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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS
SEFER SHOFTIM

Sefer Shoftim Chapter 12

Yiftach's Legacy

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INTRODUCTION

Chapter 12 of *Sefer Shoftim* describes the aftermath of Yiftach's victory over the Ammonites. Recall that the kingdom of Amon, centered on an upper tributary of wadi Yabbok at the city of Rabbat, about 40 kilometers east of the river Jordan, had harshly oppressed the Israelite tribes of Reuven, Gad and Menashe that lived in the Transjordanian highland of Gil'ad. Eager to reverse three hundred years of history, Amon denied any Israelite claim to the fertile lands that had first been settled by those tribes after Moshe's trouncing of Sichon and Og the mighty Amorite kings (see *Bemidbar* 21:21-35; 32:1-42). The ascendant and expansionist Ammonites also pressed westwards, even subjugating the tribes of Efraim, Binyamin and Yehuda that all dwelt on the opposite side of the Jordan River. Yiftach, brigand and outlaw, had been hastily summoned by the elders of Gil'ad to counter the Ammonite menace, and after his peace overtures were rebuffed, he confidently led a force of Israelite irregulars drawn from all of the Transjordanian tribes (but especially Menashe) into battle. Unexpectedly, Yiftach inflicted a

crushing defeat, and the Ammonites were pushed back all the way to the edge of the desert, while Israelite hegemony was reestablished over the disputed lands.

But the national triumph was marred by Yiftach's personal tragedy, for he had impulsively pronounced an oath on the eve of his entry into the battle: "if You will completely surrender Bnei Amon into my hands, then that which (literally "he that") shall go forth from the portals of my house to greet me when I return in peace from Bnei Amon will be for God, and I shall offer it (literally "him") as a burnt offering!" (*Shoftim* 11:29-31). Upon his triumphant return, his own daughter and only child came forth with timbrels to joyously welcome him, and Yiftach doubled over in grief. In the end, after she had mournfully wandered for two months accompanied by her maidens, lamenting her fate among the verdant hills of Gil'ad, her father fulfilled his distorted pledge of devotion and immolated her in the name of God.

THE EFRAMITES' CLAMOR

While the account of the demise of Yiftach's daughter is recorded at the end of Chapter 11, this is only for the sake of literary considerations, in order to append her sacrifice to the victory and thus emphasize the tragic quality of the events as well as to neatly complete the shocking episode in its entirety before moving on to speak of other matters. But in reality the events of Chapter 12 happened before the daughter of Yiftach met her final fate, for the tribe of Ephraim actually clamored against Yiftach as soon as the smoke of battle had cleared:

The people of Ephraim were mustered and passed over (the Yarden) towards the north, and they said to Yiftach: "Why did you traverse (the river) in order to battle the people of Ammon while neglecting to summon us to accompany you? We will burn down your house upon you with fire!" (*Shoftim* 12:1).

Yiftach's reaction to the Ephraimite provocation was both swift as well as harsh. Rebuking them for their failure to initially join him in battle against the Ammonites, Yiftach wasted no time in gathering his compatriots, the people of Gil'ad who dwelt east of the Yarden, and engaging the Ephraimites in hostilities. Overwhelmed, the Ephraimites attempted to flee but to no avail. Quickly, Yiftach seized the fords of the Yarden in order to prevent the Ephraimites from escaping back over the river and then proceeded to slaughter them to a man:

The Gil'adites secured the fords of the Yarden of Ephraim, so that if a refugee from Ephraim would say "let me traverse," then the people of Gil'ad would say to him "are you then an Ephraimite?" If he would respond "no," then they would say to him "say now '*shibboleth*.'" When he would answer *sibboleth*, for he was unable to pronounce the word, then they would seize him and slaughter him at the fords of the Yarden. At that time, 42,000 Ephraimites perished... (12:5-6).

