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INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS  
SEFER SHOFTIM

Chapter 11, Part 1 –  
Refuting the Claim of the Ammonites  
By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

Our last *shiur*, concerning Chapter 10 of *Sefer Shoftim*, ended on a decidedly pessimistic note. After the brief and mysterious mention of Yair of Gil-ad who enjoyed a flamboyant but shallow career as judge - highlighted by not much other than many sons, many donkeys, and many towns - the narrative once again turned to ominous developments:

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 Ephraim, 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).

But while the people of Israel performed their perfunctory and routine repentance in order to secure Divine assistance, the Ammonites mustered their forces and encamped in Gil-ad, preparing for a punishing assault on their grumbling vassals (10:17). The Israelites half-heartedly counter-gathered for the inevitable clash but had no leader brave enough to lead them into battle. Thus it was that the governors of Gil-ad approached a certain Yiftach from the district of Tov and appealed to him to be their chieftain. But this Yiftach was no blank slate:

Yiftach of Gil-ad was a man of valor but he was the son of a harlot, and Gil-ad had begat him. Gil-ad's wife bore him other sons, and when the children of that woman grew up, they drove Yiftach out, saying to him: "you shall not inherit in our father's household, for you are the son of another woman!" Yiftach therefore fled from his brothers and dwelt in the district of Tov, and reckless men soon gathered about Yiftach and forayed with him (11:1-3).

## YIFTACH'S LINEAGE – TWO DIMENSIONS

Though we know nothing of Gil-ad the father, his name indicates that he was a respected member of the tribe of Menasheh, for his tribal ancestor was none other than Gil-ad the son of Makhir the son of Menasheh (see Bamidbar 26:29). Our Gil-ad's "firstborn" son was Yiftach, but because the latter's mother was a prostitute, he did not achieve the legitimacy that Gil-ad's later sons later claimed exclusively for themselves. Thus it was that Yiftach was forcibly expelled by them, into the maw of the foreboding wilderness populated not only by nomadic shepherding tribes but also by other desperate types who had originally hailed from more agricultural or urban settings – outlaws, debtors, and men of ill-fortune. But Yiftach was a natural leader, and it was not long before these rootless characters sought solace and support in his company. Yiftach formed them into a band of bandits, marginalized men now turned against their own former lives.

This unusual introduction to the chapter's protagonist must be read in the context of at least two contrary frames of reference. On the one hand, Yiftach's background no doubt comes to emphasize the deterioration in the quality of Israel's leaders, a decline that directly paralleled their own ever-widening estrangement from God. Long gone and forgotten were the Otniels of illustrious lineage and the Devoras of prophetic inspiration. Now the people only deserved to be guided by a man of problematic pedigree who was himself gainfully employed in the infamous career of brigandage. Yair of Gil-ad, Yiftach's compatriot and immediate predecessor in the narrative, could at least recall his famous forebear and point to his own successful family, substantial wealth and deeds to numerous fertile Trans-Jordanian towns, but to what accomplishments could drifting Yiftach proudly point?

On the other hand, the narrative must surely be underscoring a favorite Biblical theme: God's salvation frequently issues forth from the most unlikely places, for only a person's spiritual merit determines their

worth in His eyes and their suitability for the awesome task that He lays out before them. While most of us superficially judge others in strict accordance with meaningless externals – appearance, ancestry, and affluence – the True Judge employs other means to gauge the man. Yiftach's "promising" introduction thus recalls a long line of other unsung Biblical heroes, people who rose from obscurity, infamy, or the performance of questionable acts to achieve renown. Didn't Tamar the daughter-in-law of Yehuda rightly don the disguise of the harlot in order to secure her future that had been unjustly denied her, thus becoming the ancestress of kings (see *Bereishit* Chapter 38)? Didn't Rachav the harlot and innkeeper preserve the spies of Yehoshua and then later join the people of Israel to embrace their destiny, becoming in the process the progenitor of prophets (see *Yehoshua* Chapter 2 and our archived *shiur*)?

## DAVID'S EXPULSION TO THE DESERT

And it is precisely this theme that the narrator of the book of *Shemuel* will later recall when he linguistically links David's ascent to the throne with our story of Yiftach. Like blameless Yiftach before him, innocent David also became an outlaw, pursued unjustly by jealous King Shaul – the "legitimate" authority figure paralleling Yiftach's half-brothers – and finally forced to flee to the wastelands of the Judean desert in order to survive. And like Yiftach before him, Providence selected David to play a pivotal role in the history of Israel, but a role seemingly incongruous with his dubious (and thankfully temporary) desert pursuits:

David left from there and fled to the caves of Adulam. His brothers and all of his clan heard of it and descended there to him. EVERY MAN WHO WAS IN DIRE STRAITS, EVERY MAN WHO HAD CREDITORS WHOM HE COULD NOT PAY AND EVERY MAN OF BITTER SPIRIT GATHERED TO HIM , AND HE BECAME THEIR CHIEF, so that there numbered with him about four hundred men... (I *Shemuel*: 22:1-2).

