

Elie Wiesel:

(applause) Tonight I would like to invite you to meet an ancient judge unlike any other. Actually, to those of you who have been here before, you know that the same has been said of all of them, and rightly so. All have some distinctive attributes that define their personality. But Gideon is still a case apart. The fourth in the line of judges separating the conquests of the land from the establishment of a Jewish monarchy, he is special. I hope you have already carefully read the chapter dealing with him in the book of Judges. I have read it at least 10 times, and with each reading it offers more enchantment.

Most major topics [00:01:00] about the human and Jewish condition can be found here, attitudes towards ambition, power, discipline, unity, solidarity, faith, peace, with one notable exception, love. It is not a love story. And Gideon's story begins badly, on a note of divine despair. It ends well, almost as the human fulfillment of a heavenly promise. Like those who preceded him and those who followed him, Gideon too is called upon to combat the traditional enemies of Israel. He too finds obstacles that seems insurmountable. He too will eventually

emerge as the savior of his people, our people. Still, there is something about him that makes him different.

First, he is appointed to his prestigious yet difficult [00:02:00] national position not by a celestial voice but by an angel. He sees and hears that angel both in his sleep and while he is awake. One wishes for some physical description of the angel. Is he big, muscular, athletic, or small, frail, melancholy, with a look of an intellectual on his face? Sorry, but the biblical texts are different from reportage. There the message outweighs description. As an appointed envoy Gideon is lucky for it is God himself who also speaks with him. It is in the text.

Gideon argues with God, and God needs to give him unusual signs and perform various miracles and assurances to convince him to accept the mission that will transform his life. [00:03:00] Unknown to this point, now he enters legend. In the book of Judges, Gideon's tale begins at the end of the chapter that relates the stunning defeat of the Canaanite general Sisera. Though the leader of a huge, well-equipped army, he succumbs in his sleep in the arms of a Jewish female hero Yael whose heroism inspired Deborah, the illustrious leader and poetess, to sing a song of admiration and gratitude for her bravery.

What a marvelous piece of poetry it is. Lyrically Deborah describes Israel's victory, and then near the end one feels a trace of compassion on her lips, compassion not for the fallen commander of the enemy army but for his [00:04:00] anguished mother. Listen. "Through the window she gazed, Sisera's mother peered through the window. Why is her son's chariot late in coming? Why are the hoof beats of his carriage so late?" One cannot but like her for her compassion. Doesn't King Solomon warn us against rejoicing over the enemy's downfall? Still, Deborah remembers the dangers of excessive pity in times of war.

And she goes on imaging Sisera's mother, who is waiting for her dead son. "The wisest of her ladies answer her," says the text, "And she too offers herself explanations. Are they not finding and dividing loot, a comely captive or two comely captives for every man, booty of colored garments for Sisera, the chief. Booty of colored embroidery, [00:05:00] doubly embroidered garments for the necks of the looters." And Deborah concludes her song with these words, "So may all your enemies be destroyed, oh God, and let those who love him be like the powerfully rising sun," which according to most commentators gains power as it rises at dawn.

Is it a blessing at all? Doesn't the sun also set? And those who love him, sings Deborah, him? Not those who love you? The chapter ends with a few well-chosen filled with serenity and hope. *Vatishkot ha'aretz arba'im shana*, for 40 years the land finally knew the blessings of peace. At this point one feels like applauding. Thank God for the good news. We needed it. Israel needs and deserves some respite, some breathing space. [00:06:00] So bravo, Jewish history. Thank you, God of Israel. Thank you for allowing your people to live for a while far from the perils of hatred and bloodshed, out of reach of the enemy that is determined to offend and oppress them, and even more, move them to despair._ Forty years of national tranquility on the borders. Is there a greater blessing in the world?

But this question elicits yet another. Is tranquility always a blessing? Or like love or money, does it all depend on what one does with it? If tranquility is being used for good endeavors and worthy goals it is commendable. If it is being misused it is not. Let's read the next chapter of Jewish history which follows upon Deborah's song. Listen to the opening line.

Va'ya'asu Bnei Yisrael et ha'ra b'einay Adoshem, and the children of Israel [00:07:00] did what was evil in the eyes of God. On the simplest level this opening is not unusual in the

book of Judges. Remember, that period does not enjoy good press in biblical or Talmudic literature.

