

Judges

The Perils of Possession



Pardes פודס
Institute of Jewish Studies



MAGGID

Michael Hattin

JUDGES

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Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies
Maggid Books

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*In loving memory of Irving and Beatrice Stone,
who dedicated their lives to the
advancement of Jewish education.*

We are proud and honored to continue in their legacy.

*Their Children, Grandchildren, and Great-Grandchildren
Jerusalem, Israel
Cleveland, Ohio USA*

*In honor of Faygie and Phil Schwartz
whose love of learning sets the bar
for their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren*

In memory of

Esther Eisenstat, זכרונה לברכה

who always enjoyed her Rabbi's shiur on Neviim.

*May this book inspire others with her love of Am Yisrael,
Torat Yisrael, and Eretz Yisrael.*

תנצב"ה

With love,

*Chaim Eisenstat, David Eisenstat and Amanda Salem,
and her grandchildren Ariella, Leora, and Joshua*

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Preface

The book of Judges is an integral part of our story as a people. It describes the struggles of the tribes of Israel to overcome their external enemies as well as their internal differences as they are forged into the nation of Israel in its land. It highlights their formidable transition from a nomadic, shepherding life to one settled and agrarian. It introduces us to the tribes' colossal challenge of how to respond to pervasive moral and cultural values, incompatible with our mission as a people. As such, it is a book of great relevance.

Like many of our other biblical texts that have been adopted by more than half of the world as inspiration for their own teachings, the book of Judges is known to most of us only in outline and only in translation. It is a tragic irony of our long and tumultuous history that the majority of the "people of the Book" have never read it. In order to remedy the situation, we would need to delve deeply into the original Hebrew text along with its three thousand years of accumulated commentary. Most of us, given the exigencies of the hour, are not likely to do so.

This volume is an attempt to introduce readers to the contents of the book of Judges without sacrificing breadth or depth. The touchstone of our biblical text tradition is *careful* reading, which is unlike other reading. Other reading tends to be information-driven, with the text simply a medium for conveying the information. Having attained the data, we can discard the text. In Jewish text study, however, the words themselves

and even their very letters have intrinsic value. Every word is precious and every turn of phrase laden. Some of us refer to this phenomenon as the “divinity of the text” – the idea that the text of the Tanakh was inspired by God.

This approach regards the text of the Tanakh reverentially. Rather than a cursory reading to extract the information, the text of the Tanakh deserves profound study in order to ascertain the deeper meaning. On a practical level, this means that we are concerned not only with the basic message of the story, but also with the actual words and syntax of the text. Vocabulary, grammar, and literary structure are critical areas of investigation; themes, historical context, and realia are essential topics of enquiry. In Jewish text study, it is never enough just to get the general idea; one has to master the material. In Jewish text study, a single reading is insufficient; with each additional reading we gain more insights. In Jewish text study, a difficult passage is never denigrated or dismissed; it is studied again and again with the hope that we might yet understand it.

Considered from this perspective, studying the Tanakh might seem an overwhelming undertaking, and it is. Fortunately, though, we are not the first ones to read the Tanakh or to contemplate our own story within it. We are only a small part of a much longer continuum that extends back thousands of years. While we are called upon to extract fresh relevance and insight from the timeless words, we do not labor alone. We have at our disposal the vast accumulation of interpretive material that spans much of recorded history and much of the globe. This is both humbling and exhilarating.

I have been blessed to teach at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem for almost twenty years. During that time, I have had the opportunity to learn the book of Judges with my students on a number of occasions. Each study has raised many perceptive questions and spurred much reflection. I am indebted to my students for their enquiries, their insights, and their never-ending demand to understand the text more deeply.

Much of the preliminary material for this study was prepared for an online course of Yeshivat Har Etzion’s Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash. The Yeshiva has always held a special place in my heart for its rigorous as well as thoughtful approach to the study of Jewish

texts, whether Talmud, Halakha, or Tanakh. The VBM is an innovative institution that has pioneered serious online learning without forfeiting complexity and nuance. My initial course for the VBM on the book of Judges was never finished. I am pleased to finally present the completed study and am grateful to the VBM for their magnanimity of spirit in allowing me to publish the material in book form. I would also like to thank the many readers over the years who have been patiently waiting to find out what happened to Samson!

