

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS
SEFER SHOFTIM

Chapter 7

Gid'on Leads the People
By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

Last time, we considered the events leading up to the appointment of Gid'on as the liberator of Israel from the hands of the Midianites. Recall that the young man had been busily threshing the grain manually in order to conceal it from the oppressors, when an angel of God in the guise of a man had unexpectedly alighted at the homestead. There, the ethereal visitor had countered Gid'on's poignant challenge concerning Divine absence with one of his own: "Go with this strength and save Israel from the clutches of Midian. Behold, I have appointed you!" (6:14). Though the young man protested, God would not be deterred, and so Gid'on reluctantly donned the mantle of leadership. But before embarking on his mission to destroy the Midianites, he had to first demonstrate willingness and resolve to destroy a more pernicious enemy much closer at hand: the Ba'al worship that pervaded Israelite culture and the worldview of which corrosively undermined the ethical absolutes demanded by the acknowledgement and worship of the single God.

Thus it was that God called upon Gid'on to obliterate the local shrine of 'Ofra consisting of a sacrificial altar, an idolatrous tree, and a special animal designated for Ba'al worship, all of them to be replaced by a new altar dedicated to the service of the Most High. Gid'on complied, but executed the holy work under cover of darkness, for he knew that the townspeople would not take well to the eradication of their temple. On the morrow, they were in fact incensed, but Gid'on's father cleverly saved him from their vengeance by indignantly appealing to their own twisted beliefs: "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).

INTERPRETING THE SIGNS

Emboldened by his success, buoyed by his new *nom de guerre*, Yeruba'al now sounded the shofar and rallied the people of Menashe, Asher, Zevulun and Naftali. But hesitation seized him once again so that before he proceeded, he requested and received two heartening signs from God: in the first, the clump of wool was dew-soaked while the threshing floor remained dry, while in the second, the wool was dry and the threshing floor became damp.

In both cases, the sign of opposites highlighted the chasm and the conflict between the wool (animal product) and the grain of the threshing floor (agricultural product), perhaps a pointed reference to two opposing ways of life that could no longer be reconciled in the rugged but fertile highlands of Menashe. On the one hand, the marauding and nomadic Midianites and their flocks (i.e. the wool) had infiltrated the hills from the arid eastern lands and had tightened their hold upon the bounty of its terraced slopes, while on the other the industrious Israelite farmers, wringing subsistence from the soil (i.e. the grain), dreamt of liberation from their hands.

"REFINING" THE FIGHTING FORCE

Yeruba'al, being Gid'on, awoke the next morning with all of the people that were with him and encamped at the spring of Charod, while the camp of the Midianites was to the north of the hill of Moreh in the valley (7:1).

The fighting force that Gid'on then assembles at the spring of Charod on the northern slopes of Mount Gilbo'a is an impressive one (at least in quantitative terms), numbering some thirty-two thousand irregulars, but God suddenly tells the warrior to pare the numbers! "There are too many people with you for Me to surrender Midian to you, for then Israel may be arrogant against Me and say that 'my own power has delivered me'" (7:2). Astoundingly, God informs Gid'on that it is not only or even primarily external victory against Midian that is the objective, but rather internal victory against idolatry, syncretism, and their corollaries of overbearing pride and spiritual self-delusion. If Israel prevails against Midian by sheer force of their numbers, then they will fail to recognize God's pivotal role in either their oppression or else their deliverance, ascribing the whole sorry interlude and even its happy ending to strategy and statecraft. But if Israel prevails against the Midianite hordes, even with but a tiny force of three hundred souls, then God's involvement will be well-nigh undeniable. And

thus it was that twenty-two thousand of the original forces were allowed to return home for (rightfully) feeling fearful (7:3), while the remaining ten thousand were further reduced by the succeeding ordeal at the waters.

In this curious test of who would fight and who would not, God tells Gid'on to allow the men to drink from the spring waters of the Charod. Whosoever bends to the surface and hurriedly scoops small drabs of the water up to his mouth is to be selected for the battle, while all those who prostrate themselves and drink while in a bowing posture are to be rejected. While some of the modern commentaries offer a number of intriguing explanations for the matter, ascribing for instance the precious commodity of initiative and alacrity to the scoopers and assuming sloth for the bowers, the medievals seem to have read the context more realistically, for the subject here (as it seems to be throughout the narrative) is primarily the polemic against Ba'al. Thus, Rashi (11th century, France) explains that those who prostrated themselves in order to drink demonstrated that such a posture was natural for them, for the prevailing practice among the worshippers of Ba'al was to genuflect and to bow in its presence. The scoopers, on the other hand, avoided (or at least were unfamiliar with) that particular position, indicating that they were loyal to the God of Israel. It is intriguing to note that in the traditional worship of the synagogue to this very day, bowing to the ground is uncommon, and even when occasionally practiced can only be performed within strict parameters when the service takes place outside of the Temple precincts (see *Shulchan Arukh* Chapter 131:8 with commentaries).

THE DREAM

In the end, then, only three hundred fighters remained, a mere remnant of the thirty-two thousand who answered Gid'on's initial call. No wonder the hapless warrior needed a further Divine sign to lift his flagging spirits before the battle was engaged:

That night, God said to Gid'on 'arise and descend into the (enemy) camp, for I have given it into your hand! But if you are fearful to go down, then go descend with your servant Foora to the camp. You shall hear what they say, and then your hands will be strengthened and you shall descend into the camp...(7:9-11).