Upon reading the words *va'yehi bi'yemay shefot ha'shoftim*, it happened once upon a time during the period when the judges were judging. Talmudic sages wondered why such repetition? *Shefot hashoftim*. Isn't it a task of judges to judge? And the question is pertinent, as is the answer formulated by Rashi. *Oy lo le'dor she'shofet et shoftav*. Woe unto the generation which is passing judgment on its judges. In other words, there are times when everything and everybody is corrupted for doing what is evil in the eyes of God.

Such is the case of Gideon's generation. [00:08:00] What were its sins and transgressions? The text does not enter into detail. Rather, the first part of the verse covers the overall moral decline of the entire community. The second half of the same verse suggests punishment. *Vayitneim be'yad Midyan sheva shanim* So God delivered the children of Israel in the hand of Midian for seven years. And at this point perhaps we shall discuss it later. At this point we must open parenthesis. One, this is the thirty-fifth year of our annual encounters at the Y, sitting at the same desk and inviting you to join me in the great fascinating and enriching adventure one finds in learning.

On several occasions I had decided to bring this series to an end. You know the old expression. Enough is enough. But each time I remembered Rabbeinu Shaul Lieberman, my old teacher and friend, z"l. [00:09:00] He would leave me, when we didn't meet that day, on my answering machine a Talmudic injunction, *b'Torah matahay aleha*. What about learning?

Usually for 35 years we used to do Thursdays. Today it may be Thursday, if we stay long enough. But that has been and still is the point of these sessions, to study together, to share the wisdom we have all received from our teachers and their teachers in whose words Moshe Rabbenu words are still reverberating. We are still at Sinai. We are the people of the book, that is what Muhammad called us. In the beginning he was our friend. Later when the Jews of Medina refused to accept him as their prophet he turned against us. And the same is true of Luther's relationship with the Jewish people.

If only we [00:10:00] would renounce our faith, our love for Torah, our Ahavat Yisrael. If only we would be ready to be less Jewish, less concerned with the faith of Israel and Judaism. They, the intellectual or religious leaders of certain nations or groups would be happy to sing our praise, just be a little

bit less Jewish. That's how it used to be generally. Today the attitude of Christians to us Jews as a people and its religious faith has changed for the better. Except for the Vatican's stubborn refusal to open the secret archives to Jewish scholars and historians and except for the strange pro-Arab attitude of the Vatican to the question of Jerusalem, most relations, in many quarters, have improved.

Rabbis and priests often meet and explore together common concerns. Bishops and cardinals come to Jewish affairs. The pope went to the shul [00:11:00] in Rome and went to Yad Vashem and the Kotel in Jerusalem. Some things have changed, but Islam has not changed. Islam's traditional hostility to Jews is reflected in the present Israeli Palestinian conflict. In this context a confession may seem in order. I belong to those who naively in the beginning believed in the Oslo process. Not that I had faith in Arafat. I had none. I was never ready to forget the shameful and cowardly PLO attack on the children of Ma'alot, and therefore I had occasions when I was urged if not pressed, to see him. I refused. I belong to the very few who have not met Arafat. (laughs) (applause)

But I had faith in Yitzhak Rabin, zichrono livracha, who saw to put an end to funerals and tears. I said to myself, if it's

good for him, how can I be dissatisfied? Why should I be more skeptical than he, after all, the commander in chief of the Six-Day War, the man who liberated and brought back the West Bank, Jerusalem? Why should I doubt when he had no doubt? Or if he had he didn't say.

Sadly, I no longer believe in Oslo. When Arafat rejected Prime Minister Barak's unprecedented concerns at Camp David and chose violence instead I realized that he doesn't want peace and never did. And then came the second phase when Marion, my wife and I, in Davos, where we go every year to the conference, we heard Peres, Shimon Peres and Arafat together on stage. That was a kind of annual [00:13:00] show. And Peres began as always speaking about hope and the new Middle East, very optimistic. And then Arafat drew out, pulled out from his pocket a 38-minute speech filled with such hatred, with such violence, with such poison, accusing Israel of being a fascist, barbaric government in the presence of Shimon Peres, who was a member of that government. And Arafat owed something to Peres. Who was Arafat before Oslo? An outlaw. The head of a terrorist band. Nothing. He wouldn't be accepted. He couldn't come to America. He came to the United Nations once but not to America.

