

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS

SEFER SHOFTIM

Shiur #06: Chapter 3 Conclusion

Ehud and Shamgar

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INTRODUCTION

Forty years of calm follow the ascent of Otniel son of Kenaz to the position of judge. Recall that Otniel, the successor figure to Yehoshua, had battled Kushan Rish'atayim and liberated the people from his oppressive yoke. While the victory ushered in a long period of relative stability, the situation deteriorated after Otniel's death. "The people of Israel continued to do evil in the sight of God" and Otniel was no longer alive to restrain or to guide them. As was so often the case in the book, the demise of the Shofet constituted the invitation for the people of Israel to stray from God, a dynamic that itself invariably unleashed the harsh corrective measure of externally-imposed oppression: "God strengthened Eglon the king of Moav over Israel, for they had done evil in God's sight. He (Eglon) gathered to him the people of Amon and Amalek, and then went and struck down Israel and possessed the town of date palms..." (3:12 -13).

THE GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

In this brief description of the oppressor and his cohorts there is a wealth of geographical information. The petty kingdom of Moav, whose inhabitants descended from Lot nephew of Avraham and were thus distant if hostile kin (see Bereishit 19:30-38), was located along the eastern shores of the Dead Sea in modern-day Jordan. Frequently, Moav was allied with its northern neighbor and ethnic relative Amon, whose small realm was centered around the city of Rabbat, located around thirty kilometers northeast of the Dead Sea on the border of the desert near the sources of the river Yabbok. In Biblical times, the Ammonite capital was known as Rabbat

Bnei Amon (Rabbat of the people of Amon), a name that is mirrored until the present day in the name of Jordan's capital Amman located on its ruins. Sometimes, these two, Moav and Amon, would join forces with their southern kin Edom, who inhabited the territory to the south of the Dead Sea, but the participation of the Edomites is absent from Eglon's coalition recorded in our chapter.

As for the Amalekites, they were a nomadic people who wandered in the regions of the northern Sinai and Negev, and were frequently implicated in the reprehensible act of marauding and pillage. By pedigree, the Amalekites were descendents of Esav (see Bereishit 36:12), and thus shared a cultural connection with their more settled Edomite kin. The tribes of Israel had first made their unsavory acquaintance decades earlier, as they journeyed forth from Egypt, wearily pausing at Refidim. There, Amalek had unexpectedly attacked, concentrating their assault upon the weak and weary who straggled at the rear of the Israelite column (see Shemot 17:8-16). Throughout the Biblical narratives, Amalek is portrayed as a mercenary opportunist, swooping down from the wilderness to prey upon the settled areas whenever fearful of famine or else attracted by the prospect of gain. It is no wonder, then, that early on, the Torah had singled out their heartless and venal conduct for special censure (see Devarim 25:17 -19).

Eglon concentrates his attack against the "city of palms," elsewhere identified as the town of Yericho (see Devarim 34:3 that mentions "the Negev and the plain, the valley of Yericho that is the city of palms, until Tzo'ar"). The valley of Yericho, located in the hot plain of the Jordan, is well watered by underground springs and provides an excellent climate for the cultivation of the date palm. Yericho is of course located on the Jordan's western banks and Eglon's campaign against the region indicates that he and his cronies had forded the Jordan River and penetrated into the territory of the tribe of Binyamin (see Yehoshua 18:21), where they established a colony. This would imply not only a seizure of Binyamin's lands but also the overrunning (at least temporarily) of the Israelite tribes of Reuven and Gad who dwelt east of the Jordan, for Eglon could not have reached the river without traversing their pastures. Additionally, it is important to bear in mind that the tribe of Binyamin shared a border to their north with the tribe of Efraim, and the Israelites of the latter were no doubt unsettled by the developments unfolding at their doorstep.

EHUD'S HEROIC EXPLOITS

It is thus not surprising that it was a certain Ehud son of Gera, a left-handed warrior from the tribe of Binyamin, who arose as the people's savior. The narrative provides us with a gripping account of Ehud's bravery, for he seems to have single-handedly initiated the revolt against Moavite rule. The Binyaminite led a delegation of his compatriots bearing tribute for the king, but Ehud also carried a concealed dagger. After no doubt allaying the alertness of his hosts with the presentation of the gifts, Ehud sent the other emissaries homewards and urgently requested from the obese monarch an exclusive audience. This performance further lowered the guard of the court, for who would dare to attack the king single-handedly while seemingly unarmed, especially in the aftermath of a preceding show of pronounced obeisance? But as Ehud entered the king's private chambers, the attending ministers failed to notice his small and honed weapon, for (being left-handed) he unexpectedly wore it on his right side. Claiming to bear a message from God, Ehud brought the rotund ruler to his feet, but as Eglon struggled to rise (an act that presumably required the use of both of his hands), Ehud plunged the knife into his swollen and vulnerable belly and messily dispatched him. Stealing away and locking the chambers after him, Ehud took his leave.