THE PRECEDENT OF GID'ON

Exploiting the inability of the Ephraimites to properly pronounce the sibilants, Yiftach's men were able to easily ferret them out and to kill them. The Ephraimite losses were of course staggering, exceeding in

number any other Israelite casualty list recorded in the Book! Considering the matter from the point of view of leadership, we may say that Yiftach here failed miserably. Alert readers may recall, of course, that this is not the first example of wounded Eframite pride recorded in *Sefer Shoftim*, nor is it the first time that a judge had been placed in such trying circumstances. We must compare Yiftach's conduct to that of one of his predecessors, namely Gid'on, who had earlier overcome another Transjordanian oppressor that had penetrated into the heartland of the Israelite settlement west of the Yarden. Gid'on's victory over the Midianites is recorded in Chapters 7 and 8 and readers are invited to review the material and to study the relevant archived articles. For our purposes, what is important to note is that in the heated aftermath of warfare, Gid'on also faced an Eframite challenge to his rule, but he met it in a radically different and infinitely more constructive way.

Under circumstances not unlike those faced by Yiftach, when similarly confronted by a large and well-armed enemy force, Gid'on assembled a coalition of tribes to engage the Midianites but he conspicuously omitted summoning the Eframites. It was not until the rout of the fleeing foe that Gid'on belatedly called upon the Eframites to secure the western fords of the Yarden, in order to prevent the nomadic Midianites from escaping across the river eastwards towards the desert. This the tribe duly did, but then they strove with Gid'on "mightily":

The men of Ephraim said to him: "what is this thing that you have done to us by not summoning us to when you went to fight the Midianites?" ...But he responded: "Have I done anything as valiant as you have done now? Are not the gleanings of Ephraim better than the harvest of Avi'ezer? The Lord has given the Midianite

chieftains Orev and Zeev into your hands! What have I done to equal your exploits?" When he said this to them, their anger subsided (8:8:1-3).

Thus, Gid'on also was confronted by an Eframite provocation born out of the proud tribe's (feigned?) frustration with being excluded, but, unlike Yiftach, he defused the situation with soothing words. By employing a strategic mix of self-deprecation and glowing praise, he was able to overcome the Eframite hurt and to win them over to his side. And rather than exacerbating the existing tribal rivalries, always a source of great grief in the Book, Gid'on attempted to heal the natural rifts and to foster unity, and because of his willingness to exercise humility he was successful.

THE CONTRAST WITH YIFTACH

But Yiftach was a man cut from different cloth. A brigand at heart, the charismatic outlaw had been called from the desolate highlands to do battle with the Ammonites, and with his fighting spirit he prevailed. Faced, however, with a quarrel among his own splintered polity, he could not and would not bring the tribes together. By championing his own compatriots and their decisive role in the victory, by denigrating the Eframites that were angered by their exclusion from the rout, he stoked the coals of strife and tens of thousands perished by his word!

Now it is the case that Yiftach seems to justifiably suggest in his rebuttal to Ephraim that the tribe had initially remained deaf to his entreaties to assist in the battle, at least until the Ammonites were already put to flight. A paraphrase of verses 2 and 3 might, in fact, read as

follows: "As long as the threat of the Ammonites was still upon you, you would not dare to join us despite my urgent appeals" said Yiftach, "but now that I have scattered them so that they are in withdrawal from your territory, you complain about your exclusion from the fray!" In this aspect, his situation differed markedly from that of Gid'on who had never called upon the Eframites to join the battle, since it was anyway Menashe and the more northern tribes that bore the brunt of the nomads' devastating invasion (see 6:33-35). Thus, it was only when the Midianites began their retreat towards the southeast that Gid'on sent his messengers to the Eframites and requested them to seize the river fords, ahead of the fleeing Midianite hordes. Yiftach's indignation at the Eframites, therefore, was certainly valid. An urgent appeal unanswered is a more serious offense than initiative not taken. Nevertheless, with the enemy vanquished and the unity of the tribes now put to the test, Yiftach should have responded with greater magnanimity.