And because and thanks of and thanks to Peres and Rabin, he became an international figure. He was invited everywhere, and he [00:14:00] insulted Peres and Israel, accusing Israel of using uranium bullets to kill Palestinian children, of poison, whatever you can imagine. So then came Durban, shame. It was a shame, a mark of shame on the United Nations, a conference against hate became a conference on and of hate, hate for America and hate to Israel.

So I realized that Arafat and the Palestinians don't want peace. It's not a matter of territorial demands. It never was. What Arafat and his people want is not a Palestinian state neighboring Israel but a Palestinian state without Israel. Is Israel the cause of Bin Laden's murderous terror campaign against America? All serious experts say it is not. Bin Laden does not [00:15:00] care much about Israel. Israel is too small for him. He, the megalomaniac hates America and its allies because they represent a civilization based on democratic values and humanistic principles. To him America is the enemy. He wants to stand up to the great Satan, as he called America.

Even without Israel as part of the international scenery he would have sent his emissaries to spread death in our cities. There 6,000 victims were killed not because they supported

Israel but because at that fateful hour they were there in the twin towers and the Pentagon. Israel is now 53 years old. How many periods of peace has it enjoyed? None. Its leaders were compelled to fight six wars for its survival, and it's resisting terrorism now. And whatever Israel feels every day for so long, America feels [00:16:00] now.

This study session is dedicated to the memory of a uniquely gifted, sensitive, gentle, inspiring man, Bernie Fishman who close to myself, respected by judges and admired by fellow attorneys, he personified Jewish dignity and honor in all his endeavors. His passion was justice, his life learning. The causes he defended were numerous and noble. Since I began these lectures here 35 years ago, he was always in his seat next to Hilda and Bob, and his friends. He was the person I would see when leaving the hall, and tonight is the first time I speak without him in the audience. And we miss him. And in learning together we honor his name and his life.

In contemporary Jewish history, tonight [00:17:00] is special. It marks the anniversary of Crystal Night 63 years ago. Hundreds of synagogues, Jewish centers, and stores owned by Jews were destroyed or burned down all over Germany. In many cities gigantic flames looked like ominous forebodings. Overshadowed

by recent tragedies it seems to be forgotten. Who remembers Crystal Night even in our communities? We remember them as Jews always remember, by learning. *Tsei ulmad* has been an ancient injunction in the Talmud. Go and study. Here it's a little bit different. Here we say *bo ulmad*. Come and study. And open the doors for those who want to study.

Let us start [00:18:00] again from the beginning. As we said earlier, the last chapter ended with the words, "And the land was peaceful for 40 years." How did the next one begin? 'And the children of Israel did what was evil in the eyes of God, and the lord handed them over to the Midianites for seven years.'" Remember in ancient parchments, such as the Torah scroll, there is no punctuation. So we may, as an experiment, do away with the period separating the two verses. And now the sentence reads as follows, "And the land was peaceful for 40 years, and the children of Israel did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and the Lord handed them over to the Midianites." A long sentence? Yes. But it makes sense. As cause and effect. Or it is the eternal relationship between cause and effect, evil and punishment. [00:19:00]

And the idea appears frequently in sacred texts, including our own. When the people of Israel moves away from the law it will

regret it. Even when God forgives he does not forget. But what is the cause in this case? Israel's sins leading to Midianite domination, what are they? Is there nothing before that? What about the 40 peaceful 40 years? Could they be the primary cause? I repeat the question raised earlier. Is peace always a blessing? And here one has the impression that peace was experienced in a general atmosphere of complacency, probably due to excessive self-confidence.

Things were going well. People were happy. There were no outside perils, no internal crises, no confrontation with [00:20:00] invincible enemies, no insurmountable challenges. Adults were busy making money, children playing in the garden. Teachers were teaching. Adolescents were discovering love. All was well on all the fronts, too well, perhaps. Since people seem to have forgotten to whom they owed their happiness. That is how and why they did evil in the eyes of God. They did so perhaps without even realizing what they were doing. They simply forgot.

