel*. But since we have already reached the quota for the year's lectures, we have decided to stop here.

As I did last year, I wish to thank all the participants in this series, especially those who have raised questions and offered comments over the course of the year. I will, of course, be happy to relate to any question or comment in the future as well. My special thanks to R. Boaz Kalush for his careful and effective editing.

With blessings of Torah and *mitzvot*,
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(Translated by David Strauss)

14[1] As Rashi notes, the wording, "*U-Pelishtim nilchamim be-Yisrael*," "Now the Pelishtim fought against Israel" (instead of "*Va-yilachamu Pelishtim be-Yisrael*") is "like one who says: Let us go back to the first matter." The narrative goes back to what was stated in chapter 28, after the interruption of chapters 29-30, which dealt with David.

15[2] The word order is a bit difficult – "*va-yimtza'uhu ha-morim anashim ba-kashef*." If the meaning is: "*va-yimtza'uhu anashim ha-morim ba-kashef*" (as suggested by the Rid and *Metzudat David*), why doesn't it say this? In the parallel passage in *Divrei Ha-yamim*, it says: "*Va-yimtza'uhu ha-morim ba-kashef*" (I *Divrei Ha-yamim*).

16[3] This structure is reminiscent of the first defeat at the hands of the Pelishtim at the beginning of the book: "And the Pelishtim fought, and Israel was smitten, and they fled every man to his tent; and there was a very great slaughter; for there fell of Israel thirty thousand footmen. And the ark of God was taken; and the two sons of Eli, Chofni and Pinchas, were slain" (4:10-11).

17[4] There are many similarities between the two kings, Shaul and Achav, both of whose lives were filled with ups and downs. This is not the forum in which to expand upon these

similarities, which is important for understanding the story of Achav more so than understanding that of Shaul. For our purposes, the existence of a broad correspondence between the two kings reinforces our understanding of this verse.

18[5] See also II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 35:23: "And the archers shot at king Yoshiyahu; and the king said to his servants, 'Get me away; for I am **grievously wounded** (*hachaleti*).'"

19[6] In the parallel chapter in *Divrei Ha-yamim*, the cutting off of Shaul's head is omitted, apparently out of respect (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 10:8-9).

20[7] We discussed the practice of bringing booty to a temple at length above (chapter 5, lecture no. 9).

21[8] In the parallel in *Divrei Ha-yamim*, it says: "And they put his armor in the house of their gods, and fastened his head in the temple of Dagon" (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 10:10). The Radak, who systematically points out contradictions between *Divrei Ha-yamim* and the books of *Shmuel* and *Melakhim*, argues there that there is no contradiction between the two accounts, for the Pelishtim put Shaul's body on the wall of Bet-Shan, and his head in Bet-Dagon. It may also be argued that the idolatrous temple of Dagon was in the wall of Bet-Shan. Nevertheless, it seems that the contradictions between *Divrei Ha-Yamim* and the books of the prophets is a broader problem that must be confronted in a more general manner; we should not content ourselves with finding a local resolution for each contradiction.

22[9] The words, "And they burnt them there," are very difficult. They seem to refer to the corpses of Shaul and his sons, but this is problematic both substantively and in light of what is said in the next verse, which describes the burial of their bones. *Divrei Ha-yamim* ignores the whole matter, and merely writes: "They arose, all the men at arms, and took away the body of Shaul and the bodies of his sons and brought them to Yavesh, and buried their bones under the terebinth in Yavesh, and fasted seven days" (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 10:12). The Radak suggests the possibility that since the flesh had begun to rot, they burned the flesh and buried only the bones. Rashi writes that the verse is not referring to the burning of bones, but to a fire which was lit to mark the death of a king (about this practice, see *Yirmiyahu* 34:5 and II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 15:14, although there it may be talking about the burning of incense).

23[10] Regarding this point as well there is a difference between what is described here and what is described in *Divrei Ha-yamim*. There, it says that the bones were buried "under the terebinth in Yavesh" (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 10:12). Here, too, the Radak reconciles the contradiction by suggesting (v. 13 in our chapter) that *eshel* is a generic term for trees, whereas *eila* is a specific tree. See our comment above, note 8.

24[11] There (lecture no. 19) we discussed at length the connections between the inhabitants of Binyamin and the inhabitants of Yavesh-Gil'ad, and the special connection to Shaul.

25[12] The Radak notes that the seven days that the people of Yavesh-Gil'ad fasted correspond to the seven days that the people of Yavesh-Gil'ad had requested that Nachash the Amonite give to decide whether or not they would surrender to him, during the course of which Shaul arrived to help them.

26[13] The story, however, is still not finished, and it only ends after another debt is repaid. Following the incident involving the Giv'onites at the end of the book of *Shmuel* (II *Shmuel* 21), Shaul's burial is completed, and he merits to be buried alongside his forefathers: "And the bones of Shaul and Yonatan his son they buried in the country of Binyamin in Tzela, in the tomb of Kish his father" (ibid. v. 14).
