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INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS  
SEFER SHOFTIM

Chapter 6  
The Appointment of Gid'on  
By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 6 of *Sefer Shoftim* opens with a familiar and tragic refrain. Sometime after the remarkable victory of Devorah and Barak over Yavin and his chief-of-staff Sisera, a triumph that ushered in a forty year period of relative calm and stability, the people of Israel were again confronted with a grave situation. Having strayed once more from God, Israel was abandoned to its own (wholly inadequate) devices, and foreign domination was quick to follow. This time, it was the Midianites that oppressed them, ably assisted by their enthusiastic allies Amalek and Bnei Kedem, or the Eastern peoples. This trinity of trouble for seven years descended upon the Israelites like a proverbial plague of locusts (6:5), consuming everything in its path – "they would despoil all of the land's produce, until the outskirts of Aza, leaving no sustenance in Israel, nor any sheep, cattle or donkeys. For they and their flocks would come up with their tents...they and their camels were innumerable, and they would come to the land to despoil it" (6:6:4-5).

Israel cried out to God and He responded by dispatching a prophet to the people, but this messenger of God bore no tidings of hope:

Thus says God the Lord of Israel: I brought you forth from Egypt and released you from the house of slavery. I saved you from the clutches of Egypt and all of your oppressors, and I drove them out from before you and gave you their land. I said to you that I am God your Lord, do not fear the gods of the Amorite in whose land you dwell, BUT YOU DID NOT HEARKEN TO MY VOICE (6:6:8-10).

RECALLING AN EARLIER PASSAGE

The anonymous prophet's disheartening words of rebuke, squarely laying the blame for the people's difficult predicament at their own doorstep, recall an earlier passage from Chapter 2, also delivered under similar circumstances of national failure and despondency:

A messenger of God ascended from Gilgal to those that wept ("ha-bochim")...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 Bochim (literally "those that weep"), and there they offered sacrifice to God (2:1-5).

The two pronouncements are essentially equivalent in content. In both, the unnamed prophet remembers the people's Exodus from Egypt, a defining act of Divine kindness as well as the touchstone of Israel's unique sense of mission. The messenger then goes on to recall God's oft-and-shrilly repeated warning: do not adopt the polytheism of the land's inhabitants, their colorful cults of fertility and death, the licentious rites and the moral relativism of those Canaanite tribes whose shrines were to be found upon every high place and under every leafy tree. Finally, in both passages, the prophet concludes by declaring Israel's infidelity to God's teachings, a crime considered all the more treacherous and tragic in light of God's graciousness in having granted them the precious gift of the land.

## BEGINNING A NEW ERA

The overall effect of the visit from the mysterious prophet in our chapter is no doubt to recall the earlier passage and its message. But it is also to suggest, as the earlier passage itself suggested, that we are now embarking upon a new section of the book. Recall that the first chapter of the book was preliminary, summarizing some of the tribes' early triumphs in dislodging the Canaanites while indicting the lethargy of the others. The second chapter introduced, with the visit of the first mysterious Divine messenger and the people's resultant tears, the recurring and wretched cycle of the book: disloyalty to God's Torah, foreign oppression, pained outcry, appointment of a saving judge, brief respite of stability, and disloyalty to God's Torah once again. With the third chapter, the saga of the judges began in earnest, and the stories of Otniel, Ehud, Shamgar (mentioned only in passing) and Devorah took us to the end of the fifth chapter. It was Devorah's triumphant hymn, recalling in theme, style, and tone Israel's Song at the Sea some two centuries earlier, which fittingly concluded the book's first section. The era of these earlier judges – Otniel, Ehud, Shamgar, and Devorah – was now officially over, and with their demise, the era of selfless, righteous, and manifestly inspirational leadership also came to a close.

With the appearance of the mysterious Divine messenger in Chapter 6 of our book, ostensibly introducing the career of the judge Gid'on, a new and more uncertain era begins. Henceforward, the moral caliber of the people's leaders will be noticeably less impressive than that of their forebears, a decline mirrored by the waning moral spirit of the people of Israel themselves.

## THE ADVERSARIES AND THEIR SITE OF ATTACK

All three of the oppressors introduced in our chapter all – Midianites, Amalekites and Bnei Kedem – are well-known to us from other Biblical (as well as non-Biblical) contexts as being wide-ranging nomadic tribes, who would frequently infiltrate into more settled areas in accordance with either necessity or convenience. Inhabiting the extensive desert regions of the southern Negev, the Sinai, and the Arabian peninsula, these shepherding tribes were also involved in the profitable camel caravans which would transport goods and people across the arid and inhospitable expanses that extended between the urban centers of Egypt and Mesopotamia. If famine forced their hand (by reducing grazing areas), they would have no choice but to supplement their decreased income by conducting occasional forays into inhabited lands. If those lands were weakly defended and/or reasonably fertile, then their incursions might be more frequent and last much longer. And so it was that the Israelites, subsistence farmers busily at work within the confines of a simple and rural economy, found themselves in the unenviable position of being compelled to provide for their more numerous, powerful, and wholly unwelcome distant kin.

Recall that *Sefer Shoftim* as a whole unfolds against the backdrop of a tribal, as opposed to a national organization. The tribes of Israel, each one earlier assigned its own specific territory by Yehoshua, often acted according to their own narrow self-interests, and rarely did they all come together to advance any sort of national agenda. The so-called judges were therefore often no more than regional leaders, and their battles were never waged on behalf of all of the people of Israel. Though the Book often speaks of "Israel being oppressed," it is really only certain tribes that bare the brunt of the enemy's tyranny, while other tribes often remained entirely unaffected.

