

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS
SEFER SHOFTIM

Chapter 6

Gid'on's Challenge
By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

Last time, we began our study of *Sefer Shoftim* with the story of Gid'on's appointment. Recall that Israel had strayed from God and then fallen prey to the rapacious Midianites and their allies, marauders who had infiltrated from their eastern desert wastelands to hungrily consume the modest offerings of the Eframite hill country. Gid'on had just been introduced to us when the messenger from God had unexpectedly alighted at their homestead in Ofra, and then planted himself under the shade of a terebinth, fixing his gaze upon the busy lad. The young man, his father Yoash too old to attend to the threshing, was busy beating the wheat stalks by hand in order to conceal the small amounts of grain from the Midianites. But when the messenger greeted him with God's blessing, Gid'on responded with sorrow and distress: "Please sir, if God is with us, then why has all of this befallen us?" Undeterred, the messenger then revealed the true nature of his visit to the town of Ofra, and designated Gid'on as the liberator of the Jews, in God's name.

Gid'on, taken aback by the sudden turn in the conversation, faced his mysterious visitor and said: "Dear God, how shall I save Israel? Behold my clan is the smallest in Menashe and I am the youngest in my family!" (6:15). The tribe of Menashe, whose territory extended both west and east of the Jordan, was composed of six main clans, all of them descendents of Gil'ad the son of Machir the son of Menashe: Avi'ezer, Chelek, Asriel, Shechem, Chefer, and Shemida (see Yehoshua 17:1-2). These clans all settled west of the Jordan, while the other sons of Machir joined the eastern dwelling tribes and carved out a huge swath of territory in the Transjordan, known as the land of Gil'ad. Here, Gid'on invokes both his clan's relative insignificance as well as his own lowly stature in the family in an attempt to evade the mission, but to no avail. "I will be with you," God gently responded, "for you shall strike down the Midianites as a single man!" (6:16). Unconvinced, the young Gid'on requests a sign and later in the chapter requests two more.

RECALLING MOSHE

In many respects, Gid'on's conduct in this passage and God's response call to mind another liberator who sought mightily to dissuade God from choosing him and then had to be fortified with multiple signs, namely Moshe. Summoned in the beginning of the *Sefer Shemot* to the burning bush, Moshe stood in awe as God announced His intent to rescue the people from Egypt. But when God appointed him as His emissary to Pharaoh, Moshe politely refused: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should take the people of Israel out of Egypt?" God then responded just as He did now to Gid'on: "I will be with you..." and then proceeded to arm the erstwhile shepherd with an arsenal of potent signs calculated to strengthen his hesitant spirit (see *Shemot* Chapters 3-4).

But while Moshe may have doubted his own suitability for the mission, he never doubted that it was in fact God Himself who communicated to him from the midst of the burning bush. Gid'on, on the other hand, though he responds to the unexpected news with the dawning realization that perhaps the messenger has been sent by God Himself (6:15), is nevertheless not absolutely certain that his visitor is in fact a Divine emissary. Presenting an offering of goat meat, matzot (a favorite of hosts since they can be prepared quickly - see *Bereishit* 18:6; 19:3), and stew, Gid'on expects the visitor to partake of the meal but is instead instructed to place it upon a rock after spilling the stew upon it. The visitor then lifts his staff and touches the food with its tip, and suddenly it is entirely incinerated, while the visitor, actually an angel in disguise, ascends heavenward with the flames. Gid'on then realizes that God's angel has indeed addressed him.

FATEFUL ENCOUNTERS

The motif of the "disguised angel," always anonymous and unnamed but bearing critical tidings while in human form, occurs elsewhere in Tanakh. Recall that Avraham's three visitors, who initially came to announce the pregnancy of Sarah and the birth of Yitzchak, and proceeded on to Sodom, arrived at his tent in the guise of men. Only later in their visit did it become apparent to Avraham that it was in fact Divine angels who were sitting at his table (see *Bereishit* 18). The ruse was then reenacted when the visitors initially came to the house of Lot in Sodom posing as tired travelers, only later revealing their true nature when the house was surrounded (see *Bereishit* 19). Ya'akov, who had fled to the east from his brother Esav's wrath, only to reencounter it some twenty years later upon his return to Canaan, on the way crossed the path of a mysterious man who was subsequently revealed to be a Divine being (see *Bereishit* 32:25-31). As Yehoshua stood at the outskirts of Jericho, the people of Israel having scarcely crossed the Jordon and entered the land, a man appeared before him bearing a drawn sword. Yehoshua was initially unsure about the identity and loyalties of

the man but it soon became apparent that the apparition was in fact an angelic "captain of God's hosts" who had arrived to fortify Yehoshua on the eve of the battle. Realizing the true identity of the nighttime visitor, Yehoshua fell to the ground before him (see *Yehoshua* 5:13-15). And in our own book, Mano'ach and his wife, the parents of mighty Shimshon, initially mistake their guest for a man, only later realizing that in fact they have been visited by an angel of God (*Shoftim* 13).

