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Nach Yommi

COMPANION

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Volume I:
Neviim Rishonim - Early Prophets

Section B:
Shoftim - Judges

Judges

Introduction

Sefer Shoftim - The Book of Judges: An Introduction

Tanach now enters what appears to be a tumultuous period. In fact, I believe the period of the Judges is completely misunderstood by most people.

Here's what happens in the Book of Judges: Foreign occupation, assassination, idolatry, uprisings, apparent human sacrifice, civil war, intermarriage, treachery, prostitution, torture, more idolatry, murder, dismemberment, a bigger civil war, a Tribe almost wiped out, and girls seized as brides.

Casually reading Judges may make one think that ancient Israel was the most bloodthirsty, dysfunctional nation in the history of the world. G-d forbid! It's important to contextualize these events.

The book does not take place over the course of six months or a year. The Book of Judges occurs over the span of 355 years. That's considerably longer than the United States has been around (231 years as of this writing). Imagine a history of the United States in 21 short chapters. Chapter 1: Revolution. Chapter 4: The Army Gives Native Americans Blankets Infected with Small Pox. Chapter 8: Civil War; Lincoln Assassinated. Chapter 11: Sweatshops. Chapter 14: Internment Camps for Japanese-Americans. Chapter 16: McCarthyism. Chapter 18: JFK, RFK and MLK Shot. Chapter 19: Watergate. Chapter 20: Monicagate. Chapter 21: Abu Ghraib. To a reader 3,000 years in the future, the US would appear to be in one constant state of oppression or upheaval. But I think most of us walk down the streets feeling pretty secure. Sure, there are always things that need improvement, but for the most part things are actually pretty good.

Well, the time of the Judges was no different. Yes, there were regrettable, misguided incidents. There were occasionally huge lapses in judgment. But people overlook the lines in between. After the Judge Osniel, the Navi tells us that things were quiet for forty years (3:11). After Ehud, we are told that things were peaceful for eighty years (3:30). Add up such statements in the book and you'll see that the times when nothing was going on far outweigh the occasionally shocking incidents. It's just that the Navi tells us the shocking incidents in greater detail and in close proximity.

Several times, the Navi tells us that the land had no King in those days and that every person did what was right in his own eyes. (It even ends on that note.) That makes it sound as if the land was lawless, like the Wild West. But ancient Israel was no anarchy. While there was no centralized ruler in the form of a king, there were rulers and leaders. Each Tribe had leaders in the form of Elders. There were neviim (prophets). There was the Kohein Gadol (High Priest). And there were the Shoftim - the Judges - about whom this book was written. They were either great military leaders, Torah scholars, or both.

All of this is important to keep in mind so as not to get a skewed picture of the very long historical period that this book covers in just a few short bullet points.

Chapter 1

Laying the Groundwork

Following the death of Joshua, the Jews consulted G-d via the Urim and Tumim to see which Tribe should be the first to conquer remaining Canaanite pockets within their territory. The first role fell to the Tribe of Judah. Judah invited Simeon to join them as Simeon's cities were scattered throughout the portion of Judah. (Refer back to the Book of Joshua.)

Judah captured the Canaanite king named Adoni-Bezek and cut off his thumbs and big toes. This kind of mutilation is unprecedented in Jewish warfare, but it was Divinely mandated as an appropriate punishment. Adoni-Bezek related that he had done likewise to kings he conquered, forcing them to scavenge for scraps under his table, like dogs. Because of his confession, the Jews kept him alive and brought him back to Jerusalem.

At this time, Caleb offered his daughter Achasah as a wife to whoever could rid Hebron of its giants. This was accomplished by his half-brother Osniel. (More about him a little later on.) This is one of the cases cited by the Midrash as an example of someone making a condition that could have gone horribly wrong, but turned out okay. The conditions of Eliezer (to find a wife for Yitzchak in parshas Chayei Sarah) and Saul (to marry off his daughter in I Samuel 17) also turned out okay. Contrast these with the story of Yiftach in a few chapters - that one did NOT end well. (We'll see all the details in Chapter 11, G-d willing.) Why did G-d assist Eliezer, Saul and Caleb? They were using their conditions to make shidduchim (match-making). Yiftach wasn't, so he lacked that extra protection.

