

# The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

**The Book of Shmuel  
Yeshivat Har Etzion**

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## **LECTURE 25: CHAPTERS 13-14**

### **THE FIRST WAR AGAINST THE PELISHTIM (PART IV)**

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#### **XII. THE COMPARISON BETWEEN SHAUL AND GIDON**

In the previous lesson we noted the striking contrast between Shaul's passive inaction and his failure even to inquire of God, and Yehonatan's active efforts and successful combination of deep faith in God and military capability that allows him to bring the war against the Pelishtim to a favorable conclusion. Interestingly, Scripture expresses the wide gap between Shaul and Yehonatan by way of one of the most instructive parallels in the book of *Shmuel*, that between the figure of Gidon the *Shofet* and the figures of Shaul and Yehonatan. This parallelism stretches over several chapters in the book (9-14), and reaches its climax in the account of the war against the Pelishtim. Following this parallelism and the surprising twist that it receives will add an important dimension to our understanding of the narrative and its message.

The first points of parallelism appear already at the beginning of Shaul's career:

- 1) Both figures are called already at our first encounter with them "a mighty man of valor" (*Shoftim* 6:12; I *Shmuel* 9:1).
  
- 2) When they are informed of the role for which they have been designated, they both express their opposition, for reasons of modesty, with similar arguments (as was noted in chapter 9):

And he said to him, O my Lord, with what shall I save Israel? Behold, my family is the poorest in Menasheh, and I am the youngest in my father's house. (*Shoftim* 6:15)

And Shaul answered and said, Am I not a Binyamini, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel? And my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Binyamin? Why then do you speak so to me? (I *Shmuel* 9:21)

- 3) Both figures are promised that God will be with them:

And the Lord said to him, Surely I will be with You. (*Shoftim* 6:16)

That you do as occasion serve you; for God is with you. (I *Shmuel* 10:7)

- 4) Both Shmuel and Gidon are given signs that strengthen their faith in their appointment:

Gidon asks the angel: "If now I have found favor in your sight, then show me a sign that it is You who talks with me" (*Shoftim* 6:17)<sup>1[1]</sup>; Shmuel says to Shaul: "And let it be, when these signs are come to you, that you do as occasion serve you; for God is with you" (I *Shmuel* 10:7).

At this stage, the parallelism inclines toward Shaul's favor, for he is given signs even without asking for them, whereas Gidon had to ask for signs.

I will later point to additional parallels between Shaul and Gidon,<sup>2[2]</sup> but at this stage let us move on to the main parallel – in the account of the war against the Pelishtim in chapters 13-14.

### **XIII. THE COMPARISON BETWEEN THE WAR AGAINST THE PELISHIM AND THE WAR AGAINST MIDYAN**

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<sup>1[1]</sup> Gidon asks for signs again later prior to the war against Midyan (ibid. vv. 36-40), and receives further strengthening on the night of the war (ibid. 7:9-15).

<sup>2[2]</sup> At this point, note should be taken of the great similarity between the words of the prophet prior to Gidon's selection and the words of Shmuel prior to the selection of Shaul in the lottery in the presence of Israel. In *Shoftim* (6:8-9), it says: "The Lord sent a prophet to the children of Israel, who said to them, **Thus says the Lord God of Israel, I brought you up from Egypt**, and brought you out of the house of slaves; **and I delivered you out of the hand of Egypt, and out of the hand of all those that oppressed you.**" And Shmuel says to the people: "**Thus says the Lord God of Israel, I brought up Israel out of Egypt, and delivered out of the hand of Egypt, and out of the hand** off all the kingdoms, **and of them that oppressed you**" (I *Shmuel* 10:18).

