

## THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

### LECTURE 61: CHAPTER 2 (2)

#### THE BATTLE BY THE POOL AT GIV'ON (PART I)

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##### I. The General Picture

In last week's lecture, we discussed the split in the kingdom: David rules over Yehuda in Hebron, while Ish-Boshet the son of Shaul rules over Israel from Machanayim.<sup>1</sup>[1] We also saw that Scripture points an accusatory finger at Avner for this split. The next section deals with one of the consequences of Avner's actions: the tragic account of the battle by the pool in Giv'on, which began as a battle to be fought by representatives of each side and limited to twenty-four soldiers, and ended with great bloodshed and the deaths of three hundred and eighty fighters. This section (2:12-3:1), which comprises one consecutive narrative, cannot be taught in the order of the verses, and therefore the reader is asked to read the entire account first so that we may discuss it in its totality.

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1 [1] In the previous lecture, we raised the question of why God first sent David to Hebron. A similar question may be raised regarding why Avner moved Ish-Boshet specifically to Machanayim, which is located on the eastern side of the Jordan, between the tribal territories of Menasheh and Gad (see *Yehoshua* 13:26,30). It is possible that the move to the other side of the Jordan stemmed from a tactical consideration – distance from the Philistines. Moreover, as was noted in the previous lecture, Shaul had extensive connections with the people of Yavesh-Gil'ad, and perhaps with the tribe of Gad in general. To this we might add that Machanayim also had religious significance: It was there that the angels appeared to Yaakov (*Bereishit* 32:2-3), and it is included among the cities of the Levites (*Yehoshua* 21:36).

The general picture emerging from this section is that of a triumph of David's camp, under the leadership of Yoav ben Tzeruya, over Ish-Boshet's camp, headed by Avner ben Ner. This victory is already described in a relatively early stage of the story:

**(17)** And the battle was very sore that day; and Avner was beaten, and the men of Israel, before the servants of David.

Later in the story, the victory finds expression in the great gap in the number of casualties on the respective sides:

**(30)** And Yoav returned from following Avner; and when he had gathered all the people together, **there lacked of David's servants nineteen men and Asa'el.** **(31)** But the servants of David had smitten of Binyamin, even of Avner's men - **three hundred and threescore men died.**

The verse with which the story concludes also testifies that, in practice, this battle comprised one chapter of a larger totality that reflects the consequences of this specific campaign in a broader context:

**(3:1)** Now there was long war between the house of Shaul and the house of David; and David waxed stronger and stronger, but the house of Shaul waxed weaker and weaker.

At first glance, we can say that this story describes Avner ben Ner's first punishment. He who caused the division of the kingdom was defeated together with his men and lost hundreds of his troops in battle, a war that would never have been fought were it not for this split.

## **II. Yoav's part**

At a closer look, however, it seems that Yoav does not come out clean from this story either. This follows mainly from two aspects of the story:

1) Scriptural accounts of war usually note only the number of casualties among the defeated, but not those among the victors.<sup>2[2]</sup> In our chapter, however, Scripture also points out the number of casualties in Yoav's camp, one of which was of special significance:

**(30)** And Yoav returned from following Avner; and when he had gathered all the people together, there lacked of David's servants nineteen men and Asa'el.

Asa'el was, of course, not an ordinary soldier. Besides being the brother of Yoav ben Tzeruya –his death thus constituting a heavy personal blow to Yoav – Asa'el had unique martial skills: "And Asa'el was as light of foot as one of the roes that are in the field" (v. 18). Moreover, Asa'el was one of David's twelve section heads, and he was in charge of twenty-four thousand people, whose role was to maintain David for one month a year (see I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 27:7). The story of Asa'el's death, together with the note of the death of another nineteen men, express the fact that Yoav's victory was not complete, and that he too returned from battle with a sense of grief and mourning.

2. At a certain stage in the course of the battle, Avner turns directly to Yoav and taunts him:

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2 [2] Let us bring an example from another civil war, the war between Israel and Binyamin at the end of the book of *Shofetim*. This is the way Scripture describes the first two days of battle, when the people of Binyamin were winning: "And the children of Binyamin came forth out of Giv'a, and destroyed down to the ground of the Israelites on that day twenty and two thousand men... And Binyamin went forth against them out of Giv'a the second day, and destroyed down to the ground of the children of Israel again eighteen thousand men." (*Shofetim* 20:21-25). Scripture does not mention how many fell from Binyamin, even though it is difficult to assume that they suffered no casualties whatsoever.

(26) Shall the sword devour for ever?<sup>3</sup>[3] Know you not that it will be bitterness in the end? How long shall it be, then, before you bid the people return from following their brethren?

These words raise questions: Surely it was Avner who had proposed: "Let the young men, I pray you, arise and play before us" (v. 14). How, then, can he now come with complaints to Yoav?

And indeed, that is what Yoav answers him - "You started:"

(27) And Yoav said: "As God lives, if you had not spoken, surely then only after the morning the people would have gone away, every one from following his brother.

We must still understand: What did Avner mean, and why did he accuse Yoav?