Is this a lesson for generations to come? Of course, faced with outside pressures we mobilize our energies. We resist. In a world that hates us for being Jewish we become more motivated more courageous, more inventive, more imaginative, in other

words, more Jewish. On the other hand, in a more tolerant and emancipated society [00:21:00] our frontline appears to be less solid. Cracks on various levels become visible and numerous. Seduction is now a greater threat than persecution. Has anyone ever established reliable statistics on the number of Jews lost to assimilation as compared to oppression?

And yet I do not believe peace to be dangerous to the Jewish spirit. During King Solomon's reign Judah was at peace, and spiritually things were not bad at all. During the golden age Jews and Muslims and Christians lived at peace with one another. And yet both Jews and Muslims bequeathed literary, philosophical, and theological masterworks to their respective religions. Yes, peace is truly a blessing, when it is true peace and not an illusion.

Let's go back to Gideon. As a judge, [00:22:00] is he really different from the others? He's less well-known than Samson, perhaps less perplexing than Yiftah. Is it that his biography is less compelling than theirs? It includes neither romantic adventures nor unnecessary words leading to the death of an innocent daughter. Of his life one knows only what is revealed in the text. Was he married? Yes. Though nothing is known about his wife. His military experience, it's not clear why he

was chosen to lead his people into battle. His special religious education, his father, Joash ha-Ezri was an idol worshipper, but so were many of his contemporaries. And Gideon himself? Again, we don't know.

When he first appears on the stage we see him helping his father threshing wheat at the wine press to hide it from the Midianites. [00:23:00] Then an angel appeared and said to him, "The lord is with you. *Gibor ha'chayil*, O mighty hero." Now, had the angel appeared before someone else Gideon would have remained a laborer, just as Yiftah would have remained an outlaw and Samson a womanizer. (laughter) If they had not been summoned by God nothing would have happened to them. But all three were chosen. Yiftah because of his leadership qualities and Samson because of his strength. But why was Gideon honored by the angel's visit? Actually, he was not the only one to see or hear the angel. Let us return to the text.

For seven years dominated and oppressed by the Midianites, the children of Israel, quote, "Made holes, the caves, at the strongholds which are in the mountains, and it came to pass that whenever they would so the Midianites, helped by the Amalekites and the people of the east, they [00:24:00] would overrun them, destroying the produce of the land until Gaza, leaving no

sustenance for Israel, neither sheep nor oxen nor donkeys. Clearly from all viewpoints, militarily, economically, Israel's situation was desperate. Militarily weak and probably demoralized, it encouraged all its neighbors to join the aggressive Midianite alliance invading the territory of the tribe of Menashe, bordering on the valley of Jezreel, robbing and pillaging public stores and private homes.

Their first goal, the destruction of Israel's economy, and ultimately its national sovereignty. Though first indicates the cruelty of the aggressor no commentary is needed, but there is one. In the Midrash it mentions the complicity of certain elements that collaborated with the enemy's agents, bringing them to the hiding [00:25:00] places where Jews kept their provisions, hence the striking expression *va'yidal Yisrael me'od*. Israel was very impoverished, said Rabbi Yitzhak, impoverished in good deeds, moral impoverish. Said Rabbi Levi, impoverished in everything, both moral and otherwise.

Then, unable to bear it any longer, , *va'yizzaku bnei Yisrael el HaShem*, the children of Israel cried out to the lord, and the Midrash, as imaginative as ever, offers us an illustration of the event. This is how the children of Israel spoke to God, "When princes transgressed the law it is enough for them to

bring an offering and they are forgiven. When anointed one errs it is enough for him to bring a sacrifice, and he is forgiven. But we have [00:26:00] nothing to offer you. What can we do to be forgiven?" And the Lord answers, "Let the entire people get together and bring one ox alone." "But we are poor," cried the people. "We don't even possess one ox." "All right," said the Lord, "Give me words of Torah. Say a prayer, and that will be sufficient." And the people said, "We don't know how to pray."

And God said to them, "All right, then weep. Just weep, and that will be enough." And weep they did. And God received their tears.