Scripture draws a broad parallel between Shaul's war against the Pelishtim and Gidon's war against Midyan:

- 1) In both accounts, the enemy is described as enormous in number:

Now Midyan and Amalek and all the children of the east lay along in the valley like locusts for multitude; and their camels were without number, **as the sand by the seashore for multitude**. (*Shoftim* 7:12)

And the Pelishtim gathered themselves together to fight with Israel, thirty thousand chariots, and six thousand horsemen, and people **like the sand on the seashore for multitude**. (I *Shmuel* 13:5)<sup>3[3]</sup>

The people of Israel, in contrast, pass through a sifting process, until only a small number of fighters are left. In the war against Midyan the main message is that the war is God's, and therefore there is an explicit order to reduce the number of soldiers.<sup>4[4]</sup> This process is done by first weeding out the "fearful and afraid" (*Shoftim* 7:3) and then those who bow down upon their knees to drink water (ibid. vv. 5-6), until only a small army is left:

And the number of them that lapped, putting their hand to their mouth, were three hundred men; but **all the rest of the people** bowed down upon their knees to drink... and **he sent all the rest of the people of Israel every man to his tent**, and retained those three hundred men. (*Shoftim* 7:6-8)

In the case of Shaul there is no explicit command to reduce the number of fighters, but his army was also thinned out, with Scripture using a very similar formulation as that used in connection with Gidon:

Shaul chose him three thousand of Israel... **and the rest of the people he sent every man to his tent**. (I *Shmuel* 13:2)

Later, Shaul's army was further reduced in size to numbers approaching those of Gidon's army:

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<sup>3[3]</sup> Only in one other war do we find such a description of the enemy – in Yehoshua's war against the kings of the north: "And they went out, they and all their host with them, a people numerous like the sand that is upon the seashore for multitude, with a great many horses and chariots" (*Yehoshua* 11:4). There too victory is achieved through a sudden blow: "So Yehoshua came, and all the people of war with him, against them by the waters of Meron suddenly, and they fell upon them" (ibid. v. 7).

<sup>4[4]</sup> We find a parallel phenomenon in Achav's first war against Aram (I *Melakhim* 20). There too a campaign is fought in which the few are pitted against the many, a gap about which the king of Aram boasts: "If the dust of Shomron shall suffice for handfuls for all the people that follow me" (ibid. v. 10). There too victory is achieved through a small group: two hundred and thirty two young men of the princes of the provinces. This, however, is not the forum to discuss the parallels between these wars in greater detail.

And Shaul numbered the people that were present with him, about six hundred men.<sup>5[5]</sup> (ibid. v. 15)

- 2) In both cases, the war begins with the respective leader mustering his troops in similar fashion:

But the spirit of the Lord clothed Gidon, and **he blew a shofar**, and Aviezer **mustered behind him**. (*Shoftim* 6:34)

And Shaul **blew the shofar** throughout all the land saying, Let the Hebrews hear. And all Israel heard say that Shaul had smitten the garrison of the Pelishtim, and that Israel also had become odious to the Pelishtim. **And the people mustered after** Shaul at Gilgal. (I *Shmuel* 13:3-4)

- 3) In both wars, a description is given of Israel's fear, their running away from the enemy and their hiding themselves in hideouts:

And because of Midyan the children of Israel made for themselves the tunnels which are in the mountains, and caves, and strongholds. (*Shoftim* 6:2)

When the men of Israel saw that they were in straits, (for the people were hard-pressed,) then the people hid themselves in caves, and in thickets, and in rocks, and in strongholds, and in pits. (I *Shmuel* 13:6)

At this stage, however, the parallelism reaches a turning point. Until now the parallelism focused on two individuals – Gidon and Shaul – and on the two situations – the war against Midyan and the war against the Pelishtim. Following these parallels, the story reaches Shaul's failure regarding the sacrifices, which was dealt with at length in previous lessons. This failure brings Shaul to adopt an entirely passive approach, and from now on he does not parallel Gidon. On the contrary, there is a certain point regarding which the contrast between the two figures stands out prominently: Whereas Gidon adopts the military strategy of "And he divided the three hundred men **into three groups**" (*Shoftim* 7:16), in the war against the Pelishtim, this very same strategy is used against Shaul, in the aftermath of his sin: "And the raiding parties came out of the camp of the Pelishtim **in three groups**" (I *Shmuel* 13:17).<sup>6[6]</sup>

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<sup>5[5]</sup> This might be a typological number denoting a military battalion. Elsewhere as well this number denotes a battalion, e.g., *Shoftim* 3:31; 18:11; I *Shmuel* 27:2; II *Shmuel* 15:18.