### III. Giv'on

In order to understand the problematic nature of Yoav's conduct, we must examine the beginning of the story:

(12) And Avner the son of Ner and the servants of Ish-Boshet the son of Shaul went out from Machanayim to Giv'on. (13) And Yoav the son of Tzeruya and the servants of David went out; and they met together by the pool of Giv'on, and sat down, the one on the one side of the pool, and the other on the other side of the pool.

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3 [3] This expression, which is quite common, can be understood in two ways: It may be argued (and so it seems from the Radak) that the word "*tokhal*" refers to Yoav, and Avner's question was as follows: Will you "eat" your sword forever? In other words, is your sword your fixed food? But it is also possible that the word "*tokhal*" refers to the sword, and the verse has a more general meaning: "Shall the sword devour of us, one of the other, forever?" (*Metzudat David*)

It should not be assumed that the meeting of the two armies in Giv'on was by chance. The verse's formulation in the past perfect (*yatz'u*), rather than in the simple past (*va-yetz'u*),<sup>4[4]</sup> implies that Yoav ben Tzeruya went out first in the direction of Giv'on, and when Avner heard about this, he too headed there together with his men. Thus, the struggle revolved around the question of control of Giv'on. We must, therefore, explain: What was the importance of Giv'on?

It should first be noted that Giv'on is located in the tribal territory of Binyamin (see *Yehoshua* 18:25), and therefore Yoav's presence there is not natural and seems even provocative. As for the importance of the city, we can point to two distinctive features:

1) At a later stage in the days of David, we find the *Mishkan* in Giv'on, as is mentioned in the story dealing with the threshing floor of Aravna: "For the *Mishkan* of the Lord, which Moshe made in the wilderness, and the altar of burnt-offering were at that time in the high place at Giv'on" (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 21:29). When did the *Mishkan* arrive in Giv'on? It is reasonable to assume that this took place following the destruction of Nov at the hand of Shaul (see I *Shmuel* 22). As *Chazal* said, "When Shmuel the Ramatite died, Nov was destroyed and they came to Giv'on" (*Zevachim* 118b). If indeed the *Mishkan* was located in Giv'on at this time, we can easily understand that the issue of control over the place is of prime importance – just as during the period of the next division between the kingdoms of Yehuda and Israel, following the rebellion of Yerov'am, control over a holy site was a central issue, which led Yerov'am ben Nevat to build the golden calves (see I *Melakhim* 12).

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4 [4] The past tense is most often expressed by forms such as "*va-yomer*," "*va-yelekh*," "*va-yikach*," and the like, followed by the subject: "*va-yomer Hashem*" (God said), "*va-yelekh Moshe*" (Moshe went), "*va-yikach Korach*" (Korach took). The forms "*yomar*," "*yelekh*," and "*yikach*" are future forms, but the addition of the letter *vav* at the beginning of the word turns them into past forms ("*vav ha-hipukh*" or "*vav ha-mehapekhet*," "the inverting *vav*"). In contrast, the past perfect – which is used to describe what happened before something else happened – begins with the subject which is followed by forms like "*amar*," "*halakh*," and "*lakach*" (the common form of the past tense today). For example, "And the man knew Chava his wife, and she conceived, and bore Kayin" (*Bereishit* 4:1), and Rashi, ad loc.: "Already before the previous matter, before he sinned and was banished from the Garden of Eden;" "Now the Lord had revealed unto Shemuel a day before Shaul came, saying" (I *Shemuel* 9:15).

It may be added that Giv'on was already perceived as an important city when it was inhabited by the Giv'onites – "Because Giv'on was a great city, as one of the royal cities, and because it was greater than Ai" (*Yehoshua* 10:2). And like Hebron, Giv'on too had a historical-religious background, in that it was the city in which a great miracle had taken place: "Sun, stand you still upon Giv'on; and you, Moon, in the valley of Ayalon" (*ibid.* 12).

2) Moreover, Giv'on was closely connected to Shaul's family. We learn from the book of *Divrei Ha-yamim* that Shaul's family had lived in Giv'on for generations: "**And in Giv'on there dwelt the father of Giv'on**, Ye'i'el, whose wife's name was Ma'akha; and his first-born son Avdon, and Tzur, and Kish, and Ba'al, and Ner, and Nadav... And Ner begot Kish; **and Kish begot Shaul**" (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 9:35-39).<sup>5[5]</sup> Hence, by going to Giv'on, Yoav entered into an area that was clearly identified with the house of Shaul.

It stands to reason that Yoav wanted to "demonstrate his presence" in Giv'on, the great city and site of the *Mishkan*, despite its strong connection to Shaul's family. When Avner heard of Yoav's intentions, he quickly headed there together with his men. The two camps stood opposite each other, and one can feel the tense atmosphere alluded to in v. 13:

... And they met together by the pool of Giv'on, and sat down, the one on the one side of the pool, and the other on the other side of the pool.

