

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS

SEFER SHOFTIM

Shiur #04: Chapter 2
The Pernicious Cycle of the Book
By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

The second chapter of the book of Shoftim opens with an obscure and mysterious reference:

A messenger of God ascended from Gilgal to those that wept ("ha-bokhim")...

The identity of the messenger is not divulged, nor is the historical period, nor even the location of the event. What is, however, crystal clear, is the message of the anonymous figure, words that he conveys in the name of God:

He said: 'I brought you up from the land of Egypt and I brought you to the land that I swore to your ancestors, and I said that I would never abrogate My covenant with you. You, in turn, must not conclude covenants with those that inhabit this land, rather, break down their altars. But you did not hearken to Me. What have you done? I therefore said that I will not drive them out from before you, but they will be like thorns to you and their gods will ensnare you.' As the messenger of God said these things to all of Israel, the people lifted up their voices and wept. They therefore called that place Bokhim (literally "those that weep"), and there they offered sacrifice to God (2:1-5).

GILGAL AND BOKHIM – PATHETIC ECHOES OF SEFER YEHOSHUA

Presumably, "those that wept" refers to the people of Israel who bemoaned their lack of success in settling the new land and in dislodging the Canaanite cults. But why does the passage divulge neither the identity of the messenger nor any other pertinent information about the assembly? When studying the book of Shoftim there is an entirely reasonable tendency to compare and contrast it with the book of Yehoshua that precedes it. This is justifiable on chronological as well as on thematic grounds. Chronologically, Sefer Shoftim forms the continuation of Sefer Yehoshua and its events follow immediately on the heels of Yehoshua's death. While it is true that the time span of the former (c. 350 years) is much greater than that of the latter (c. 50 years), the two nevertheless constitute a single continuum in time. Thematically, of course, the two are also linked, for while Sefer Yehoshua chronicled the beginning of the

conquest and settlement of Canaan, Sefer Shoftim details the historical unfolding of that process, spelling the sorry tale of its dismal failure as well as furnishing the causes.

It may therefore be possible to appreciate the sudden appearance of this messenger from Gilgal against the backdrop of Sefer Yehoshua. Gilgal, located just west of the Jordan River at the outskirts of the town of Yericho, was the first encampment of the people of Israel after they traversed the swollen streambed during the springtime of Yehoshua's leadership. There, they cast off the infamy of the wilderness wanderings by performing mass circumcision, and there they celebrated their first Passover as a nation in their land (Yehoshua 5:2-12). There as well, Yehoshua was unexpectedly visited by the man-like apparition of "God's Captain of the Host," who brandished his menacing sword of fire in the direction of Yericho and brought a message of Divine support and encouragement concerning the upcoming engagement of the Canaanites in battle.

In our passage, the (angelic?) messenger also is associated with Gilgal, but from there he ascends bearing ominous tidings of defeat and setback. The people, far from being in a celebratory mood, instead cry out, because they are informed by him that the Canaanite menace will not be neutralized. Thus, rather than constituting a festive and triumphant assembly after the manner of Yehoshua's Passover, the meeting at Bokhim underscores the unraveling of Israel's destiny in the new land. In a word, then, by echoing events associated with Yehoshua, our book emphasizes the terrible contrast that has unfolded: this time the messenger's mission to the people is about REVERSAL and DEFEAT, for he bears no arms symbolizing victory but only painful words of Divine rebuke. Now some views preserved in Rabbinic tradition associated this messenger with the fiery Pinchas, grandson of Aharon the Priest and long-lived scion of the priesthood. Perhaps we are to adopt this view only if we also embrace its Midrashic corollary: that one of the messengers sent by Yehoshua to spy out Yericho was none other than the same Pinchas (see Yehoshua 2:4, Rashi and Radak), thus again highlighting the great and tragic contrast described above.

THE RECURRING CYCLE OF THE BOOK

The matter is underscored in the text by the flashback that follows. In verses 6 – 10 we are told, in the final optimistic passage in the book (!), that Yehoshua had sent the people forth to settle the land. As long as Yehoshua and the elders were alive, as long as the generation of the conquest remembered, the fidelity of Israel to God and to His commands was assured. But then a "different generation arose that knew not God nor the acts that He had wrought for Israel."

What follows next is thematically a most significant section, for it traces in outline the spiritual malaise that characterizes the entire era of the Judges:

The people of Israel did evil in the sight of God and served the ba'alim. They abandoned God the Lord of their ancestors who had taken them out of the land of Egypt and they instead followed other gods from the gods of the nations that were round about them... God became angry with Israel and gave them over to marauders who attacked them... until it became unbearable for them... God established judges who saved them from the hands of their attackers... but when the judge died, then they would return to corrupt their ways... to

follow other gods...for they would not abandon their deeds and their grievous ways. God became angry with Israel and He said: "because this nation has transgressed My covenant that I commanded their ancestors and did not hearken to Me, I in turn will not continue to drive out even one man from the nations that remained at the time of Yehoshua's death. They will instead serve as a test for Israel to ascertain whether they will observe the way of God to follow them (the commands) as their ancestors did, or not." So therefore God granted a reprieve to these nations and did not drive them out quickly, for He did not turn them over to Yehoshua.

There are of course a number of readily identifiable features that demarcate this recurring cycle: (1) the people stray from God by adopting the practices and values of their Canaanite neighbors; (2) corrective punishment comes in the form of oppression at the hands of some local or else regional (but rarely international) enemy; (3) the people cry out at their insufferable situation; (4) God responds by designating a "judge" who saves the people from the hands of their oppressor; (5) the people's tenuous loyalty to God dissipates with the death of the judge and they soon return to their recidivistic ways, thus setting the cycle in motion once again. While Chapter 1 of the book focused upon the failure of the people to dispossess and drive out the indigenous Canaanites and especially their pagan and morally relativistic culture, Chapter 2 introduces the consequences of that monumental debacle: Israel adopted the ways of their neighbors and became estranged from God, therefore inviting reprimand. It is this two-stage process – failure to effect physical dispossession followed by adoption of religious and cultural norms – that causally drives the engine of the downward spiral.

