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INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS
SEFER SHOFTIM

Chapter 10
"Renew Our Days as of Old"
By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

The tenth chapter of *Sefer Shoftim*, occurring about midway through the book, is transitional in character. In our previous reading of Chapter 9, Avimelech, the self-serving son of Gid'on who seized the reigns of leadership in his father's stead, met his humiliating end at the hands of a woman non-combatant. At his demise, he much resembled invincible General Sisera who was felled by Ya'el's wiles at the conclusion of Devora and Barak's battle against the Canaanite King of Chatzor (Chapter 4). In both these situations, Providence indicates that no man, no matter how powerful, can escape the consequences of his villainous deeds indefinitely. "The Omnipresent has many messengers to fulfill His decree," and therefore even valiant and ruthless warriors may unexpectedly perish in ignominy through the agency of much weaker opponents.

After the death of Avimelech, the book records that two minor judges arose to deliver the people of Israel: Tola' son of Pua from the tribe of Yissachar, and Yair of Gil'ad from the Transjordanian branch of the tribe of Menashe. Both served for a total of 45 years but precious little is recorded of their exploits. In fact, the text does not even mention the oppressor from whom they rescued the people. In so far as brevity is concerned, the account of these two is quite similar to the report about Shamgar son of Anat, who succeeded Ehud and preceded Devora. His biography consists of a single verse appended to Chapter 3 of the book and states only that he prevailed against the Philistines and slew six hundred of their men with an ox goad!

THE STRANGE ACCOUNT OF YAIR OF GIL'AD

But at least the few details provided about Shamgar's success are contextual; they name his foes, tally their death toll, and describe his weapon of choice. While the text provides us with no pertinent details

concerning Tola', those associated with Yair are most extraneous and actually recorded in the form of a poetic couplet:

After him arose Yair of Gil'ad, and he judged Israel for twenty-two years. He had thirty sons who rode upon thirty donkeys ("*ayarim*"), and thirty towns ("*ayarim*") had they. These were called Chavot Yair until this very day, and they are located in the land of the Gil'ad. Yair died and was buried in Kamon...(10:3-4).

In the original Hebrew, the passage has an almost sing-song quality, for the narrator has used the same word to describe the donkeys and the towns, though in fact there are minor differences in pronunciation between the two. Donkeys are "*ayarim*," but towns are more properly "*ayarot*" or "*arim*"!

The medieval commentaries offer only general insights into the passage, suggesting that the text mentions these curious details in order to indicate the importance and privileged status of this man. The comments of the Radak (Rabbi David Kimchi, 13th century, Provence) are typical: "This recounting is meant to inform us why he was a judge, for he was mighty and honored on account of his wealth, his offspring and his glory. Each one of his children was a noble who rode upon a donkey...for they alone were permitted to ride in those lands..." (commentary to 10:4).

It is, however, odd that no other judge so far mentioned in the book was catapulted into leadership based on similar credentials. Might the text be indicating, according to the Radak, that this judge came to the fore for the wrong reasons, for in the realm of judgment and leadership he possessed dubious qualifications? And might this development, according to the Radak, suggest a new trend that describes a further decline in the caliber of Israel's leaders?

YAIR JUNIOR AND YAIR SENIOR

There is perhaps another reason for the inclusion of these details. To appreciate it one must first recognize that Yair of Gil'ad had a mighty ancestor by the same name. Recall that some three hundred years earlier, on the eve of Israel's entry into the land, the shepherding tribes of Reuben and Gad had decided to remain on the eastern side of the Yarden, in the fertile grazing lands that the Israelites had recently seized from Sichon and Og. These Amorite tyrants had refused to allow the tribes of Israel unobstructed passage through their land into Canaan (see *Bemidbar* 21:21-35) and met them on the battlefield only to be remarkably defeated.

Eventually, some of the clans of the tribe of Menashe decided to join Reuven and Gad, led by the sons of Machir son of Menashe (*Bemidbar* 32:39). These Menashite warriors conquered and settled the area of the Gil'ad or the Transjordanian highlands. As the passage in *Sefer Bemidbar* relates, there were other mighty men of Menashe who also settled the territory: "Yair the son of Menashe captured the Amorite cities and called them 'Chavot Yair.' Novach went and captured the town of Kenat and its outskirts, and he renamed it 'Novach' after himself" (*Bemidbar* 32:41-42).

Thus, the original Yair was a powerful warrior who claimed extensive swaths of territory in the land of the Gil'ad. Now, as it turns out based upon genealogical lists preserved in *Divrei ha-Yamim*, this Yair was not really the son of Menashe at all, but rather descended from the tribe of Yehuda! Chetzron, the son of Peretz who was Yehuda's firstborn, married the daughter of Machir. Their child was Seguv, and "Seguv begot Yair, who possessed twenty-three cities in the land of the Gil'ad" (*Divrei ha-Yamim* 1:2:21-22). In other words, original Yair was the great grandson of Machir, but in terms of tribal affiliation was actually considered to be a Yehudite. The fact that he was identified by the text in *Sefer Bemidbar* as a Menashite indicates that he held his grandmother's lineage (for she was the daughter of Machir) in great esteem. And the reason for this is clear: Machir's sons were themselves powerful warriors and the family had a well-deserved reputation among the other tribes for valor and bravery.

