

Shofetim 3: Collapse of Covenant

Yehuda Dicker



Abstract— Many of the narratives in Sefer Shofetim, the book of Judges, follow a narrative cycle: Bnei Yisrael, the Children of Israel, sin, God sends a foreign nation to oppress them, and the people cry out to God, who then sends them a savior. Following the savior's death, Bnei Yisrael repeat this cycle. This essay will firstly analyze the significance of the Ehud-Eglon episode found in the third chapter of Judges in which Ehud artfully deceives and murders the Moabite King, Eglon, thereby extracating Bnei Yisrael from an oppressive foreign power. I will then explore what the chapter communicates about the larger national condition of the Israelites, and how the characters of Otniel, Ehud, and Shamgar each shed a unique light on the Bnei Yisrael's deteriorating religious and political stature.

The core questions we will try to answer are:

- 1) Why does Ehud's narrative take up the majority of the chapter, and should we understand his success as human-manufactured or divine?
- 2) What is Eglon's significance?
- 3) How do literary parallels to other episodes in Tanakh inform our reading of this chapter?
- 4) What does this chapter tell us about the Bnei Yisrael's state as a nation?

DIVINE DELIVERANCE OR LUCK?

The episode of Ehud and Eglon is an action-packed saga in which the weak fell the mighty. Eglon is introduced as follows: "And because they [the Bnei Yisrael] did what was offensive to the Lord, the Lord let King Eglon of Moav prevail over Israel."¹ We look no further than verse 6 to see what this "offense" was: "The Israelites settled among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites; they took their daughters to wife and gave their own daughters to their sons, and they worshiped their gods."²

The Bnei Yisrael once again fall victim to the surrounding pagan nations. Nonetheless, God sends Ehud to save His people. Ehud promptly embarks on his mission and, somewhat surprisingly, succeeds flawlessly. Without raising any suspicion at all, Ehud is able to gain a private audience with the king, murder him, and then slip away. This brings us to our first question: is Ehud's success due to immense skill or divine assistance?

The first clue that this story is really one of divine intervention lies in the language used to describe the behavior of Eglon's servants. As Ehud makes his get-away, Eglon's guards finally discover that their king has been murdered, "But Ehud had made good his escape

¹ Judges 3:12

² *Ibid.*, 3:5-6

while they delayed (hitmahmiham); he had passed Pesilim and escaped to Seirah.”³ The use of the word “hitmahmiham” (delay) found in this verse is rare, encouraging us to connect it to the only two other appearances of it in the Bible: in the story of Lot’s rescue from Sedom and the Torah’s description of the Bnei Yisrael’s exodus from Egypt.^{4 5} There is a clear thematic link with all three stories revolving around oppression, divine destruction, and deliverance. We see that Ehud’s assassination of Eglon is the act of deliverance in our chapter, as following it “the land was tranquil for eighty years.”⁶ Ehud’s actions are part of a divine plan, as “The LORD set up a savior for [the Bnei Yisrael]: the Benjaminite Ehud son of Gera.”⁷

Ehud’s divine appointment also explains his incredible “luck” and skill throughout the episode. For example, by uttering a mere four words, “Devar seiter li eilekha,” “Your Majesty, I have a secret message for you,” he is amazingly able to gain a private audience with the Moabite king, Eglon. Further, Ehud manages to smuggle a weapon into the meeting simply because people have ignored his left-handedness and do not check his right side for a weapon.⁸ It would seemingly be easy for either of these tactics to fail; the fact they succeed is miraculous. Further, Ehud escapes safely because Eglon’s servants conveniently assume he is “relieving himself” in the bathroom, when it should have been clear that he was meeting with Ehud. Thus, they “waited for a long time” before discovering his dead body.⁹ Through this analysis, it becomes clear that Ehud’s success is not because of his incredible skill, but because God guides him every step of the way.

Working within the framework of divine intervention, the hitmahmiham (delay) parallel with Lot’s rescue can help explain God’s motivation to save the Bnei Yisrael in Chapter three of Sefer Shofetim. From verses twelve to fifteen we are told that, even though “the Bnei Yisrael continued to do that which was evil in the eyes of Hashem,” Hashem prepares Ehud as a savior for them.¹⁰ There is no reason given, or change of behavior within the Bnei Yisrael, that would explain why Hashem now decides to help them instead of strengthening their oppressors. We find an answer in the story of Lot:

וַיְהִי־מִמָּחָר וַיִּחַזְקוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים בְּיָדוֹ וַבְּיַד אִשְׁתּוֹ וַבְּיַד שְׁתֵּי בָנָתָיו בְּחֶמְלַת ה' עָלָיו וַיִּצְאֵהוּ וַיַּנְחֵהוּ מִחוּץ לְעִיר:

“Still he (Lot) delayed. So the men (God’s angels) seized his hand, and the hands of his wife and his two daughters— **due to the Lord’s mercy on him**—and brought him out and left him outside the city.”¹¹