By the time the Moavite princes realized the fate of their king, Ehud was already well on his way. Breathlessly arriving in the hill country of Efraim, Ehud sounded the rallying cry with the shofar and then led the people (who presumably were awaiting his return) into battle. But now Ehud employed a clever strategy, for he first seized the fords east of Yericho and thus prevented the fleeing Moavites from escaping across the Jordan to regroup. About ten thousand Moavites were vanquished in the ensuing battle while the threat of their coalition was lifted. The passage concludes with the formulaic observation that "the land was peaceful for eighty years" (3:30), but the verses shed no further light on Ehud's exploits, either as judge or as general, during that period.

THE BRIEF ASCENT OF SHAMGAR

There is, however, a brief but telling post-script to the account, appended to the exploits of Ehud but clearly separated from them in the original Hebrew text by an open line ("parasha petucha"):

After him, there was Shamgar son of Anat who smote six hundred Philistines with an ox goad. He too saved Israel (3:31).

Of this Shamgar, we know nothing more. He is obliquely mentioned later on in the victory song of Deborah (5:6), where his stewardship is described in the context of her larger report of the regional instability that was the backdrop for her own miraculous triumph over the king of Chazor:

In the days of Shamgar son of Anat, in the days of Ya'el, the roads were deserted, and the wayfarers would take circuitous routes (to avoid the menacing Canaanites).

Thus, it seems that while Shamgar relieved the plight of the people by overpowering the Philistines, his exploits were not sufficient to restore safety to the countryside. The oppressors still prowled and Israel still cowered before them. We may note that this reading is reinforced by the mention of Shamgar's unusual weapon, for an ox goad is a sharpened agricultural implement that is used to drive the oxen forward as they plow the fields. The implication is clear: the pastoral tribes of Israel, who, unlike the Philistines, did not hail from a martial or even an urban tradition, were lightly "armed" only with the tools of their farms, thus constituting (most of the time) easy prey for their more technically advanced neighbors. That Shamgar was able to prevail against six hundred of the Philistines while armed with nothing more than his ox goad was thus at once a triumph of singular dimensions but at the same time an achievement of little lasting impact.

SHAMGAR'S OBSCURE TRIBAL AFFILIATION

Concerning Shamgar's tribal affiliation, the Biblical text is uncharacteristically silent. Rashi (11th century, France), commenting upon a Talmudic passage in which Rabbi Eli'ezer remarks that there wasn't a single tribe that did not provide at least one of the Judges, says:

Those that led the people from the death of Yehoshua until Shemuel anointed Saul king over Israel (were known as judges). Yehoshua was from Ephraim and Ehud was from Benjamin...concerning Otniel, Yiftach (11:1), SHAMGAR, Yair (10:3), and 'Avdon (12:13), I know not the names of their tribes, neither is there any explicit mention in the text of a judge arising from the tribes of Reuven, Shim'on, Gad or Asher (commentary to Talmud Bavli Tractate Sukka 27b).

While the comparatively late source of the Yalkut Shim'oni does assign Otniel to Yehuda, Yiftach and Yair to Menashe, and 'Avdon to Ephraim, it too is silent concerning the pedigree of Shamgar. But could it be (and here we can only speculate) that he hailed from the tribe of Shim'on? This would locate his activities in close proximity to his nemeses the Philistines, who settled the coast from Aza (modern day Gaza) in the south to Ekron about fifty kilometers northwards. Now the Philistines were a sea people who migrated probably from the southern reaches of the Aegean Sea (perhaps from Crete) and arrived on Canaanite shores sometime in the 13th century BCE. Though they initially established their confederacy of city-states along the Mediterranean coast near their landing points, they soon sought to expand their power inland. This brought them into perpetual conflict with the tribe of Dan whose lands bordered them to the north (Yehoshua 19:40-48), as well as with Yehuda whose territory began in the foothills (the "Shefela") to the east of the Philistine towns. Now the tribe of Shim'on never achieved territorial independence, and its people were instead settled among Yehuda's southwestern towns (compare Shoftim 1:1-3), particularly in the arid Negev region of Be'er Sheva (Yehoshua 19:1-9). If in fact Shamgar was from Shim'on, then his conflict with the Philistines would be eminently comprehensible.

