

Gideon as the Transitional Figure in the Book of Judges

Rabbi Hayyim Angel

National Scholar, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals (jewishideas.org)

Bible Faculty, Yeshiva University

Tanakh Faculty, Beit Midrash of Teaneck

שופטים פרק ח

(ד) וַיָּבֹא גַדְעוֹן הַיִּרְדְּנָה עִבְרָה הוּא וּשְׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר אִתּוֹ עֵינָפִים וְרֹדְפִים: (ה) וַיֹּאמֶר לְאִנְשֵׁי סְכוּת תָּנּוּ נָא כְּפָרוֹת לַחֵם לָעַם אֲשֶׁר בְּרַגְלֵי כִי עֵינָפִים הֵם וְאֲנֹכִי רֹדֵף אַחֲרֵי זָבַח וְצִלְמִנֶעַ מַלְכֵי מִדְיָן: (ו) וַיֹּאמֶר שָׂרֵי סְכוּת הַכֹּף זָבַח וְצִלְמִנֶעַ עֲתָה בְיַדְךָ כִּי נִתְּן לְצַבָּאָה לַחֵם: (ז) וַיֹּאמֶר גַּדְעוֹן לָכֵן בָּתֵּת ה' אֶת זָבַח וְאֶת צִלְמִנֶעַ בְּיָדִי וְדִשְׁתִּי אֶת בְּשָׂרְכֶם אֶת קוֹצֵי הַמִּדְבָּר וְאֶת הַבְּרִקָּנִים: (ח) וַיַּעַל מִשֶׁם פְּנוּאֵל וַיְדַבֵּר אֲלֵיהֶם כְּזֹאת וַיַּעֲנוּ אוֹתוֹ אִנְשֵׁי פְּנוּאֵל כְּאֲשֶׁר עָנּוּ אִנְשֵׁי סְכוּת: (ט) וַיֹּאמֶר גַּם לְאִנְשֵׁי פְּנוּאֵל לֵאמֹר בְּשׁוּבִי בְּשָׁלוֹם אֶתְּךָ אֶת הַמַּגְדָּל הַזֶּה: פ

... (טו) וַיָּבֹא אֶל אִנְשֵׁי סְכוּת וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה זָבַח וְצִלְמִנֶעַ אֲשֶׁר חֲרַפְתֶּם אוֹתִי לֵאמֹר הַכֹּף זָבַח וְצִלְמִנֶעַ עֲתָה בְיַדְךָ כִּי נִתְּן לְאִנְשֵׁי הַיַּעֲפִים לַחֵם: (טז) וַיִּקַּח אֶת זִקְנֵי הָעִיר וְאֶת קוֹצֵי הַמִּדְבָּר וְאֶת הַבְּרִקָּנִים וַיַּדַּע בָּהֶם אֶת אִנְשֵׁי סְכוּת: (יז) וְאֶת מַגְדָּל פְּנוּאֵל נָתַץ וַיַּהַרְג אֶת אִנְשֵׁי הָעִיר:

(יח) וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל זָבַח וְאֶל צִלְמִנֶעַ אֵיפֹה הָאִנְשִׁים אֲשֶׁר הֲרַגְתֶּם בְּתַבּוּר וַיֹּאמְרוּ כְּמוֹהֶם אַחַד כְּתָאֵר בְּנֵי הַמִּלְכָּד: (יט) וַיֹּאמֶר אַחִי בְנֵי אִמִּי הֵם חִי ה' לֹא הֲחִיתֶם אוֹתָם לֹא הֲרַגְתִּי אֹתְכֶם: (כ) וַיֹּאמֶר לִיתֵר בְּכוֹרוֹ קוֹם הֲרַג אוֹתָם וְלֹא שְׁלַף הַנֶּעַר חֲרַבּוֹ כִּי יָרָא כִּי עוֹדְנּוּ נֶעַר: (כא) וַיֹּאמֶר זָבַח וְצִלְמִנֶעַ קוֹם אֶתָּה וּפְגַע בָּנוּ כִּי כָאִישׁ גְּבוּרָתוֹ וַיִּקַּם גַּדְעוֹן וַיַּהַרְג אֶת זָבַח וְאֶת צִלְמִנֶעַ וַיִּקַּח אֶת הַשְּׁהֲרָנִים אֲשֶׁר בְּצוּאָרֵי גְמְלֵיהֶם:

