YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)
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INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS
SEFER SHOFTIM

The Book of Judges – Lesson #1

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Introduction

Welcome to our continuing class on the 'Prophets,' a project of the Virtual Beit Midrash of Yeshivat Har Etzion. This week, we shall begin our study of Sefer Shoftim, the Book of Judges. This book is the second in the division of Tanakh known as 'Neviim' or Prophets, and its contents describe the trials, tribulations and triumphs experienced by the Israelite tribes as they struggled to settle the land of Canaan after the death of Yehoshua and the "elders that succeeded him." 'Tanakh,' of course, is a Hebrew acronym for 'Torah' (Pentateuch), 'Neviim' (Prophets), and 'Ketuvim' (Writings), the three components of the Hebrew Bible.

Sefer Shoftim is named after the inspiring regional chieftains, the so-called "Judges," who led their tribes on the battlefield and also frequently provided them with spiritual guidance and leadership. Chronologically, while the Book constitutes the natural continuation of Sefer Yehoshua, it describes events that transpire over a much longer period of Biblical history. While the events of Sefer Yehoshua are tightly bound up with the lifetime of its main protagonist, the course of Sefer Shoftim covers a period of almost four hundred years, from the preliminary attempts by the tribes to secure their allotted lands until the eve of the monarchy centuries later. The period of the Shoftim was perhaps the most turbulent in all of Biblical history, as the people of Israel struggled mightily to lay the foundations of their state in the shadow of very powerful and corrosive cultural, moral and military threats.

During the course of our studies, we shall grapple not only with textual difficulties and the intricacies of exegesis, but will also encounter many important and thought-provoking issues that are introduced by the narratives of this Book. Included among them: defining the confluence of Divine intervention and human initiative, understanding the role played by good (or bad!) leadership in shaping the political contours and underlying value system of the tribe or state, considering how to effectively address surrounding cultural values and their related religious practices when these are at odds with the mission of the people of Israel, delineating the parameters of the oft-stated Biblical link between fidelity to God and national success, and recognizing the awesome effort needed to forge disparate tribes and their self-interested local leadership into the united people of Israel. Before considering the text itself, however, a number of preliminary remarks and observations are in order.

Translations

Many of you will probably be studying the text of Shoftim in translation. There are a number of good English translations of the text available, but it is critical to bear in mind that a translation of any sort cannot take the place of the original Hebrew text. Biblical Hebrew is a rich and layered language, full of subtle nuances and multiple gradations of meaning. A translation cannot but convey one out of a large number of possible readings of the text, and perhaps not the most plausible reading at that. A translation is itself an interpretation that offers the reader a window into the text, but can never replace a study of the text in its original language. Critical literary and interpretive elements such as alliteration, word play, and meter are difficult to reproduce in translation, and most translations can therefore convey only an incomplete reading.

Additionally, the Hebrew Bible chooses its words with extreme care. Recurring expressions and phrases, both within a book as well as with reference to the larger context of the other books of the Tanakh, often carry the possibility of additional interpretations. This is a possibility that simply does not exist in translation, where no attempt is made to link remote references by utilizing a vocabulary of equivalent terms.

To offer a striking example from this week's parasha, the ark of Noach is described in the Biblical text by the word 'teiva' (Bereishit 6:14). The only other usage of this term in the entire Hebrew Scriptures occurs in the context of Yocheved's poignant attempt to save the life of her infant son Moshe, by placing him in a box of reeds, a 'teiva,' and allowing him to pathetically float away from her maternal embrace down the River Nile (Shemot 2:3). Studying the text in translation (in this case, that of the 'New JPS Translation,' Philadelphia, 1988) indicates that Noach built an 'ark,' and that Yocheved prepared a 'basket,' and suggests that there is absolutely no connection between the two episodes. Reading the text in the original Hebrew, however, in which the same word 'teiva' is used in both passages, raises the possibility that there is in fact a fundamental link between them.

In Biblical Hebrew, a sea-going vessel is often called an 'oniya' (see Bereishit 49:13, Devarim 28:68, Yona 1:3, etc.), or rarely a 'sephina' (Yona 1:5), but never, barring the context of Noach and Yocheved, a 'teiva.' What is the structural difference between a 'teiva' and the vessels described by these other terms? R. Avraham Ibn Ezra (Spain, 11th century) remarks that with respect to Noach, the Torah uses the noun "teiva rather than sephina, because this craft does not have the form of an oniya, and has no oars or rudder" (6:14).