It is with this infamy that Yiftach's term concludes, for nothing else is recorded of his short six-year rule (12:7). And while it may be said that in beating back the Ammonites, Yiftach fulfilled his mandate as judge admirably, posterity remembers him more for his fits of excess. His rash and reckless words were his undoing, condemning both his kinsman to the slaughter as well as his own daughter to the flames. No wonder that when the ancient Rabbis came to ponder the curious epitaph that records his burial "in the cities of Gil'ad" (verse 7) they facetiously concluded that he must have suffered from a debilitating illness that caused his limbs to wither away and drop off one at a time, so that each one was buried in a different town of his realm (see *Bereishit Rabba* Chapter 60:3). Thus, the Scriptures could literally and rightly claim that he was, in fact, buried "in the cities of Gil'ad"! But were they perhaps more soberly alluding to his

sowing of divisiveness and discord, to his penchant for breeding schism among the tribes – body Israel – over which he exercised his rule? Were the Rabbis perchance referring to the striking down and sacrificial dismemberment of his own daughter, his own flesh and blood and a metaphorical limb of his body, in a twisted and perverse act of devotion to God?

THE CONCLUDING PASSAGE

Our chapter is concluded with the mention of three minor and obscure judges, each one receiving only two or three verses of text. Of Ivtzan from Beit Lechem it was said only that he judged for seven years and had many sons and daughters, of Elon from Zevulun it was recorded only that he judged for ten years, and of Avdon son of Hillel from Pir'aton it was stated only that he ruled for eight years and had many sons and grandsons. Thus it is that the long narrative of Yiftach is finished with a concise list of little known personalities, much as the Gid'on saga had similarly concluded with the mention of two minor judges named Tol'a and Yair (see 10:1-5). The arc of inexorable decline that is the Book's abiding feature is in no way relieved by the mention of these murky fellows, and their terse biographies serve as a fitting introduction to *Sefer Shoftim's* final cycle of failure and final judge to wit, Shimshon of Dan.

The geography suggested by the mention of Elon and Avdon indicates a more northern locus for their exploits, as the tribe of Zevulun is due west of the Sea of Galilee while Pir'aton is found in the hill country of Efraim. Based on this scant information alone, we might have concluded that Ivtzan of Beit Lechem similarly hailed from the region,

for in the territory of Zevulun there is to be found a town of "Beit Lechem" (see *Yehoshua* 19:15). The more famous Beit Lechem, however, at least insofar as the Biblical narratives are concerned, is Beit Lechem of Yehuda, located just south of Jerusalem. If therefore Ivtzan came from Beit Lechem Yehuda, then he would be the second judge from that tribe recorded in the Book. The first had been Otniel son of Kenaz whose exploits in capturing Kiryat Sefer won him glory as well as the hand of hoary Calev's daughter in marriage (1:8-15). Later on, Otniel defeated the tyrant Kushan, thus earning his place as the first of the judges (3:7-11). Ivtzan's mention would therefore serve as a fitting close to the era, inviting us to ponder further the steep curve of deterioration that is traced by the lives and times of the judges.

But for some of the Rabbis, the mention of Ivtzan may have actually provided a faint glimmer of hope. In Talmud *Bavli* Tractate *Bava Batra* 91a, Rabba bar Rav Huna remarks in the name of Rav that "Ivtzan is Boaz," and this identification is widely quoted by the classical commentaries. Boaz of Beit Lechem Yehuda is of course one of the heroes of Megillat Ruth, a compassionate man who cares for Naomi, the indigent widow of his deceased relative Elimelekh, as well as for Ruth her Moavite daughter-in-law. The *Megilla*, whose events take place "during the time of the judges" (1:1) is in fact a poignant tale of loss, loyalty, and love, and furnishes us a telling glimpse into the lives of ordinary rural Israelites who lived among the hills of Judea in a town called Beit Lechem. Theirs was a tight and supportive community that provided assistance to those in need as well as comfort to those that were in pain. There are, in fact, few books in the *Tanakh* that can compare to Megillat Ruth for sheer empathic power. And while our analysis of *Sefer Shoftim* has tended to paint that age as being dark, chaotic and

malevolent, Ivtzan of Beit Lechem reminds us that nestled among the rocky hills were plenty of common folk who, while they may have eked out their subsistence and lived and died unremarkably, were nevertheless noble and upright.

Readers are kindly requested to prepare Chapter 13 for next time, against the backdrop of *Bemidbar* Chapters 5-6 that discuss the provisions of the Nazir.