(coughing) I'm sorry. [00:27:00]

Weeping. They did weep, and God received their tears, and he answered their silent prayers: send them a prophet. A Talmudic source identifies him as Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the fiercest among Moses' faithful disciples. If it was him, he must have been at least 200 years old. Some sages believe that like the prophet Elijah, Pinehas, son of Eleazar, on special assignment -- could I get a glass of water, please? I'm sorry. Once in 35 years it's permitted, right? (laughter) [00:28:00] Thank you very much. (applause)

Pinehas, son of Eleazar on special assignment, also roams through history and the world bringing God's word to those in need. In the text, the prophet addresses himself not to Gideon alone but to the entire community of Israel. His message is harsh, almost pitiless. Thus said the lord God of Israel, "I brought you up from Egypt, and I removed you from the house of slavery. I rescued you from the hands of the Egyptians and from the land of all your oppressors. I drove them away from you and gave you their land. I said to you, 'I am the Lord your God. Do not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell.' But you did not heed my voice. You didn't hear me." [00:29:00]

That's all he had to communicate on God's behalf, and the rest was up to their imagination, as if to say, "I have given you so much, and you have let me down. That is why you have been suffering. And then an angel of God came and sat under the elm tree in a place called Ophra. Who was the angel? Malach in Hebrew means emissary or messenger. Was he the prophet who had spoken to the whole community already? All we know is that the place under the elm tree belonged to Gideon's father, Joash ha-Ezri. And Gideon was threshing wheat while the angel sitting under the tree speaks to him, as if to an old acquaintance, greeting him with the words like, "mighty hero".

Why was he sitting? Let's interrupt the narrative and quote a marvelous Midrashic commentary. [00:30:00] It is generally admitted that Gideon is neither a just man nor a son of just man. Actually, in the Tractate of Rosh Hashanah he is mentioned together with Yiftach and Samson as one of the *raykim* or hoodlums in the community. That is why the angel sat down instead of addressing Gideon immediately. He needed time to find something special, some kind of virtue that would make him worthy of his task. He couldn't find anything. And finally he saw him with Joash ha-Ezri, with his father as they were threshing wheat. At one point Gideon turned to his father and said, "Father, you are old. Should the Midianites arrive you will lack the strength to run away. Better go home. I shall work for you." And so the angel, reassured, turned to Gideon and said, "You have fulfilled [00:31:00] the commandment of *kibud av*," of honoring one's father. "You will have the honor of saving the children of Israel."

In the text itself the image of Gideon is unlike that of Yiftach and Samson, rather attractive, neither arrogant nor too modest. Gideon is a young man who remembers the lessons of Jewish history he must have learned in his childhood. And he is one who dares to question their validity or at least their

relevance. When the angel addresses him with the customary courtesy, *HaShem im'cha gibor ha'hayil*, which means may God be with you or God is with you, man of courage, Gideon doesn't say who are you? What do you want? Why me? He must have heard the prophet and made the connection between admonishment and the angel's greeting.

Instead he asks not without some irritation, "I beg you, sir, if God is with us then why have all these woes befallen us, [00:32:00] and where are all the miracles our fathers didn't stop telling us about when God freed us from Egypt? Why has God abandoned us now and handed us over to the Midianites?" In other words, God has given us freedom only to take it back? And here, according to the Talmud and the text it is no longer the angel but God himself who answers, "Go with this strength of yours and you shall save Israel from the grip of Midian. Behold, I have sent you." Admit it, Gideon should be happy. But he's not.

Now he wants more. He wants more than words. He wants proof that he was not dreaming or hallucinating. He wants certainty. And so like many of his peers among the prophets, he speaks with humility about his own [00:33:00] shortcomings, "I beg of you, my lord, with what shall I save Israel? Behold, my section is

the poorest in the tribe of Menashe. And in my father's house I am the youngest." In other words, how do you want me to undertake my mission without the proper means to fulfill it? Instead of reprimanding Gideon for his skepticism God gives him further reassurance.

"I shall be with you," says God. "And you shall strike all of Midian as if it were a single man." Now Gideon ought to be satisfied. He is not. What else does he want, our future hero? He says what is in his heart. He demands proof that it is really truly God's voice he has heard, not somebody else's. Listen to the way he formulates his wish. "If I have now found favor in your eyes, then please, perform a sign for me that it is you who is speaking with me." [00:34:00] And thinking perhaps that God or His angels need advice on how to obtain results he offers it, "Please, God, do not depart from here until I return to you with my offerings." And God acquiesces. "I shall remain here until you return."