The dedicated team at Maggid Books are paragons of professionalism and skill; many thanks to Rachelle Emanuel, Carolyn Budow Ben-David, Ita Olesker, Tani Bayer, and Yehudit Singer-Freud. Rabbi Reuven Ziegler has been especially helpful during the course of this project. Special thanks are due to Mr. Matthew Miller, of Koren Publishers, for his foresight and for his unswerving dedication to the monumental project of making the Hebrew Bible and its interpretation available to intelligent and devoted English-speaking readers.

Finally, my profoundest thanks to my dear family – my wife Rivka, and my children Elchanan and Shvut, Akiva, Hillel, Leeba, and Miriam. Without your encouragement and patience, I would not have been able to complete this project. You are my source of strength and my safe harbor.

I would like to dedicate this work in memory of my dear parents Cecille and Bernard Hattin, שרה בת שמואל לייב and בעשא דב בן ר' אהרן, who were always supportive of my endeavors and proud of my accomplishments. As well, I remember fondly my dear sister Lisa, לאה בת בעשא דב ושרה, whose untimely passing cut short a life of kindness, generosity, and dedication to family, community, and Torah observance. May all their souls be secure in the bond of life.

כי אין מלה בלשוני הן' ידעת בלה

Michael Hattin

Alon Shevut

2020



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whose generosity helped make this project possible:*

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Andrew and Ilana Album, Raanana, Israel

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Introduction

The book of Judges follows the book of Joshua seamlessly. In Joshua, the people of Israel traversed the Jordan River, entered the land, and began the process of conquering it. This involved major battles against coalitions of Canaanite kings, each of whom ruled over a petty city-state. First, the southern hill country was conquered, followed by the northern part of the country. Only then, did the settlement of the land begin in earnest.

While the actual warfare in the book of Joshua lasted for a relatively short time, settling the land took centuries. Only the initial stages are described in the book of Joshua – the allotment of territory to the tribes of Israel and their first halting steps in clearing the land and cultivating its slopes. Joshua died with much of the task incomplete.

The book of Judges begins where the book of Joshua ends. With the aged leader no more, the tribes of Israel naturally turn inwards, more concerned with their own fate than with a larger vision of the people as a whole. Each tribe must fend for itself; some are more successful in wresting their territory from the grip of the Canaanites, and some less. Joshua may have smashed the Canaanite military coalitions, but the Canaanite people and their culture remained largely intact. When the tribes of Israel fall prey to Canaanite idolatry and its associated values, retribution is swift and harsh. It takes the form of non-Israelite oppressors, regional despots, who overrun one or more tribes and impose tyranny.

It is against this backdrop that the book of Judges begins. While the book describes a series of tribal leaders that arise to lead the tribes to victory over their oppressors, it is unclear whether the events are recorded in exact chronological order. Did one judge follow another in quick succession, or could some of them have ruled concurrently in different regions of the country, with others appearing only after a lapse of time? Does the book of Judges offer us a comprehensive record of *every* judge who was active during this pivotal period of Israelite history, or only of the predominant ones? Might there have been others whose story is not told in our book?

The medieval commentaries, basing themselves mainly on earlier rabbinic traditions, were generally of the opinion that the judges followed one after another in quick succession and never overlapped. The straightforward reading of the text supports this view. Thus, for example, we read that Othniel brought stability for forty years and afterwards died. The text then says, “The people of Israel continued to do evil in God’s eyes” (3:12), implying that their regression took place after the death of Othniel. This is even more explicit after the death of Ehud, where the verse reports, “The people of Israel continued to do evil in God’s eyes, and Ehud was dead” (4:1). After Abimelech’s demise, the verse states, “After Abimelech, Tola son of Pua arose to save Israel” (10:1), and so too concerning Ya’ir who followed Tola (10:3), Ibzan who followed Yiftah (12:8), Elon who followed Ibzan (12:11), and Abdon who followed Elon (12:13). These verses certainly indicate a sequence of judges who did not overlap, but it is still possible that some time elapsed between the death of one and the ascent of another. Tola, for instance, was the judge who arose after Abimelech, but perhaps some time passed between Abimelech’s demise and Tola’s becoming judge.

