

THE BOOK OF II SHMUEL

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LECTURE 63: CHAPTER 3 (2)

AVNER CROSSES OVER TO DAVID'S CAMP

I. THE CONFLICT BETWEEN AVNER AND ISH BOSHET

The story of Avner's decision to cross over to David's camp opens with a verse describing the situation in Ish-Boshet's house:

(6) And it came to pass, while there was war between the house of Shaul and the house of David, that Avner showed himself strong in the house of Shaul.

This verse implies that Avner solidified his position as the strong man in Ish-Boshet's kingdom – something which, in effect, stood at the foundation of the entire kingdom. In the previous lectures, we noted Ish-Boshet's weakness and the fact that it was Avner who established his kingdom. It seems, however, that at a certain stage, even Ish-Boshet began to feel uncomfortable with the presence of such a powerful and authoritative person, who was – at least formally – subordinate to him. Indeed, at a certain point, Ish-Boshet's patience lapses, and he comes to Avner with complaints:

(7) Now Shaul had a concubine whose name was Ritzpa, the daughter of Aya; and he said to Avner, “Why have you gone in unto my father's concubine?”

Before we consider the claim itself, let us note the literary device that Scripture employs: "And he said to Avner" – who? Anyone who reads the verse quickly is liable to answer: Shaul! Clearly the reference is to Ish-Boshet, but to our great surprise, his name has not been mentioned for tens of verses. It stands to reason that by formulating this verse as if Ish-Boshet's name was erased from it, Scripture wishes to express its belittling attitude toward the man. Scripture uses this device in several other places, one of which is in the continuation of our story: "And he could not answer Avner another word, because he feared him" (v. 11). In this way we get the impression that Ish-Boshet has become "erased."

Let us now consider the claim itself: What does Ish-Boshet want from Avner? Are we dealing here with a complaint about Avner's morality or spiritual values? It stands to reason that the complaint is made on an entirely different plain. In several places in Scripture, we find sons cohabiting with their fathers' concubines in order to proclaim thereby that they are the heirs to the throne. The most striking example is, of course, Avshalom, who under Achitofel's advice, sleeps with his father's concubines on the roof before all of Israel (see below 16:20-22). Similarly, we can understand Shlomo's anger at Adoniya after he asked Bat-Sheva to ask Shlomo to give him Avishag the Shunamitess as a wife (*I Melakhim* 2:13-25). This apparently also explains Reuven's action when he slept with Bilha, his father's concubine (*Bereishit* 35:22). Thus, Ish-Boshet comes with a complaint against Avner - he is trying to strengthen his position through the symbolic act of cohabiting with his Shaul's concubine.

This claim enrages Avner:

(8) Then Avner was very wroth for the words of Ish-Boshet, and said, "Am I a dog's head that belongs to Yehuda?¹[1] This day do I show kindness unto the house of Shaul your father, to his brethren, and to his friends, and have not delivered you into the hand of David, and yet you charge me this day with a fault concerning this woman. **(9)** God do so to Avner, and more also, if, as the Lord has sworn to David, I do not even so to him; **(10)** to transfer the kingdom from the house of Shaul, and to set up the throne of David over Israel and over Yehuda, from Dan even to Be'er-Sheva."

1 [1] Avner describes what happened in the lowest possible terms: Ish-Boshet relates to him as a dog – and not just any dog, but a dog belonging to Yehuda.

Avner does not deny that he had relations with Ritzpa the daughter of Aya; what bothers him is the interpretation that Ish-Boshet attached to this step. In effect, Avner argues against Ish-Boshet as follows: It was I who raised you to the throne at that critical moment when I could have turned you over to David. You should have understood and accepted this "arrangement," that whereas you are the official king, it is I who decides things in this kingdom. I am comfortable with this arrangement, for I am not Shaul's son as you are, and in great measure, this is also the best possible arrangement that you could have reached. Now, instead of understanding and internalizing that your kingdom's entire existence depends on me, you accuse me of trying to undermine your kingship?!

It is reasonable to assume that it is not only on account of this insult that Avner decides to abandon Ish-Boshet. He certainly already noticed how the house of Shaul was sinking and the house of David was on the rise. Ish-Boshet's words served as the "last straw," and for Avner this insult made the situation irreversible. Accordingly, Avner proclaims in Ish-Boshet's ears his decision to move over to David's camp and to hand over to him the kingdom over all of Israel.

Avner's words reveal a negative point about himself. When he declares, "As the Lord has sworn to David, I do not even so to him," Avner attests to the fact that he is aware of God's oath to David.^{2[2]} Thus, it becomes clear that in his innermost being, Avner knew all along that whatever he had done until this point was contrary to the will of God.

In any case, Ish-Boshet, the non-person, responds to Avner's words with total shock:

^{2 [2]} It seems that Avner, who clung to Shaul while he chased after David, heard Shaul say to David things like: "And now, behold, I know that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand" (1 *Shmuel* 24:20), and he was aware of Shmuel's prophecy to Shaul that the kingdom would be removed from him and given to someone else. Moreover, it seems that this idea was widespread among the people. Yehonatan also said to David: "And you shall be king over Israel... and that also Shaul my father knows" (ibid. 23:17). Avigayil also said to David: "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" (ibid. 25:30).