The chapter ends with a list of Tribes and the cities from where they did not expel the Canaanite nations, a fact that is about to become extremely significant.

Chapter 2

The Stage is Set

A messenger of G-d spoke to the people. (While the Hebrew word "malach" often refers to a Heavenly angel, it literally means a messenger. The Targum translates this as a "prophet" and Vayikra Rabbah and Seder Olam both state that it was Pinchas, the High Priest.)

The messenger (Pinchas) chastised the people for not chasing out the Canaanite nations, as G-d had commanded. Since they did not chase the other nations out, they would remain in Israel as a source of trouble and their idols would serve as a source of temptation. The people cried because of this message and they named the place Bochim, from the Hebrew word meaning to cry.

Time passed. A new generation arose that did not experience G-d's miracles firsthand. The Jews would worship idols, then G-d would punish them by allowing their enemies to invade and take over. Ultimately, G-d

would send a Shofeit (Judge), who would encourage the people to repent. G-d would then redeem the Jews from their enemies. However, when the Judge died, the people would backslide and the cycle would start over again. This is the sad state of affairs we will see repeated throughout the Book of Judges.

Chapter 3

Here Come the Judges! Here Come the Judges!

The chapter begins with a list of nations that still maintained a presence in Israel: Philistines, Amorites, Hittites, Jebusites, Tzidonites, Hivites and Perizites. They were there to serve as a constant test for the Jews, to see if they would follow G-d's laws.

The Jews didn't do so well.

They intermarried with the Canaanite nations and worshipped idols. G-d therefore delivered the nation into the hands of Kushan-Rishasayim, king of Aram-Naharayim (Mesopotamia). The Jews served him for eight years, at which time they cried out to Hashem and He sent them Osniel ben Kenaz, the first Judge. (This was Caleb's half-brother from Chapter One.) Osniel led the people to victory and they enjoyed forty years of peace.

Osniel was succeeded by Ehud ben Gera, who was left-handed. (That tidbit will be important shortly.) The Jews fell back into their bad habits, so G-d allowed Eglon, king of Moab to take over the land. Eglon was morbidly obese. (That fact, too, will be important soon.)

Ehud went to see Eglon. He strapped a short sword on his right side, which escaped unnoticed. (The overwhelming majority of soldiers were right-handed and wore their long swords on the left. Moab Homeland Security was not all that thorough.) Ehud told Eglon he had a message for him from G-d. Eglon sent his attendants out for privacy. He then stood up out of respect for G-d. Ehud drew his small, concealed sword and thrust it into Eglon's belly, including the hilt. Ehud left and locked the door behind him.

Excrement was pouring out of Eglon's wound. His servants smelled it and assumed that the king was relieving himself in his locked chamber. After a while, they became suspicious. They opened the door and found their king dead. Of course, by that time, Ehud was long gone. Ehud summoned the troops who routed the Moabite forces, leading to eighty years of peace.

Ehud was succeeded by Shamgar ben Anas, who was Judge for only a few months. In that time, he defeated the Philistines.

One interesting detail: Despite his position and his huge size, King Eglon of Moab rose out of respect for G-d. G-d rewarded this by allowing one of Eglon's descendants, the righteous Ruth, to become the ancestor of King David (and, therefore, Moshiach).

Chapter 4

“...and the Bees.”

When the Jews backslid into their bad ways, G-d allowed Canaan to occupy Israel, led by a general named Sisera. They cried out and G-d sent Devorah (Deborah, whose name is Hebrew for a bee) as a Judge to save them.

Devorah summoned Barak to lead her army. (Barak may be another name for Lapidos, and may have been Devorah’s husband.) Barak considered himself unworthy and said he would only do so if Devorah agreed to go, as well. She did, but she cautioned Barak that now a woman would be credited with the victory - and she didn’t mean herself!

