

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS

SEFER SHOFTIM

Shiur #05: Chapter 3

The Dynamics of Oppression

By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

Last time, we considered the significance of the recurring cycle of Sefer Shoftim, as spelled out in chapter 2 of the book. The text indicated that with the death of Yehoshua and the elders that succeeded him, Israel's resolve in pursuing the wars of conquest began to diminish. Content to allow the Canaanites to remain with their pagan cults intact, Israel eventually began to stray from God by adopting their corrupt beliefs and practices. God, in turn, did not provide any more assistance for the task of driving out the remaining Canaanites, in order that Israel's fidelity to Him and His Torah might be tested by their continued presence:

These are the nations that God allowed to remain in order to test Israel, all those who knew not of the Canaanite wars (of conquest)...the five Philistine governors, all of the Canaanite and Tzidonite and Chivite who dwelt at Mount Levanon, from the mount of Ba'al Chermon until the approach of Chamat...(3:1-3).

THE GEOGRAPHICAL FRAMEWORK

Geographically, these remaining nations were associated with the coastal plain of the Mediterranean Sea from 'Aza in the south until the Lebanon mountain range and beyond to the north. The Philistines, who themselves were invaders from afar (probably the island of Crete), dwelt in cities along the coast and were organized into a federation of five powerful city-states. At

the time of the Shoftim their presence was just beginning to be felt in Canaan, but due to their superior technology and more extensive military experience, the pressure that they exerted upon the towns and cities of the interior steadily increased, until by the time of the dawn of Israelite monarchy, it was intolerable. The Philistines remained, in fact, a potent and much-feared force until they were finally overpowered by David centuries after the events of our book.

As for the Canaanite, Tzidonite and Chivite who dwelt at Mount Lebanon, these were all powerful merchant peoples who controlled the sea trade in the eastern Mediterranean basin. "Canaanite" is therefore perhaps utilized here used in its more generic sense of "merchant" (as in, most famously, the couplet of Mishle 31:24: "She fashioned a mantle and SOLD IT, and gave a belt to the CANAANITE"). The Tzidonites were Phoenicians located around the modern coastal town of Sidon, located about 40 kilometers north of the Lebanese border, while the Chivites lived at the feet of majestic Mount Chermon that straddles that same border even today. The overall geographic implication of the above is to suggest that the main area of successful settlement by the Israelite tribes was mostly confined to the rocky central hill country of Canaan, while the coastal plain and its associated fertile valleys and, farther north, its naturally protected harbors, remained almost entirely in the hands of the indigenous peoples.

THE SCOURGE OF INTERMARRIAGE AND ITS CAUSES

But, our text notes ominously, rather than continuing their struggle to possess the land and build their state predicated upon the principles of ethical monotheism, the people of Israel "dwelt in the midst of the Canaanites...they took their daughters for wives and gave their own daughters to their (the Canaanite's) sons, AND THEY SERVED THEIR GODS" (3:5-6). Here, then, the essence of the problem is presented in a proverbial nutshell: suffering the Canaanites to maintain their cultural presence in the land constituted an invitation to intermarry with them, for they were the dominant culture. Intermarriage, in turn, necessarily led to an adoption by the Israelites of the easier way of life – idolatry.

Who could fail to identify the parallels between the struggles of the ancient tribes of Israel in their new land with the challenges that face contemporary Jewry even now? As we all know, in

a confrontation between two cultural worldviews, the more established of the two is at a decided advantage before the clash is even joined. Its norms and conventions, its laws and customs, have already won over the adherents who are frequently more settled, more respected and more powerful. The onus is therefore on the minority culture to prove its worth, an even more daunting if not impossible task when its own followers are not entirely committed to the cause themselves. Of course, the difficulty is greatly amplified when the norms of the minority culture demand moral or ritual restraints that are not enjoined by the majority view. No wonder ancient Israel rarely succeeded in prevailing for any length of time against the cultural dominance of the Canaanites and the surrounding peoples, any more than modern-day Jewry prevails in its struggle to maintain a serious and dedicated cultural identity in the lands of its dispersion!