After all, the Transjordanian lands, with their lofty plateaus, verdant hills, sheep and cattle of mythical proportions (see for instance *Devarim* 32:14; *Amos* 4:1; *Tehillim* 22:13), and of course their colossal overlords Sichon and Og, were regarded as a frontier region that only the mighty could tame. And when Machir's sons did so, they earned their place in Israelite history. Yair, who was their kin by marriage, allied himself with them and adopted their destiny as his own. The region that *Sefer Bemidbar* calls "Chavot Yair" must be synonymous with the "twenty-three cities of the Gil'ad" mentioned in *Divrei ha-Yamim*. The mention of these many towns indicates that original Yair quickly found his place in the clan of Machir, becoming a very successful warrior, settler and leader in his own right.

The parallel passage in *Sefer Devarim* is even more profuse in its praise of original Yair. There, Moshe describes in greater detail the giant Og who ruled over the northern reaches of the region, called the Bashan (today known as the Golan Heights). Moshe relates:

God also gave 'Og the King of the Bashan and all of his people into our hands, and we struck him down leaving no remnant. We captured all of his cities at that time, there was not even one that we did not seize from them, sixty cities that were the whole region of the Argov, the kingdom of Og in the Bashan. All of these were fortified cities with tall ramparts, double gates and bars, besides the unwalled cities which were very many...Only 'Og alone remained, a remnant of the Refaim, behold his bed of iron is still preserved in Rabbat Bnei 'Amon, it is nine cubits long and four cubits wide, by a man's cubit...the rest of the Gil'ad and all of the Bashan that was the kingdom of Og, I assigned to the half tribe of Menashe – all of the region of Argov and the whole Bashan was once known as the land of the Refaim. YAIR THE SON OF MENASHE SEIZED ALL OF THE REGION OF THE ARGOV, UNTIL THE BORDER OF THE GESHURITE AND MA'ACHITE, AND HE CALLED THE CITIES OF THE BASHAN BY HIS NAME "CHAVOT YAIR" UNTIL THIS VERY DAY! (*Devarim* 3:2-14).

DREAMING OF FOREBEARS

It is now more clear why our passage in *Sefer Shoftim* describes our Yair of Gil'ad in these terms. It is to draw a direct line between him and his ancestor not only in terms of a shared name and a common pedigree, but also with respect to successful leadership. Just as original Yair led his men to victory over the mighty Amorites and settled the wild land of the north Transjordan, eventually claiming twenty-three towns as his own, just so did Yair his descendent loyally follow in his footsteps and even surpass him. For while original Yair had only twenty-three towns to his credit, our Yair had thirty, all of them called "Chavot Yair" after the name first given by his ancestor!

But now the text introduces what may be considered to be a glaring contrast between the two Yairs, for our Yair did not manage to preserve his holdings for very long at all. After his death,

the people of Israel continued to do evil in God's eyes, worshipping the Ba'als and the Ashtorets, the gods of Aram, the gods of Tzidon, the gods of Moav, the gods of Bnei 'Amon and the gods of the Philistines, and they abandoned God and did not serve Him. Thus, God became angry with them and turned them over to the Philistines and to the Ammonites. They (the Ammonites) harshly oppressed the Israelites that very year, and for eighteen years thereafter, all of

the Israelites that dwelt on the eastern side of the Yarden in the land of the Amorites, those that were in the Gil'ad (10:6-8).

A WISTFUL MEDITATION TINGED WITH IRONY

It may be better, then, to read the particulars of our Yair's thirty sons, his thirty donkeys and his thirty towns as the man's wistful meditation on a bygone age remembered nostalgically, a painful reminiscence about the time when the eastern tribes were ascendant and their Amorite and Ammonite enemies were overpowered and in decline. Yair the younger must have tried valiantly to resurrect a past for which his oppressed people yearned, but to no lasting avail, for hostile Ammon was now more powerful than they.

We can almost see him in our mind's eye, dressing up his sons as nobles, cloaking their donkeys in festive gear and leading a farcical procession through the grassy highlands of the Gil'ad and the Bashan in an annual recreation of his ancestor Yair's famous campaigns and victories. And we can almost hear the Israelite onlookers, nurtured on tales of heroism from the golden past but no strangers to the current Ammonite oppression, who immortalize the pathetic sight of proud Yair and his procession with their own derisive song, a song of sons, donkeys and cities, a song of disappointment and disdain, a rhyming couplet of "*ayarim*" (and should Yair himself perhaps be counted among them?)!