<sup>6[6]</sup> As I noted in lecture no. 23, in the war against Amon – which preceded Shaul's failure in Gilgal – it was precisely Shaul who used this strategy: "And Shaul put the people in three companies" (I *Shmuel* 11:11). It seems that in that war Shaul conducted himself like Gidon, as is evident from other parallels: 1) At the time of the war against Amon, Shaul is described in a way that does not appear in the account of his war against the Pelishtim – "And the spirit of God came upon Shaul" (I *Shmuel* 11:6). This parallels what is stated about Gidon: "But the spirit of the Lord clothed Gidon" (*Shoftim* 6:34). 2) In both wars, the respective leaders sent "messengers" throughout the land: "**And he sent messengers** throughout all Menasheh who also mustered behind him: **and he sent messengers** to Asher, and to

#### XIV. THE COMPARISON GIDON AND YEHONATAN

The similarity between Shaul and Gidon in the war against Amon sharpens the turning point in the war against the Pelishtim. To our great surprise, even though the correspondence between Shaul and Gidon ceases in the wake of Shau's sin, the parallel between the war against the Pelishtim and the war against Midyan continues in full force – only that Shaul's place is seized from now on by his son Yehonatan. The parallels between Yehonatan and Gidon arise at several points:

1) As we saw in the previous lesson, in contrast to Shaul who makes no use of the means that stand at his disposal to inquire of God, Yehonatan succeeds – even though he has no "official" way of doing so – in clarifying God's will by way of a sign that he himself devises, and which he presents to his lad:

**Now it came to pass one day**, that Yonatan the son of Shaul said to **the boy** that bore his armor, Come, let us go over to the garrison of the Pelishtim... Then said Yehonatan, Behold, we will pass over to these men, and we will reveal ourselves to them. If they say thus to us, Tarry until we come to you, then we will stand still in our place, and will not go up to them. But if they say to us, Come up to us, then we will go up; for the Lord had delivered them into our hand: and this shall be a sign to us. (I *Shmuel* 14:1-10)

This account is reminiscent of Gidon, who also goes down to the enemy camp with his lad, and receives a sign from God:

**And it was on the same night** that the Lord said to him, Arise, go down to the camp; for I have delivered it into your hand. But if you fear to go down, go you with Pura **your boy** down to the camp, and you shall hear what they say; and afterwards shall your hands be strengthened. (*Shoftim* 7:9-11)

2) After receiving the sign by hearing what is said in the enemy camp, the two respective leaders are confident in their victory:

And it was, when Gidon heard the telling of the dream, and its interpretation, that he bowed himself down to the ground, and returned to the camp of Israel

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Zevulun, and to Naftali; and they came up to meet them" (*Shoftim* 6:35); "And he took a yoke of oxen, and cut them up in pieces, **and sent them** throughout all the territory of Israel by the hands of **messengers**, saying, Whoever comes not forth after Shaul and after Shmuel, so shall it be done to his oxen." (I *Shmuel* 11:7). 3) The two leaders arrive in the enemy's camp at night: "So Gidon, and the hundred men that were with him, **came** to the edge of **the camp** at the beginning of **the middle watch**" (*Shoftim* 7:19); "**And they came** into the midst of **the camp in the morning watch**" (I *Shmuel* 11:11).

and said, Arise, **for the Lord has delivered into your hand** the host of Midyan. (*Shoftim* 7:15)

And the men of the garrison answered Yonatan and his armor-bearer, and said, Come up to us, and we will show you something. And Yonatan said to his armor-bearer, Come up after me: **for the Lord has delivered them into the hand of Israel.** (I *Shmuel* 14:12)

- 3) The attacks made by Gidon and Yehonatan lead to amazingly similar results:

And the Lord set **every man's sword against his fellow.** (*Shoftim* 7:22)

And, behold, **every man's sword was against his fellow;** and there was a very great confusion. (I *Shmuel* 14:20)

It should be noted that these are the only two instances of this phrase in Scripture.