(כב) וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֵל גַּדְעוֹן מָשַׁל בָּנוּ גַם אֶתָּה גַם בְּנֵדָה גַם בְּנֵדָה כִּי הוֹשַׁעְתָּנוּ מִיַּד מִדְיָן: (כג) וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם גַּדְעוֹן לֹא אֲמַשֵּׁל אֲנִי בְכֶם וְלֹא יִמְשַׁל בְּנֵי בְכֶם ה' יִמְשַׁל בְּכֶם:

(כד) וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם גַּדְעוֹן אֲשַׁאֲלֶה מִכֶּם שְׂאֵלָה וַתָּנוּ לִי אִישׁ נָזֶם שְׁלָלוּ... (כו) וַיַּעַשׂ אוֹתוֹ גַּדְעוֹן לְאֶפֶס וַיִּצַּג אוֹתוֹ בְּעִירוֹ בְּעַפְרָה וַיִּזְנוּ כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל אַחֲרָיו שֶׁם וַיְהִי לְגַדְעוֹן וּלְבֵיתוֹ לְמוֹקֵשׁ:

(כח) וַיִּפְנֶעַ מִדְיָן לִפְנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא יָסִפוּ לְשֹׂאת רֹאשָׁם וַתִּשְׁקֹט הָאָרֶץ אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בִּימֵי גַדְעוֹן: פ (כט) וַיִּלְךָ יִרְבֶּעַל בֶּן יוֹאֵשׁ וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּבֵיתוֹ: (ל) וּלְגַדְעוֹן הָיוּ שִׁבְעִים בָּנִים יִצְאֵי יָרְכוּ כִּי נָשִׁים רַבּוֹת הָיוּ לוֹ: (לא) וּפִילְגֶשׁוּ אֲשֶׁר בְּשָׂכָם יָלְדָה לוֹ גַם הִיא בֶן וַיִּשָּׂם אֶת שְׁמוֹ אַבִּימֶלֶךְ: (לב) וַיָּמָת גַּדְעוֹן בֶּן יוֹאֵשׁ בְּשִׁיבָה טוֹבָה וַיִּקְבֹּר בְּקִבְרֵי יוֹאֵשׁ אָבִיו בְּעַפְרָה אָבִי הָעֶזְרִי: פ

(לג) וַיְהִי כְּאֲשֶׁר מָת גַּדְעוֹן וַיָּשׁוּבוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּזְנוּ אַחֲרֵי הַבְּעָלִים וַיִּשְׁיִמוּ לָהֶם בַּעַל בְּרִית לְאֵלֵהֶם: (לד) וְלֹא זָכְרוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֵיהֶם הַמַּצִּיל אוֹתָם מִיַּד כָּל אִבְיָהֶם מִסָּבִיב: (לה) וְלֹא עָשׂוּ חֶסֶד עִם בֵּית יִרְבֶּעַל גַּדְעוֹן כְּכָל הַטוֹבָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה עִם יִשְׂרָאֵל: פ

Judges chapter 8

⁴Gideon came to the Jordan and crossed it. The three hundred men with him were famished, but still in pursuit. ⁵He said to the people of Succoth, “Please give some loaves of bread to the men who are following me, for they are famished, and I am pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian.” ⁶But the officials of Succoth replied, “Are Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hands, that we should give bread to your troops?” ⁷“I swear,” declared Gideon, “when the LORD delivers Zebah and Zalmunna into my hands, I’ll thresh your bodies upon desert thorns and briars!” ⁸From there he went up to Penuel and made the same request of them; but the people of Penuel gave him the same reply as the people of Succoth. ⁹So he also threatened the people of Penuel: “When I come back safe, I’ll tear down this tower!”...

