

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS
SEFER SHOFTIM

Chapter 9
The Brief Reign of Avimelekh
By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 8 of *Sefer Shoftim* ended with the demise of Gid'on, son of Yoash. Recall how the spirited Menashite, fortified by Divine signs and wonders, had overcome his own self-doubts in order to overpower the Midianites and drive them from the land. So crushing had been his triumph that his compatriots had asked of him to become their appointed ruler and to perpetuate that rule through the founding of a dynasty. But humble Gid'on refused, reminding the people that their true loyalties must be to God. In the end, though, Gid'on's tenure was tarnished by his fashioning of the commemorative golden efod that soon degenerated into coarse idolatry.

The chapter concluded with two important biographical details concerning his descendents. First of all, the text informed us that Gid'on fathered seventy sons (!) "for he had many wives." Second of all, we were informed that "his concubine in Shekhem also bore him a son, and he made his name Avimelekh." It is this Avimelekh, of course, who is the subject of Chapter 9. Finally, in a stultifying postscript, the chapter added that after Gid'on's death, the people of Israel once again strayed from God, this time embracing the Shekhemite fetish of Ba'al Brit. Thus, they forgot the God who had saved them from their enemies and, as the events of Chapter 9 bear out, "they did not act compassionately towards the household of Yeruba'al Gid'on, in accordance with all of the goodness that he had done for Israel" (8:35).

AVIMELEKH SEIZES POWER IN SHEKHEM

After his father's demise, Avimelekh quickly repaired to Shekhem and enlisted the help of his maternal uncles and the extended clan of his mother to convince the powerful governors of the town that the mantle of

leadership ought to be passed to him. "What would you prefer," he rhetorically asked them, "that all of Yeruba'al's seventy sons should rule over you, or rather that one man should rule over you? Remember also that I am your own bone and flesh!" (9:2).

Now the important hill-country city of Shekhem, located some 50 kilometers north of Jerusalem in the tribal territory of Menashe, was not settled by Israelites but rather was populated by an indigenous Canaanite tribe that ethnically descended from the Chivite (see *Sefer Bereishit* 34:2). The inhabitants of Shekhem, however, were not hostile to their Israelite neighbors and throughout the lengthy account of the conquest and settlement of the land preserved in *Sefer Yehoshua*, there is no mention of the city of Shekhem in any context of combat. They did not join the Canaanite confederacies of city-states that unsuccessfully battled against the Israelite armies nor is there any record in the book of an Israelite conquest of their territory. On the other hand, we do find that Yehoshua's inspirational and exhortative parting address to the people of Israel was delivered from Shekhem (see *Sefer Yehoshua* 24:1). It therefore seems plausible that the Canaanite people of Shekhem, perhaps still recalling the stinging defeat inflicted upon them by the sons of Ya'acov centuries earlier (See *Sefer Bereishit* Chapter 34), decided that a neutral stance towards the returning Israelites would be safest for their welfare, and thus was born their tradition of accommodation.

It thus emerges that Avimelekh, the child of Gid'on's concubine from Shekhem, was the offspring of a woman who was not, in all probability, Israelite in origin. Thus, he shared an ethnic affinity with the Canaanite townspeople that his other seventy half-brothers did not. This connection of blood and common cultural worldview with the indigenous Shekhemites can perhaps also be inferred from the fact that when Avimelekh addresses his mother's family and the governors in turn, he invariably refers to his father Gid'on by his nom de guerre "Yeruba'al." This name, assigned to Gid'on when he first threw down the local idolatrous shrine in the town of 'Ofra (see 6:32), contains the "ba'al" root that would have been most sympathetic to Canaanite sensibilities.

No wonder Avimelekh's words fell on receptive ears, for he soon secured funds from the treasury of the local idolatrous temple of Ba'al Brit and then gathered a militia of vicious and vile men to do the unspeakable. Arriving unexpectedly at the home of his father's clan in 'Ofra, Avimelekh slaughtered his seventy half-brothers to a man, and then proclaimed himself king over the city-state of Shekhem and over its surrounding territory. Thus did Avimelekh champion his maternal connection to the

Canaanites of Shekhem while displaying utter estrangement from his father's Israelite origins.

The sum of seventy pieces of silver that Avimelekh received from the shrine (9:4) corresponds exactly to the seventy brothers that he then went on to execute. Is it perhaps a pointed reference to his complete disdain for the inherent value of human life and fraternal blood, for did he not coldly execute each one of his brothers for the measly pittance of a single silver shekel?

