YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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***MIKDASH***

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**Lecture #255: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (LXIV) – The Prohibition of Bamot (XLII)**

In this *shiur* we wish to examine the Torah and its commentaries regarding the essence of the prohibition against sorcery, and the ways proposed by the Torah to deal with this abomination. We will return to Shaul and the sorceress in Ein Dor to complete our study of this issue.

### Did the incident connected to the sorceress in Ein Dor involve an act of deception or a Divine resucitation of Shemuel?

The Radak cites a disagreement among the Geonim regarding the essence of sorcery, whether the sorceress in Ein Dor performed a grand act of deception or did God really bring Shemuel back to life. The Radak opens with a general picture of the nature of sorcery:

In my opinion acts of sorcery should be understood based on what *Chazal* have said that a sorcerer (*baal ov*) is one who speaks from between his joints or from between his elbows; a wizard (*yidoni*) is one who places a bone of an animal known as a *yadua* in his mouth and speaks of things to come. Speaking from between his joints means making a low sound from between his joints or from below his armpits by way of actions that he performs, knocking with his arms. And some say he also burns incense to a demon, and it is the demon who answers and speaks. They further said that a *baal ov* conjures up the dead with his male organ or consults with a skull. Conjuring up the dead with his male organ means that it is as if he were conjuring up the dead, and he speaks and makes sounds from beneath the surface of the ground above the grave, the way that Shaul heard the voice of Shemuel, and the voice was very low, as it is written (*Yeshaya* 29:4): "And your voice shall be, as of a sorcerer, out of the ground." One who consults with a skull is also called a *baal ov*. This means that he has a skull of shoham stone or clear glass, and he performs actions which make it appear that a low *voice* is being sounded, and it appears as if that voice asks and answers. This is what *Chazal* have said… *Chazal* have further said three things about one who conjures the dead with his male organ: He who conjures him up sees him, but does not hear him; he who needs him hears him, but does not see him; and he who does not need him neither hears him nor sees him. So too in the case of Shemuel, the woman that conjured him up saw him but did not hear him; Shaul who needed him heard him but did not see him; and Avner and Amasa who did not need him, neither heard him nor saw him. (Radak, I *Shemuel* 28:24, s.v. *ve-lo ra'ahu*)

The Radak then brings a disagreement among the Geonim as to what actually happened:

We have seen a disagreement among the Geonim as to this matter. They all agree that acts of sorcery are vain and empty, falsehood and deception. However, there are those who say that Shemuel did not speak with Shaul, and God forbid, Shemuel did not rise from his grave or speak, but rather the woman did it all by way of deception…. This is the understanding of Rav Shemuel ben Chofni Gaon. And he said that even though the plain sense of the words of *Chazal* in the Gemara imply that it actually happened that the woman brought Shemuel up, this should not be accepted as it is contradicted by the intellect. But Rav Saadya Gaon and Rav Hai Gaon said that it is true that it is far-fetched to say that the woman knew the future or that she resurrected the dead with her sorcery. Rather the Creator brought Shemuel back to life, so that he should tell Shaul all that would happen to him in the future… One may ask according to these Gaonim: If the Holy One, blessed be He, resurrected Shemuel in order to tell Shaul what would happen to him, why did He not tell him by way of dreams or by way of the *Urim* or by way of prophets, but rather through the sorceress. And furthermore, how could this have been hidden from Shaul, who was wise and a king, and who had with him many great sages, if sorcery involves a person talking from a hidden spot? How could he have been mistaken about this? This is difficult to accept. (ibid.)

The Radak first asserts that there is a consensus among all the Geonim that there is no truth to sorcery, as the Rambam later ruled explicitly. He then cites two different opinions as to how we should relate to what the woman in Ein Dor did. According to Rav Shemuel ben Chofni Gaon the entire story is one big act of deception on the part of the sorceress; Shemuel did not actually rise from the dead, and she described what was happening based on her imagination. This position does not accord with the view of *Chazal* who understood the Biblical text according to its plain sense.