Lot was not saved because he was a pious or righteous individual, nor was he rescued due to any reformation of, or atonement for, transgressive behavior. According to a plain reading of the text, God spares Lot purely “due to the Lord’s mercy.” Accordingly, in Shofetim chapter 3, God mercifully rescues his chosen people, absent any reformation of behavior on the part of the Bnei Yisrael. The Bnei Yisrael merely “cried out to the Lord,” and He responded.¹² Thus, Ehud’s mission impossible is successful due exclusively to

³ *Ibid*, 3:26

⁴ Genesis 19:15-16

⁵ Exodus 12:39

⁶ Judges 3:30

⁷ *Ibid*, 3:15

⁸ *Ibid*, 3:19

⁹ *Ibid*, 3: 24-25

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 3:12

¹¹ Genesis 19:16

¹² Judges 3:15

God's compassion for His beloved nation.

THE COLLAPSED COVENANT

The poor national stature of the Bnei Yisrael is stressed by their paradigmatic breaking of the covenant with God, as foretold in Shemot. In the chapter 3's opening we are told:

(ה) ובני ישראל ישובו בקרב הקנעני החתי והאמרי והפרזי והחוי והיבויסי: (ו) ויקחו את בנותיהם להם לנשים ואת בנותיהם נתנו לבניהם ויעבדו את אלהיהם: פ (ז) ויעשו בני ישראל את הרע בעיני ה' וישקחו את ה' אלהיהם ויעבדו את הבצלים ואת האשרות:

The Israelites settled among the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites; they took the nations' daughters as wives and gave their own daughters to their sons, and they worshiped their gods. The Israelites did what was offensive to the Lord; they ignored the Lord their God and worshiped the Baalim and the Asherot.

Settling and marrying within the various surrounding nations breaks the Bnei Yisrael's commitment of not "making a covenant with the inhabitants of the land;" the Bnei Yisrael also fail to destroy any idolatry found in Israel, as they are commanded to do in Shemot 34:13.¹³ This fulfills God's warning that if the Bnei Yisrael "take wives from among their daughters for [their] sons, their daughters will lust after their gods and will cause [their] sons to lust after their gods."¹⁴ Per God's "prediction," merely marrying amongst the surrounding nations suffices to lead the Bnei Yisrael down a slippery slope that ends in paganism. Unable to resist the temptations of the foreign nations, the Bnei Yisrael assimilate, intermarry, and ultimately sink so low that they reach the very point God warned against. Thus, the Bnei Yisrael must be extracted from the dregs of pagan culture via Divine redemption.

EGLON HAZAHAV

The next question deals specifically with why the Eglon episode itself comprises the majority of chapter 3 of Sefer Shofetim--why is Eglon so important? It appears that Eglon and his assassination take up so much space in the chapter because he symbolically represents the idolatry corrupting the Bnei Yisrael. Eglon's role as an idolatrous figure is furthered by a number of textual parallels between the story of Eglon and that of the egl hazahav in Shemot 32. This begins with the delay of Eglon's servants to check on him:

(כה) ויחילו עד בוש והנה איננו פתח דלתות העליה ויקחו את המפתח והנה אדנייהם גפל ארצה מת:

"They [Eglon's servants] waited a **long time (bosh)**; and when he did not open the doors of the chamber, they took the key and opened them—and there their master was lying dead on the floor!"¹⁵

¹³ Exodus 34:12

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 34:15-16

¹⁵ Judges 3:25

The use of the word *bosh* calls the reader back to the first time and only time the verb appears in the Torah:

(א) וַיֵּרָא הָעָם כִּי בָשַׁשׁ מֹשֶׁה לָרֶדֶת מִן הַהָר וַיִּקְהַל הָעָם עַל אֶהֱרֹן ... (ג) וַיִּתְפָּקְדוּ כָל הָעָם אֶת נֹזְמֵי הַזָּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנוֹתָם וּבְרִיאוֹ אֶל אֶהֱרֹן: (ד) וַיִּקַּח מֵיָדָם וַיִּצַר אֹתוֹ בַּחֶרֶט וַיַּעֲשֶׂהוּ עֵגֶל מִסֶּכֶה וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלֵינוּךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם:

When the people saw that Moses was taking **so long (boshesh)** in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron... (3) And all the people took off the gold rings that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. This he took from them and cast in a mold, and made it into a molten calf.¹⁶

In both narratives, a delay leads to a destruction of an “*egel*”: the Golden Calf of Shemot and Eglon—whose name shares its root with *egel*—in Shofetim. Later, in Shemot, there is a detailed description of Moshe “butchering” the golden calf: “He (Moshe) took the calf that they had made and burned it; he ground it to powder. . . .”¹⁷ The graphic description of Ehud’s butchering of Eglon mirrors Moshe’s iconoclasm. Finally, on the broader thematic plane, both stories see the Bnei Yisrael shamelessly break faith with God and succumb to baseless idolatry. In Shemot this is through the worship of the Golden Calf, and in Shofetim by way of assimilation and idolatry.