ALL IN A NAME

A man of resolve, ruthless Avimelekh must have had his eye on the kingship from the very day that the Israelites had first broached the subject. It is reasonable to assume that at the time of Gid'on's great victory over Midian, Avimelekh was either not yet born or else very young, for at the killing of the Midianite princes Zevach and Tzalmuna in the aftermath of the victory, Gid'on's firstborn Yeter was described as being "still a lad" (8:20). No doubt, however, the son of the concubine grew up with the stories of his father's great victory and the reports of his father's refusal to become a dynastic ruler of the people. But Avimelekh was made of more brutal stuff than his humble father. It is more than likely in fact that his portentous name, which means "my father is king," was not given to him by Gid'on his father at all, but rather was self-assigned. The pertinent verse in Chapter 8 implies such a reading, for it says:

His (Gid'on's) concubine who was in Shekhem also bore him a son,
AND HE MADE HIS NAME AVIMELEKH (8:31).

Now, in general in the Tanakh, when names are given to children by their parents, the verb "*vayiKRA*" ("and he called") is used, or else "*vatiKRA*" ("and she called") if the mother bestows it (see, for example, *Bereishit* 16:15; 19:37-38; 21:3; 29:31-30:24, et al). The verb *KRA* means "to call" and its usage in Biblical Hebrew is quite similar to its usage in modern English – it frequently means to address another, and it can sometimes mean to assign a name. But here, the account does not say "*vayikra et shemo Avimelekh*," but rather "*vayaSeM et shemo Avimelekh*" which translates literally as "and he made his name Avimelekh." Perhaps the subject of the pronoun "he" in verse 31 is not father Gid'on at all but rather Avimelekh himself, and indicates that at some point the ambitious lad renounced his birth name and instead adopted a moniker that was more in keeping with his insatiable aspirations for rule. Gid'on may have refused to become ruler over his people, but Avimelekh used the pretext of his

father's eminent qualifications for that office in order to advance his own illegitimate and impious claim.

THE PARABLE OF YOTAM

There was, however, one brother out of the seventy who escaped Avimelekh's murderous grasp. Young Yotam (whose name is a pathetic rearrangement of "*yatom*" or orphan) followed the news of Avimelekh's ascent with alarm; at the time of the latter's coronation at Shekhem, Yotam climbed steep Har Gerizim opposite and called out to the assembly from a safe distance. Addressing himself to the governors of Shekhem who had aided and abetted Avimelekh's rise, Yotam pronounced what ranks as one of the most famous parables in the Hebrew Bible: the story of the trees in search of a king. The trees of the forest, he cried out, went to appoint a king. They approached the olive, the fig and the grape in turn, but each one refused, citing their need to instead fulfill their special appointed tasks for the glory of God and for the benefit of humanity. "Shall I cease providing my sweet honey and good fruits in order to hold sway over the trees?!" replied the fig (9:11). In desperation, the trees then turned to the "*atad*," who ominously invited the other trees to take shelter under its shade while also warning them that should they fail to show fidelity, then "a fire shall shoot forth from the '*atad*' and consume even the cedars of Lebanon!" (9:15).

While the olive, fig and grape are well-known species, staples of the Biblical diet, and mentioned in the Tanakh innumerable times, the exact identity of the "*atad*" is subject to disagreement. Many modern-day botanists have identified the "*atad*" with various species of the lyceum. These medium-height (1.5-2 meters) wild bramble bushes have a thick and stout low canopy of foliage that is full of thorns. Since the branches of the bramble often reach to the ground, the trunk is scarcely exposed and therefore the shade provided by the bush is negligible. In the summer, the bramble sheds its leaves that then dry out upon the ground and become highly inflammable. In ancient times, the bush was often planted around orchards and vineyards to discourage trespassers, whether of the human or animal variety.

If in fact this is the "*atad*" of Yotam's parable, then his message would be clear. While the other trees that were asked to become king are all productive members of the landscape, yielding delectable fruit and useful byproducts, the bramble yields but thorns. And while those other trees bring only benefit to their floral or faunal neighbors with their shade and produce, the bramble is a source of neither, for its fruits are inedible

and its shade is insignificant. In fact, if anything, the bramble constitutes a threat to its surroundings, for not only do its sharp thorns harm any who venture too close, but its dried leaves can spread destruction far and wide when they are ignited. So too Avimelekh, explains Yotam. Though he lacks any of the constructive and useful qualifications to become a good king and useful leader, he has seized the vacant position by force. And though he promises to protect those who had been persuaded to appoint him, in the end he will destroy them and himself with his self-centered recklessness.

