

# The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Themes and Ideas in the Haftara  
Yeshivat Har Etzion

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**This haftara series is dedicated in memory  
of our beloved Chaya Leah bat Efrayim Yitzchak  
(Mrs. Claire Reinitz), zichronah livracha,  
by her family.**

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## **PARASHAT CHUKAT**

### **THE RIGHT MAN AT THE WRONG TIME**

**Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein**

#### **TIME OF TRANSITION**

The *haftara* of *Parashat Chukat* (*Shofetim* 11:1-33), which recounts the story of Yiftach and the war that he waged against Amon, is found exactly in the middle of the book of *Shofetim*. Ten chapters precede it and ten chapters follow it. The fact that the story of Yiftach is found at the midpoint of the book is not merely an accidental, though interesting, statistical piece of information, but rather it reflects a most essential aspect of Yiftach's leadership. With respect to his very essence, Yiftach is found in the middle of the book, and the dynamic of the transition from the first half

of the book to the second half is a critical issue for understanding the person and accomplishments of Yiftach. The fact that the story appears in the statistical midpoint of the book with respect to the number of chapters is lovely, but the heart of the matter is in the transition itself, and that will be our focus.

## THE DELIVERERS

To understand the world in which Yiftach operated, we must examine what happens in the book as a whole. The book is called the book of *Shofetim*, the word *shofetim* being used here in the sense of "leaders."<sup>[1]</sup> A key verse that repeats itself in different forms throughout the book is "And so-and-so judged (*vayishpot*) Israel for such-and-such years," meaning that his leadership extended for that period of years. When, however, we examine the book a little more closely, we see that this formulation is not found at all in the first half of the book, where no mention is made of *shofetim*, but only of *moshi'im*, "deliverers." The verse that describes the ascent of Otniel ben Kenaz, the first *shofet* – "The Lord raised up a deliverer to the children of Israel, who delivered them" (*Shofetim* 3:9) – is what characterizes the early *shofetim*. The term *moshi'a* implies that we are not dealing with a *shofet* who leads the people for an extended period of time, but rather a military commander who appears on the scene during a time of crisis.

The *moshi'a* seizes leadership and steps out into the public arena as a military leader during a security crisis and resolves it. When the crisis is over, he does not continue to lead the people, but rather he goes home. When we examine the verses, we see that nowhere does it say with respect to the early *shofetim* – truth be said, it would be better to call them *moshi'im* – that they continued to lead the people. The formula that characterizes the beginning of the book is not "And he led the people for forty years," or the like, but rather, "And the land was quiet for forty years." The *moshi'a* does not lead the people following his military victory, but rather his actions bring to calm and tranquility that last for a certain period of time.<sup>[2]</sup>

Indeed, some of these *shofetim* are not described by Scripture as leaders that are active for an extended period of time, or even as army mobilizers. Thus, for example, all that we are told about Shamgar ben Anat (3:31) is that he conducted a successful

military raid that led to calm, no information being given as to how long he led the people. Similarly, Ehud ben Gera who was active during the same period achieves quiet for eighty years, as it is stated: "And the land was quiet for eighty years" (3:30). This does not mean that he led the people for eighty years, as is implied by the charts hanging in many classrooms, but rather that his actions achieved a certain degree of calm for that duration. Even in his old age, and even after he died, the quiet continued until a new threat arose in the wake of additional sins (see 4:1-2). This is the meaning of the verse that states that the land was quiet for eighty years, and not that Ehud ruled for such a long period, twice as long as that of any other leader known to us during the period of the early prophets, and astonishing in and of itself. There is no need to assume that Ehud began his career very early in life and that he continued in office until a ripe old age, but rather that his actions brought about an extended period of calm.

## **TURNING TO GIDON**

This is the course of events described in the first half of the book of *Shofetim*, deliverers arising who deliver Israel and then go home. This system led, of course, to instability, and to a situation in which every man did what was right in his eyes. It was only natural then that at a certain point the people decided that they had had enough of this chaos and so they turned to Gidon that he should establish a stable regime: "Then the men of Israel said to Gidon, Rule you over us, both you, and your son, and your son's son also; for you have delivered us from the hand of Midyan" (8:22). Gidon, however, refuses their offer, and declares: "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the Lord shall rule over you" (8:23). Nevertheless, the basic dynamic of the transition from chance deliverers to fixed leaders is preserved and it is realized a little later, following the end of the anarchy and despotism of the period of Avimelekh and the men of Shekhem.

