

## שׁוֹפְטִים

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# THE LEADERSHIP OF THE *SHOFTIM* PERIOD

*Klal Yisrael's* leaders during the era of the *Shoftim* were unique. This was the only period of Jewish history during which women and individuals of seemingly minor significance were promoted to leadership positions. Gidon, Shimshon, and Yiftach are considered by *Chazal* to be men of questionable character, yet they became *Shoftim* (*Rosh Hashanah* 25:); Devorah, Yael, (*Chidushei Haradal, Rus Rabbah* 1:1) and Chanah (*Berachos* 31:; *Megillah* 14•) are considered prominent among our nation's leaders.

Gidon is particularly noteworthy for his response to the people of his generation who wanted to make him their king; he would have been succeeded by his children. This was an extremely tempting invitation, but Gidon resisted it by proclaiming:

לֹא אֲמַשֵּׁל אֲנִי בְכֶם, וְלֹא יִמְשֵׁל בְּנֵי בְכֶם, ה' יִמְשֵׁל בְכֶם

“I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: Hashem shall rule over you” (*Shoftim* 8:23).

Gidon understood that his role was to be a deputy of Hashem; he perceived that the ultimate King of *Am Yisrael* was to be Hashem Himself.

Nevertheless, as virtuous as Gidon was, he is blamed for being shortsighted in relation to Hashem. Gidon requested that the people present him with the earrings of his defeated enemies, which he converted into an *efod* (a type of garment) (*Shoftim* 8:27). Although Gidon had no intention whatsoever of using it as an idol, the people did come to worship it. For this unwary transgression, the *Midrash (Rus Rabbah* 1:2) implicates him in idol worship.

Yaakov *Avinu* saw through prophetic vision that Shimshon possessed the attributes to be *Melech Mashiach (Bereishis Rabbah* 98:14). Shimshon, however, was a very unusual leader. He did not lead *Klal Yisrael* in battle against their enemies; instead, he elected to live among the Philistines and harassed them within their own borders (*Shoftim* 13, 14, 15 and 16). His shoulder span was sixty *amos* — cubits (*Sotah* 10•) — yet he was lame in both legs (*Sanhedrin* 105•). He displayed a passion for women (*Yefei To'ar, Bereishis Rabbah* 98:14), and he was punished with blindness for following the desires of his eyes (*Sotah* 9:). In relation to Shimshon it is stated, “Woe to the generation whose judges were [seemingly] evil” (*Yefei Anaf, Rus Rabbah* 1:1).

Yiftach, the most unworthy of all the *Shoftim (Bamidbar Rabbah* 19:15; Maharsha, *Rosh Hashanah* 25:), a leader of low men (*Shoftim* 11:3), and an *Am Ha'aretz* —unlearned person (*Vayikra Rabbah* 37:4) — is referred to by *Midrash Koheles* (10:15) with the verse: “The labor of the foolish wearies him” (*Koheles* 10:15). Although unsuccessful in his diplomatic efforts, Yiftach proved himself to be a shrewd leader (*Shoftim* 11:12-27). His downfall came about when, due to his ignorance of Torah law, he vowed to offer his daughter as a sacrifice to Hashem (*ibid.*

30; see *Tosafos, Chulin 2*::; *Keren Orah, Nedarim 21*•), and in his vanity he failed to rescind that vow (*Vayikra Rabbah 37:4*; *Midrash Tanchuma, Bechukosai 5*). Nevertheless, due to his extreme piety he was deemed worthy of *Ruach Hakodesh* (*Bamidbar Rabbah 19:15*).

Barak, who was a *Shofeit* along with Devorah and Yael (*Rus Rabbah 1:1*) was considered to be an *Am Ha'aretz* (*Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 9:1*; *Yalkut Shimoni, Shoftim 4*). The sons of Eli *Hakohein*, Chafni and Pinchas,

ובני עלי בני בליעל לא ידעו את ה'

were wicked, they knew not Hashem (*Shemuel I 2:12*);

they were guilty of corrupting the Temple sacrifice service. The sons of Shemuel *Hanavi*, Yoel and Aviyah, were designated as *Shoftim* by Shemuel, yet

ולא הלכו בניו בדרכיו ויטו אחרי הבצע ויקחו שחד ויטו משפט

They did not walk in his ways, but turned aside after lucre, and took bribes, and perverted justice (*Shemuel I 8:3*).