Perhaps what is most striking, however, is the irony inherent in the Divine response, for while Israel, according to the above cycle, actively seeks accommodation with its Canaanite neighbors, preferring spiritually corrosive coexistence to stark self-definition, God consistently foils any possibility of real rapprochement and relationship by introducing instead an underlying hostility that breeds oppression. In a scene first staged here but actually replayed throughout Biblical history (and beyond), Israel is painfully reminded that, try as they might, they cannot abandon their unique mission in the world, neither by passive detachment nor even by active divestment.

THE CANAANITE FETISHES

Having understood the general thrust of the critical passage above, there are a number of terms that still beg for definition. The first ones concern the objects of the people's misplaced affections, the so-called "ba'alim" (verse 11, singular ba'al) and "ashtarot" (verse 13, singular ashtoret) that were the staples of Canaanite pagan belief and at the focus of their ceremonial and ritual lives. The classical commentaries, living some 1500-2000 years after Canaanite polytheism had been extirpated, could only guess at the identity and nature of these pagan gods. Rabbi David Kimchi (13th century, Provence), for instance, succeeded in formulating a generic taxonomy when he correctly surmised that the ba'alim were regarded as masters by their worshippers. He was less accurate when he claimed that "ashtoret" idols typically came in the shape of female sheep (commentary to 2:13). What animated him in arriving at both definitions were the only tools at his disposal: the linguistic and cross-referential data provided by the Hebrew Bible. Thus, "ba'alim" is the plural of "ba'al" that in many other contexts meant master or owner (see for instance Shemot

21:28 et al). "Ashtarot," never precisely defined in the Scriptures, occasionally occurred in the context of sheep (see for instance Devarim 7:12 – "He will love you, bless you, and multiply you. He will bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your earth, your grain, wine and oil, the calves of your cattle and the lambs ["ashtarot"] of your sheep, upon the land that He swore to give to your ancestors").

We now know, thanks to recovered ancient extra-Biblical texts and material finds, that Ba'al was in fact the most important member of the Canaanite pantheon, and was avidly worshipped throughout the length and breadth of the land as the god of storms, wind and rainfall. His consort was Ashtoret, often represented as an unusually well-endowed female and revered as the goddess of fertility. This fertility theme was of course preserved by the text of Devarim quoted above while the other idolatrous implications of the name were neutralized. Of course we must appreciate that in Canaan, a land that is dry and arid for the better part of the year, a land lacking any truly large rivers or lakes, a land whose hot valleys and terraced slopes depended in ancient times exclusively upon rainfall for their bounty, the worship of the ba'alim and ashtarot was not only widespread but had to be taken seriously as well. But that worship frequently included less than savory rituals. The active participation of temple prostitutes as well as various animals – all in the name of invoking the gods' favor for rain and bounty – represented not only the typical Canaanite cultic practices but also the scourge of immorality that characterized their culture as a whole.

Of course, Ba'al and Ashtoret, since they emerged from a polytheistic worldview, could certainly countenance the inclusion of other gods in their pantheon, even the God of Israel. But the converse was not possible: since God was an absolute and transcendent Being, neither dependent upon the whims of fate nor subject to its laws, Author and Champion of a morality that was correspondingly severe, the worship of any other forces – even when these were understood as being ultimately subject to His authority – was intolerable. But while the exclusivity of the Deity was certainly demanded by the Torah, what tended to develop in ancient Israel, under the pervasive influence of Canaanite culture, was the combining of His worship with the worship of the Canaanite gods, in a process known as syncretism. Therefore, Israel worshipped God (at least as a national divinity) while at the same time incorporating the worst of Canaanite belief and practice into their worldview. Thus it was, in the recurring motif that underscored the age of the Judges, that oppressed Israel could capriciously abandon their Canaanite fetishes and embrace God for relief, then just as quickly perform an about-face and discard His exclusive worship for the spiritual intoxication provided by the ba'alim and the ashtarot.

THE ROLE OF THE JUDGE

The second term that must be more precisely defined in this context is, of course, the namesake of the book: "judges." What exactly was the role of these figures that are described in the original Hebrew as "Shoftim"? While the primary connotation of the word, especially as it tends to be used in the post-Biblical literature, means "judge," an exclusively judicial definition is too narrow for our context. No doubt, the judges often judged as evidenced by the example of Devorah (4:4), but even more often they seem to have utilized their leadership skills in rallying the people to cast off the oppressive enemy yoke through the exercise of arms. Ehud (3:15) and Gid'on (7:16) were gifted fighters, Yiftach a born strategist (11:1). Thus, perhaps the judges of ancient

Israel were more akin to talented generals who retired to more prosaic political and judicial pursuits after the enemy had been vanquished. Then again, a few of the judges (such as Gid'on early in his career – 6:25-32) also provided religious and spiritual guidance and were remembered by posterity for their devotion to God.

A judge, then, in the context of our Biblical book, is typically a combination of an inspired leader, military strategist, and religious figure, who is, however, defined primarily by his accomplishments on the battlefield. Thus it is that Shimshon, who neither provided leadership nor set any vaunted spiritual example, is nevertheless characterized as a judge (16:31). In ancient Israel, the roles of civic leader, judicial authority, and military strategist tended to overlap. Here, they come together in the proud guise of the "Judge."

Next time, we will consider some of the other general features of the period of the Judges, especially as these pertain to their tribal affiliations. Readers are kindly requested to study Chapter 3.