## **THE FIRST SHOFET**

We now come to the decisive role of two gray and unknown figures and the importance of a small section in the middle of the book:

And after Avimelekh there arose to defend Israel Tola the son of Pu'a, the son of Dodo, a man of Yissakhar, and he dwelt in Shamir in mount Efrayim. And he judged Israel twenty three years, and died, and was buried in Shamir.

And after him arose Yair, the Giladi, and judged Israel twenty two years. And he had thirty sons that rode on thirty ass colts, and they had thirty cities, which are called Chavvot-Yair to this day, which are in the land of Gilad. And Yair died, and was buried in Kamon. (10:1-5)

On the first reading, Tola the son of Pu'a seems to be a very minor figure, who was not credited with any significant achievements. Nothing is reported about him except for the fact that he was a *shofet* and that he was buried; he did not deliver Israel from the hand of the Pelishtim, or fight against Amon or execute any action worthy of scriptural mention. Nevertheless, he is a key figure, because he was **the first true shofet**. For the first time it is stated about a person that he judged Israel for an extended period of time, and not only that he defeated their enemy and brought about a period of calm. Tola had a capital city and a geographical base, and he inaugurated political leadership extending for a significant period of time. It is precisely the fact that he is not a charismatic military leader, but rather a quiet and gray figure, that emphasizes the stability that he brings and the regimental revolution that he leads.

Tola was followed by Yair the Giladi, who deepened the process. Regarding him, Scripture focuses on his sons and their ass colts. In other words, we are witness here to the rise of people who are close to those in power, and to the special benefits that they receive. Modern man, who has had his fill of bureaucracy and is no longer sensitive to the exploitation of power for personal benefit, has little good to say about bureaucracy and those close to power. But if we consider the alternative, namely, anarchy and a society in which there is no guiding hand whatsoever, we will well understand which is the least of all evils, and how dangerous is the situation in which the individual is abandoned as prey in the hands of bullies. Yair's development of some kind of bureaucracy marks the establishment and the deepening of an orderly regime, and in this lies its importance. Thus, Scripture notes these facts about the ass colts, and does not see them as irrelevant information.

## MILITARY AND CIVIL LEADER

It is at this point in the development of the period that we find Yiftach. For the first time since the transition to orderly leadership, a security threat arises. The people do not react by turning to the civil *shofetim* who are leading and administrating the day-to-day regime; rather, they decide that they must search for a charismatic deliverer and a heroic figure in the style of previous deliverers.

In this manner they reach Yiftach and propose that he be their deliverer who will lead Israel's forces in battle against the people of Amon. Indeed, the figure of Yiftach, as described in the opening verses of the *haftara*, corresponds well to the model of deliverer, but not to that of *shofet*. He is ostracized, of lowly descent, and lives on the fringes of society in the company of idle and reckless people, relying on his martial skills. These traits are useful for a military campaign, but they do not satisfy the required criteria for running a country during peacetime. Therefore, the people make him the following proposal: "Come, and be our captain, that we may fight with the children of Amon" (11:6). They see him as a military leader who will lead the forces, and nothing more, this in light of the "deliverer" model of leadership familiar to them from previous crises. Yiftach, however, does not want to suffice with that; rather, he is interested in becoming a *shofet*, for the times had changed and the "*shofet*" model had already been introduced into the world. Unlike Gidon, he insists on translating military success into civil authority, and the elders of Gilad, seeing no alternative, make the following offer:

And the elders of Gilad said to Yiftach, Therefore we turn again to you now, that you may go with us, and fight against the children of Amon, and be our head over all the inhabitants of Gilad. And Yiftach said to the elders of Gilad, If you bring me back home to fight against the children of Amon, and the Lord deliver them before me, shall I be your head? And the elders of Gilad said to Yiftach, The Lord is witness between us, if we do not so according to your words. (11:8-10)

The concluding verse of the opening section of the *haftara* finely expresses the tension in the job offer: "Then Yiftach went with the elders of Gilad, and the people made him head and captain over them" (11:11). They view him as a captain regarding whom they have no other alternative but to appoint him as their head, whereas he sees himself first and foremost as their *shofet*.