In contrast to the above judges, Deborah’s death is never reported, and although forty years of stability are mentioned, this is followed by a non-committal formulation: “The people of Israel did evil in God’s eyes” (6:1). Might this imply that the said evil was perpetrated while Deborah was still alive, perhaps in another region of the country? Samson’s birth is introduced against the backdrop of Philistine oppression that extended for forty years after Abdon’s death (13:1), so he certainly did not follow Abdon immediately. Nor is it clear that there was no substantial time

lapse between Abdon's death and the beginning of the Philistine tyranny. Most glaringly, the verse states that Deborah arose when the people of Israel did evil after the death of Ehud (4:1) and after the forty years of stability that he bestowed (3:30). This would imply that there was no time for another judge between Ehud and Deborah. However, between those two verses the text states, "After him was Shamgar son of Anat ... he too saved Israel" (3:31)! Perhaps we should conclude that while many judges did immediately follow on the heels of the judge who preceded them, this was not always the case. What is clear from the text is that the events of the book unfold over the course of approximately three to four centuries. This is in contrast to the book of Joshua that covers a relatively short time span of a few decades.

Structurally, the book of Judges can be divided into three sections. The first, comprising the opening two chapters, offers us an introduction to the story. We are reminded of Joshua's demise (already reported at the end of his book) and told about the challenges facing the tribes of Israel: Much of the land remains unconquered and many of the tribes demonstrate little will to claim their territory. We are then introduced to the pattern of Israelite history during this period – the story of the judges plays itself out as a series of repetitive cycles. In each cycle, the tribes stray from God by failing to uproot Canaanite settlement and consequently embracing Canaanite idolatry, they suffer oppression and then cry out to God for rescue. God relents and inspires a charismatic character, the judge, who rises from obscurity to lead the tribes of Israel in battle against their foes. This judge triumphs, restores some semblance of stability, and leads the people for a number of years. After the judge's demise, however, his hard-won accomplishments are forgotten, and once again the people stray from God. The cycle then repeats itself.

The second section of the book is the actual story of the judges and stretches from chapter 3 until the end of chapter 16. In this section, we encounter thirteen named leaders who are designated as judges, but not all of them receive equal treatment in the text. The exploits of some are described at length, while for others, only a brief mention is provided. Almost all of them do perform what might be expected from a judge – to save the tribes of Israel from harm. However, at least one of them does no such thing. Abimelech son of Gideon, who leads for a

period of only three years, is entirely occupied with imposing his ruthless rule over the people that he is charged with saving. He is the only leader who seizes power after his father's death, thus introducing the pitfalls of hereditary rule. During his short tenure, there are no foreign oppressors that he defeats. In fact, *he* is the oppressor. His bloody career is so at odds with every other leader in the book that it is best to view him as an anti-judge. That being the case, it is more accurate to speak of twelve judges and one anti-judge.

Working with a total of twelve functional judges, we can immediately recognize the implications. In the Tanakh, numbers have significance, not only in an esoteric and mystical sense, but also as literary cues. For example, the number three, especially a duration of three days, highlights introspection and anticipation. The number seven symbolizes perfection and wholeness, such as in the days of creation or the branches of the Menora. The number ten represents a complete unit, as it does for us to this day. There are ten utterances at Sinai, not because God has no more to say, but rather because the list provides a full set of basic guiding principles. The number twelve is not about the months of the year (after all, in the lunar-solar calendar of Jewish tradition, sometimes there are thirteen months in a year), but about the twelve tribes of Israel. The eponymous twelve tribes are first introduced in Genesis 30; from then on, the people of Israel are typically enumerated or described as the Twelve Tribes.¹

The reason why there are twelve judges, and no more or less, is precisely because there are twelve tribes. While most, but not all, of the tribes are represented by at least one judge, the point is not to be comprehensive in terms of their tribal identity but rather to indicate to the reader that this is a book about the tribes, not about the *nation* of Israel. In other words, during the period of the judges, tribalism reigns. Its effects are acutely felt at every point in the book. When a tribe is oppressed, they will usually have to deal with the threat on their own. Rarely do other tribes come to the aid of their compatriots, unless they themselves are also threatened. Rarely does a judge exercise any authority over, or rescue, any tribe but his own. This naturally leads to

1. As in, for instance, Genesis 49:28.

an important conclusion about the judges in the book – unlike Moses or Joshua, they are regional, rather than national leaders.