Israel routed Sisera’s army, but the general himself escaped. He ran to the tent of Yael, wife of Chever the Kenite. (The Kenites were descendants of Moshe’s father-in-law, Yisro.) He asked to be hidden and for some water. She covered him with a blanket and gave him some milk to make him tired. (She may have done a few other things, but we won’t go into them here.) When Sisera fell asleep, Yael took the tent peg and drove it into his temple. She then showed Barak where Sisera could be found.

The Navi tells us that Devorah judged people under a date tree. The reason she did so because of yichud, the prohibition against being secluded with a member of the opposite sex. If a woman of Devorah’s caliber, who was above such temptations and certainly above suspicion, was concerned with such things, certainly we average folk should be careful with these laws!

Chapter 5

Life on Other Planets?

Like Moses and Miriam after the salvation at the Red Sea, Devorah and Barak now sang a song of praise to G-d. It’s very beautiful and a synopsis can’t do it justice, so make sure you read it. We’ll just hit a few high points here:

* In the song, Devorah refers to herself as a metaphorical mother to the nation. Some say that the song was Divinely inspired and that’s what G-d instructed her to say. Others criticize her for her immodest choice of words.

* The Tribe of Issachar were renowned scholars. The members of Zevulun (Zebulun) supported them financially and shared in the merit of their learning (like a modern-day kollel). It’s interesting to note that the song of Devorah refers to the Tribe of Zevulun as “those who wield a scribe’s pen.” One explanation is that it refers to the merchants of Zevulun, who wrote out receipts. Another explanation is that it refers to the scholars of Zevulun, even though Zevulun was not primarily a Tribe of scholars. May I suggest that it is perhaps because of the merit they got from supporting Issachar’s Torah study? (Just thinking out loud...)

* Verse 20 says that the stars in their orbits joined the battle against Sisera. Verse 23 curses the inhabitants of Meroz for not coming to help. Some commentators say that Meroz was the name of a nearby city, but Rashi quotes the Talmud in Moed Katan (16a) that it's the name of a star. So who are the inhabitants of another star? Extraterrestrials? Not necessarily, but we can't rule it out...

* The song ends with a powerful description of Sisera's mother, looking out the window, waiting for her son to return from battle. Her attendants try to comfort her with the thought that he and his men are dividing the spoils and choosing attractive captives for themselves. That his mother would be comforted by such things says quite a lot about the environment in which Sisera was raised!

Chapter 6

Midian and Gideon

After 40 years of peace, the nation once again slacked off and G-d allowed Midian to occupy the country. The Midianites were particularly cruel; they didn't just raid the Jews' crops, they destroyed what they couldn't use. (Verse 5 compares them to a swarm of locusts.) The people cried out and G-d sent Gideon (Gidon in Hebrew, but we'll stick with the English).

Gideon was threshing wheat at his winepress in an effort to conceal it from the Midianites when G-d sent an angel to give him his "marching orders." Considering himself unworthy, Gideon asked for a sign. The angel had him put meat, matzos and broth on a rock. (The broth was poured over the solid food.) A fire came out of the rock and consumed the offering. (Yes, this is a preview of the miracle later wrought for Elijah in the Book of Kings.)

That night, G-d had Gideon break apart his father's altar to the Baal and cut down his Asheira (a tree worshipped for idolatry). He built an altar to Hashem and sacrificed his father's fattened bull on it, using the wood of the Asheira for kindling. The next morning, when the people of the town learned what Gideon had done, they wanted to kill him. Gideon's father Yoash interceded, saying that if Baal has a problem with what Gideon did, and if Baal had the ability to deal with it, then Baal would deal with it himself. This earned Gideon the nickname "Yerubaal," "let the Baal handle it."

Finally, Gideon asked for a sign so that the people would know he was sent by G-d. Gideon laid out a fleece on the threshing floor. On one night, the dew fell only on the fleece, not on the ground. On the next, the dew fell only on the ground, not on the fleece.

Chapter 7

Thinning the Herd

Gideon's army was too large for G-d's tastes. Yes, the army was too LARGE. G-d wanted it to be clear that the victory was in no way a natural occurrence and, while it is unlikely that 32,000 Jews would defeat 135,000 Midianites, it is not outside the realm of possibility.