The significance of this unusual deficiency is quite obvious. The lack of oars or a rudder for the ark effectively renders it incapable of being steered. The rising floodwaters will bear the craft, but Noach will play no role in piloting it or in directing it to land. Only God's merciful providence will ensure that the ark successfully weathers the torrential floodwaters and sets down intact on safe shores. God alone is the guiding power who drives the ark through the churning deep and steers it clear of mishap.

In a similar vein, when Yocheved places her infant son into his teiva and releases him to the unknown, she is not simply attempting to save his life by aiding his escape down river. Her seemingly hopeless gesture, after all other possibilities of concealing Moshe have been exhausted, actually represents an act of great faith. By constructing this craft for him and allowing it to pitifully float away from her outstretched arms, she is actually entrusting the life of her child to the

Merciful God. It is He who will care for Moshe and lovingly guide him downstream into the unexpectedly tender arms of Pharaoh's own daughter! Here again, the teiva represents God's role in shaping human destiny, and by entering the realm of the teiva we entrust our survival to a Transcendent Being who cares, preserves, sustains and saves.

Of course, a reading such as that offered above is not possible in translation except as a fanciful literary leap of imagination, since there is no reason to textually link 'arks' with 'baskets.' It is only in the original Hebrew that a meaningful connection emerges. In our study of Sefer Shoftim and the rest of the books of the Tanakh we will come across many additional examples of this critically important interpretive tool.

Chapter and Verse

The conventional numbering of the Biblical text into chapters and verses is not the product of Jewish tradition. In the handwritten Torah scroll, for example, the content is divided into paragraphs and sections according to visual breaks in the text. These breaks consist in the main of two types: a 'minor' division signified by a space between two paragraphs on the same line, and a 'major' division signified by a blank space that concludes a line. Verses may be regarded as separate sentences, but are not numbered.

It was Jerome, a prominent fourth-century Church father responsible for translating the Hebrew Bible, Apocrypha, and 'New Testament' into Latin, who first introduced the basis of the now universally accepted system of chapters. His translation, undertaken for the benefit of the common people, was known as the Vulgate (from the Latin 'vulgata' or 'popular'), and became the official Scriptures of the Roman Catholic Church. Stephen Langton, a 13th century English cardinal and later the Archbishop of Canterbury, refined Jerome's work by dividing the 'Old Testament' books of the Vulgate into the chapters and verses as we now know them. Ironically, the impetus for his work was the desire to facilitate disputations of the Scriptures with the Jews, by introducing a more uniform method for citing references. In any case, these divisions into chapter and verse were accepted by all subsequent translations and, with the invention of the printing press, eventually found their way into the printed Hebrew editions as well.

Often, Jerome's divisions are at odds with the traditional Jewish separations of the Biblical text. Admittedly, this is less of a problem in Sefer Shoftim than in other Biblical books, since the narratives of our book tend to be self-contained units that lend themselves well to division into chapters. Nevertheless, we do find, for example, that Chapter Eight of Shoftim begins with the angry outcry of the people of Efraim, who condemn Gid'on (Gideon) for having failed to include them in his battle plans against the Midianites. There is no such division in the Hebrew text, where the verse describing their complaint is organically connected to the previous one describing the defeat of the two Midianite chieftains, Orev and Ze'ev. Some of the modern Jewish translations of the Hebrew Bible (such as the 'Jerusalem Bible' by Koren Publishers, Jerusalem, 1992) have attempted to remedy the situation by incorporating the traditional divisions into their translated text.

It is important to realize that sometimes, the text's internal divisions may be critical tools in assisting us to evaluate its intent. After all, a verse does not stand only by itself, but must be

understood as part of the larger context. The interpretation of a passage may hinge upon how it is connected to the verses that precede and follow it. Thus, it will be necessary for us to bear in mind that the chapter/verse divisions are not immutable, and are in fact sometimes unsubstantiated from the point of view of Jewish tradition. We should therefore also not be surprised if occasionally, 'chapter' readings are assigned that seem to conflict with the chapter divisions themselves.