With this startling insight, it is now possible to appreciate why some judges are treated at length, while others receive only a few lines of text. We are familiar with the names Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Yiftah, and Samson because the book tells us about them in a fair amount of detail. But how many of us recognize by name Otniel, Shamgar, Tola, Ya'ir, Ibzan, Elon or Abdon? How many of us remember significant details of their exploits? This is in spite of the fact that these seven “minor” judges actually outnumber the main five mentioned above. From this we may deduce that the point of the narrative is not to comprehensively relate the story of all of Israel's leaders over the course of three hundred or four hundred years, but rather to indicate that there were twelve of them, neither more nor less, because their story is the story of the tribes. In other words, it may very well be the case that many of these minor judges are included not because their exploits were pivotal or their lives memorable, but rather because we need a total of exactly twelve judges in order to construct a framework that is intended to highlight the theme of tribalism! While all twelve, without a doubt, were active during the period of Israelite history under discussion, the literary decision to include them all as part of a unified story is an artifice.

What follows from this premise is that we can probably assume that there were other judges during this period of Israelite history, perhaps many more than twelve. A case in point is the mysterious Bedan (I Sam. 12:11), whom Samuel mentions in his list of saviors of Israel. Surveying the period of the judges that preceded him, Samuel recalls the great oppressor Sisera, the menacing Philistines, and the aggressive Moabites. When the people cried out to God and pledged their renewed allegiance to Him, He sent “Yerubaal and Bedan, Yiftah and Samuel, and He saved you from your enemies round about, and you dwelt in security.” While Yerubaal and Yiftah are familiar figures from the book of Judges, Bedan is not. Although rabbinic tradition and classical commentaries identify Bedan as Samson who hailed from the tribe of Dan (interpreting the name Bedan as “a son of the tribe of Dan”), it is much easier to assume that Bedan was a judge active sometime between Gideon and Yiftah, who is nowhere mentioned in the book of Judges and about

whom we know nothing else.² To summarize, the point of our book is not to list all of the judges that ever lived, but rather to describe what the era of the judges was like: It was a tumultuous period, when the people of Israel were divided, discordant and factious. They were not united as a nation; they were not bonded as a polis. Every tribe and every clan within a tribe put its interests first. This is the essence of the “twelve judges” motif.

The third and final section of the book, comprising chapters 17–21, is the most disturbing. In this unit, no judge is mentioned. The two episodes in this final section present a leaderless Israel, racked by division and at the nadir of its moral decline. It is here that we confront the heart of darkness in the form of idolatry, rape, and murder. By the time the book concludes, we wonder how it was that the people of Israel reached such a low point. Our only consolation at the end is the anticipation of what follows the book of Judges – the book of Samuel with its cast of more positive and redeeming *national* leaders: Samuel, Saul, and David.

While the final chapters clearly end on a dismal note, we may be surprised to discover that the entire trajectory of the book actually anticipates this ending. This is because the middle section that tells the story of the twelve (or thirteen) judges does not simply describe them as undifferentiated, amorphous, and formulaic protagonists, but makes clear to the careful reader that their individual careers follow a declining arc. That is to say, the earlier judges are of a higher caliber than the later ones. Otniel, Ehud, and Deborah are leaders above reproach, who betray no obvious character defects or lapses of faith in God. They are successful on the battlefield and continue to lead nobly once they have left it. When the time comes for them to pass on, they do so gracefully. Gideon is less than an ideal judge – he is wracked both by self-doubt as well as doubts concerning God’s support. In the end, he unwittingly writes for himself an infamous epitaph of Baal worship. When he is followed by his unscrupulous son Abimelech, we already know what to

2. The name Bedan also occurs in I Chronicles 7:17, where he is identified as an obscure descendant of Menashe. While there is no suggestion that the Bedan of Samuel is the Bedan of Chronicles, the point is that the name need not be explained as a wordplay indicating his tribe of origin.

expect. The final cohort of judges, represented by Yiftah and Samson, are deeply flawed leaders who save their tribes, but also unleash great destruction in their wake.