Indeed, Eglon’s idolatrous position vis-a-vis the Bnei Yisrael can be seen in the language used to describe their relationship. We are told “*vayavdu Bnei Yisrael et eglon melech moav*” “The Bnei Yisrael served Eglon king of Moav.”¹⁸ It is possible to argue even divine notions of service when appreciating the verb and noun in our chapter, “*vayikrav et hamincha l’eglon*” “And [Ehud] brought the tribute (mincha) to Eglon,”¹⁹ and its parallel to the first description of the mincha offering in Vayikra, “*v’chi takriv korban minha ma’afeh tanur*” “When you bring an offering of meal (mincha) baked in the oven.”²⁰ These associations with idolatry hint that Eglon’s relationship to the Bnei Yisrael is not only oppressive, but is in some way explicitly, religiously corrupting. This can be linked to the larger assimilation and betrayal of Hashem in verses one to seven that will be analyzed shortly. Ehud needs to destroy Eglon like Mose did the Golden Calf, because Eglon is the golden calf of Sefer Shofetim.

DECLINING LEADERSHIP

One sees Ehud as a clear step down in leadership from Otniel, his predecessor, in strength and godliness. This decline is most blatant in their opening introductions. Our first picture of Otniel is somebody aligned with God, as we are told “The spirit of the Lord descended upon him.” Otniel is far more impressive as a leader, being all of “Israel’s chieftain” and the one who successfully acts out God’s overthrow of King Cushan-Rishata’im of Aram.²¹ In contrast, there is no mention of Ehud’s position as an actual judge. Additionally, Otniel is from the tribe of Yehuda, which is designated for leadership in the

¹⁶ Exodus 32:1-4

¹⁷ Ibid., 32:20

¹⁸ Judges 3:14

¹⁹ Ibid., 3:17

²⁰ Leviticus 2:4

²¹ Judges, 3:10

blessings of Yaakov²² and Moshe, while Ehud is from the tribe of Binyamin, which is not clearly designated for any leadership role after Yehoshua's passing.

To fully grasp the contrast between Otniel and Ehud, we can compare how their hands are described. Otniel's hands are emphasized by the text as instruments of power: "King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram [is delivered by Hashem] into his hands" and his "hand prevailed" over his enemies.²³ In contrast, Ehud's hands define his biggest weakness, his "crippled right hand."²⁴

To appreciate this contrast, we must examine the archetypal "saving hand" in the Tanakh, that of God's. Hand imagery is repeated, especially in Shemot, to represent God's powerful salvation. After seeing God split the sea, we are told "Israel saw the **great hand** (yad hagedola) which the Lord had wielded against the Egyptians."²⁵ So too in Shirat HaYam, the people praise how "Your **right hand**, O LORD, [is] glorious in power, **Your right hand**, O LORD, shatters the foe!"²⁶ The Torah describes God's salvation in terms of His yad hagedolah, His mighty, right hand that brings salvation (yeshu'ah) after outcry (tza'aka). Otniel emulates this ideal form of deliverance through a 'strong hand'; Ehud does not.

This decline of leadership is also noticeable between Ehud and his successor Shamgar. This is most obvious in the way Shamgar's story is given only a single verse at the end of our chapter: "After him came Shamgar son of Anath, who slew six hundred Philistines with an ox-goad; he also was a saviour of Israel."²⁷ The introductory clause "after him" presents Shamgar's rule as an after-thought and secondary to Ehud's time, instead of as an equal savior himself. Saying, "And he also saved Israel!" continues this minimizing comparison, as Shamgar's achievements are not appreciated and respected in and of themselves. Instead, Shamgar's impressive feat is overshadowed by the salvations brought about through the greater Ehud, and the even greater Otniel.

THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL

During the era of the Shofetim, the people's spiritual and national position continues to decline. In chapter 4 of Sefer Shofetim, a clear dichotomy can be seen between the generations before Yehoshua's death, and those after. The absence of Yehoshua's leadership and guidance triggers a cycle of sin that continuously worsens throughout Shofetim. Chapter three explores the start of this decline, both through the nation's fulfillment of the divine prophecy of assimilation and sin, and the idol-like status of Eglon. This is the first step of the Bnei Yisrael's major downward religious trajectory. Eventually, Shmuel pulls the Bnei Yisrael out of their rut and reconnects them to God. Although, as predicted in Shemot, Vayikra, and Devarim, the journey is never smooth.

²² Genesis 49:8-10

²³ Judges, 3:10

²⁴ Ibid., 3:15

²⁵ Exodus 14:31

²⁶ Ibid., 15:6

²⁷ Judges 3:31