



"AL HAPEREK"

A Renewed Meeting with Tanach

Shoftim Perakim 19-21

The story of the concubine of Givah ("pilegish ba-Givah") is one of the most difficult and shocking stories in the entire Tanach. The terrible abuse in Givah and the ensuing civil war, bring us to the final words of the book of Shoftim: *"In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes."*

General Overview < "וַיִּקְרְאוּ בְּסֵפֶר בְּתוֹרַת הָאֱלֹהִים"

Perek 19

- ❶ Throughout the story of the concubine of Givah, all the place names are provided while the human characters remain anonymous, described only through various labels. Take note of these labels and discuss how their development highlights the problematic relationship between the Levite and his concubine. Which character(s) in the perek is actually the "bad guy" and therefore guilty of abusing the concubine?
- ❷ Many lines of comparison can be drawn between the terrible story of Givah and the story of Sodom. Compare Shoftim 19:9-28 with Bereshit 13:13 and 19:1-25. What ethical message emerges from this comparison?

Perek 20

- ❸ The question *"Who shall go up for us first"* and the answer *"Yehuda"* appear at the beginning and the end of this book (1:1-2 and 20:18), serving as one of its literary frames. How does this repetition underscore the people's deterioration throughout this period?
- ❹ "Asking of the Lord" occurs three times in this perek (18, 23, 27). Pay close attention to the differences in the phrasing of each request and to the details of the situation each time. Can you point to any conceptual changes that the people undergo throughout this process?

Perek 21

- 5 Discussions of an oath and its violation appear at the beginning and end of this section (17:1-3; 21). Why is it so terrible to violate an oath, and what is problematic about the solution proposed by the elders?
- 6 "Behold, there is the feast of the Lord from year to year . . ." (19). What were the customs of this holiday in Shiloh? In spite of the fact that the Ark of the Lord (*Aron Hashem*) was kept there during this period, Shiloh is barely mentioned in the book of Shoftim. What does this omission tell us about the significance of Shiloh and the Mishkan (Tabernacle) during this period?

In-depth Study < "מִפְּנֵי וְשׂוֹם שְׁכָל"

- 7 The moral corruption reflected in the story of the concubine and her fate in Givah is horrifying. How did society allow for such a violent incident to occur? How did the tribe of Binyamin's sense of morality deteriorate to such an extent? Try to determine whether this situation was due to an exceptional event or if it was the culmination of a long process of moral corrosion. Is it possible to pin the blame on factors external to the people themselves?
- 8 At the end of the book, the tribe of Binyamin is nearly cut off from the rest of the nation. What is so problematic about the loss of a tribe from Israel? What is unique about the tribe of Binyamin amongst the twelve tribes? See Bereshit 35:17-19; 49:27; I Shmuel 9:1-2; Esther 2:5. See also the comments of Rav Yitzchak Arama cited below:

"And Eliyahu took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Yaakov, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying: Israel shall be your name" (I Melachim 18:31). This teaches that the name "Yisrael" is not appropriate except when all existing tribes will enter according to their number [12], whereupon which it will be worthy to call upon the God of Yisrael [versus "the God of Yaakov"]. And this is the reason for the great fear that all Yisrael had during the incident of the concubine of Givah, because lacking one from this number was not merely a numerical loss... The connection would be absent from the entire group" (Akedat Yitzchak 31, p. 248).

Appendix < "וַיְבִינּוּ בַּמִּקְרָא"

Commenting on the text, "*And his concubine played the harlot against him*" (19:2), R. Abiathar said that the Levite found a fly with her, and R. Yonatan said he found a hair on her . . . R. Hisda said, "A man should never terrorize his household. The concubine of Givah was terrorized by her husband and she was the cause of many thousands being slaughtered in Israel." Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav, "If a man terrorizes his household, he will eventually commit the three sins of unchastity, bloodshed, and the desecration of the Sabbath."