SHAMGAR OF SHIM'ON AND SHIMSHON OF DAN

Of course, if our identification is correct, then we might draw an even more cohesive parallel, for the ONLY two judges who are reported to have fought the Philistines are Shamgar and Shimshon (whose exploits are recounted in the late chapters of the book). Shimshon hailed from Dan to the north, whose inhabitants were directly under Philistine oppression, and he thus constituted the natural analog to Shamgar from the south. Additionally, both men are credited with unusual feats of strength, performed not with sharpened weapons of war but rather with mundane

and innocuous objects. Shamgar humbled them with an ox goad, while Shimshon famously employed the jawbone of an ass (15:15) or even his bare hands. Finally, both men are described as battling the Philistines without the support of their respective constituents, for nothing at all is reported about Shamgar rallying his tribe, whereas Shimshon's own people, cowed by Philistine oppression, were in fact vehemently opposed to his forays and went so far as to turn him over to the enemy forces (15:11-13)!

But now emerges the most glaring contrast of all, for while the tale of Shimshon (including its introductory chapters) is the longest of any judge recorded in the book and describes in detail not only the events leading up to his birth, but also his vigorous youth, his amorous adulthood and finally his untimely and tragic demise, the account of Shamgar is but a single verse! How may we account for the unfair discrepancy? Here we return to the report of the Yalkut Shim'oni, for it solemnly declares that:

There arose judges and kings from all of the tribes, save for the tribe of Shim'on that furnished neither a judge nor a king. This was on account of the transgression of Zimri their prince (see BeMidbar 25:1-9), and indicates how grievous is the transgression of sexual immorality! (Yalkut Shim'oni, Shoftim #42).

RABBI ELI'EZER VS. YALKUT SHIM'ONI

This tradition, otherwise unattested, would seem to conflict with the opinion of Rabbi Eli'ezer quoted earlier, for that great sage declared that "that there wasn't a single tribe that did not provide at least one of the Judges" (Sukka 27b). But perhaps the two sources can be reconciled. The key to the matter lies in defining exactly what Rabbi Eli'ezer meant when he spoke of the "tribes."

While Rashi is undoubtedly correct in declaring that concerning Otniel, Yiftach, Yair and Avdon the text does not explicitly mention tribal affiliation, this is for the simple reason that the information can be easily determined from the other textual cues that are provided. Thus, Otniel is from the family of Calev (3:9) who descends from Yehuda (Bemidbar 13:6). Yiftach and Yair are

both described as "Gile'adites," and thus are from the eastern tribe of Menashe who much earlier had settled the Gil'ad and possessed it (Bemidbar 32:39-42). Yair in fact is named after his forebear of the same name (Bemidbar 32:41), while the originally geographic appellation "Gil'ad" associated with Yiftach was bestowed upon the entire clan of Machir (a son of Menashe) when they first settled these Transjordanian highlands. As for 'Avdon, we are told by the text that he was "the son of Hillel from Pir'aton," a town that was located in the "land of Efraim at the hills of the Amalekites" (Shoftim 12:13-15).

Thus, we are really only left with Shamgar son of Anat from among all of the Judges, concerning whom we know nothing else, neither his tribe nor even his hometown. At the same time, as Rashi asserted earlier, there is no textual evidence for a judge from Reuven, Gad, Shim'on or Asher. We can therefore validate Rabbi Eli'ezer's view only if we make one of two assumptions, where the second of the two is clearly to be preferred: either the book does not record every judge that arose, or else Rabbi Eli'ezer's opinion must be somehow qualified.

