

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS
SEFER SHOFTIM

Chapter 8
The Victory Over Midian
By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

Last time, we read of Gid'on's remarkable victory over the Midianites. Recall how the Israelite warrior had employed the element of surprise by attacking the Midianite encampment under cover of darkness. His small fighting force, numbering but three-hundred souls, discomfited the far larger enemy armies by simultaneously striking from three separate directions at the moment of the changing of the guard. This they did while sounding *shofarot*, breaking clay jars and lighting up the black, still night with their flaming torches. The Midianites were immediately thrown into disarray and fled eastwards towards the River Yarden, but Gid'on barred their panicked retreat by preemptively sending messengers to rally the men of Ephraim to seize the fords. There many of the Midianites fell, and two of their princes who had succeeded in crossing the water – Orev and Ze'ev – were soon captured and killed. But as Gid'on caught up with the men of Ephraim, he was accorded by them a rather harsh welcome:

The men of Ephraim said to him: "what is this thing that you have done to us by failing to summon us to battle the Midianites?" And they strove with him mightily (8:1).

STRIFE WITH EFRAIM, STRIFE WITH SUKKOT AND PENUEL

At stake, of course, was not the specter of genuine damage to Eframite interests, but rather hurt Eframite pride, for Gid'on had failed to acknowledge the tribal pecking order. Gid'on's fighting force consisted primarily of men from his own Menashite clan of Avi'ezer (6:34), and it was they who had won the day by sowing panic in the Midianite camp, while the men of Ephraim were only summoned well after the enemy was already in retreat. But the Eframites tended to regard themselves, often with justification, as the linchpin of the northern tribes and as the main counter balance to powerful Yehuda to the south. Now, however, Gid'on showed his true valor in leadership, for rather than upbraiding his haughty

kinsmen and thereby exacerbating the tense situation, he instead admirably defused the matter by self-deprecatingly stroking their hurt egos. "Are not the gleanings of Ephraim preferable to the harvest of Avi'ezer?," he exclaimed, crediting the victory to Ephraim's pursuit of the retreating Midianites and their capture of the princes, while downplaying the pivotal role played by his own compatriots. "Did not the Lord give into your hands the Midianite princes Orev and Ze'ev? What could I have done to surpass your exploits?" Their wrath was then assuaged when he spoke those words (8:2-3).

Passing over the Yarden in pursuit of the remaining Midianites, his three-hundred fighters by now famished and exhausted, Gid'on asked the people of the town of Sukkot for provisions, but they derisively dismissed his request: "Have you then captured Zevach and Tzalmuna (the remaining Midianite princes) that we should provide your fighters with bread?" The people of Penuel responded as had the townsmen of Sukkot, and Gid'on pledged that upon his return he would exact vengeance from the leaders of both.

These brief but disturbing exchanges highlighted an ongoing political problem that was the bane of all of the judges who ever rose up to rescue Israel from their oppressors: the feeling among certain tribes or even towns within tribes that unless direct and immediate benefit was to accrue to them for their participation in the larger conflicts (that often tended to anyway eventually land upon their doorsteps), they would much prefer to sit it out and leave the fighting to someone else, namely, their compatriots that were more directly threatened by the oppressor. Recall how the prophetess Devorah had earlier battled the same apathy, for when she dispatched Barak son of Avino'am of Naftali to engage Sisera in battle at the feet of Mount Tabor, the tribes of Reuben, Dan and Asher had been conspicuously absent from the fray (5:16-17), while the town of otherwise obscure Meroz had likewise remained aloof (5:23). The tribes still had a very long way to go in forging a national identity that could transcend narrow partisan concerns to address the greater issues and threats of the day. In the end, Gid'on kept his cruel pledge, for upon his return from decimating the last of the fleeing Midianites that had regrouped in the Transjordan, he struck down the seventy-seven governors of Sukkot and then destroyed the fortress of Penuel (8:16-17).

