

GIDEON AND THE EPHRAIMITES

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The story of Gideon, son of Joash of the clan of Aviezer of the tribe of Manasseh, can be read in the Book of Judges, Chapters 6-8.

Some time prior to the establishment of the monarchy in Israel, the northern tribes were being harassed, molested and despoiled by Midianites, Amalekites and other nomadic peoples. Gideon was called upon by God to deliver the people from their travails. At His command and direction, Gideon mobilized a small force of only 300 men from the tribes of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali, whom he had summoned to participate in the campaign to rid Israel of this menace. With this handful of men, and with the help of God, he succeeded in routing the numerically overwhelming enemy. They fled in panic from their encampment in the Valley of Jezreel (the Emek) eastward towards the Jordan in order to reach their own region.

At this point, Gideon sent messengers to the Ephraimites that they should take control of the crossings of the Jordan. The Ephraimites accomplished their mission and captured the two captains of the Midianites, Oreb and Zeeb, whom they killed and beheaded. They brought the heads to Gideon and began to quarrel with him: *'Why did you do this to us – not calling us when you went to fight the Midianites?'* They pressed him very hard for an answer. Gideon responded to their charge with:

'After all, what have I accomplished compared to you? Why, Ephraim's gleanings [olelot] are better than Aviezer's vintage [batzir]. God has delivered into your hands the Midianite captains, Oreb and Zeeb, and what did I do compared to you?' (Jud. 8:1).

With this statement, the Ephraimites were appeased, because they saw it as a great compliment; and so do the commentators. But a careful analysis of these words will lead us to conclude that this was as clever a bit of dissembling as can be found anywhere in literature. Gideon "pulled the wool over their eyes" and the Ephraimites gladly let him do it. How and why will be demonstrated.

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To begin with, Gideon's response is not an answer to the Ephraimites' accusation; it is an evasion. He offered no reason for his failure to call them. We can conjecture that he had good reason not to. The Ephraimites were a contentious, arrogant tribe, a trait they inherited from their eponym, their founding ancestor Ephraim, Joseph's younger son. Jacob's elevation of Ephraim over his older brother Manasseh, Joseph's firstborn (Gen. 48:13-14), was probably the result of his observing Ephraim's aggressive behavior towards his brother. This sibling rivalry carried over to the relationship between the two tribes. Gideon feared that the Ephraimites would try to dominate the campaign against the Midianites and frustrate his strategy.

The Bible records a second demonstration of the cantankerous nature of the Ephraimites, once again in confrontation with the tribe of Manasseh. Jephthah, the Gileadite, from that segment of Manasseh that had settled to the east of the Jordan, defeated the Ammonites who had gone to war against the Israelites (Jud. 11). After his victory, the Ephraimites demanded to know why he had not called them to join him in this struggle (Ch. 12). They threatened to burn his house down upon him. Unlike Gideon, Jephthah gave them a direct answer, throwing their accusations back into their faces by declaring that he had indeed summoned them but that they failed to respond. The tragic consequence of Jephthah's direct challenge was the outbreak of war between these two tribes.

We can now better appreciate another nuance in Gideon's reply. He speaks about what they did as compared to what he did. It appeared to the Ephraimites as just a simple, innocuous statement, when in actuality it was a gross insult in that he, Gideon, by his own assertion *the youngest in his family from the lowliest clan*, places himself on an equal scale to the entire tribe of Ephraim. Why were they not affronted by this?

But the main thrust of this veiled jibe is Gideon's use of the words *olelot* [gleanings] and *batzir* [vintage]. *Olelot* are bunches of grapes or olives left behind by the pickers for the use of the poor, because they were inferior or unripe. *Batzir* is the entire collected grape crop. How, then, can anyone claim under any circumstances that the *olelot* are better than the *batzir*? There probably was a common expression in use in which the speaker would sarcastically compare his work or possessions to another by dubbing the other

person's work or possessions *olelot*, that is, trash, as compared to his own *batzir*.

By beginning his statement with '*Halo*. . . ' [Why!, Is not], Gideon turned this expression on its head, for what is essentially a put-down comes to appear as a compliment. By comparing the capture of the two Midianite generals to *olelot*, Gideon is simply saying that the Ephraimites accomplished very little of any significance by comparison to his victory. By introducing his words with *Halo* he made it appear to be the reverse. And he knew that the Ephraimites, in their arrogance, would swallow it.

Why? Why did not the Ephraimites see through this ploy, this insult, and react with even greater fury? Because it is in the very nature of arrogance to be so blinded by the belief in its own perfection and infallibility as to construe criticism or insult as complimentary.

In the light of the domineering behavior on the part of the Ephraimites it is interesting to note that after the schismatic division of the nation that took place upon the death of Solomon, the Ephraimites became the dominant tribe in the Northern Kingdom. In fact, the prophets frequently referred to the Northern Kingdom as "Ephraim." The most familiar illustration of this is Jeremiah 31:19, a passage that is highlighted in the music of the Rosh Ha-Shana musaf liturgy.

Is it because of their arrogance that the Ephraimites refused to heed the warnings and admonitions of the prophets, in consequence of which they were evicted from their land by the Assyrians in 722 BCE, never to be heard from again?

The lesson is clear and the wise reader will absorb it.

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