Perhaps, then, these humble origins and/or lean years of alienation and exile are Divinely calculated to offer the potential leader a unique opportunity. He or she is imbued with an appreciation of the struggles that those invisible and oppressed members of the proletariat, those that have no champions to raise their sagging spirits and no advocates to defend them from abuse, face daily. While the rich and the powerful frequently take the lead in the election of those that govern, it is the weak and vulnerable that are in the greatest need of good governance. And the best

governor is the one who deeply understands, often through his or her own life experience, the needs of all of the people - including those that are marginalized or estranged.

## YIFTACH'S FIRST MESSAGE

After his appointment as chieftain and general, secured by the elders' public pledge at Mitzpa that his tenure as leader would continue even after he had brought victory against Amon, Yiftach hurriedly attempts to avert conflict by dispatching a terse diplomatic message to the king of the Ammonites:

What is it between me and you, that you have come to me to wage war against my land? (11:12).

The tone of the message, with its preponderance of first person pronouns, is one of astonishment, with Yiftach clearly casting himself as the victim of unwarranted aggression. The king of the Ammonites responds in kind, accusing the Israelites of having unjustly seized his land when they came forth out of Egypt some three hundred years earlier! He concludes by offering an ultimatum: "now return them (these territories) in peace!" (10:13).

## SOME RELEVANT GEOGRAPHY

In order to understand the exchange, as well as Yiftach's subsequent response (10:14-27), some geography and history are in order. The eastern side of the Jordan River, from its headwaters north of the Kinneret until the southern tip of the Dead Sea, is naturally divided up by its tributaries into a number of discrete regions. Midway along the eastern shore of the Dead Sea is an impressive narrow gorge carved by the final stretch of the wadi Arnon. The Arnon, a perennial stream for most of its course, rises in the Syro-Arabian desert and then flows westwards some fifty kilometers in distance while dropping some nine hundred meters in elevation, before emptying into the Dead Sea. In ancient times, the wadi Arnon formed the natural boundary between the petty kingdom of Moav to the south and the Israelite tribes of Reuven and Gad to the north.

Midway between the Kinneret and the Dead Sea another tributary of the Yarden bifurcates the landscape, this one called the Yabbok. The Yabbok constituted the northern border of the kingdom of Amon in

Biblical times. In the fertile territories that stretched out to the north of the Yabbok, the powerful Amorites held sway. The Amorite territories were themselves divided up by the river Yarmuch (not mentioned in the *Tanakh*) that empties into the Yarden just south of the Kinneret and forms the natural boundary between the region of the Gil-ad to the south and the Bashan to the north. Finally, at the southern extremity of the Dead Sea was another small wadi, called by the moderns "wadi Chasa," that delineated the border between Moav and Edom.

We may therefore broadly speak of four main tributaries and four corresponding small kingdoms. Listed from south to north, they are the kingdoms of the Edomites, Moavites, Ammonites, and Amorites and the tributaries of wadi Chasa, Arnon, Yabbok and Yarmuch. The Edomites held sway over the regions to the south of the Dead Sea all the way down to the Gulf of Eilat. The Moavites and Ammonites ruled over the lands that stretched from the southern extremity of the Dead Sea past wadi Arnon and up to the Yabbok, while the Amorites controlled the mountainous plateau that rose up beyond the Yabbok and continued past the Yarmuch all the way up to the lofty mountain range of the Chermon.

It therefore emerges that Moav and Amon were neighboring peoples that shared hegemony over the Trans-Jordanian highlands from the Arnon until the Yabbok. But not only were Moav and Amon adjoining realms; they were also related by ties of blood. Recall that Lot, the nephew of Avraham, had long ago (perhaps some seven hundred years before the events of our chapter) dwelt in the fertile region of Sodom, the area of the "plain of the Yarden" (see *Bereishit* 13:10-12). In the aftermath of Sodom's overthrow, he and his two surviving daughters had fearfully retired to a cave and there he concluded his life in infamy by fathering through them two grandchildren: Moav and Amon (see *Bereishit* 19:30-38).