¹⁵Then he came to the people of Succoth and said, “Here are Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you mocked me, saying, ‘Are Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hands, that we should give your famished men bread?’” ¹⁶And he took the elders of the city and, [bringing] desert thorns and briars, he punished the people of Succoth with them. ¹⁷As for Penuel, he tore down its tower and killed the townspeople.

¹⁸Then he asked Zebah and Zalmunna, “Those men you killed at Tabor, what were they like?” “They looked just like you,” they replied, “like sons of a king.” ¹⁹“They were my brothers,” he declared, “the sons of my mother. As the LORD lives, if you had spared them, I would not kill you.” ²⁰And he commanded his oldest son Jether, “Go kill them!” But the boy did not draw his sword, for he was timid, being still a boy. ²¹Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, “Come, you slay us; for strength comes with manhood.” So Gideon went over and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and he took the crescents that were on the necks of their camels.

²²Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, “Rule over us—you, your son, and your grandson as well; for you have saved us from the Midianites.” ²³But Gideon replied, “I will not rule over you myself, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD alone shall rule over you.”

²⁴And Gideon said to them, “I have a request to make of you: Each of you give me the earring he received as booty.” ...²⁷Gideon made an ephod of this gold and set it up in his own town of Ophrah. There all Israel went astray after it, and it became a snare to Gideon and his household.

²⁸Thus Midian submitted to the Israelites and did not raise its head again; and the land was tranquil for forty years in Gideon’s time. ²⁹So Jerubbaal son of Joash retired to his own house. ³⁰Gideon had seventy sons of his own issue, for he had many wives. ³¹A son was also born to him by his concubine in Shechem, and he named him Abimelech. ³²Gideon son of Joash died at a ripe old age, and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash at Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

³³After Gideon died, the Israelites again went astray after the Baalim, and they adopted Baal-berith as a god. ³⁴The Israelites gave no thought to the LORD their God, who saved them from all the enemies around them. ³⁵Nor did they show loyalty to the house of Jerubbaal-Gideon in return for all the good that he had done for Israel.

1. I Samuel 12:12

But when you saw that Nahash king of the Ammonites was advancing against you, you said to me, ‘No, we must have a king reigning over us’—though the Lord your God is your King.

שמואל א' יב: יב
וַתֵּרְאוּ כִּי נֹחַשׁ מֶלֶךְ בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן בָּא עֲלֵיכֶם וַתֹּאמְרוּ לִי לֹא כִּי מֶלֶךְ יִמְלֹךְ עָלֵינוּ וְהוֹ אֶל-לִקְיָכֶם מֶלְכְּכֶם :

2. Judges 7:18

When I and all those with me blow our horns, you too, all around the camp, will blow your horns and shout, ‘For the LORD and for Gideon!’”

שופטים ז: יח
וַתִּקְעֵתִי בְּשׁוֹפָר אֲנֹכִי וְכָל אֲשֶׁר אִתִּי וַתִּקְעֵתֶם בְּשׁוֹפְרוֹת גַּם אַתֶּם סְבִיבוֹת כָּל הַמַּחֲנֶה וְאַמְרַתֶּם לַה' וּלְגִדְעוֹן :

3. Judges 21:25

In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did as he pleased.

שופטים כא: כה
בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם אֵין מֶלֶךְ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ הַיָּשָׁר בְּעֵינָיו יַעֲשֶׂה :

SUMMARY CHART

	Positive-Idealistic Motives	Negative-Personal Motives
Reason for punishing Succoth and Penuel	National Security	They mocked Gideon
Reason for killing Midianite kings	They were enemies of Israel	They killed Gideon's brothers
Reason for appointing Jether to kill kings		Family vendetta Possibly to train his eldest son as his successor
Reason for declining monarchy	The Lord is your King	
Reasons for ephod	Commemorate God's role in the victory Possibly a divining agent	To establish Gideon's hometown as a shrine, and to bolster his sons' claim as future leaders
Name of Abimelech	God is King	My father (= Gideon) is king