G-d told Gideon to send home whoever was afraid of battle. 22,000 people went home, leaving 10,000 to fight 135,000 Midianites. You know what? Still too many.

G-d had Gideon bring the soldiers to the water to drink. Those who bent down to the water like dogs were sent home. Those who scooped water up remained. 300 remained. (300 Jews versus 135,000 Midianites? THAT'S more like it!)

Gideon and his attendant went down to the Midianite camp where they heard one of the enemy soldiers relating a dream to his friend. In his dream, a roasted loaf of barley bread rolled into their camp and knocked over a tent. The other Midianite interpreted the dream to mean that G-d has delivered them into Gideon's hands. (Overhearing this was most encouraging to Gideon.)

Gideon's game plan: he gave each of his men a shofar and a torch. Each man put his lit torch inside a jug (sort of like a Biblical-era "KosherLamp"). When Gideon gave the signal, they blew their shofars, making a tremendous noise. Then they broke the jugs which made even more noise and revealed the torches. All this was disorienting enough, but remember that armies normally have one torch-bearer and one bugler per platoon. Seeing so many torches and hearing so many shofars also made the Midianites think a giant army was put there in the dark.

The Jews had surrounded the Midianite camp on three sides. The enemy forces fled through the unblocked side and were pursued by the Israelite troops. Gideon sent messengers to the Tribe of Ephraim, asking them to block the enemy's escape. The people of Ephraim captured and executed two generals, Orev and Zeev. All's well that ends well, right? Keep reading...

Chapter 8

Gideon's Here to Knock Heads and Give Out Candy *(Please Note: He's All Out of Candy)*

The men of Ephraim complained to Gideon: Why didn't he call them for the battle with Midian, instead of leaving them the clean-up? Gideon replied that their role, which they perceived to be small, was actually greater than his accomplishment. (At the risk of waxing political, capturing Orev and Zeev could be compared to the US forces who found Saddam in his "spider hole." It was a significant event that happened after the battle was won.) The men of Ephraim accepted this from Gideon. (Compare how the Judge Yiftach mishandled a similar situation in Chapter 12.)



Gideon and his army were pursuing the Kings of Midian, when they came to the city of Succos. They asked for food, but were rebuffed because the people feared that Midian would remain in power and would punish them for helping Gideon. Gideon replied that he would capture the kings, then return to thrash the leaders of Succos with thorns. He proceeded to the city of Penuel. They likewise refused to assist Gideon because their city was protected by a tower; he swore to return and destroy the tower. Gideon caught the kings, then returned to punish those cities, as he had said.

Next, Gideon interrogated the captured kings and he learned that his own brothers were among their victims. More displeased than ever, he instructed his son to execute the captives. His son was still a youth and was too intimidated to do so, so Gideon did it himself.

The people asked Gideon to become king over them and to start a dynasty, but he declined. Instead, he collected gold nose rings from each of his soldiers' booty. He used them to make an ephod (a kind of apron, similar to the one worn by the High Priest) as a sign that G-d had wrought the victory. Unfortunately, his plan backfired and people worshipped it as an idol.

This was followed by 40 peaceful years. Gideon had many wives and 70 sons. Avimelech was Gideon's son from a concubine. Gideon died and the people started to fall back into their bad ways. To be continued next chapter...

Chapter 9

The Rise and Fall of Avimelech

Avimelech stirred up trouble in the city of Shechem. He suggested that all 70 of Gidon's sons would become rulers over the nation and wouldn't it be better if there was just one (i.e., him)? The people of Shechem were from Avimelech's mother's side of the family. They gave Avimelech 70 pieces of silver with which he hired mercenaries who killed all the other sons of Gidon, except for Yosam, the youngest, who hid. (Avimelech had them killed at a particular rock, a fact that will become important later on.) The people of Shechem then crowned Avimelech king.