Gid'on and Foora go down towards the edge of the Midianite encampment and overhear the conversation just as one fellow relates a dream to his compatriot. In his dream, he relates that he saw a round, flat barley bread rolling through the encampment, eventually striking and overturning the

tent. The compatriot is immediately certain as to the import of the vision: "It is none other than the sword of Gid'on son of Yoash the man of Israel. God has given Midian and the entire camp into his hand!" (7:14). Gid'on's ongoing need for reassurance, as well as God's willingness to indulge it, are of course two striking features of the episode. The tally of miraculous signs so far provided to Gid'on to inspire his confidence now stands at four (6:17, 37, 39; 7:9). While earlier judges had to contend with challenges at least as great as that of Gid'on (such as Deborah facing the menace of Sisera and his nine hundred chariots of iron – 4:3), none merited quite the same degree of Divine hand-holding that the Menashite has thus far received. And that of course highlights not only the enormity of the trials that Gid'on must overcome but also the measure of his own limited spiritual resources to be able to do so unassisted. Thus it is that God intervenes repeatedly to save Gid'on from losing faith not in Him but rather in himself.

But there is more, for while we tend to focus our exclusive attention on the leader's foibles and shortcomings, we must also bear in mind the more serious implications: the judge and leader of the people is only the moral and spiritual reflection of his/her own constituents. Seldom if ever do we find any of the judges SHAPING the character of the people; invariably, they are portrayed as products of their age, sometimes more successful and sometimes less, but always arising out of obscurity as a RESPONSE to the contingencies of the hour, and never altering the destiny of their tribes for long. Thus, if the caliber of the *shoftim* decreases as the book progresses, then that is more than a statement about mediocre governance; it is also an indictment of the spiritual state of the people of Israel.

Returning to the specifics of the episode, we are also struck by the compatriot's response. How many of us would have proclaimed to our confused and sleepy fellow, with certainty and without hesitation, that the significance of such a curious dream was that "It is none other than the sword of Gid'on son of Yoash the man of Israel. God has given Midian and the entire camp into his hand!"? Rather, it seems that Gid'on's lack of fortitude may have been more contagious than he himself realized. The irony is therefore obvious: while Gid'on frets and fusses and fears for the worst, the vastly more powerful Midianites, whose fighters and flocks fill the valley like "locusts in number" (7:12), regard him with alarm as being fortified for victory while they are destined for defeat!

As for the significance of the barley bread and the tent, here again we may have intimations of Israelite versus Midianite pursuits. The

Israelites engage in farming and agriculture (the barley bread), the Midianites in nomadic shepherding (the tent). Seeing that the barley bread rolls into the camp, strikes the tent, and overturns it, the friend assumes that it refers to current concerns. News of Gid'on's massive and spirited troop rally had no doubt reached the Midianites, while reports of the sobering reduction in the number of fighters by Divine selection had not. So the Midianites are anticipating a massive onslaught, an attempt by the Israelite agriculturists to exact vengeance for so many years of pillage and plunder at the hands of the easterners' innumerable flocks. The cryptic dream is thus eminently intelligible, once the subliminal states of mind of the protagonists have been deciphered.

THE ISRAELITE ONSLAUGHT

In the end, of course, Gid'on unexpectedly prevails, not by the strength of his force but by the Divinely-inspired element of surprise, always a favorite expression in Tanakh of God's involvement in the arena of human history. The Midianites are hardly anticipating a nighttime attack – surely a force rumored to number in the tens of thousands could not successfully conceal their movements and mount an offensive under cover of darkness! But it is precisely because Gid'on has scarcely three hundred fighters under his command – the very antithesis of overwhelming force – that a preemptive attack is at all possible. "Arming" his men with shofarot and with clay jars containing lighted torches (7:16), dividing his force into three groups each attacking from a different direction (7:16, 21), and choosing the precise and confusion-filled moment of the late night changing of the guard (7:19), Gid'on succeeds in throwing the Midianite camp into disarray. In an instant, the silent and comforting night, crowned by an ink-black vault ornamented with innumerable points of light, is shattered. Confounded by the noise of the smashing jars, by the blare of the shofarot and by the outcry of the Israelite force, dazed by the burning torches that suddenly appear out of the darkness and threaten the tents with conflagration, bewildered by the enemy forces that seem to be attacking from three directions simultaneously, and utterly convinced that the wily and ruthless Israelite has a colossal army at his disposal, the Midianites begin to flee. Panic seizes the camp and, as so happens when vast crowds are suddenly startled, the dread takes on a destructive dynamic of its own – "God caused the sword of each one to be against his own fellow...and the camp fled ..." (7:22).

Eastwards escape the Midianites – only that fourth direction had been left "unguarded" by Gid'on's men – eastwards towards the Jordan River, and beyond that the desert wastelands that the marauders call home.

Gid'on, however, strategically anticipating just such a development, not only rallies the people of Naftali, Asher and Menashe to pursue the fleeing Midianites, but encourages the Ephraimites (who are closest to the action) to seize the river fords, thus preventing the Midianites from crossing unmolested. Two of the enemy chieftains are captured and killed, and before the smoke of the battle has cleared, the chapter unexpectedly ends – another glaring example of chapter and verse not only ignoring the traditional division of the text but even its natural literary arrangement. For next time, readers are asked to conclude the story of Gid'on's battle, that will in the end unfold in unexpected directions, by kindly reading Chapter 8.