The implied commercial character of the aforementioned Canaanites, Tzidonites and Chivites is also very significant, for it suggests that commercial ties are frequently the impetus for the social and cultural ties that must necessarily follow, and that themselves eventually must culminate in intermarriage. It is not possible for most people to "do business" with their peers while eschewing the development of some sort of extra-business social relationship. As these social ties become more common and thus less threatening, then they tend to grow in intensity, especially when they are often driven on the minority side by a conscious desire to identify with the dominant culture. And intermarriage, at least in cultural or moral terms, and insofar as worldviews are concerned, is rarely a positive meeting of the minds. Though perhaps "love conquers all" with respect to the spousal relationship, for the household that is raised in the shadow of intermarriage, only one cultural or worldview will most probably prevail, and that is (perhaps counter-intuitively) not necessarily the view that is presented most eloquently or persuasively, but rather the view that demands less. And idolatry, like its modern day descendants of relativism, hedonism and materialism, demands less, far less than what is enjoined by the Absolute God of Israel who decrees moral restraint, spiritual growth and devotion to a higher meaning.

To put the matter in concrete if somewhat unsettling terms, the "Chanukah bush" or its derivatives that adorn many an American Jewish household at this time of year should not be interpreted as symbols of healthy cultural cross-fertilization. Rather, they constitute a pathetic statement of cultural apathy and of a capitulation borne out of complacency and ignorance. They

are a sure sign of a household in which the inherent worth of authentic Jewish values is so under-recognized that those values have been willingly sacrificed on the altar of accommodation without even a whisper of protest.

KUSHAN RISH'ATAYIM AND REGIONAL SUBJUGATION

And so it was that ancient Israel served the ba'al and the ashera, the latter denoting some sort of locally situated sacred tree (!) with its associated shrine that served as the focal point for idolatrous (and invariably lascivious) rites. "God's anger was kindled" (3:8) so that they came to be oppressed by a certain Kushan Rish'atayim, King of Aram Naharaim. The area of Aram Naharaim (literally "Aram between the two rivers") is well-known to us from a myriad of other Biblical references, beginning with the story of our own forbears Avraham and Sarah (see Bereishit 24:10). It is situated at the conjunction of the extreme north-east of modern-day Syria and northern Iraq, namely the lands that are delineated by the headwaters of the great rivers of the Euphrates and the Tigris. Kushan Rish'atayim, however, is otherwise unknown, but surely the latter name recorded in our text must constitute a Hebrew play on words for his transliterated native name, for the word literally means a "double measure of wickedness." No doubt he was thus dubbed by his vassals in consequence of the eight years of hard subjugation that were his bequest to them.

But Israel was saved from the oppression by a certain Otniel, a descendant of Kenaz and Calev's younger brother. Calev, of course, is none other than Calev son of Yefune, the Yehudite sent by Moshe many years earlier to scout out the land of Canaan in the aborted mission of the spies (see Bemidbar 13:6). As for Otniel, we met him earlier at Devir in the environs of Chevron, for he had conquered the territory from the Canaanite giants that dwelt there and won the hand of Calev's daughter in marriage as a consequence (see 1:10-15). His informal appointment as Israel's first judge is therefore doubly significant. On the one hand, Otniel represents the final link with the generation of Yehoshua and the elders that succeeded him, a powerful memory of a more glorious past and perhaps the potential for its eventual re-establishment. Additionally, as a champion of the settlement of the land who personally battled the Canaanites and prevailed, Otniel recalls another dimension of Yehoshua's inspired leadership. Taken together, Otniel represents the

antithesis of Israelite apathy, the very apathy that had unleashed the dangerous dynamic of conciliation and cultural compromise that now threatened to undo all of Yehoshua's efforts.

