



PROBING

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THE PROPHETS

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“*Yiftach b'doro k'Shmuel b'doro*” – “Yiftach in his generation is to be (as highly) regarded as (was) Shmuel in his generation” [Rosh Hashanah 25a]

Sefer Shofetim reviews the history of B'nai Yisra'el during the time of the rule of the “judges” (local tribal leaders), a span of about 350 years, from the death of Yehoshua and the rise of Shmuel. During that period, the text tells the story of thirteen shofetim,– and yet, the accounts of only four of them extend beyond one chapter: the history of Devorah, the only prophetess (or prophet) who led Israel during that era, the story of Gid'on, who was asked (but refused) to accept the throne of Israel and the exploits of Shimshon HaGibor whose miraculous birth was accompanied by Hashem's guarantee that “he would begin to save Yisrael from the ‘hand’ (control) of the P'lishtim” (Sefer Shofetim 13; 5).And then there was the record of the fourth shofet, the focus of our haftarah (Shofetim 11; 1-34) the story of Yiftach HaGil'adi.

But his story seems far different than that of the other three.

In the very first pasuk of the Yiftach saga we learn that he was a “gibor chayil” – a man of valor, usually a description of a warrior, but he was also described as the son of a “zonah” (in this context a “concubine”, as his brothers describe him as “the son of a different MOTHER” – but of the same father, Gil'ad). As a result, his brothers denied him any rights in their father's inheritance and

chased him away from his house.

Not a very auspicious beginning.

We then learn that, after escaping to “Eretz Tov” Yiftach gathered a small army made up of “anashim reikim”, “boorish” men, so when the army of Ammon attacked the residents of Gil'ad, the residents ask Yiftach to lead the battle against the enemy. It is of no surprise that the rejected Yiftach refused – accepting only when they guaranteed to make him their leader.

But should we not be surprised?

His nation was threatened! His family and neighbors were on the brink of annihilation! His homeland would soon be overrun by the enemy! And yet Yiftach refused to help unless he would receive the power??

This is certainly not the leader we would expect G-d to choose.

But then we should not forget:

“*Yiftach b'doro k'Shmuel b'doro*”

This statement of Chazal is not simply a charge to each generation to accept and respect their chosen leader. Nor is it a warning to the later generations to avoid comparing the righteousness, brilliance or leadership qualities of one leader to another. This statement also includes another truth: A Divinely-chosen leader is one that is right for that specific generation and capable of fulfilling the divine mission. Such a choice need not require outstanding heritage nor great scholarship nor exceptional physical prowess. It requires only Hashem's knowledge

that the individual “fits” the generation and can lead them.

And so, despite the questionable background of Yiftach and despite the limitations we might see in his character, he was chosen. Chosen, because he had the potential to carry out G-d’s mission; chosen, because his generation needed him.

Which brings me to our Torah reading.

I believe that Chazals choice of this haftarah was not based only upon its many parallels to the parasha’s description of Israel’s war with Edom. The parasha also includes the passing of two of the three leaders of Israel and the declaration that Moshe too, would soon pass on. And we all wonder what sin was committed that had these greatest of leaders pass on within months of each other! Could any future leader hope to “outshine” any of these three?

Perhaps our haftarah is teaching that future leaders are not meant to outdo the previous ones. At times, it is simply time for a leader to pass from the position. The leader did nothing wrong, but the generation needed a new leader. And that is why the G’mara tells us “Yiftach b’doro k’Shmuel b’doro”. Each “dor” requires its own leader.

So, don’t compare. Because, ultimately, Hashem knows what He’s doing! ■

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