Yosam then called out to the people of Shechem. He used a parable likening the great leaders Osniel, Deborah and Gidon to an olive tree, a fig tree and a grape vine, all of whom refused to be monarch over the nation, but Avimelech is like a thornbush - no fruit, only fuel for fire and destruction. Since the people of Shechem acted with malice against Gidon's family, they would be repaid in kind.

Avimelech ruled for three years, after which time the people of Shechem rebelled. Gaal son of Eved stirred up opposition against Avimelech and offered to depose him. Z'vul, a loyal city leader, sent word to Avimelech warning of the mutiny and asking him to put it down. Avimelech's army went forth and battled Gaal's forces. Avimelech set fire to the tower of Shechem and killed about a thousand people.

Proceeding to Teibeitz, Avimelech started to lay siege to another tower, but a woman dropped a millstone

on his head, mortally wounding him. Avimelech asked his armorbearer to kill him so that history would not record that he was killed by a woman. After Avimelech's death, his army dispersed. Both Avimelech and the people of Shechem were repaid for their treachery against Gidon's family.

So, remember that Avimelech had his brothers killed at a particular rock? He was repaid in kind by being killed by a rock. Furthermore, we see the power of ego. Avimelech was so vain that with his dying breath he was worried that history would record that he was killed by a woman. In the end, not only does the Bible record that a woman killed him, but that he was so worried about his ego, even in death

Chapter 10

G-d Says No. (Well, Okay, Maybe a Little)

After Avimelech, Israel was ruled by Tola for 23 years, then Yair for 22 years. (This actually totals 44 years, as there was one year in which both ruled.) The Jews then backslid into their bad habits and started worshipping idols again. G-d therefore allowed the nation to fall into the hands of Ammon and the Philistines. The Jews cried out for salvation and G-d said no. He had redeemed them many times and they always went back to their evil ways, so this time they could ask the idols to save them.

Even though G-d said no, the Jews did a sincere teshuva (repentance) and got rid of their idols. They said to G-d that they would rather be punished directly by Him than by foreign nations. Since they did a sincere repentance, G-d agreed to save them. There was a change, however. Prior to this time, great leaders would redeem Israel completely. The Judges who would arise from this point on, while still great people, were also flawed. And while Israel would receive relief from their enemies, those enemies would not be completely repelled.

Chapter 11

Yiftach Messes Up - Part I

Yiftach (Jephthah in English) was a great warrior, but he had a different mother than his siblings. (She was possibly a prostitute, a concubine, or simply a woman from another Tribe - the commentators offer a variety of opinions.) His brothers expelled him so that he would not inherit with them. But when Israel went to war against Ammon, they summoned him back. Yiftach initially refused, but he then agreed to lead the forces of Israel against Ammon on the condition that they make him their leader, not just their general.

Yiftach sent messengers to the king of Ammon asking what their grievance was. The crux of the matter was land that Israel supposedly took from Ammon when they left Egypt. Yiftach pointed out some history - including that there were 300 intervening years in which Ammon could have made such a claim but didn't.

Since Ammon's point of view could not be reconciled with Israel's, war was inevitable. (Does any of this sound familiar today?)

Yiftach made a vow to G-d that if he were successful in battle, he would offer as a sacrifice the first thing that greeted him upon his return. This was greatly lacking in judgment as Yiftach was successful in battle against Ammon and upon his return was greeted by his daughter. She agreed that it was important for Yiftach to keep his word and her friends gathered to bemoan her fate, which became an annual practice.

It's important to note that nowhere does it say that Yiftach actually sacrificed his daughter. Human sacrifice is one of the most reprehensible things to G-d. It appears that Yiftach did not actually offer up his daughter, but that she became sanctified and never married. (Her friends specifically bemoaned "her virginity.") In either case, Yiftach is criticized for not seeking to have the vow annulled.

Chapter 12

Yiftach Messes Up - Part II

The warriors of Ephraim were once again upset about not being called to battle. They threatened to burn down Yiftach's house, with him in it. While almost a century earlier, Gidon was able to appease them with words, Yiftach got into a chest-thumping contest with them. The people of Gilad, Yiftach's home, warred with Ephraim. They blocked the crossings of the Jordan and whenever someone attempted to cross, they instructed the traveler to say "Shibboleth." If the traveler said "Sibboleth" in the dialect of Ephraim, they would capture and kill him. 42,000 Ephraimites were dispatched this way.