THE CAPTURED PRINCES

Finally, after the fighting had died down, the chapter records that Gid'on came back from battle, with the two captured princes of Midian in

his custody. What follows is a somewhat enigmatic exchange between him and the princes before they are put to death (8:18-21). Addressing Zevach and Tzalmuna, Gid'on demanded to know the fate of people reported killed by the Midianites at Mount Tavor. The princes responded evasively: "they were like you, the likeness of the king's children" (8:18). Gid'on then informed the princes that the murdered men had been his own relatives, "my brothers the sons of my mother," and had the Midianites but spared them, then Gid'on would have reciprocated. Now, however, Gid'on turned to his own firstborn Yeter and bid him to dispatch the two, but the lad hesitated. Finally, Gid'on slew the princes himself, and seized the golden moon-shaped ornaments that dangled from their camels' necks.

The medieval commentaries offer little insight into the conversation, and what can be gleaned from the text itself is speculative. The most plausible reading is that the tense Midianite camp, stationed at the eastern reaches of the valley of Yizra'el (6:33), had heard of Gid'on's massive troop buildup to their south at the feet of Mount Gilboa (7:1). Besides gathering their own substantial force to counter the Israelites, they also took the precaution of seizing strategic Mount Tavor to the north of the valley, perhaps taking some of Gid'on's own family as hostages in order to forestall or at least to delay an Israelite attack. After all, the northern boundary of Gid'on's tribe of Menashe extended all the way to that prominent topographical landmark, and it is not implausible that some of his close kin may have been located there. But in the end, Gid'on sent most of his fighting force home and instead struck the Midianite camp unexpectedly, as detailed above. As the Midianites retreated eastwards in hurried confusion, their princes may have decided to kill the hostages in retaliation or else to speed their flight, since their value as bargaining chips had already been expended by Gid'on's surprise attack.

INTIMATIONS OF MONARCHY

It is clear from the text of the dialogue that critical details have been omitted. But what is most significant about the conversation, of course (and this is why the matter was included by the narrator at all), is the Midianite princes' parenthetical remark that "they were like you, the likeness of the king's children." This passing comment, offered by the captured leaders of a vanquished enemy, is the very first intimation in the Tanakh that a "judge" of the Israelites had the bearing and the ability of a king!

The great question mark hanging over the book of *Shoftim* from its earliest chapters, like some proverbial dark cloud, had concerned the

matter of central and effective leadership. As the chapters of the book disappointingly unfolded, we noted how the tribes of Israel had slowly fallen away from their mission only to embrace Canaanite idolatry, and had jettisoned the basic unity that the early stages of conquest of the land had necessitated. In part this was because they had not yet developed a stable and inspired political system that could impose order while ensuring continuity. Judges came and judges went, but none ever succeeded in rallying the tribes as one or else perpetuating their positive reforms for long. And no judge ever produced a child that could rule in his/her place. Inevitably, the demise of the judge spelled the end of the all-too-brief period of peace and permanence associated with his/her rule, to be ominously followed by the familiar refrain: "the people of Israel did evil in the sight of God..." (2:11; 3:12; 4:1; 6:1; etc.). But now for the first time, these Midianite princes, condemned to die for their rash act of kidnapping and murder, broached the sore subject by intimating that Gid'on might be a candidate for kingship.

Strikingly, the matter was immediately taken up by the Israelites themselves, for in the very next section they say to Gid'on: "rule over us – you, your son, and your grandson – for you have saved us from the clutches of Midian!" (8:22). Although the people do not use the verb form for the implementation of kingship, "*liMLoKh*," but rather "*liMShoL*" meaning, to exercise dominion, the thrust of their request is clear. They seek relief from the constant state of political turmoil and vulnerability to foreign tyranny associated with the lack of a central authority, and recognize in Gid'on's solidified rule the potential for real and substantive change. While the people seem to grasp that a desire for real kingship is premature, divided as they still are along tribal lines and still preoccupied with physically settling the land, effective regional leadership seems, for the very first time in many years, within grasp.