We may therefore divide the middle section of the book, chapters 3–16, into three smaller units: chapters 3–5 – Ehud and Deborah, chapters 6–10 – Gideon (and Abimelech), and chapters 11–16 – Yiftah and Samson. It should be readily apparent that the minor judges in the book can be understood to serve as “tribal fillers” for these others. The tripartite subdivision of the middle section is marked by a refrain, with variations, occurring as the introduction to each part in turn. Its general formula is:

God said to Israel, “I took you out of Egypt, brought you to this land and defeated your enemies for you. I enjoined upon you not to worship the idols of these peoples or adopt their gods, but you did not listen to My voice!” (see Judges 2:1, 6:8–10, 10:11–14)

A fundamental truth about the judges and their epoch emerges from this analysis: Any particular judge is only as good as the people that he leads. He rarely offers a full-scale corrective, but only a temporary reprieve until the next cycle. He is the mirror image of his supporters. As the book progresses and the people of Israel descend deeper and deeper into idolatry and immorality, their decline is reflected in the leader that emerges to save them. For this reason, at the very end, *no* leader will emerge. The ancient rabbis expressed this most acerbically when they said:

Yiftah in his generation is to be regarded as Samuel in his generation. This comes to teach you that even the most insubstantial of men who is appointed as a leader of the people must be regarded as the greatest of leaders. (Rosh HaShana 25b)

The above discussion is summarized in outline form on the following pages. The numbers in the left margin, from 1–21, correspond to the chapters of the book. A line of three asterisks indicates the basic breakdown of the book into three main sections. A Roman numeral

introduces each judge in turn, who is followed by his tribal affiliation if indicated by the text. Next, the oppressor whom the judge must defeat is mentioned, and within the square brackets after the tyrant's name are two numbers. The first of these numbers refers to the number of years that the tribe suffers at the hands of the foe before the appearance of the judge. The second number indicates the total number of years that the judge leads the people. A question mark in place of a number means that the text does not report the data. (It is not entirely clear whether the years of oppression should be counted as part of the total career of the judge or not.) Finally, judges with an asterisk before their name are to be regarded as "major" judges, whose exploits are given in detail. Judges without an asterisk are "minor" judges whose entire careers are spelled out in one to three verses. The section of the judges is further broken down into three smaller units, as we have pointed out, with each one introduced by a verse of infamy.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF JUDGES

1. Israelite tribes war with Canaanites: some successes and many failures.

A messenger of God ascended from Gilgal to those that wept. He said, "I took you out of Egypt and brought you to the land that I swore to give to your ancestors. I said, 'I will never abrogate My covenant with you. As for you, make no covenants with the inhabitants of this land – break down their altars!' But you did not listen to Me. What have you done?" (2:1–2)

2. The cycle: idolatry → oppression → outcry → saving judge → stability/death of judge → idolatry...

* * *

First Cycle – Judges above Reproach

3. (I) **Otniel ben Kenaz of Judah** vs. Kushan Rishatayim of Aram Naharayim [8/40]

- (II) *Ehud ben Gera of Benjamin vs. Eglon king of Moab [18/80]
- (III) Shamgar ben Anat of ? vs. Philistines [?/?]
- 4-5. (IV) *Deborah wife of Lapidot of Ephraim (?) and Barak ben Abinoam of Naphtali vs. Yavin king of Canaan and Sisera [20/40]

God sent a prophet to Israel. He said to them: "Thus says God the Lord of Israel, 'I took you out of Egypt and brought you forth from the house of bondage. I saved you from the clutches of Egypt and from the clutches of all of your oppressors. I drove them out from before you and I gave you their land. I said to you: "I am God your Lord; do not revere the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell." But you did not listen to Me!" (6:8-10)

Second Cycle – Judges of Little Faith

- 6-8. (V) *Gideon ben Yoash of Menashe vs. Midian, Amalek, Bnei Kedem [7/40]
9. (Va) Abimelech ben Gideon [3]
10. (VI) Tola ben Pua ben Dodo of Issachar [23]
- (VII) Ya'ir HaGiladi of Menashe [22]

God said to Israel, "Did I not save you from Egypt and from the Amorites, from the Ammonites, and from the Philistines? The Sidonites, Amalek, and Maon oppressed you, and you cried out to Me and I saved you from their clutches. But you have abandoned Me and served other gods. Therefore, I will save you no more. Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen – let them save you in your time of travail!" (10:11-14)

Final Cycle – Judges of Disrepute

11–12. (VIII) *Yiftah HaGiladi of Menashe vs. King of Ammon
(and Ephraim) [18/6]

(IX) Ibzan of Beit Lehem (Zebulun?) [7]

(X) Elon of Zebulun [10]

(XI) Abdon ben Hillel of Piraton (Ephraim) [8]

13–16. (XII) *Samson ben Manoah of Dan vs. Philistines [40/20]

* * *

17–18. Idol of Micah

19–21. Concubine at Giva

This modest study assumes only a basic familiarity with the book of Judges. The reader who would like to get maximum benefit is highly advised to read the primary material of the book of Judges in tandem with this volume. I have supplemented the text with many informative footnotes that substantially expand on the discussion and offer the reader additional sources to ponder. I recommend consulting the footnotes for more information and analysis. Except when otherwise noted, all translations of verses and commentaries that appear in this book are mine alone.