Yiftach ruled for six years. He was followed by Ivtzan, who is identified with Boaz from the Book of Ruth. Ivtzan judged for seven years and was succeeded by Elon. Elon ruled for ten years and was succeeded by Avdon, who ruled for eight years.

Chapter 13

The Coming of Samson

The Jews slacked off again, so G-d allowed the Philistines to take over for forty years. A man named Manoach, from the Tribe of Dan, had no children. An angel appeared to Manoach's wife and told her that she would have a child who would begin to save the nation from Philistine oppression; he would be a nazir (nazirite) from birth, so he should never eat grapes or drink wine and his hair should be grown long and never cut. The woman told Manoach that a prophet had spoken to her; he prayed for the messenger to come again. The angel returned and repeated his message. Manoach offered to prepare a goat for the guest, who they presumed to be human. The angel had them prepare it as a sacrifice, which was consumed by a Heavenly fire.

When the messenger disappeared, they realized he was actually an angel. The woman gave birth and called the baby Shimshon (Samson).

It's interesting that the part of the prophecy about Samson saving the Jews from the Philistines was only told by the angel to the woman. Neither the angel nor the woman told it to Manoach. The woman was concerned that if that part of the prophecy became known, the Philistines would try to kill the child. Therefore, it was just for her ears.

Samson was going to be a different kind of fighter. Rather than leading armies in battle, he was a guerilla warrior. He got involved in fights with the Philistines that resembled personal disputes as an excuse to harm them without having them take revenge on the Jews as a whole. We will see the Navi note that Samson's often bizarre behavior was motivated by Hashem for this purpose.

Chapter 14

The Marriage of Samson

Samson saw a Philistine woman in Timnah and asked his parents to get her for his wife. The obvious question is how this was permissible. Granted, people do impermissible things all the time, but Samson was the Judge of Israel and would logically be expected to follow halacha (Jewish law). Samson's parents were equally bothered by this, but Samson insisted. Verse 4 clarifies for us that this was mandated by G-d as part of Samson's mission to reduce Philistine oppression.

On the way to Timnah, Samson was attacked by a lion, which he killed with his bare hands. Some time later, he passed that way again and found that bees had built a hive full of honey inside the lion's carcass. Samson enjoyed the honey, but told no one whence it came.

At the wedding feast, he proposed a riddle based on this incident to his Philistine guests: "From the eater came food and from the strong came sweet." The wager was a hefty wardrobe and the guests had a week to solve it. They pressed Samson's wife, who was a Philistine, to get them the answer. She pestered Samson until he told it to her. Then, when the guests knew the answer, Samson knew they had cheated. He killed thirty Philistines and used their clothes to pay the debt. (Verse 19 again clarifies for us that this action was directed by G-d.)

Chapter 15

Foxes and Donkeys

Samson had left his wife with her father. He later went to reclaim her, only to find that the father had given her away to another man. Since she was not divorced from Samson, this was blatant adultery, tacitly sanctioned by the local Philistine community in violation of the Seven Universal Laws. Samson tied foxes together by the

tails with torches and let them loose through the Philistines' fields, burning down their crops. When the Philistines heard of this, they burned the adulterous woman and her father. Samson reprimanded them that that's what should have been done in the first place.

The men of the Tribe of Judah were concerned that Samson was stirring up trouble with the Philistines and that it would come back to bite them. He allowed them to arrest him and to turn him over to the Philistines, but when they handed him over, he broke his bonds, grabbed a donkey's jawbone and killed 1,000 of the enemy troops.

Even though Samson's story is not yet finished, the Navi records here that he judged for twenty years. The Radak (on verse 16:31 in the next chapter) notes that this is because this incident was the high point of Samson's career. His decline now begins.