Now we can understand the criticism that is also directed at Yoav in this chapter. While David is trying to unify the kingdom through peaceful means, Yoav adopts a violent and aggressive approach. He goes to Giv'on to demonstrate control and ownership of the place, which has, as we have seen, great importance from various perspectives. This provocation was superfluous, and it is reasonable to assume that it was done without the consent of David, who is not mentioned anywhere in the story. Now we can well understand Avner's argument: "Know you not that it will be bitterness in the end? How long shall it be then, before you bid the people return from following their brethren?" This argument does not relate to the battle itself, but

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<sup>5 [5]</sup> Shaul's family's settling in Giv'on is likely connected to what is reported at the end of the book regarding the breaking of the covenant that Shaul had made with the Giv'onites and the famine that ensued as a punishment: "It is for Shaul, and for his bloody house, because he put to death the Giv'onites" (21:1). For more on the connection between Shaul and the Giv'onites, see our *shiur* on chapter 4.

to what preceded it – Yoav's very arrival in Giv'on. Avner claims that Yoav should have known that no good would come of this provocation, which would force Avner to arrive at the site, and that things were liable to get out of control. Therefore, the responsibility for everything that happened afterwards falls upon Yoav, at least from Avner's perspective.

In any event, the two sides set themselves one against the other at the pool in Giv'on, and neither is ready "to blink" and leave.

#### IV. The Game that ends in a Dangerous draw

Now we can understand Avner's strange proposal: "Let the young men, I pray you, arise and play before us." Avner, in effect, proposes a way to resolve the conflict, revolving around the demonstration of presence in and control of the place. It is reasonable to assume that it was Avner's intention that the one whose men would emerge victorious would remain there for the time being, and the loser would leave. This proposal to resolve the standoff – "And they sat down, the one on the one side of the pool, and the other on the other side of the pool" (v. 13) – is very similar to Golyat the Philistine's proposal to conduct a battle to be fought by representative of each side, a proposal that was raised in a similar situation of an unresolved standoff: "And the Philistines stood on a mountain on the one side, and Israel stood on a mountain on the other side" (I *Shmuel* 17:3). Avner obtains Yoav's agreement and representatives of both sides present themselves for battle:

(15) Then they arose and passed over by number: twelve for Binyamin, and for Ish-Boshet the son of Shaul, and twelve of the servants of David.<sup>6</sup>[6]

It stands to reason that the number of soldiers on each side – twelve – is not coincidental. Since this battle reflects the struggle for leadership of the

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6 [6] The asymmetry in the verse emphasizes the tribal quality of Avner's representatives: "Twelve for **Binyamin**, and for Ish-Boshet" – the volunteers in Avner's camp were all of the tribe of Binyamin. This is understandable, first and foremost, because of their connection to the house of Shaul. It seems, however, that they volunteered for this battle because they took Yoav's action – his penetration along with his men into their tribal territory – as a personal insult.

entire people of Israel, with its twelve tribes, it is symbolic that each camp sends out this number of people.

However, the idea to resolve the conflict in this way did not succeed:

(16) And they caught every one his fellow by the head, and thrust his sword in his fellow's side; so they fell down together; wherefore that place was called Chelkat-Ha-Tzurim,7[7] which is in Giv'on.

It is possible that Scripture intentionally describes the situation in ironic fashion. The fighters who are lined up one against one each hold a sword in one hand and the head of his opponent in the other, and together they sink their swords in each other's bodies. In this way, Scripture expresses its negative judgment of Avner's problematic proposal, to conduct a "game" based on the lives of soldiers.8[8] *Chazal* say:

Why was Avner killed?... R. Yehoshua ben Levi said: Because he turned the blood of young men into a game. (*Yerushalmi, Pe'a* 1:1)

In any event, this battle of the champions ended in a draw, and in the wake of this, the "game" turned into a tragedy of bloodshed:

(17) And the battle was very sore that day....

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7 [7] According to the Radak, the expression stems from the word "*tzur*" in the sense of strength, that is to say, the place where the mighty fought. R. Yeshayahu, however, writes: "The meaning of the word '*tzurim*' is like 'Make you knives of flint (*tzurim*)' (*Yehoshua* 5:2)... and because they were all killed by the sword, it is called '*Chelkat ha-Tzurim*,' that is to say, those killed by the sword."

8 [8] This account is reminiscent of what is said regarding Gid'on's war against Midyan: "And the Lord set **every man's sword against his fellow**, even throughout all the host" (*Shofetim* 7:22). It might be possible to infer from here that also in our chapter God interceded and brought about the negative results.



This formulation, which appears nowhere else with respect to any battle fought in Scripture, testifies to the severity of the consequences of this "game." After the two sides saw the blood flowing, matters heated up, and a full-fledged war broke out between the two sides.

As was noted above, the primary responsibility for this war is cast upon Avner, who split the kingdom, and in our story proposed that awful "game," which ended as it did. For this, Avner was punished, as is stated in the continuation of the verse:

... and Avner was beaten, and the men of Israel, before the servants of David.

Nevertheless, as we saw above, Yoav, who behaved provocatively and also responded to Avner's "game" proposal, does not come out clean from this battle either.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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