Generally, what emerges is a very bleak spiritual picture of the generations of the *Shoftim*.

איזה דור שכלו הבל הוי אומר זה דורו של שפוט השופטים

What generation is it that is altogether vain? You must say the generation where there is a “judging of judges” (*Bava Basra 15*:).

The *Shoftim* did not inspire respect from the common people. Before a judge could order an offender flogged, the offender would flog the judge (*Bereishis Rabbah 42:3*).

The *Shoftim* were immobilized by fear of violent defendants and therefore failed to convict them. The judges were thus guilty of transgressing the admonition “Be not intimidated by any man” (*Devarim 1:17*), and the growing epidemic of crime that swept the nation went unchecked. Just as *Klal Yisrael* fell short of being a perfectly righteous nation, their judges fell short of being ideal rulers. Ideally, a ruler guides the people by his personal example and his strong, inspired leadership. The judges did not provide effective leadership, and the people did not attain spiritual perfection. As a result, the society crumbled (*Mei'am Lo'ez, Rus 1*).

A system of anarchy and lawlessness prevailed (Maharal, *Chidushei Aggados, Bava Basra 15*::; see *Derech Chaim 1:1*): “Every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (*Shoftim 21:25*). There was no central government; instead society was controlled by chieftain-judges. Torah knowledge had declined (*Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 9:3*; *Yalkut Shimoni Shoftim 4*); therefore, qualified leaders were scarce. Hence, many unqualified individuals declared themselves to be judges (*Mei'am Lo'ez, Rus 1*).

The judges enumerated in *Shoftim*, however, were all appointed by Hashem. Due to the scarcity of qualified judges, women were also offered on opportunity to become *Shoftim*— “Dark is the generation ruled by women” (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shoftim 4*).

Rav Nachman (*Megillah 14*:) comments, in regard to inappropriate behavior on the part of the prophetess Devorah, “Haughtiness does not befit women.” Rashi (*ibid.*) expands on this by commenting: “prominence is unsuitable for women.” The *Sifsei Chachamim* (*ibid.*) adds that women can certainly achieve lofty spiritual levels, but positions of leadership are not fitting for them.

A generation's leadership is actually a reflection of that generation. During the *Shoftim* period, *Klal Yisrael* was in a feminine-like, weakened state; hence its leaders were women (*Mei'am Lo'ez, Shoftim 4:5*).

*Chazal (Rosh Hashanah 25:)* however, present an alternative view of the *Shoftim* generations by forewarning us not to judge these leaders on seeming superficialities. Their piety, virtue, and idealism were so great that they deserve mention with such veritable leaders as Moshe, Aharon and Shemuel *Hanavi*. The *Shoftim* generations were so elevated that it was not necessary to have the greatest Torah scholars as leaders; it was possible to highlight individuals who displayed other admirable character traits. Their holiness manifested itself in their attitude toward Hashem and to their fellow man. Hence, female leadership was also a possibility for those great generations. The restraints of future generations did not yet present themselves, and this permitted the individual's nobility of soul and sterling character to shine forth. The *Gemara (Sanhedrin 106:)* describes the differences between generations by applying the text "Hashem looks towards the heart" (*Shemuel I 16:7*).

The critique leveled against the *Shoftim* generations, that they were guilty of "judging the judges," can also be interpreted in a different light. The masses were not shy about publicly criticizing their leaders when they felt it was warranted. The *Shoftim* period was the era which followed the epoch of the *Dor Hamidbar* — the generation that stood at *Har Sinai*. The masses were so righteous that they demanded perfection from their leadership. If they perceived corruption, regardless of its insignificance, they were aggressive in censuring it, even if the resulting situation seemed to border on anarchy. It is a testament to the greatness of those generations that they were willing and able to challenge authority in an attempt to improve it.

This situation is a carry-over from the generation of the *midbar*. Moshe *Rabbeinu* complained to Hashem: "What should I do to these people; a bit more, and they will stone me" (*Shemos 17:4*). Moshe was addressing the generation of the greatest Jews who ever lived. Every act, every thought of their leadership was scrutinized and open to microscopic inspection in an effort to achieve as much perfection as possible. *Klal Yisrael* always demanded perfection from their leaders. The leadership of these generations reflected that yearning for perfection in the most subtle of ways.

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