



This week's:

Jewish Literacy Programme Year 5 ~ Week 4

who / who are you?**מי \ מי אתה?****please / please speak****נא \ נא לדבר****mountain / Mount Sinai****הר \ הר סיני****but, only / but keep My Shabbatot****אך \ אך אתה שברתני תשמרו**
(שומות ל"א: י"א)**heart / the heart of the man****לב \ לב האדם****fire / fire on the altar****אש \ אש על המזבח**

Jewish History 2

Shoftim: The Time of the Judges

The Talmud calls the Book of Shoftim (Judges), "the Book of the Straight."

Why?

Because the ultimate goal of every Jew is to use his free will to work out what is wrong and right, using the Torah as a guide. And this is what happens in the Time of Judges.

In those days, there was no king in Israel, everyone did what was right in his eyes. (Shoftim 21:25)

You might think that this verse sounds like a description of anarchy. But there was no anarchy; the vast majority of Jews were totally dedicated to Torah and were making decisions in the right way. That is, in fact, the ideal situation. The tribes worked well as a loose group of states with strong central leadership arising only when the nation was threatened by an external enemy.

Of course, the lack of central authority following the death of Joshua did have negative consequence; a small minority, took it as a license to slip into idolatry and immorality. This happened largely because the Jews did not get rid of all of the Canaanites, as they were commanded to do, and the Canaanite pagan influence was felt.

Whenever the Jews abandon God, the repercussions are immediate:

“And they turned away from the G-d of their fathers and they went after other gods. And the anger of the L-rd was kindled against Israel and He delivered them into the hands of plunderers and He gave them over to the hands of their enemies. (Judges 2:8-14)

This is one of the most important and often-repeated patterns we have to understand in how Jewish history works. When the Jews betray their covenant with G-d, bad things happen - usually, an enemy comes and attacks.

The covenant with G-d doesn't just cover the behaviour of man toward G-d; it also includes the commandments regarding the behaviour of man toward man. But both are a must.

Heed The Warning

Hashem says over and over again - keep the Torah, all facets of it and no one will bother you. You will live in peace in your land. You will prosper, and not only that, the whole world will come to learn from you and you will be a light to the nations.

But if you don't, a big fist will not come out of heaven and swat you, because G-d acts in history. What will happen instead is a physical enemy will appear or a famine will hit the land, and all will suffer. These negative events always served as wake-up call and would only get worse if ignored until they reached the level where they were impossible to ignore.

From Har Sinai onward the Jewish people were always aware of their covenant with G-d, the responsibilities it entailed the consequences of their not adhering to their side of the bargain. Because of this awareness, when calamities have befallen the Jewish people they were always viewed as symptoms of deeper problems in the Jewish people's relationship with each other and / or with Hashem.

When bad things happen to Jews, it is never by chance. It is always a consequence of Jewish actions, and therefore, the remedy is never to deal only with the external threat. If an enemy attacks, defense is necessary, but so is introspection (thinking about how we have behaved); the presence of an enemy is only a symptom of a deeper problem that must be dealt with.

This cause and effect relationship repeats itself over and over again throughout the period of the Judges and continues throughout Jewish history until today.

We see this in the Time of Judges which extends from 1244 BCE to 879 BCE:

“And the Lord raised up Judges and they saved them [the Israelites] from the hands of those who had oppressed them.” (Shoftim 2:16)

Who are the Judges?

The Judges are the Jewish leaders who arise during this time, unify the people, get them to repent, deal with the spiritual problems of the nation, and also deal with the physical threat.

They are sometimes military leaders who know how to mobilize the nation for war against an enemy, but their real power lies in their Torah knowledge and ability to judge with Jewish law.

The narrative for this entire period appears in the Book of Judges (Shoftim), authored by the last great personality in the period of the Judges - Shmuel the Navi. The period of the Judges spans a period of 365 years from the first judge, Otniel ben Kenaz, and with the last judge, the Prophet Samuel.

During this period there were seventeen different judges. Some led the Jewish people for decades while others only for a few years. The Book of Shoftim goes into great detail for some of the Judges (Ehud, Deborah and Samuel) while others get only the briefest mention (Ibzan, Elon, Avdon). While all were great leaders, some were greater than others. Tradition tells us that the level of the Judge depended on the collective level of the Jewish people. Every generation got the leadership it deserved.

We will look at the lives of a few of the most famous Judges.