Judges 1:1–36

Israel's Tragic Lethargy

It came to pass after the death of Joshua, that the people of Israel enquired of God saying, “Who shall go up for us first to do battle against the Canaanites?” God said, “Judah shall go up, for behold I have given the land into his hands.” Judah said to Simeon his brother, “Go up with me to secure my lot and we will fight [together] against the Canaanites, and then I will go with you to secure your lot.” So Simeon accompanied him. (1:1–3)

Thus begins the book of Judges, with a description of the battles of the tribe of Judah. The opening phrase of the book is reminiscent of the beginning of the book of Joshua: “It came to pass after the death of Moses the servant of God, that God said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses’s loyal servant...” (Josh. 1:1). We will have many occasions to compare and contrast the book of Judges with the book of Joshua, and we will discover that while the two books have much in common and sometimes overlap, they are fundamentally different in theme and outlook.

JOSHUA’S ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The book of Joshua described the Israelites’ entry into the land of Canaan. Some forty years after the exodus from Egypt, the people traversed the Jordan River under the able leadership of Joshua. Moses the lawgiver,

who had taken them out of Egypt, brought them to Sinai to receive the Torah, and guided them during the entire period of their sojourn in the wilderness, died at the plains of Moab on the Jordan's eastern banks. Before his demise, at God's behest, he appointed a successor to lead the people into the new land, a capable teacher and gifted warrior by the name of Joshua. And Joshua was successful. Under his rule, the tribes of Israel united to battle the Canaanite confederacies, and they achieved impressive results. By the time Joshua died, the major military alliances of the Canaanites had been defeated and the land had been allocated to the Israelite tribes.

However, the defeat of the armies of the chief Canaanite city-states and the distribution of their lands did not signify the end of the conflict. The land was still largely unsettled, and Israel had yet to set down deep and durable roots. Obviously, it was not sufficient to defeat the Canaanites on the battlefield, a process that did not take more than a few years. In order to claim the land as their own, the people of Israel had to make it theirs by clearing its forests, terracing and cultivating its rocky slopes, and building their towns and cities, all the while avoiding the pervasive charms of Canaanite polytheism. The task of settlement required a much more ambitious timeframe than was available to Joshua, lasting many decades if not centuries. The associated mandate of extirpating all indigenous traces of idolatry could not possibly be completed overnight. Clearly then, the colossal undertaking could not be accomplished during Joshua's lifetime, lengthy though it was. God had indicated as much toward the end of Joshua's life: "Joshua was old, he had lived many days, and God said to him, 'You are now old and have lived many days, and so much of the land still remains to be possessed'" (Josh. 13:1). In fact, the matter had been spelled out many decades earlier in the Torah itself, when God addressed the people of Israel as they stood at Mount Sinai in the immediate aftermath of the revelation:

I shall send My dread before you to rout all of the nations that you shall encounter, and all of your enemies shall turn their backs [in flight] from you. I shall send before you the hornet to drive out the Hivite, Canaanite, and Hittite from before you. *But I will not drive them out before you in a single year, for then*

the land will become desolate and the beasts of the field will multiply against you. Rather, I will drive them out very slowly, until you increase and inherit the land. I shall establish your borders from the Sea of Reeds until the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness until the river [Euphrates], for I shall give into your hand the inhabitants of the land, and I shall drive them out from before you. You shall not establish a covenant with them or with their gods. Let them not dwell in your land, lest they cause you to transgress against Me, for if you serve their gods you shall become ensnared. (Ex. 23:27–31)

UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF MILITARY VICTORY

Thus, when the book of Judges begins, the land still remains “unconquered.” The defeat of the Canaanite confederacies and their combined armies in the time of Joshua may have removed the immediate existential threat from the tribes of Israel, but the tribes still had to take possession of their territories, and the local military menaces still had to be overcome. It is the story of that possession, its short-lived triumphs, and its lengthy setbacks that constitutes the bulk of our book.