AVIMELEKH'S DEMISE

After pronouncing his portentous parable, Yotam flees, and it is not long before Avimelekh and the nobles of Shekhem have a falling out. After three years of suffering his rapacious rule (9:22), the governors fight back. By positioning their own men upon the well-traveled and well-taxed hill trails that crisscross Shekhemite territory, they are able to seize for themselves one of Avimelekh's important sources of income (9:25). And when a rabble rouser by the name of Ga'al son of 'Eved passes through town and openly criticizes Avimelekh's rule, the governors rally around him (9:26-29). But Zevul, who is Avimelekh's local lackey, secretly sends word to his absent boss and when Avimelekh unexpectedly soon arrives with his warriors, a pitched battle erupts between the two sides (9:30-40). Ga'al is easily defeated and expelled from the city and Avimelekh then prevails against it (9:41-45).

In the meantime, the governors flee to the town's fortress (associated with the temple of Ba'al Brit) and barricade themselves, but Avimelekh rallies his men to quickly fell trees and gather their branches. Placing the wood at the base of the tower, he sets it alight and it topples, killing about one thousand men and women (9:46-49). The remaining opposition to Avimelekh regroups and gathers at the nearby fortress of Tevetz, but the wily and ruthless ruler soon besieges it. This time, though, as Avimelekh approaches its ramparts to set them alight, a woman casts down an upper millstone that finds its mark and strikes him on the head. Realizing that he has been dealt a deathblow, he beseeches his armor bearer to dispatch him, lest it be said that "a woman has killed him!" (9:50-54). His servant complies, and thus comes to its ignominious end one of the sorriest chapters in the book. The people of Israel disperse, and the narrative concludes with the observation that in fact the curse of Yotam was fulfilled: the fire of Avimelekh did overtake the nobles of Shekhem and also spelled his own downfall.

AVOIDING THE PITFALLS OF MONARCHY

This first attempt in Israel to establish some sort of dynastic rule thus fails completely. The narrative is decidedly unsympathetic to any of the protagonists mentioned in the chapter, save for Yotam the surviving son of Gid'on. Avimelekh of course represents the pitfalls associated with hereditary rule, for while this system may accomplish the transition of power more smoothly than typically transpires with other forms of government, often the one who assumes that power is unfit to wield it. Avimelekh had no redeeming qualities of his own and was only appointed king because of his father's merit and his own unbridled avidity. Though Avimelekh may also have been a gifted fighter and strategist, he used those talents only to own his advantage and not for the benefit of the people. Avimelekh is the ONLY judge in the book (if he may be referred to as such) who is not engaged whatsoever in the typical pursuits associated with being a Biblical judge. He does not exhort and instruct like Devorah, nor does he rescue from oppression like 'Otniel, Ehud, or Gid'on. No wonder that after his dismal end, the notion of monarchy was effectively shelved by the people of Israel for almost two centuries!

As for Ga'al son of 'Eved and Zevul, they too are rogues of the first order, the former an inebriated malcontent espousing no palliative political platform to counter Avimelekh's, and the latter an obsequious crony of the first degree. Even the oppressed governors and people of Shekhem, idol worshippers all who were initially only too willing to support Avimelekh's murderous bid for the throne, elicit no pity from the reader. It is no wonder that the main protagonists have such unflattering names, for "Ga'al" means to vomit up, "'Eved" means slave, and "Zevul" (at least in later Rabbinic Hebrew) relates to the spreading of fertilizer!

CONCLUSION

As a whole, this chapter serves as a severe caution, providing us with a profile of the anti-ruler who must not be empowered even when the people are justifiably desperate for leadership. The anti-ruler candidate possesses a lust for power that should immediately be regarded with suspicion and alarm. He is often inspired with a healthy dose of paranoia and thinks nothing of brutally extirpating any and all who oppose him. Though he may possess cunning, charisma and capability, he has absolutely no sense of a higher purpose and no regard for the larger good. He acts for his own advantage and views the world through the narrow prism of greed and self-gain.

In short, the chapter indicates, no ruler at all is preferable to the anti-ruler, for though the latter appears to alleviate social and political chaos in the short term, in fact his narcissistic policies tend to propagate it in the long term. Without fail, the anti-ruler in the end destroys himself as well as his constituents. "God thus requited the evil of Avimelekh, that which he had done to his father by slaying his seventy brothers. As for all of the evil of the people of Shekhem, God requited it upon them also, for the curse of Yotam son of Yeruba'al overtook them" (9:56-57).

For next time, readers are kindly requested to read Chapters 10 and 11.

Shabbat Shalom

For further study: for two fascinating articles concerning the identity of the "*atad*," see Prof. Yehuda Feliks in "Nature and Man in the Bible" who adopts the conventional identification, and Noga HaReuveni in "Tree and Shrub in Our Biblical Heritage" who offers a different but no less intriguing possibility.