It is therefore not surprising that in the ancient sources, Otniel is presented as a successor figure to Yehoshua himself:

"Otniel son of Kenaz captured it (the town of Devir)" – Yehoshua 15:17 – This is an example of what the verse states: "the sun rises and the sun sets" (Kohelet 1:5). Said Rabbi Abba son of Kahanna: don't we already know that the sun rises and the sun sets? Rather, the verse indicates to us that before the Holy One blessed be He causes the sun of one righteous leader to set, He already causes the sun of his successor to rise... Before Moshe's sun had set, Yehoshua's sun had risen; before Yehoshua's sun had set, Otniel's sun had risen, as the verse states: "Otniel son of Kenaz captured it" (Yalkut Shim'oni 26).

THE EXAMPLE OF OTNIEL: OBJECTIVE HISTORICAL REALITY VS. THE MORE EXALTED IDEAL

But Otniel's successful tenure also points to another fascinating and frequently misconceived facet of the historical period of the judges. Unlike his predecessor Yehoshua, Otniel is most certainly a regional leader. There is no indication whatsoever that he exercises any sort of national rule, and everything that we know about him and his influence squarely places him within the specific southern region of the tribe of Yehuda. In other words, as the first of the judges, Otniel introduces us to a new period in Israelite history, an era during which the tribes act independently and are acted upon in turn by external threats that tend to be confined to particular areas of Canaan. Rarely did any judge transcend his tribal affiliations to achieve more widespread and effective rule, certainly not for sustained periods that extended beyond the immediate exigencies of the hour of battle. Though the text invariably speaks of "Israel straying from God," and of oppressors harshly ruling "over Israel," both of those negative dynamics were in fact driven by very local engines. Israel did not stray from God as a consequence of some sort of widespread movement decided upon in a national plebiscite, but rather because in every region of Canaan there were Canaanites and their cults that attracted the surrounding, local Israelites to their way of life.

Kushan Rish'atayim and his ilk that invariably followed him did not necessarily subjugate national Israel but only a tribe or two (sometimes more) that were the narrow focus of the oppressive campaign.

But the text presents us with a more countrywide reading not because it has revised the objective, historical truth, but rather because insofar as spiritual matters are concerned, it is the correct reading. One of the most unique features of the Biblical mindset is that it tends to view life's horizons through the prism of community or nation. No Israelite stands alone, neither insofar as his/her mission and destiny are concerned, nor with respect to their fate. All Israelites are bound together, a lesson driven home in the most startling fashion by the example of Achan and the ban placed upon the booty of Yericho (see Yehoshua Chapter 7). Recall that after the miraculous fall of Yericho, the first Canaanite town to be engaged in battle whose ramparts came tumbling down, Yehoshua had imposed a ban upon the taking of any spoils, to emphatically drive home the lesson that victory was due to God's ongoing intervention. But Achan of the tribe of Yehuda had succumbed to temptation and taken a few items for himself. What followed was his eventual extirpation, but not before the entire fate of the nation was placed in the balance: "Israel has transgressed and abrogated My covenant that I have commanded them!" God had thundered (IBID, 7:11), indicating that the axiom of nationhood implies a most significant corollary: co-responsibility.

CONCLUSION

Thus, what reality could not accomplish, the Tanakh deliberately attempted to foster through its telling of the tale. A particular tribe is oppressed, but all of Israel must experience (only vicariously) their suffering. A judge arises to liberate his tribal region, and all of Israel must breathe a collective sigh of relief. Though admittedly, such national identification was almost always absent from the landscape, the text nevertheless invokes it as a statement of what ought to be, rather than what was. Do we not, even to this day, often trumpet the call for universal Jewish unity during a historical period that, in light of our dispersion and its effects, is not terribly unlike the age of tribalism associated with the period of the Judges? Doesn't reality paint a much more sober and circumspect picture of divisiveness and division, factionalism and narrow, partisan

concerns, both in the modern state of Israel as well as abroad? Is our call, then, a cruel mockery of the truth, or is it instead the preservation of an ancient ideal (hammered into our consciousness by these very texts and others like them) that we hope will one day finally be realized, and will only be realized if we continue to dream of it?

Next time, we will complete the chapter by considering the exploits of Ehud son of Geira. Please complete the reading of Chapter 3.