On the other hand, Rav Saadya Gaon and Rav Hai Gaon maintain that while sorcery is nonsense, God Himself brought Shaul back to life in order to inform Shemuel about what was to happen to him. According to this understanding the sorceress herself was very surprised by what was happening. But the Radak raises objections and ultimately rejects the view of Rav Saadya and Rav Hai.

The Ralbag asks two questions: How does Shemuel receive prophecy after he is dead? And how is it possible that a prophetic statement should be delivered by way of a sorceress?

"Tomorrow you and your sons will be with me" – that is to say, they shall be dead like him. The information reaching Shaul raises many questions. First, how is it possible that prophecy should reach Shemuel after he is dead, as this is impossible… Second, how is it possible that a prophetic statement such as this should be delivered by way of sorcery? To answer the first question, we say that in truth no word reached Shaul from Shemuel, but rather this was all his imagination, as we mentioned; this answers the first question. As for the second question, the answer is that Shaul had prophetic power, as it is stated: "Is Shaul also one of the prophets?" (I *Shemuel* 10:11). Now with the stirring up of his imagination, and from what was told to him by Shaul in the latter's lifetime, it being explained to him that God tore the kingdom from him and gave it to David, as Shaul said to David: "I know well that you shall surely be king" (I *Shemuel* 24:20); and from what was made patently clear to him that God was with David and that He had departed from him; all these things mentioned here reached him through this act. Some were known to him previously, and some became known to him at this time through his prophetic power. This is what it says: "Moreover the Lord will also deliver Israel with you into the hand of the Pelishtim; and tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me" (I *Shemuel* 28:19).

The Ralbag as well believes that it was all Shaul's imagination and that the sorceress did not actually raise Shemuel from the dead. As for the second question, the Ralbag answers that Shaul himself was endowed with prophetic power, and with that power Shaul arrived at his understanding.

There is a difficulty reconciling the Ralbag's explanation with the verse that says that God did not answer Shaul by way of prophets. Is it reasonable to say that He did not answer him by way of other prophets, but Shaul was able to reach his understanding through his own prophetic power?

### Mention made of shemuel's death

Shemuel's death was mentioned already earlier:

Now Shemuel died; and all Israel were gathered together to mourn him, and they buried him, in his house a Rama. And David arose, and went down to the wilderness of Paran. (I *Shemuel* 25:1)

What need is there then to mention his death once again? The Abravanel explains the matter as follows:

I think that Shemuel's death is mentioned here for two purposes. First, to inform us of his high level of prophecy. That is, that while in the days of Eli, the word of God "was precious in those days; there was no frequent vision" (I *Shemuel* 3:1), after prophecy rested on Shemuel, the entire house filled with light… And therefore in his days there was a company of prophets in his Beit Midrash in Nayot in Rama, but after he died, this preparation [for prophecy] was removed… So when Shaul sought the word of God to know what would be the outcome of the war, the prophets did not say: Where is God, and the word was not with them….

The second purpose is that we saw many times that Shaul went out to battle against the Pelishtim, never asking for the word of the Lord, but rather he girded himself in his own strength, put his trust in God, and did what he had to do. Surely you see in the battle at Yavesh Gilad, and what Yonatan did with his lad to the Pelishtim, and the way Shaul fought "against Moav, and against the children of Ammon, and against Edom, and against the kings of Tzova, and against the Pelishtim; and wherever he turned himself, he did them mischief" (I *Shemuel* 14:47). It was not Shaul's practice to inquire of God. And therefore a difficulty may be raised to the author of the book, why Shaul worked so hard at this time to inquire of God, to the point that he went to seek out an *ov,* a *yidoni*, and someone who conjures up the dead?

To answer this question, he prefaced by saying that there are three reasons: First, that Shemuel had died, not that he died now, but that he had already died, and therefore it does not say: *Vayamat Shemuel*, but rather *u-Shemuel met* – that he was already dead, for were he alive, Shaul would have relied upon him, and not inquire of any other prophet, and not speak with the holy spirit, and certainly not involve himself in sorcery. (I *Shemuel* 25:1)

First, Abravanel explains that by way of the merit of Shemuel's prophecy, there were many prophets in Israel, but when Shaul wanted to know what would be the outcome of his war against the Pelishtim, there were already no prophets.