We may illustrate the distinction between military victory versus effective and permanent possession with a modern, if somewhat imperfect, example. In the Six Day War of June 1967, the beleaguered and out-gunned State of Israel achieved a crushing victory over its powerful Arab foes, who had initiated the conflict with the express goal of destroying it. Even as Egypt massed its forces in the Sinai Peninsula and closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, a *causus belli* by any objective definition, Israel waited for clarifications from the superpowers. As the drums of war beat ever more feverishly in Arab capitals, Israel launched a surprise attack on the enemy airfields and destroyed their jets on the ground. Syrian forces were repelled from the Golan Heights and the Jordanian legions were forced to relinquish the ancient city of Jerusalem. By the end of the war, Israel had not only defeated the military alliance consisting of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and their allies, but had also succeeded in conquering large tracts of enemy territory that had not been assigned to it according to the Partition Plan of 1947. In the aftermath of the war, the Arab world convened at Khartoum to unequivocally reject Israeli

overtures to return the conquered territories in exchange for peace,¹ and so the land remained in Israeli hands. However, the State of Israel hesitated to formally annex it, and so that acquisition of land was never followed up by a determined program of possession, and hence was never completed. As a result, decades after that conflict, the State of Israel still finds itself in the precarious and unenviable position of attempting to secure its borders, with no foreseeable end in sight. While we may continue to debate the merits of that war and its consequences, for our purposes one point is clear: Even an astounding military victory is not sufficient to guarantee possession of territory unless victories on the battlefield are resolutely followed by settlement.

TRIBES VS. A NATION

Because the conflicts recounted in the book of Judges are so very different from the battles waged in the book of Joshua – the latter consisting of a short series of intense battles, the former the much longer process of possession – the makeup of the respective fighting forces are also markedly different. Joshua's battles were undertaken as a national enterprise by all of the tribes together. Even the tribes that dwelt east of the Jordan had sent their complement of troops to serve under his command (see Josh. 1:12–18). In contrast, the battles in the book of Judges are primarily regional in scope and are waged by each tribe on its own to secure its land.

The opening of our book, therefore, while stylistically recalling the introductory phrases of the book of Joshua, highlights the glaring distinctions by focusing on the tribes of Judah and Simeon. For now there is no national leader, no national mission, and no corresponding national vision. Each tribe must act on its own to take possession of its portion. While a group of tribes sometimes collaborates, as do Judah and Simeon in our chapter, they more often labor alone. Perhaps this explains the inclusion of verses 9–15 that describe the conquest of the southern hill country in the environs of Hebron by Othniel son of Kenaz, kinsman of Caleb. The passage is almost an exact repetition of Joshua 15:13–19, and chronologically it belongs there since the conquest of Kiryat

1. See Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) for a complete account.

Sefer took place while Joshua was still alive. However, it is repeated here in a different tone. Whereas the passage in the book of Joshua spoke of Caleb and Othniel fulfilling their part of the national mission under the watchful gaze of the national leader, our section recasts those events in much more tribal terms. The accomplishments of Caleb and Othniel are understood here as belonging exclusively to the tribe of Judah rather than to the people of Israel as a whole. Tribal securing of territory, with its inescapable corollary of narrower, more sectarian concerns, engenders the book's greatest challenges and yields very unsatisfactory results.

CLOSENESS VS. DISTANCE

Another important difference between the opening lines of the two books is that the book of Joshua immediately introduced us to God's involvement in the story: "It came to pass after the death of Moses the servant of God, that God said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses's loyal servant..." While it is true that God's involvement became less overt as the book of Joshua progressed, our book already begins from a point of divine obscurity. Here, there is no prophet who directly communicates God's word to the people. God has not appointed an individual who is inspired to speak on His behalf. Instead, the people must "enquire" of Him, an expression that indicates consultation using the stones of the golden breastplate of the high priest. According to the provisions of the book of Numbers 27:15–23, when Joshua succeeds his mentor Moses as leader, he is to secure God's response to matters of national significance through the *urim* and *tumim* – mysterious names of God placed within the folds of the breastplate and its gemstones. The Torah states:

He shall stand before Elazar the priest who shall ask for him before God by the law of the *urim*. In accordance with it they shall go out [to battle] and in accordance with it they shall come in [from battle], he and all of the people of Israel with him and all of the congregation. (Num. 27:21)

These twelve stones were engraved with the names of the tribes of Israel, and talmudic tradition relates that in response to the enquiry of a national leader, some of the letters would light up or otherwise stand