(11) And he could not answer Avner another word, because he feared him.

It seems that this response only sharpens Scripture's negative assessment of him. If this is the way Ish-Boshet reacts to Avner's words, why did he see fit from the outset to confront him? Ish-Boshet's inability to understand the situation is a central feature in the one action of Ish-Boshet recorded in Scripture.

Thus, in the end, we receive a rather negative picture of the two people who split the kingdom: Ish-Boshet, a weak king who lacks the wisdom to rule, and Avner, who only now remembers to act in accordance with God's will, and this too for personal reasons. It is no wonder, then, that the house of Shaul continues to sink against the backdrop of the rise of the house of David.

II. MIKHAL

In any case, it is clear that Avner's proposal fits in with David's aspirations. As we saw in the previous chapters, David aimed at unifying the kingdom of Israel through peaceful means – and here Avner all but serves him a unified kingdom on a silver platter.

Indeed, David responds to Avner in the affirmative, but presents him with a single request:

(13) And he said, "Well; I will make a league with you; but one thing I require of you, that is, you shall not see my face, except you first bring Mikhal, Shaul's daughter, when you come to see my face.

At the same time, David directs this request to the official king – Ish-Boshet:

(14) And David sent messengers to Ish-Boshet, Shaul's son, saying, "Deliver me my wife Mikhal, whom I betrothed to me for a hundred foreskins of the Philistines."

We already dealt at length with the root of the complicated and problematic relationship between David and Mikhal (see our lectures on chap. 18 and on the end of chap. 25 of I *Shmuel* [lectures 36 and 49]). In brief, we will mention that from the very beginning, this relationship rested on shaky foundations: Mikhal's one-sided love, on the one hand,^{3[3]} and David's interest to "marry into the king's family,"^{4[4]} on the other. This situation could not last forever, and indeed, while Shaul was pursuing David and David was wandering in the wilderness, the connection between David and Mikhal was severed. David marries two wives, Avigayil and Achinoam, and Shaul gives his daughter Mikhal to Palti the son of Layish (I *Shmuel* 35:42-44). Now David asks that Mikhal, who had been taken from him without justification, be returned to him.

Consider that in the two different requests – the one to Avner and the other to Ish-Boshet – David offers two different explanations for his request. When he turns to Avner, he emphasizes that Mikhal is "the daughter of Shaul," and this is well-understandable; David asks for Mikhal as part of the process that he is conducting with Avner – the unification of the kingdoms of Yehuda and Israel. It is clear that the return of Mikhal will strengthen David's standing in the eyes of Israel, for in this way he once again becomes the son-in-law of the previous king, and following the deaths of Shaul's sons – with the exception of the weak Ish-Boshet – David is effectively Shaul's natural heir.

When, on the other hand, he turns to Ish-Boshet, David presents his demand in the name of justice: "Deliver me my wife Mikhal, whom I betrothed to me for a hundred foreskins of the Philistines." In this way, David wishes to emphasize that he does not want Mikhal to be returned to him merely in indirect fashion, as part of the conflict between Avner and Ish-Boshet, but rather in manifest manner, and therefore the official ruler – Ish-Boshet, Mikhal's brother – must take part in the repair of the injustice that Shaul committed against David when he took her away from him.

3 [3] Mikhal is the only woman about whom Scripture attests that she loved a man. We already noted (lecture no. 26, I *Shmuel*) the great similarity between David and Mikhal's wedding and the wedding of Yaakov and Rachel, and that it is precisely this parallel that emphasizes the main difference between the two stories: Yaakov loved Rachel, whereas David does not return Mikhal's love.

4 [4] This expression repeats itself four times in I *Shmuel* 18, and thus clarifies the necessity that David sees in this marriage.

There is something missing in both requests: David does not demand Mikhal's return based on feelings of love, or even feelings of gratitude toward her. David's requests follow from entirely different considerations, unrelated to his relationship with Mikhal.

What is Scripture's stance regarding David's request? The answer to this question may be learned from the following account:

(15) And Ish-Boshet sent and took her from her husband, even from Paltiel the son of Layish. **(16)** And her husband went with her, weeping as he went, and followed her to Bachurim. Then said Avner unto him, "Go, return;" and he returned.

The touching description of Paltiel ben Layish's weeping is undoubtedly intended to stir up empathy towards him and criticism of David. Even if David acts out of legitimate motives, the bottom line is that his action involves injury to an individual.