CONFUSION OF MEANS WITH ENDS

Surprisingly, however, Gid'on will have none of it. Humbly responding with noble words that recall his earlier reluctance to lead the people (6:15), Gid'on says: "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. Rather, let God rule over you!" (8:23). Gid'on will not don the permanent mantle of leadership as the people demand nor will he agree to appoint his son in his stead, because he feels that such innovations will have the effect of shifting communal and national focus away from serving God to instead concentrate it upon man. Kingship is not a panacea, Gid'on explains, as if all of the people's difficulties could be effortlessly overcome simply by appointing a monarch to rule over them. If the people of Israel

are estranged from God, insensitive to His word and loyal instead to Ba'al and to his vulgar cohorts, then no king will succeed in turning the tide and alleviating their plight.

This remarkable little passage, then, introduces the essence of the "king debate" and the crux of the people's awful quandary. Unwilling on the one hand to wholeheartedly commit themselves to the sternness and solemnity of ethical monotheism, but on the other hand becoming increasingly impatient with the never-ending cycle of oppression and decline, the people grope for a way out. But Gid'on will not accede to their request, for there can be no quick fixes for the people's sorry predicament. Recall that the major events of Gid'on's career – his appointment, his marshaling of a fighting force and his astounding victory – were all bound up with his parallel and more insidious struggle against pervasive Ba'al worship. Although the Midianites had been soundly defeated on the battlefield and beaten back to their desert redoubts, the challenge presented by Ba'al had hardly yet even (or ever) been engaged. Now then was not the time to establish a monarchy that, if abused, could very well entrench Ba'al worship to an even greater degree. Rather, Gid'on's refusal seemed to suggest that the people should rather take the opportunity of the triumph over Midian and the breathing space afforded by that triumph to address the fundamental and underlying problems plaguing their society.

THE GOLDEN *EFOD* AND THE GOLDEN CALF

The final events recorded of Gid'on's career are less than flattering and bear out the hazards of kingship and the pitfalls associated with power:

Gid'on said to them: I will make a request of you. Let each one of you surrender to me the (golden) earrings of their spoils...and they spread a garment and each one cast in his earrings of the spoils...Gid'on fashioned it into an *efod* and displayed it in his town of 'Ofra, but all of the people of Israel strayed after it there, and it became an ensnarement for Gid'on and for his household...(8:24-28).

Gid'on of course sought to commemorate his great victory over Midian with some tangible monument. Elsewhere in Tanakh, the *efod* is mentioned as one of the more ornamented outer garments of the priest that was also used in the ritual of making enquiry of God and seeking His guidance (see *Shemuel* 1:23:6 et al, and the proof text of *Bemidbar* 27:21). Perhaps Gid'on chose an *efod* to recall God's guiding hand in the great victory, His willingness to bolster the warrior's spirits with signs and

signals throughout the saga. But the fashioning of the image only spelt trouble, for it eventually became an object of veneration in its own right and a lightning rod for the people's idolatrous desires. Gid'on thus met the people's request for a king with one of his own, but while he admirably deflated their misplaced aspirations, he unwittingly provided in their stead a dangerous source of stumbling.

In this connection, it is intriguing to note the similarities between this account and the narrative of the golden calf (see *Shemot* 32:1-6), cast by Aharon the *Kohen* when Moshe tarried in his descent from Mount Sinai. In both cases, a leader figure gathers golden earrings from the people, and with the best of intentions fashions them into an innocuous object that quickly becomes an idolatrous fetish. According to some commentaries on *Shemot* 32:4, Aharon even gathers the gold in a garment (called there "*cheret*") just as Gid'on does here, but that particular detail hinges upon an obscure phrase that can just as easily be read as a description of him fashioning the object with a stylus. Be that as it may, the overall thrust of the narratives is the same: when precious materials (or even mundane ones) are utilized to make a tangible symbol of something grand, even when the process is carried out with the purest of objectives, there are sure to be those who will seize the opportunity to self-servingly turn the symbol into something else entirely.