Chapter 16

Samson and Delilah

Samson went to Gaza where he saw a prostitute and desired her. The Philistines were told that Samson was in town, so they set an ambush. No problem for Samson! He simply ripped the city gates off the wall and carried them away with him. But here's where the trouble began: Samson was permitted to do some extraordinary things as part of his mission, but this incident was different. Sometimes one has to do an unpleasant task, such as fight a war or execute a criminal. These things should never be considered fun, but rather solemn duties. While Samson may have had lofty goals for his actions, in this case he simultaneously indulged his passions. (Basically, his mission was to attract Philistine attention in Gaza, not to have a good time doing it.)

Then Samson fell in love with a Philistine woman named Delilah. The Philistine leaders bribed her to find out the secret of Samson's great strength. He humored her with a series of lies: tie him up with wet twine, with new ropes, weave his braids on a loom - each of these proved false. Finally he told her that he was a Nazir to G-d from birth and that never shaving his hair was the secret. (She knew that this was the truth since he used the expression "a Nazir to G-d" and he wouldn't use G-d's name in vain.) Delilah shaved Samson's head while he slept, then called the Philistines to arrest him.

The Philistines put out Samson's eyes (this was a Divine punishment for his lusting after the prostitute in Gaza) and put him to work in the prison mill. During this time, his hair started to grow in. Later, during a Philistine celebration, they brought him up to make fun of him. Leaning on pillars, Samson prayed for G-d to return his strength so that he could knock the entire building down, killing everyone in it (himself included!). G-d obliged and Samson killed more of the enemy with his dying act than in his whole career.

The question must be asked how Samson could be permitted to commit suicide. The fact is that knocking down the Philistine temple required Divine assistance; it was not an act that Samson could have accomplished without G-d's help. From the fact that G-d returned Samson's supernatural strength, we see that He agreed that the request was appropriate.

Chapter 17

Idols in Our Midst

There was a man from Mt. Ephraim named Micah, who stole a large sum of silver from his mother, but returned it fearing her curse on the thief. She had already resolved to consecrate the money, so she gave it back to him to have made into a statue.

When he received the statue from the silver smith, Micah set it up in his house as an idol and he made one of his sons the priest of his new religion. Eventually, a Levite came traveling by. Micah was thrilled to have a Levite, from whose Tribe come real Kohanim (Jewish priests). He offered him a hefty salary to stay and be his priest. The Levite joined Micah's household and Micah took his presence as a sign of G-d's approval. (It wasn't.)

Please note that in the earliest verses of the chapter, the man's name is Micayehu. The suffix of his name, indicating G-d's Name, was dropped as soon as he embraced idolatry. Nothing makes G-d (metaphorically) depart quicker!

Chapter 18

The Levite Revealed (Gasp!)

Despite being placed after the story of Samson, there is a consensus that it actually occurred much earlier, in the time of Osniel, the first Judge.

Scouts from the Tribe of Dan were looking for territory when they discovered the altar in Micah's house. They asked the Levite if they would be successful in their quest and he said they would. (He answered in the name of G-d, rather than the idol. He didn't actually believe in the idol; that was "just a job.")

The Danites went about their mission. They reported back about Micah's idol, which they decided to seize. The Levite opposed them, so they offered him a better job: being priest for them, rather than for Micah alone. A job's a job, so he took the offer.

Micah found out what was going on and he opposed it. The Danite forces, who greatly outnumbered Micah's forces, strongly suggested that he just walk away. Dan conquered the city of Laish and renamed it Dan after their ancestor. (Laish is presumably the same city as Leshem in Joshua 19). They established a house of idolatry with the Levite as priest. At this point, the Navi reveals his name: Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Menashe.

But wait! The letter "nun" in the name "Menashe" is suspended halfway above the rest of the name! It's half in and half out. With the "nun" in, the name is Menashe. With the "nun" out, the name is Moshe!

The commentators explain that Jonathan was the grandson of Moshe (Moses). Moshe was a Levite and he had

a son named Gershom, so it all makes sense. So why the “nun,” rendering his name Menashe? Out of respect for Moses, the Navi concealed that fact. (It wasn’t falsified, as the truth is still evident, but it was made more discreet.)

Chapter 19

Okay, Now THIS Is Messed Up!