Moreover, it is possible that David is punished for this step later in the book. When he runs away from Avshalom, David arrives in the very place where Mikhal was taken away from Paltiel ben Layish, and there he encounters Shimi ben Gera:

And when king David came to Bachurim, behold, there came out thence a man of the family of the house of Shaul, whose name was Shimi, the son of Gera; he came out, and kept on cursing as he came. And he cast stones at David, and at all the servants of king David; and all the people and all the mighty men were on his right hand and on his left. And thus said Shimi when he cursed, "Begone, begone, you man of blood, and base fellow; the Lord has returned upon you all the blood of the house of Shaul, in whose stead you have reigned; and the Lord has delivered the kingdom into the hand of Avshalom your son; and, behold, you are taken in your own mischief, because you are a man of blood..." So David and his men went by the way; and Shimi went along on the hillside over against him, and cursed as he went, and threw stones at him, and cast dust. (II *Shmuel* 16:5-8, 13)

The parallel between the two stories taking place in Bachurim is evident: David caused Paltiel to "go weeping" ("*halokh u-vakho*"), and he is punished by way of Shimi who "goes cursing" ("*halokh va-yekalel*");⁵[5] David caused injury to Mikhal the daughter of Shaul, and in corresponding fashion Shimi ben Gera cast stones at him, cursing him for the harm he caused the house of Shaul.⁶[6] This picture completes the critique of David's step alluded to in our chapter.

Nevertheless, highlighting the weeping of Paltiel ben Layish also emphasizes the fact that Mikhal did not cry. What was Mikhal thinking when she was being taken to David? Did she really believe that he suddenly began to love her?

In chapter 6, we will once again meet Mikhal and see how this sad matter of the relationship between David and Mikhal ends.

III. AVNER'S COVENANT

After completing the first condition – the return of Mikhal – Avner now begins to fulfill the second promise that he had made to David – turning all of Israel to him:

(17) And Avner had communication with the elders of Israel, saying, "In times past you sought for David to be king over you; (18) now then do it; for the Lord has spoken of David, saying, 'By the hand of My servant

5 [5] I once composed a "*midrash*" to this story: When David took Mikhal from Paltiel ben Layish, Paltiel would go ahead weeping, and each and every tear that fell to the ground turned into a stone; and Shimi ben Gera later picked up these stones and cast them at David. While this "*midrash*" is a figment of my imagination, it seems to me that it reflects the plain sense of the Scriptural text.

6 [6] Though Shimi ben Gera accused David of being responsible for the deaths of the people of the house of Shaul, this accusation was not justified, as we shall see in the coming chapters. It seems, however, that the embarrassing situation in which David finds himself, being accused of causing harm to the house of Shaul, is connected to the injury that he caused in our chapter.

David I will save My people Israel out of the hand of the Philistines, and out of the hand of all their enemies."7[7] (19) And Avner also spoke in the ears of Binyamin; and Avner went also to speak in the ears of David in Hebron all that seemed good to Israel, and to the whole house of Binyamin.

These verses reveal another aspect of the split of the kingdom. Avner's remarks to the elders imply that they had already asked him to set David as king over them; and it stands to reason that Avner is referring to the period following the death of Shaul. Thus, it becomes clear that already then the elders of Israel inclined to accept David's aspiration to establish a united kingdom. Avner split the kingdom not only in opposition to David's turning to the people of Yavesh-Gil'ad, as we saw in chapter 2, but also in opposition to the desires of the elders of Israel. Now, in any event, Avner tells the elders that the time has come to appoint David as king over all of Israel.

After obtaining the agreement of the elders of Israel, Avner approaches the "hard core" of Shaul's supporters – the people of Binyamin – and obtains their agreement as well. He then comes to David with the report that his proposal was accepted both by the people of Israel and the entire tribe of Binyamin. David greets him with favor:

7 [7] This verse raises a substantive difficulty and also a linguistic difficulty, the two possibly being connected. Substantively, we do not find up until now that God said that David would deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines. Linguistically, there is a difficulty in the words, "By the hand of My servant David *hoshi'a* (lit., "He saved") My people Israel," for it should have read, "*oshi'a*" ("I will save"). It seems, therefore, that Avner is logically combining together two facts. The deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines was originally Shaul's task: "Tomorrow about this time I will send you a man out of the land of Binyamin, and you shall anoint him to be prince over My people Israel, and he shall save My people out of the hand of the Philistines" (I *Shmuel* 9:16). Since Shaul did not deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines, and since David was chosen to replace Shaul, the logical conclusion is that David will deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines, and that it was about him that this prophecy was stated. Thus, Avner attributes to David a citation from a prophecy that was originally said about Shaul.

(20) So Avner came to David to Hebron, and twenty men with him.^{8[8]} And David made Avner and the men that were with him a feast. (21) And Avner said unto David, "I will arise and go, and will gather all Israel unto my lord the king, that they may make a covenant with you, and that you may reign over all that your soul desires." And David sent Avner away; and he went in peace.

Now, after a basic agreement has been reached, Avner declares his intention to actualize the matter: to gather Israel and crown David as king over all of Israel. From David's perspective, this is a realization of his dream - the unification of Yehuda and Israel through peaceful means.

(Translated by David Strauss)

^{8 [8]} It may be symbolic that Avner comes to David with precisely twenty men, for in the battle that took place in Giv'on in the preceding chapter, precisely that number of David's men fell – "nineteen men and Asa'el" (2:30).