(Talmud Bavli Masechet Gittin 6b)

If you ask about the seventy-two thousand who were killed in Givat Binyamin: For what reason were they killed? There was a Great Sanhedrin of which Moshe, Yehoshua, and Pinchas ben Elazar were a part, and they were supposed to tie ropes of iron on their waists, raise their clothes above their knees [ie: "pull up their sleeves"], and go to all of Israel's cities: one day to Lachish, one day to Eglon, one day to Hebron, one day to Bet El, one day to Jerusalem, and teach them ethical morality [*derech eretz*] in a year, in two, in three, in four, in five, until Israel was settled in its land...But they did not do so. Because Israel entered their land and each individual ran to his own vineyard and olive tree, saying "Peace be on my soul," so as not to make trouble. The sages of the Mishnah taught (Pirkei Avot 4:12): "*Engage little in business but occupy yourself with Torah. Be humble in spirit before all men. If you neglect Torah many causes for neglecting it will present themselves to you.*" And when they committed disgusting and unworthy acts at Givat Binyamin, the Holy One Blessed be He came out to destroy the whole world, and seventy-two thousand fell. And who killed them? The Great Sanhedrin that included Moshe, Yehoshua, and Pinchas with them.

(Yalkut Shimoni: Shoftim, Remez 68)

For Further Study < "וַיְבִינּוּ בְּמִקְרָא"

In his commentary on the story of Sodom in Bereshit 19:8, the Ramban (Nachmanides) analyzes the story of the concubine of Givah. In order to facilitate the reading, we have divided the commentary into sections and added titles. The Ramban's comments received mixed reviews from the Al haPerek staff. We would be delighted to hear your reactions to his comments on our forum.

Differences between the story of the concubine of Givah and the story of Sodom:

Know and understand that the matter of the concubine of Givah, even though it resembles this affair, does not attain the degree of evil of the inhabitants of Sodom. Those wicked ones of Givah had no intention of stopping people from coming among them. Rather, they were steeped in immorality and desired sexual relations with the wayfarer, and when he brought his concubine out to them, they were satisfied with her. The old man [who had invited the wayfarer to his house] and said to the men of Givah, "Behold, here is my daughter, a virgin, and his concubine; I will bring them out now . . . and do with them what seems good to you," knew that they would not want his daughter and that they would not harm her. This was why they refused to listen to him. And when he finally turned his concubine alone outdoors to them, they ceased molesting him. Now the mater of the house, as well as the guest, both wanted to save the man through his concubine, as a concubine does not have the status of a man's wife. Besides, she had already played the harlot against him. In that breach, too, not all of the men of the city were involved as they were in Sodom, concerning which it is said, "Both young and old, all the people from every quarter," while of Givah it is said, "Behold, the men of the city, certain base fellows"--only some of them, those who were the rulers and strong men of the city, even as the man said in relating the incident, "And the masters of Givah rose against me." This was why the others did not protest against them.

The controversy between the tribe of Binyamin and the other tribes:

"Now the chiefs of all the people, of all the tribes of Yisrael" wanted to erect a great guard in the matter of immorality by slaying them, as it is said, "Now therefore deliver up the men, the base fellows that are in Givah, that we may put

them to death." It is clear that according to the law of the Torah they were not guilty of the death-penalty as they had done no deed exclusive of the torture of the concubine—harlot. They did not intend her death, nor did she die at their hands for "they let her go at the approach of dawn," and she walked from them to her master's house and after that she died, weakened perhaps by her numerous violations and chilled while lying at the door until it was light, and there she died. But because the men of Givah had wanted to do a shameful deed just as the men of Sodom, the tribes saw fit "to make a fence unto the Torah" so that this should never again happen or be contemplated in Yisrael, even as they said, "And that we may put away evil from Yisrael." This judgment has its origin in the principle which our Rabbis have stated: "the Court may administer stripes and the death penalty which are not authorized by the Torah. However, they may not do this [with the intent of instituting a law which] transgresses the words of the Torah but only for the purpose of erecting a fence around the Torah." The tribe of Binyamin, however, did not consent to this as they were not guilty of the death-penalty for violating the concubine. Perhaps the Binyamites were also provoked by the fact that the tribes did not communicate with them first and reached a consensus without asking for their opinion. In my opinion, this [failure to consult Binyamin] caused Yisrael's punishment which resulted in their being routed at first since the war was done not in accordance with the law. The obligation of making "the fence" lay upon the tribe of Binyamin, and not upon them, as it is the tribe itself that is obligated to judge its constituents. Thus both parties were deserving of punishment. Binyamin sinned by not bothering to punish the wicked ones or even rebuke them. Yisrael sinned by making war not in accordance with the law.