Another story from the early days of the Judges: there was a Levite who lived in Mt. Ephraim whose concubine left him and returned to her father’s home. After four months, the Levite went to retrieve her. Everyone was reconciled and the Levite stayed at his father-in-law’s house for several days. (A concubine is sort of like a wife, but without a marriage contract. It’s beyond the scope of this synopsis to get into that here.) After a few days, the man and his concubine took to the road. At nightfall, they stopped in a Benjaminite city called Gibeah. There, they stayed with a local man, an Ephramite, who invited them in. Here’s where things went horribly wrong.

A group of people from Gibeah acted like the inhabitants of Sodom did to Lot when he hosted the angels. They demanded that the man be sent out so that they could engage him in acts of sodomy. In a misguided show of hospitality, the host offered his own daughter and the concubine to the mob. (Wasn’t the concubine also a guest deserving of his protection?) The mob initially declined this offer, but the man pushed his concubine out to them. A bird in the hand, they took the deal and molested her all night long. At daybreak, she was released, made her way back to the host’s house, and collapsed on the doorstep, where she expired.

Okay, this next part is going to seem REALLY bizarre, but stay with me here:

When the man saw what had been done to his concubine (as if he hadn’t pushed her out), he cut her corpse into 12 pieces and sent one to each Tribe telling the story of what the mob in Gibeah had done. (In this case, 12 includes both sons of Joseph and Levi; Benjamin did not receive one.) The purpose was to stir the passions of the nation that such a thing could be done. It worked, because they called a national meeting to address the atrocity.

Chapter 20

Perhaps We Over-Reacted

Every Tribe sent representatives to the national meeting at Mitzpah. The Levite man told his story and the nation demanded an explanation from the Tribe of Benjamin. Benjamin refused to yield to national authority, insisting that they would deal with the situation as an internal matter. This was unacceptable to the rest of the Tribes, who declared war on Benjamin. Benjamin’s army was 26,700. The rest of the nation had assembled an

army of 400,000. (Perhaps Benjamin should have just handed over the offending members of their Tribe.)

In the first battle, Benjamin killed 22,000 Israelites. In the second battle, Benjamin killed another 18,000. Finally the 11 Tribes asked of G-d whether they should go to battle against Benjamin and G-d said yes, adding that they would then be victorious. (They had asked once before, but that was after they prepared for war. In other words, the first time they asked, their actions showed that they had already decided before asking.)

In the third battle, Israel ambushed Benjamin by surprise. Israel killed 25,100 Benjaminites. Benjamin retreated and was pursued. 18,000 soldiers were killed in battle and another 7,000 were killed in flight. 600 escaped to the Rock of Rimmon, where they stayed for four months. The cities of Benjamin were eradicated, so that only the 600 refugees at Rimmon survived.

Chapter 21

Who Wants to Marry a Benjaminite?

Because of the atrocity committed in Gibeah, the other Tribes had sworn at the meeting in Mitzpah not to give their daughters as wives to the Tribe of Benjamin. Now they had a problem: the entire Tribe had been wiped out except for the 600 refugees! What could be done? They couldn't violate their oath, but they also could not allow a Tribe to become extinct. What to do?

First, they determined that nobody had come to the meeting from the town of Yaveish-Gilad. Therefore, nobody from Yaveish-Gilad was bound by the oath. They struck down the population of Yaveish-Gilad, since attendance at the national assembly was mandatory on pain of death. They kept alive 400 marriageable girls for wives for Benjaminite refugees.

But this left 200 Benjaminite refugees without wives. How could they renew the Tribe without the other Tribes violating their oath? It was decided that the 200 remaining Benjaminites would go to the yearly festival in Shiloh. When the local girls went out to dance, each man would catch himself a wife. This would be done with the girl's consent, but not the parents', so there would be no violation of their oath not to give their daughters to the Tribe of Benjamin.

The Book of Judges ends by restating that there was no King in those days, suggesting that with a strong central leader, such tragedies could have been avoided. (That may be true, but we will see when we get to the Book of Kings that the ruler was the problem about as often as he was the solution!)