How much had the fortunes of the people of Israel been transformed over the intervening centuries, and all because of their poor choices! How optimistic it had all seemed when Israel first entered the land, decimating their foes and determinedly dedicating themselves to their brilliant destiny! But now Israel had adopted the gods of Canaan and imbibed their twisted values, forsaking their own national mission and casting their God away!

The fact that of no other judge are such particulars mentioned, and the fact that these details are recounted immediately before the report of Israel's infidelity to God, would seem to indicate that the narrator has not only come to offer curious biographical details. Rather, he consciously employs the literary technique of irony in order to project the true feelings of the people: it would take much more than many sons, numerous donkeys and sentimental signposts pointing to cities of the past to recreate the glory days of Yair son of Menashe. It would take, the narrator suggests, the unwavering efforts of the people to eradicate idolatry from their midst and to devote themselves sincerely to the God of Israel and to His instruction. And though Yair of Gil'ad and his tribesmen pined for the grandeur of their illustrious forebears, they achieved none of original Yair's renown.

The glaring juxtaposition of the passages is now eminently intelligible:

After him arose Yair of Gil'ad, and he judged Israel for twenty-two years. He had thirty sons who rode upon thirty donkeys ("*ayarim*") and thirty towns ("*ayarim*") had they. These were called Chavot Yair until this very day, and they are located in the land of the Gil'ad. Yair died and was buried in Kamon.

The people of Israel continued to do evil in God's eyes, worshipping the Ba'als and the Ashtorets, the gods of Aram, the gods of Tzidon, the gods of Moav, the gods of Bnei 'Amon and the gods of the Philistines, and they abandoned God and did not serve Him. Thus, God became angry with them and turned them over to the Philistines and to the Ammonites. They (the Ammonites) harshly oppressed the Israelites that very year, and for eighteen years thereafter, all of the Israelites that dwelt on the eastern side of the Yarden in the land of the Amorites, those that were in the Gil'ad. Bnei Amon crossed the Yarden to battle against Yehuda, Binyamin and the house of Efraim, and Israel was in dire straits. The people of Israel cried out to God saying: we have sinned against You, we have abandoned our God and instead worshipped the Ba'als! (10:3-10).

A FAMILIAR REFRAIN

But there is more to this passage than a woeful tale of national glory departed and Israelite treachery repeated. The section continues:

God said to the people of Israel: Did I not save you from Egypt, the Amorite, Bnei Amon, Philistines, Tzidonites, Amalek and Ma'on who oppressed you? You cried out to Me and I saved you from their clutches! But you have abandoned Me and serve other gods, therefore I will no more save you. Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen, let them save you in your hour of trouble!

The people of Israel said to God: we have sinned. Do to us what You like, but save us this day! They removed the foreign gods from their midst and served God, so that His spirit became pained by Israel's affliction (10:11-16).

Once again, we have what appears to be a classic *Sefer Shoftim* formulation: God reminds the people of His earlier salvation, upbraids

them for their current infidelity, and seemingly abandons them to their own devices. The people in turn respond by "repenting," and then God relents, thus setting the stage for the emergence of the next judge. We have, in fact, seen the use of this convention on two other occasions. It occurs at the end of Chapter 2 after the reported demise of Yehoshua (11-23), in the lengthy section that spells out for the first time the dismal cycle of the book. It happens once again in Chapter 6 (7-10), after the storied victory of Devora. In both of these earlier cases, and here as well, the passages of censure are transitional, for they invariably conclude not only the literary section that precedes them but effectively seal the historical era as well.

As we have seen, for as long as Yehoshua and the elders led the people, they remained loyal to God. When he died, they began to stray. The early judges who rescued them – Otniel, Ehud, Shamgar and Devora – demonstrated resolve and strength of spirit and completed their careers without scandal. But the judges that followed Devora – Gid'on, and of course ignoble Avimelech – did not achieve the same fame: Gid'on was tainted by an ongoing need for Divine reassurance, and he finished his term against the shameful backdrop of his memorial *efod* of gold that became an object of veneration. But he did know how to lead the people, averting conflict with Ephraim and neutralizing the Midianite threat. Avimelech was, of course, no judge at all but only a poor excuse for one, though one can assume that during his brief tenure the foes of Israel were held at bay, if not by his merit than on account of his father's lingering dread.

But with the demise of the two minor judges that followed Avimelech, the book again reverts to the convention of recounting Israelite betrayal and Divine displeasure, in order to indicate that we are now about to embark upon another new historical era, marked by further decline. The exploits of these final leaders who will arise after Tola' son of Pua and Yair of Gil'ad will be recounted in Chapters 11-16, and will usher in the book's final chapters; the text here intimates that these last judges will not demonstrate the dignity nor achieve the success of even their immediate predecessors.

Next time, we will continue with Chapter 11.