## **THE IMPULSIVITY OF A FIGHTER**

It is precisely in Yiftach's insistence on being a *shofet* that his personal tragedy lies. As it turns out, he is unfit to serve as a *shofet*, because his primary strength is in his ability to wage war, and not in leading a nation. As was well expressed by *Chazal (Rosh Hashana 25b)*, Yiftach was one of the "light ones of the world"; he knows how to fight, and even to rise spiritually during battle ("Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Yiftach"; 11:29), but he lacks inner spiritual strength that is suitable for leadership in the post-war period. The story of his vow and the sacrifice of his daughter testifies to this. He pronounces the vow without thinking, and without the care that might be expected in such a situation. As an impulsive act of a soldier who makes a vow as he goes out to battle, it is quite understandable. But the condition for accepting the vow with understanding is the exercise of reason in the implementation of the vow following the war. In other words, examining the validity of the vow and the possibility of annulling it is critical.

Yiftach's reaction to the vow and its consequences will also demonstrate for us whether he is graced with leadership skills, whether he is prepared to admit how unsuitable is his vow, which at the time had expressed his fighting spirit, to civil reality, and whether he is capable of expressing remorse over having made the vow. The nullification of a vow is based on the principle of mistake and/or regret, and the ability to make such an admission is a quality that attests that the leader is flexible enough to admit that his declared intentions of the past are no longer suited for present circumstances. Regret is based on a person's recognition that his earlier thinking is no longer appropriate given the change in circumstances. A person who is capable of such recognition is ready to change his mind, and not fix his present conduct according to what he thought in the past.

## **LACK OF FLEXIBILITY**

Yiftach, however, does not do this. He does not clarify whether or not his vow is valid, and he makes no attempt to nullify it. In the finest military tradition, the

senior officer does not consider changing what he had said, and instead of reconsidering and reexamining his vow, he insists on its unconditional fulfillment. All this proves what he have suspected all along, that Yiftach lacks the qualities that are necessary for leading a nation during times of peace. If he shows no mercy to his daughter, but rather decides her fate with a total lack of consideration and flexibility, he will surely act in this manner toward the rest of his people. Indeed, *Chazal* sharply criticized the very formulation of the vow and the fact that he did not have it annulled. The Gemara in *Ta'anit* (4a) defines the vow as a request that was improperly presented, and in other midrashim we find a most critical attitude to the fact that the vow was not annulled.

We see then that Yiftach was very suited to be a deliverer, according to the old model that prevailed prior to his day, but he insisted on being a *shofet* which was a role that did not match his personality and skills. For this he paid a dear price in the account of the vow and his daughter, and it may be assumed that the period of his leadership was also not particularly successful. Yiftach, then, was the right man at the wrong time. As long as he headed the campaign against the people of Amon, he was the person who was appropriate for the time and place, but later, his insistence on leadership turned him into a deliverer who was unfit for the role of *shofet*.

[It should be noted that this same problem accompanied the *shofet* who came after Yiftach – Shimshon. He too fits the model of "deliverer" but is active during the period of the *shofetim*, and this is his problem. Regarding Shimshon it is also stated (15:20) that he judged Israel, but his primary activity was going out to war and constant going to the land of the Pelishtim, so that he never really served as a *shofet* in an orderly manner, as did his predecessors.]

(Translated by David Strauss)

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[1] To me, this assertion is obvious, but many *Rishonim* did not accept it; they understood the term has a legal sense. This is what follows, for example, from the extensive discussion of the Ran in his *derashot* regarding the status of the king within the legal system on the basis of the expression "and our king will judge us {*ve-shofeteinu*}" and many other sources. The discussion in *Tosafot* (*Gittin* 88b and parallels), who bring proof that a woman is fit to serve as a judge from Devora, requires further study in light of this question (there the situation is further complicated by the fact that Scripture says that Israel went up to Devora for judgment). The common English translation of the title of the book as "Judges" rather than "Leaders" also reflects this understanding.

Of course, there is a common denominator between the two roles, namely, the need to employ sound judgment when choosing between various alternatives, but their objectives and their definitions are different.

[2] As stated, the prevailing expression in Scripture is *moshi'a*, rather than *shofet*. The root *sh-f-t* appears once with respect to Otniel, but as a description of his action when he went out to war and in the sense of assuming leadership in battle – "And the spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he judged Israel, and went out to war" (3:10), and not in the sense of stable political leadership following the defeat of one's enemies. Similarly, Devora is described as a *shofetet*, and it is entirely possible that her actions were different than those of all the other figures mentioned in the first half of the book of *Shofetim*. This, however, requires broader treatment than what is possible in the context of the present *shiur*.