The first inquiry of the Lord and the reason for its failure

And also, "hey asked not counsel at the mouth of the Eternal" on this matter. Instead they questioned God and said, "Who shall go up for us first to battle against the children of Binyamin?" They themselves had decided to do battle in any case. Similarly, they did not inquire concerning the outcome of the battle, "If You will give them into my hand," since they relied on their manpower which was exceedingly great as they were now more than ten times [as numerous as the Binyamites]. All they asked was, "Who shall go up for us first," this being like

casting lots among them. Perhaps each tribe was saying, "I will not go up first," or each tribe was saying, "I will be first." And the Holy One, blessed be He, answered in accordance with their question: "Yehuda first," meaning, Yehuda is always first, "For he has chosen Yehuda to be prince." This was why He did not say, "Yehuda shall go up," as in other places, for He did not give them permission. However, He did not stop them, and neither did He tell them, "Go not up, neither fight," because of the merited punishment of the Binyamites. Thus did God walk with both of them by chance, leaving them to natural circumstances. Accordingly, the Binyamites, who were valiant men and whose cities were well fortified, destroyed the Israelites who had "made flesh their arm of strength." But now the Binyamites compounded their merited punishment. It would have been sufficient for them to drive the Israelites away from Givah. Instead, they willed them, "seeking to destroy them by a perpetual hatred," and they slew the mighty number of twenty-two thousand of their people.

The second inquiry of the Lord and the reason for its failure

Now when the Israelites suffered such a great defeat they became aware of their error, namely, that they did battle with their brethren without receiving Divine permission and engaged in a battle which was not in accordance with the law of the Torah. Therefore, on the second day they asked, "Shall I again draw nigh to battle against the children of Binyamin my brother?" Now they mentioned the brotherhood among them, asking whether He forbids them to do battle. But now on the second day, God permitted them, saying, "Go up against him," as it was now permissible for them to avenge the spilled blood of their brethren. However, they did not ask whether they will be victorious because they were still relying upon their superior numbers to bring victory under all circumstances. But since God had explained to them only that the battle was permissible to them, and since their first sin had not yet been atoned for, there fell among them also on the second day eighteen thousand.

The third inquiry of the Lord and the reason for its "success"

On the third day they decreed a fast, and they fasted "and they wept. . . before the Eternal," and they offered burnt offerings to atone for their sinful thoughts through which they relied upon the strength of their arm. They also offered

peace offerings, which were Thanksgiving peace offerings, since they considered themselves as if they had all escaped from the sword of Binyamin. This indeed is the law of all who are delivered from danger . . . Now the number of dead among the Israelites during the two days was forty thousand, and in the end twenty-five thousand of Binyamin's warriors fell, and besides those that were put to the sword "from the whole city and all that they found." It is possible that among the men, women and children they totaled fifteen thousand additional casualties, thus making the punishment of the two groups equal.

The words of Hazal regarding the reason for the punishment of Bnei Yisrael in the story of the concubine of Givah:

How significant are the words of our Rabbis who said that the anger of God at that time was due to the idol of Micha! "Said the Holy One, blessed be He, 'Concerning My honor, which was violated by those guilty of death and those who raised their hand against the principle of religion, namely, the unity of God, you did not protest, but for the honor of a mortal you did protest, to an extent which exceeded the limits of justice!'" Therefore He confounded the counsel of the two groups and made their hearts stubborn, "and they remembered not the brotherly covenant." But after the affair they had regrets, just as it is said, "And the people came to Bet El and sat there til evening before God, and lifted up their voice, and wept bitterly. And they said, 'O Eternal God of Yisrael, why is this come to pass in Yisrael, that there should be today one tribe missing from Yisrael?'" For now they realized their mistakes and punishment. We have thus incidentally explained a concealed matter which is not clear [with a cursory reading of the text], and we have mentioned the cause thereof.

(Translation by Rabbi Dr. Charles B. Chavel)



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