Perhaps the recurring motif is meant to impress upon the reader the value of encounter, as well as its awesome potential. How often we randomly interact with people during the course of our lives; how little we realize at the time that some of those encounters will in fact turn out to be fateful and life-altering. God's messengers constantly cross our path; most of the time they are of the non-ethereal variety, but they are His messengers nonetheless. When our Biblical protagonists rendezvous with God's heralds disguised as men, destiny beckons. What appeared initially to Gid'on as a polite meeting of little ultimate significance, as the curious man sat down near him and watched him diligently thresh, as he courteously greeted him with encouraging words - in the end was revealed to be life-transforming. And every person who is sensitive to the presence of God in his own life, realizes that even in mundane moments of encounter, destiny is sometimes engaged.

DEEDS OF TRUST

That very night, God said to him: Take your father's ox as well as the second seven-year old ox, destroy the altar of the Ba'al that is your father's, and cut down the sacred tree that overhangs it. Build instead an altar to God your Lord upon the summit of this stronghold at Ma'aracha, and then take the second ox and offer it up as a wholly burnt sacrifice using wood from the sacred tree that you shall cut down...(6:25-26).

Gid'on's unexpected (to him) appointment as leader of the people of Israel, as their designated savior from the Midianites, is not extended by God unconditionally. He will first have to prove his fitness for the noble task by demonstrating fortitude and faith, by publicly proclaiming his opposition to the corrupt values and corrosive belief system then current among his own compatriots. By this time in Biblical history, of course, the people of Israel had wholeheartedly adopted the idolatrous practices of their Canaanite neighbors. Worship of the storm and fertility god Ba'al, one of the chiefs of the Canaanite pantheon, was not only widespread but also taken seriously by its adherents. Canaanite idolatry, like Canaanite politics and Canaanite commerce, was ever a local affair, with household or village shrines covering the hilltops and dotting the countryside over the length and breadth of the land. These shrines were often

adorned with sacred trees, or "asherot," that were regarded as potent expressions of vitality and regeneration. The trees, sometimes planted singularly and often arranged in groves, provided welcome shade as well as cultic value for the performance of the lascivious rites that characterized Ba'al worship.

Now, God calls upon Gid'on to destroy the altar of Ba'al, to cut down its sacred tree, and to execute instructive retribution by using its very wood to offer sacrifice to God, a sacrifice consisting of a consecrated ox raised for seven years to the glory of the storm god himself! In short, Gid'on is to utterly destroy the local shrine and replace it with a testament to his steadfast trust in God, emphasizing to the people that their long-term salvation from suffering and oppression will not be won without a fundamental shift in their worldview and moral system. He is to demonstrate in a concrete way what the Torah had often repeated abstractly: reject idolatry and its associated value system and prosper; embrace them and perish. But while Gid'on does not oppose or attempt to evade the Divine injunction, well-founded fear gets the better of him, and it is only under cover of darkness that he musters ten of his servants to assist him in carrying out the deed. This lack of confidence in God and in himself, while completely understandable under the circumstances, is nevertheless indicative of the declining caliber and softer mettle of Israel's judges during this time. If Devorah ever doubted, we know nothing of it. If Ehud ever hesitated, the text has not reported it. But doubt and hesitation will color Gid'on's conduct throughout his storied career.

THE RESPONSE OF THE PEOPLE

On the morrow, the villagers of Ofra arose to discover the outrage carried out against their god and against its shrine, and all of the evidence quickly pointed to Gid'on as the perpetrator. The enraged people, in a stunning and ironic reversal of the Torah's pronouncement that those that embrace idolatry commit a capital crime (see for instance Devarim 17:2-7), now demand that he be put to death, but his father's quick thinking saves the day. In a stroke of genius, Yoash succeeds in presenting himself as an ardent supporter of Ba'al while simultaneously undermining the supposed efficacy of its worship. Rather than surrendering his son to the mob, he instead suggests to all those clamoring for the handover that Ba'al be allowed to fight his own battles: "Will you then fight for Ba'al or save it (from harm)? Let he who strives with Ba'al be put to death by morning, for if he is god then he will strive with him for throwing down his altar!" (6:31)

It is in the aftermath of this pivotal episode that Gid'on takes on the new name of Yeruba'al or "the one with whom Ba'al will strive," a fitting name for the remainder of a mission that will be devoted not only to relieving Israel's material plight but to addressing its spiritual shortcomings as well. But how astounding

indeed that the inhabitants of Ofra, Israelites all, have become champions of Ba'al and its protectors, while the God of Israel is either brazenly ignored by them or else admitted only grudgingly to their idolatrous pantheon!

Having passed the trial of trust, Gid'on now moves to gather a fighting force against the Midianite army then stationed at the fertile and strategic Valley of Yizra'el. But the tribal and sectarian spirit of the age is reflected by the fact that his own Menashite clansmen are supplemented by irregulars from only Asher, Zevulun, and Naftali - all of them settled in the regions directly menaced by the Midianite incursion. The other tribes were presumably not oppressed by the Midianites and their cohorts, and thus absented themselves from the battle preparations. But still Gid'on cannot proceed until he has secured two more signs from God a clump of wool soaked by dew while the surrounding ground of the threshing floor remains dry, and a dry clump of wool surrounded by a wet threshing floor (6:37-40). And so the chapter ends, with the protagonist having inflicted a stinging rebuke to his idolatrous neighbors while yet showing himself to have been insidiously infected by the penchant of Ba'al's adherents for seeking signs, portents, and prognostications.

Next time, we will consider the battle against the Midianites. Readers are requested to prepare Chapter 7.