The geographical locus of our chapter is the more northern reaches of the country – the hills of Menashe, and the sloping lands of Asher, Zevulun and Naftali (6:35) – all of them bordering the fertile valley of Yizra'el. 'Emek Yizra'el, stretching arc-like all the way from the Mediterranean coast at the Carmel range until the feet of Mount Tavor some forty kilometers to the east, not only constituted one of Canaan's most extensive and fertile valleys, but also contained the land's most strategic and profitable international route. All

commerce or armed forces passing from Egypt to Damascus and on to Mesopotamia or back had to either traverse this valley or else take routes that were much less direct as well as topographically more challenging. And thus it was that every conflict in *Sefer Shoftim* that involved the central or northern tribes ultimately resolved itself somewhere across the verdant valley floor of Emek Yizra'el. More specifically, it seems that it was the tribe of Menashe, nestled in the rugged but productive hill country, that was Midian's target of choice, and the trouble therefore came right to our protagonist's proverbial door.

## GID'ON THRESHES THE WHEAT

When the messenger of God, an ethereal being in the guise of a human being, suddenly appeared at the homestead of Yoash from the clan of Avi'ezer, young Gid'on was busily beating ("chovet") the wheat stalks at the wine pit "to hide away from Midian" (6:11). Now the threshing of the wheat was typically a more public production - at the onset of the summer months, the stalks were spread upon flat and open ground, and an ox or similar creature then slowly drew a huge sledge, its undersurface embedded with sharp stones, over the grain. This separated the ears from the stalk while effectively breaking open the tough husks to release the kernels. Later, the kernels were separated from this waste material, the chaff, by the process of winnowing. In winnowing, the crushed grain is thrown heavenward, so that the wind blows away the lighter chaff while the heavier kernels fall to the ground to be later collected and ground. Clearly, it is most efficient to perform these tasks in a more exposed location, at an elevation if possible, so that the winds can do their work with greater efficiency (see for instance Shemuel 2:24:18-25 for a reference to the elevated location of the "threshing floor of Ornan the Yevusite," later purchased by David to become the site of the Temple). But here, the passage tellingly indicates that Gid'on beat the stalks with a stick, and did so at the "gat," a depression dug into the bedrock for the collection of the wine that runs off as the grapes are crushed. The overall effect of this introduction to Gid'on's appointment is to highlight the people's dire situation. It seems that the Israelites needed to be ever on guard from the Midianite menace, and were therefore forced to thresh their grain only in small amounts and at secluded and unsuspecting locations.

What follows next is most startling. The visitor saw Gid'on and extended to him a brief greeting: "May God be with you, diligent one!" In the context of Biblical social intercourse, such a salutation is probably as innocuous as the statement "How are you?" is for us. In fact, in Megillat Ruth (the events of which unfold during the "rule of the judges" - 1:1), the wealthy Bo'az greets his busy reapers with the very same expression: "He said to them: may God be with you!" But there, the reapers politely but mechanically responded "May God bless you in turn!" Here, however, the messenger's remarks triggered a pained and poignant

outburst from the young Gid'on: "Please sir, if God is truly with us, then why has all of this befallen us? Where are all of His wonders that our ancestors would recount, saying that God took us out of Egypt? Now, God has abandoned us and given us over to the clutches of Midian!" (6:13)

## GID'ON IS APPOINTED

The pathos of the moment is captured perfectly by a Midrash cited by Rashi (11<sup>th</sup> century, France), claiming that the events of the chapter occurred around the time of Passover! Just a night earlier, the rabbis explain, Gid'on had sat down to the Seder with his aged father and family, and his father had recounted the story of the Exodus. That perennial tale of national renewal, predicated upon a conception of an absolute God that cared about human suffering and intervened to save the oppressed from the oppressor, was still fresh in Gid'on's mind when the mysterious visitor arrived, and watched silently as he furtively beat the grain and then spirited it away from the prying eyes of the Midianites. The visitor offered a harmless greeting, but as often happens when the recipient of such a greeting happens to be concurrently tormented by some agonizing inner crisis, the inoffensive words opened a floodgate: "Where is He now?" cried Gid'on. "Where has He been? Why doesn't He save us from our distress?"

God, however, is not angered by Gid'on's audacity. Far from it. By railing against Him, Gid'on paradoxically demonstrates that he cares much about Him and especially about the fate of His people. By recounting their plight in the midst of a demonstration of his own, Gid'on ties his destiny to theirs. Turning towards him, the visitor locks his otherworldly eyes on Gid'on's own, and a shiver goes down the young man's sturdy spine. Peering intensely into his soul, the messenger now speaks the word of God: "Go with this strength and save Israel from the clutches of Midian. Behold, I have appointed you!" (6:14) Thus it is that Gid'on is designated to be Israel's liberator, in a modest epiphany that unexpectedly unfolds at the obscured site of his old father's wine pit. But God, who can forcefully speak to man from the midst of consuming fire, can also tenderly address him from the depths of his own broken heart. The nature of all revelation, however, is to demand from us a response: verbalized expressions of care for the people, God indicates, must be matched by a genuine preparedness to assist in relieving their plight, or else they are only a shallow exercise in self-righteousness.

Next time, we will complete Chapter 6. Readers are therefore requested to finish the chapter.