There is of course a glaring contrast as well between our passage and the golden calf episode: there, it was the people who demanded a god figure in Moshe's stead, pressing reluctant Aharon to proceed, but here it is Gid'on the leader of the people who unleashes the tragic dynamic. Or shall we say that the analog in our section to Israel's request for a molten image was none other than their desire for a king that immediately precedes the account of the *efod* (and is even affixed to it in the original Hebrew text), both of them representing, under the circumstances, well-intentioned but fundamentally flawed aspirations?

REMEMBERING GID'ON

Thus does Gid'on's career come to an end, by ushering in the very idolatrous worship that he had so vehemently combated at the beginning of his mission. But posterity remembered his exploits more fondly, recalling his crushing victory over Midian as an especially impressive portent. For the Levite poet Assaf, a contemporary of David (c. 1000 BCE) who witnessed his victories against powerful confederacies that sought to strangle the nascent Israelite state, Gid'on's triumph provided special inspiration:

A song for instruments by Assaf. Lord, do not remain quiet, do not be silent or still, Lord. For Your enemies roar and Your foes raise up their heads. Against Your people they plan secret schemes, and take counsel against Your protected ones. They say: let us go and cut them off from being a people, that the name of Israel be remembered no more. For they draw their hearts together and conclude pacts against you. The tents of Edom and Yishma'el, Moav and those of Hagar, Geval, 'Amon and 'Amalek, Peleshet with those that dwell in Tzor. Even Ashur has joined them, they are the accomplices of the children of Lot, *sela*. ACT AGAINST THEM AS YOU DID TO MIDIAN, like Sisera and Yavin at the *wadi* of Kishon. THEY WERE DESTROYED AT 'EIN DOR, THEY WERE STREWN LIKE REFUSE UPON THE GROUND. MAKE THEIR PRINCES LIKE OREV AND ZE'EV, ALL OF THEIR GOVERNORS LIKE ZEVACH AND TZALMUNA. FOR THEY HAVE SAID: WE WILL INHERIT FOR OURSELVES THE PLEASANT HABITATIONS OF GOD. My Lord, make them like a tumbleweed and like chaff driven before the wind, (burn them) like fire that consumes the forest and as flames that ignite the hills. So too shall You pursue them with Your whirlwind and overawe them with Your storm... (*Tehillim* Chapter 83).

And for the prophet Yeshayahu (Isaiah) who lived in the 8th century BCE and witnessed the rise of Assyria and the fall and exile of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, Gid'on's triumph was the precursor to Jerusalem's own miraculous deliverance from the Assyrian monarch Sancheriv, who laid siege to its walls with massive force in 701 BCE. Describing that event with prophetic foresight, seeing in his mind's eye the decimated Assyrian camp despoiled by the Israelites, he declares:

The people that walked in darkness have seen great light, and light has brightly shined upon those that dwelt in a land overshadowed with death. You (God) have made the people exalted and have increased their joy; they rejoice before You like the joy of harvest and thrill in the division of the spoils. For their burdensome yoke, the beam placed upon the shoulders, the staff that oppressed them YOU HAVE SMASHED LIKE ON THE DAY OF MIDIAN...(Yeshayahu 9:1-3).

And in another prophecy, this time pronounced as the Assyrian onslaught was underway but before they had actually reached the gates of Jerusalem, Yeshayahu declares:

Therefore thus says God the Lord of Hosts: do not fear Assyria, My people who dwell in Zion, for though he may strike you with the rod and raise his staff against you like the Egyptians of old, in a very short time My anger will be spent upon their abominable words. God shall raise up a whip against them LIKE THE STRIKING DOWN OF MIDIAN AT THE ROCK OF Oreb, like His staff raised up against the sea, and he (Assyria) shall be carried off after the manner of Egypt! (10:24-26).

Thus we leave Gid'on and his achievements behind, inspired by his own personal struggle to overcome self-doubt as well as by his singular victory over his people's foes, yet sadly disappointed by the events of his twilight years. But the saga of Gid'on is not yet over. In the next section, his son Avimelekh will raise the issue of kingship one last and urgent time before it is finally buried by the people for some two centuries, until the end of prophet Shemuel's life and the ascent of Shaul to the throne. For next time, readers are requested to study Chapter 9.