Beyond the responsibility of Shaul, the death of Shaul also impacted on the absence of prophecy in general, and therefore Scripture at the beginning of the chapter mentions Shemuel's death, even though this was already noted in chapter 25.

Second, Shaul relied on Shemuel, and he would never have turned to a different prophet or inquire by way of the holy spirit. Therefore, since he relied on Shemuel, already in Shemuel's lifetime, he removed the sorcerers and the wizards.[[1]](#footnote-1)

### "And God has departed from me" (I *Shemuel* 28:15)

At the beginning of the chapter, Scripture describes Shaul's earlier attempts to appeal to God:

And when Shaul inquired of the Lord, the Lord answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by the *Urim*, nor by prophets. (I *Shemuel* 28:6)

The order is from the simplest and most common means to the strongest one – turning to a prophet. When Shemuel appears before him, he changes the order and omits inquiry by way of the *Urim* and the *Tumim*:

And God has departed from me, and answers me no more, neither by prophets, nor by dreams; therefore I have called You, that You may make known to Me what I shall do. (I *Shemuel* 28:15)

The one who hears this is Shaul, he who anointed Shaul as king, and he who was pained by Shaul's sin: "And he cried to the Lord all night" (I *Shemuel* 15:11), "for Shemuel mourned for Shaul" (I *Shemuel* 15:35).

Shaul makes no mention of inquiring of the *Urim* and the *Tumim*, both because at the battle in Mikhmash it was he who prevented such inquiry, and afterwards God no longer answered him, and perhaps because he did not want to mention his part in that great sin of destroying Nov the city of priests in which there were eight five people wearing a linen *efod.*

### Seeing, fear, and hearing

Scripture notes at the beginning of the chapter that Shaul trembled when he saw the Pelishti camp. When the sorceress raises Shemuel from the dead, she too sees Shemuel and is afraid of him:

And the king said to her, Be not afraid: for what do you see? And the woman said to Shaul, I saw a godlike man ascending out of the earth… And Shaul knew that it was Shemuel, and he stooped with his face to the ground, and bowed himself. (I *Shemuel* 28:13-14)

And Shemuel answers:

Because you would not obey the voice of the Lord nor would execute His fierce wrath upon Amalek, therefore has the Lord done this thing to you this day. (I *Shemuel* 28:18)

Seeing, trembling, and fearing is no substitute for obeying God. Obeying God is a fundamental condition for maintaining the monarchy, as Shemuel himself says:

If you will fear the Lord, and serve Him, and obey His voice, and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, and if both you and also the king that reigns over you will follow the Lord your God - but if you will not obey the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then shall the hand of the Lord be against you, as it was against your fathers. (I *Shemuel* 12:14-15)

Fearing God should lead to obeying Him. Shemuel's main argument regarding Shaul's sin in connection with Amalek relates to this matter. In our passage, when Shaul sees the Pelishti camp, he fears the Pelishtim, rather than God. How ironic it is that at the end of our passage, the sorceress persuades Shaul to obey her (v. 22), and in the end Shaul obeys her and his servants, and thus breaks the oath that he had taken not to eat.

Shaul's prophet, Shemuel, appears to him one last time, this time with tidings about the end of Shaul's career:

Moreover the Lord will also deliver Israel with you into the hand of the Pelishtim: and tomorrow shall you and your sons be with Me: the Lord also shall deliver the camp of Israel into the hand of the Pelishtim. (I *Shemuel* 28:19)

There is no doubt that the chapter as a whole describes Shaul's sins in this episode, as starting with his very appeal to the sorceress: "I pray you, divine for me by means of the familiar spirit, and bring him up for me, whom I shall name to you" (v. 8). In addition to the prohibition to appeal to a sorcerer, we are dealing here with a very problematic personal example of a king.

Later Shaul swears by God: "And Shaul swore to her by the Lord, saying, As the Lord lives, no punishment shall befall you for this thing" (v. 10). It stands to reason that Shaul fasted as he was accustomed to fast whenever he went out to a fateful battle. In the end, he breaks his fast at the urging of the sorceress and his servants.