Moav and Amon the descendents of Lot, bound by bloodlines, common history and shared culture (i.e. gods), soon raised clans of their own and settled down along the length of the Jordan Plain. By the time of the Israelite exodus from Egypt, they were already established kingdoms. Of course, the nations of Moav and Amon were also bound by the international trade route that traversed their lands (the great north-south highway that began at Eilat and continued all the way up to Damascus, crisscrossed here and there by secondary caravan routes leading westwards through the arid Sinai peninsula down to Egypt, and eastwards through the barren Arabian peninsula up to Mesopotamia). The Moavite capital of Kir as well as the Ammonite capital of Rabbat Bnei Amon were both located

along this road, referred to in the *Tanakh* as "the king's highway" ("*derekh hamelekh*" – *Bamidbar* 20:17), or simply "the way" ("*ha-mesila*" – *Bamidbar* 20:19). Parenthetically, it may be pointed out that the memory of the ancient Ammonites lives on in the name "Amman," the capital of the modern kingdom of Jordan and situated at the location of ancient Rabbat Bnei Amon.

## SOME RELEVANT HISTORY

Strictly speaking, then, the king of Amon seemed justified in decrying the Israelite possession of territories east of the Yarden that had been earlier considered his patrimony. But there was one significant historical detail that the Ammonite king neglected to mention, and it was this point that Yiftach singled out with special emphasis. Some indeterminate amount of time before the Israelites began their march to Cana'an, the kingdoms of Amon and Moav were attacked and overrun by the mighty Amorite king Sichon, who hailed from the north. The two petty kingdoms were easily defeated and Sichon seized some of their territory: the Ammonites were pushed back from the banks of the Yarden and confined to a narrow strip of land around their capital of Rabbat Bnei Amon (located some 30 kilometers east of the Yarden), while the Moavites lost all of their holdings north of the wadi Arnon.

Sichon soon cemented his hold on his newly-won assets by establishing his capital at refurbished Cheshbon, located upon the international highway about midway between the Arnon and the Yabbok. Sichon's crushing victory, which introduced Amorite hegemony to the region of the southern Trans-Jordan, was regarded by the surrounding peoples with awe. A fragment of an ancient ballad, preserved by the Torah in Sefer *Bamidbar* (21:27-29), describes the triumph:

...for a fire has gone forth from Cheshbon, a flame from the city of Sichon, it has consumed the city of Ar Moav and the chieftains of Arnon's high places. Woe to you, Moav, you have been destroyed oh people of the god Kemosh, for he has made his sons into refugees and his daughters into captives to the king of the Amorite, Sichon...

The historical facts, then, are these: when Israel neared Cana'an, they requested passage through Edomite and Moavite territory, but they were rebuffed by both kindred kingdoms (see *Bamidbar* 20:14-21 and especially *Devarim* 2:2-37). Circling around to the east of Edom and Moav, a maneuver that lengthened their journey considerably, Israel then requested of the Amorite king to traverse just north of wadi Arnon, through

the newly-won territory of Sichon. The ogre not only refused but came out to engage them in battle; miraculously, Israel prevailed. Therefore, argued Yiftach, the Israelites did not seize Ammonite territory at all, but rather Amorite territory, for Sichon had already conquered the land from the Ammonites before Israel won it in turn! As Yiftach explained:

The people of Israel sent messengers to Sichon king of the Amorite and king of Cheshbon, and they said to him: "let us pass through your land until we reach our place". But Sichon did not allow Israel to pass through his borders. Sichon gathered all of his people and encamped at Yahtza and fought against Israel. God the Lord of Israel gave Sichon and all of his people into the hands of Israel and they struck them down, and Israel possessed all of the lands of the Amorites that dwelt in that region. They possessed all of the Amorite territory, from the Arnon until the Yabbok and from the desert until the Yarden. Now that God Lord of Israel has driven out the Amorite from before His people Israel, will you now possess it?! (11:19-23).

And as the Talmudic Sages would later put it: "these territories of Amon and Moav were purified (made permissible to the Israelites) by Sichon" (*Gittin* 38a, *Chullin* 60b). In effect, the counter-claim of Yiftach invoked a principle of international law that is considered to be relevant even today: territory that is won from an aggressor in the course of a defensive war need not be surrendered, certainly not in the absence of adequate security guarantees, and certainly not to a hostile entity that did not exercise jurisdiction over the territory at the time of the conflict.

Next time, we will complete our discussion of Chapter 11 by considering Yiftach's ill-spoken vow, uttered on the eve of his entry into battle against the Ammonites, as well as its terrible consequences.