NO JUDGE FROM REUVEN, GAD OR ASHER

Now it is entirely reasonable to not have expected a judge to have arisen from either Reuven or Gad. Both of these tribes were composed of semi-nomadic shepherding clans who dwelt on the eastern side of the Jordan and were far removed, geographically and politically, from the fate of their brethren on the other side. Eastern Menashe managed to maintain its connection to events in Canaan only because a large part of the tribe was settled on the western side of the river. As for Asher, of it alone did the narrative report that they "dwelt in the midst of the Canaanites who inhabited the land, for they did not (could not?) drive them out" (Shoftim 1:32). In other words, in all probability Asher faded into obscurity and was lost to the national polity when it amalgamated into its Canaanite surroundings. Is it mere coincidence that when Devorah rebukes those tribes that were absent from the ranks at the battle of Mei Merom (chapter 4 – 5) she singles out Reuven, "Gil'ad" (Gad?), coastal Dan (but not its northern clans) and Asher?! In other words, the implication of all of the above is that every tribe that (a) was settled in the land of Canaan proper and (b) did not entirely dissolve into the surrounding Canaanite landscape, provided at least one judge, INCLUDING EVEN SHIM'ON.

While Shamgar son of Anat was the judge from the tribe of Shim'on, thus completing the contours of Rabbi Eli'ezer's view, the narrative intentionally obscured his origins and lineage because of Zimri's indiscretion, as reported in the Yalkut Shim'oni! It will be recalled that Zimri was one of the tribal chieftains of Shim'on. He had flagrantly opposed the leadership of Moshe and the moral imperatives of God by engaging in a defiant act of immorality with one of the princesses of Moav whose idolatrous fetish he had adopted. But his specific act had been precipitated by a more widespread phenomenon: "While Israel was encamped at Shittim, the people began to stray after the daughters of Moav. They had invited the people to participate in sacrifices to their gods and the people had eaten and bowed down to their gods. Israel thus became aligned to Ba'al Pe'or, and God became angry with them..." (Bemidbar 25:1-3). All of this had occurred as the people were encamped on the Jordan's eastern shores in preparation of entering the land, and as a direct consequence the tribe of Shim'on was decimated by plague.

SHAMGAR'S OBSCURITY

We can now begin to appreciate why Shamgar of Shim'on's exploits were intentionally understated. As scion of Zimri, Shamgar had to be especially mindful to emphasize the hazards of intermarriage and idolatry. These twin scourges of Sefer Shoftim that were regarded by its narratives as the very sources of Israel's failure to secure itself in Canaan had been precisely the planks of Zimri's platform and his entire tribe had suffered the consequences. As the Yalkut may be implying, the obscuring of his tribe and clan was not meant as a critique of Shamgar's personal conduct but rather as an indictment of tribal practices that could only lead to ruin. The Yalkut reports that: "There arose judges and kings from all of the tribes, save for the tribe of Shim'on that furnished neither a judge nor a king. This was on account of the transgression of Zimri their prince (see Bemidbar 25:1-9), and indicates how grievous is the transgression of sexual immorality!" (Yalkut Shim'oni, Shoftim #42). But we now appreciate that the intent of the Yalkut may have been to say not that Shim'on furnished no judge, for that would have necessarily conflicted with Rabbi Eli'ezer's opinion above. Rather, the Yalkut may be forcefully saying that Sefer Shoftim intentionally omitted any explicit mention of the fact. Thus the Yalkut can be reconciled with the view of Rabbi Eli'ezer, though admittedly with some reservations.

Of course, the time horizon of the Tanakh is not the same as our shortsighted and economically-conditioned perceptions, but generations and centuries in length. Zimri may have long since died, his indiscretion forgotten by the historical record, but the infamy of his act continued to bear noxious fruit. As intermarriage and idolatry again reared their ugly heads in Israel, the narratives of the book sounded the alarm by obliquely recalling Zimri's infamy. The desolation earlier wrought on Israel at the plains of Moav was symbolically remembered by our narrative's failure to mention Shamgar's clan or tribe, thus reinforcing the primary equation: intermarriage and idolatry can only spell national ruin and consignment to oblivion.

At the same time we dare not overlook the converse aspect of Rabbi Eli'ezer's view. By declaring that every tribe that cared also fielded a judge, the sage emphasizes the national dimension that we spoke of last lesson. Though often laboring without national support, every tribe (with the notable exceptions spelled out above) nevertheless contributed to the welfare of Israel. For Rabbi Eli'ezer, the concern implicit in each tribe's contribution foreshadowed the brighter days when the tribes would finally be united into a nation. In other words, though the book broadcasts a decidedly negative period of Israelite history, Rabbi Eli'ezer nevertheless detected in its narratives the dawn of a better future. May we merit to see that future unfold in our own days.

For next time, readers are kindly requested to prepare Chapter 4.

Shabbat Shalom