Scripture notes in detail Shaul's sins in this affair in addition to Shaul's previous actions (his failure to wait for Shemuel at the battle of Mikhmash, his offering a sacrifice, his failure to wipe out Amalek, and his killing of the eighty-five priests in Nov, the city of the priests). They decide the fate of Shaul and his dynasty, when on the next day they are all killed on the Gilboa in the campaign against the Pelishtim.[[2]](#footnote-2)

### The difference between Shaul and David

The end of the first book of *Shemuel* sets what happened to Shaul against that what happened to David.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Shaul trembles when he sees the Pelishti camp, and he trembles again when Shaul informs him of his death, the death of his sons, and Israel's rout on the next day.

David finds himself in a desperate situation when he returns to Tziklag and finds it burnt to the ground and all the women and children taken captive by the Pelishtim. David inquires of God, and based on the answer that he receives, pursues the Amaleki band and rescues the captives. David instructs his men to divide up the booty in an equitable manner between the soldiers who pursued the Pelishtim and those who remained behind guarding the equipment.

David is prominently displayed here as one who inquires of God in every situation and is answered by Him, as opposed to Shaul who does not inquire of God and is not answered by Him. In addition, there is a striking difference between Shaul and David with respect to Amalek – Shaul takes pity on Agag, whereas David strikes at Amalek as hard as he can and shows compassion to nobody.

These comparisons relate fundamentally to the king's basic attitude toward the word of God, and they explain, on the one hand, Shaul's tragic end coupled with Shaul and his sons' total devotion to God, and Shaul's knowledge that he would find his death in this campaign, and on the other hand, the kingdom of David who always inquires of God in order to act at all times in accordance with God's will.

### Epilogue

With this we finish our examination of Shaul's kingdom and the book of I *Shemuel.*

We have examined the service of God from the time of Israel's entry into the land, through the period of the *Shofetim,* until the time of Shemuel's leadership and Shaul's kingdom.

During the greater part of this period the *Mishkan* is found in Shilo (according to the *Seder Olam*, for 369 years), but after the days of Yehoshua the *Mishkan* does not play a significant role. Various substitutes (like Mikha's idol) offer an alternative consisting of a mixture of service of the God of Israel and idol worship. This is in addition to Divine service outside the *Mishkan* during the period when *bamot* were forbidden.

We saw the period during which the ark was separated from the great *bama*, first in Nov until its destruction at the hand of Shaul and afterwards in Giv'on. We tried to examine the various cases in which mention is made of the offering of sacrifices, building of altars, and service of God in general in the broadest sense of the term, in order to understand the spiritual reality of the period between Israel's entry into the land until the end of the days of Shaul, the first king of Israel. We saw that the *Mishkan* played no significant role for centuries.

As for the period following the destruction of Shilo, we tried to examine various specifics regarding the service of God and communication with Him during the period of Shemuel and Shaul. This ends with an account of the sins of Shaul who is judged by God, measure for measure, for his failure to obey the voice of God, his failure to make inquiry of God by way of the *Urim* and *Tumim*, his disregard for the words of the prophet, his seizure of control over the *Mishkan* and the priesthood, and his destruction of the *Mishkan* in Nov. At the end, Shaul appeals to the sorceress in Ein Dor against an explicit prohibition in the Torah, and this is accompanied by other sins.

We will continue our study with an examination of the service of God in the days of David and Shelomo. We will then continue with the service of God during the period of the split kingdom until the destruction of the Temple. As we have done thus far, we will relate to all aspects of the Divine service, service of God at *bamot*, and idol worship in the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Yehuda throughout the period.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Moshe Garciel ("*Ha-Melekh Shaul bi-Metzukato*," *Iyyunei Mikra u-Parshanut* 6) proposes that Shemuel's death is mentioned once again as an introduction to our chapter in order to emphasize the illegitimacy of Shaul's request to raise Shemuel from his place of rest. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We have not engaged here in an analysis of the chapter itself with all the issues arising in it, but rather we have focused on those apects connected to the service of God performed by king Shaul. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Garciel (see note 1) dealt with this matter at length, and we have followed in his footsteps. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)