- 3) In both wars, the men of Mount Ephraim join in the pursuit after the initial strike against the enemy:

And Gidon sent messengers throughout all **Mount Ephraim**, saying, Come down against Midyan, and seize before them the waters as far as Bet-Bara and the Jordan. Then all the men of **Ephraim** were mustered, and took the waters as far as Bet-Bara and the Jordan. (*Shoftim* 7:24)

Likewise all the men of Israel who had hid themselves **in Mount Ephraim**,<sup>7[7]</sup> when they heard that the Pelishtim fled, they also pursued them closely in the battle. (I *Shmuel* 14:22)

- 4) Toward the end of both wars, the people are faint and hungry:

And Gidon came to the Jordan, and passed over, he, and the three hundred men that were with him, **faint**, yet, pursuing them. And he said to the men of Sukkot, Give, I pray you loaves of **bread** to the people that follow me; for they are **faint.** (*Shoftim* 8:4-5)

For Shaul had adjured the people, saying, Cursed be the man that eats any food until evening, that I may be avenged on my enemies. So none of the

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<sup>7[7]</sup> According to the plain sense of Scripture, the reference is to the people mentioned in the previous chapter: "When the men of Israel saw that they were in straits, (for the people were hard-pressed,) then the people hid themselves in caves, and in thickets, and in rocks, and in strongholds, and in pits" (13:6). In light of the fact that in that verse it is not stated that the people came from Mount Ephraim, there is special significance to the fact that this is mentioned here, in the framework of the parallels between the wars.

people tasted any **food**... **And the people were faint**... **And the people were very faint.** (I *Shmuel* 14:24-31)<sup>8[8]</sup>

The significance of the correspondence is clear. As opposed to Shaul's weakness, Yehonatan demonstrates courage, continuing in the path of Gidon until the successful conclusion of the campaign. In the war against Midyan, God sends a clear message. The number of fighters was intentionally reduced so that the people should internalize the idea that it is God's war:

And the Lord said to Gidon, The people that are with you are **too many** for me to give Midyan into their hands; lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, my own hand has saved me. (*Shoftim* 7:2)

Yehonatan clearly expresses his acceptance of this principle before he goes out with his lad to fight in the Pelishti camp:

It may be that the Lord will perform a deed for us: for there is no restraint upon the Lord to save **by many or by few.** (I *Shmuel* 14:6)

In contrast to Shaul's conduct throughout the campaign, Yehonatan's faith in God leads him to victory. Scripture highlights the contrast between the two figures by way of the changing parallel to Gidon.

It also stands to reason that it was not by chance that Scripture chose the figure of Gidon to pass on the main messages of this story. Shaul, as the first king, is made to stand a test of faith in God, in order, among other reasons, to test his faith as king. For it was precisely this that concerned Shmuel in his words of parting from the people:

And Shmuel said to the people, Fear not: you have done all this wickedness. Yet turn not aside from following the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart... Only fear the Lord, and serve Him in truth with all your heart. For consider how great are the things that He has done for you. (I *Shmuel* 12:20-24)

We have already noted in the past that this is the essence of Shaul's failure at Gilgal: giving priority to human considerations over absolute faith in God and the commitment to keep His word. In contrast to this failure stands Gidon, who was the only *shofet* to whom it was proposed that he set up a dynasty similar to a royal dynasty:

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<sup>8[8]</sup> I shall deal at length with Shaul's adjuration in the next lesson.

Then the men of Israel said to Gidon, Rule you over us, both you, and your son, and your son's son also; for you have delivered us from the hand of Midyan. (*Shoftim* 8:22)

Gidon, however, refuses this offer:

And Gidon said to them, I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you. (*ibid.* v. 23)

Gidon well understood the danger in the idea of the monarchy, and by turning down Israel's seductive offer, he demonstrated his commitment to strengthening Israel's faith in God. This was also the approach adopted by Yehonatan the son of Shaul, who, in contrast to his father, based his actions on his faith in God and His ability to deliver Israel "by many or by few."

(Translated by David Strauss)

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