Modern Contributions

The modern age has witnessed an explosion of knowledge concerning the ancient world of the Bible. Archaeology has unearthed and revived ancient and forgotten civilizations that had been known only from the Biblical text, paleography has deciphered ancient Near-Eastern languages long ago extinct, stratigraphy has provided the possibility of correlating far-flung discoveries to provide a more solid historical framework, and intense study of cognate languages has provided much assistance (and conjecture!) for interpreting unusual Biblical terms and references otherwise inexplicable. All of this information and analysis has shed much light on the Biblical text, and to ignore it is to overlook an important dimension of Biblical exegesis that was sadly unavailable to the classic commentaries.

At the same time, these modern tools have often been used for quite a different purpose, to bolster arguments both for and against the authenticity of the Biblical accounts. Some archaeologists have enthusiastically donned the mantel of polemicists, using the conclusions of their work to undermine the Biblical account, and, more significantly for their purposes, to thrust aside the God silent and steadfast behind the text, with all of His moral, ethical, and spiritual demands. Proponents of various critical schools have gleefully deconstructed the apparently cohesive narratives to reveal a multiplicity of faceless authors and unskilled editors, often with the agenda of recasting Israel's proud and accurately portrayed heritage into a bold and twisted lie. Biblical scholars have often introduced emendations into the text to ostensibly reconcile what they have perceived to be divergences and inconsistencies, but their approach frequently hinges upon charging the text with a superficiality that is ludicrous. Sadder still, in the process they have often intentionally relegated the underlying message of the narrative, its profound pith and the very God-content that is at its center, to the proverbial dustbin.

The Tanakh however, is, at its core, a sacred document that describes the ongoing interaction between God and humanity, God and the people of Israel, God and the human being. It is a document that continuously challenges us to ask penetrating questions that relate to the essence of human nature and to the purpose and meaning of our existence. Its ancient but timeless words kindle the spiritual yearning that glows in every human heart, the longing for God, for goodness, and for a better world. No assault on the text can ever rob it of this, its transcendent quality. To approach the Tanakh as a secular historical account or as a fanciful mythology, only to then reject its essential message, divests it of its fundamental character and does a grave disservice to both text and reader.

In our studies, we will not look towards archeology et al to substantiate the account of the Book of Shoftim. The Divine element that animates the text requires no external proof for its confirmation. However, where archeology can shed light on understanding a Biblical text or event, we shall cautiously embrace its contributions, bearing in mind the limitations of its analyses.

In the end, the veracity of the text and the 'objective truths' provided by modern scholarship must be reconciled, but tentative 'facts' based upon inconclusive findings (or lack thereof) can be calmly ignored.

Terms and Transliterations

In general, we will adopt accurate transliterations rather than translations for place names and personal names. Thus, Joshua will be referred to as Yehoshua, Moses as Moshe, Judah as Yehuda, Jordan as Yarden, etc. Additionally, Biblical books will be referred to by their Hebrew names: Bereishit, Shemot, Vayikra, etc. Readers unfamiliar with the original Hebrew terms will no doubt require some time to adjust, but utilizing them provides the advantage of conveying a more authentic sense of the time and setting of the Biblical narratives. In order to become acclimated, when referring to other Biblical books for the first few lessons, we will use both the Hebrew term as well as the standard translation.

With respect to grammatical syntax, however, English conventions will always be adopted. Thus, for example, the 'Emorim' (Hebrew plural for 'Emori') will be referred to as the Emorites, utilizing English language plural endings. Adopting such a convention will make be more comprehensible to most readers.

Assignments

At the end of each lesson, a reading for the coming week will be assigned. It is highly recommended that readers avail themselves of the opportunity to study in advance the text of the Book, whether in translation or in the original Hebrew. It will not be possible to recount at length every episode occurring in the primary required reading, for the benefit of those who were not able to prepare ahead of time. No assumptions, however, will be made concerning readers' familiarity with external sources.

At this time, I would like to again welcome readers and students to this class. Next time, we shall begin our studies in earnest, and readers are asked to prepare the first chapter of the Book of Shoftim, verses 1 through 21. We shall concern ourselves with the preliminary battles of the tribe of Yehuda as well as with the textual transition from Sefer Yehoshua to our narratives.