When Gideon returns with his offering a flame shoots from a rock and consumes it before his eyes. Then the angel too disappeared. At last, with all these signs, Gideon's last trace of doubt must have vanished. He must now be persuaded it was an angel and that the angel was an angel of God who spoke to him.

At this point he is overcome with fear. Is he going to die even before waging one battle for his people? He had seen God. God reassures him, "Peace unto you. Don't worry. You will not die." [00:35:00] An outburst of gratitude, Gideon honors God by erecting on that very sight in Ophra an altar which he names shalom, peace. And the text says that this altar can be found there to this day.

Some of you may have decided to immediately go to Israel (laughs) to look for that place. But before doing so, the flight is two hours from now. Let's take a moment and reflect on the passage we have just studied together. In Talmudic literature special attention is given to it by a great number of sages. Gideon's encounter with God or his messenger, perhaps because of it, thus present some difficulties. Many masters fail to understand God's choice. Another man could have been a better candidate, more suitable for such [00:36:00] a momentous task.

After all, Gideon, the youngest of a family, had no special virtues or gifts and was surely without political or military experience. So why him? Listen to the Midrash. In those times when the people of Israel endured extreme pain and distress God was looking for someone who would plead to Him on their behalf.

But so poor were they all in good deeds and piety that He found none. Imagine, God couldn't find one. And then all of a sudden Gideon appeared before His eyes, and Gideon appealed to God through his humility, which is compared, in the Talmud, to the humility of Moses himself.

One source says it explicitly. Yeruba'al, the pseudonym for Gideon, *be'doro*, Gideon in his generation was as important as Moses was in his. Why? [00:37:00] Because like Moses, Gideon pleaded for Israel even when Israel was involved in sin. The text itself hints at such interpretation. When God answers Gideon saying, go with this strength, one wonders, since Gideon hasn't done anything yet, what strength is God referring to? He must refer to Gideon's courageous response to the angel. Instead of speaking on his own personal behalf Gideon spoke for the people of Israel who has now been abandoned, deserted by God. Admit it, and that took audacity.

At that very first moment during that first encounter yesterday's laborer became Israel's spokesman to God, the God of Israel. That is why, says the Yalkut Shimoni, God blessed be He, said to Gideon, "Since you had the strength to defend the [00:38:00] cause of Israel with me you will become its savior. For when Israel is in danger, to become its defender is both a

privilege and a duty." And that goes for all times, today as well as yesterday. Listen to a Talmudic commentary. When Gideon at the beginning refused, or at least showed reluctance to accept the divine mission to save Israel he committed seven sins. Still, God himself forbade anyone to criticize him by taking all those sins on himself, on God's. When Israel is in danger, God expects Gideon to become not its prosecutor but its witness, its defender.

Having received the principal elements of proof of his divine [00:39:00] appointment and the promise of success, Gideon was ready. It was in a dream that he received from God or his messenger his precise marching orders to search and destroy all idols and their altars, including the Asherah tree symbolizing the goddess Baal which belonged to his own father. He was then to erect an altar in honor of the God of Israel. How did Gideon know that a dream was more than a dream? He knew. Feeling the hostile reaction of his father's household and inhabitants of the city, he and 10 of his men waited for nightfall to implement God's instructions.

Next morning the people of the city awoke and found all their idols and temples in ruins. One can imagine their anger. In fact, it is in the text. The action drives forward at a

breathhtaking pace. They said to one another, who did this terrible thing? Feverishly they began looking for clues. Someone must have witnessed the operation. And soon everyone [00:40:00] concluded it's Gideon, son of Joash who did it. They rush to Joash and demanded, "Hand us over your son. He must die for he demolished the altar of Baal. And he has cut down the Asherah tree that was near it in your courtyard."

Interestingly, they saw to punish Gideon but not his accomplices. The Midrash wonders why Gideon needed 10 men to help him. Because he was afraid? Afraid in spite of God's assurances to stay with him and protect him? But then what is the meaning of all the compliments showered on him? One sage at least offers his support. Gideon needed 10 men because by obeying God's will he wanted to sanctify his name in public. And for an act of Kiddush HaShem, which is one of the most noble and glorious aspects of Jewish existence and activity, a minyan of 10 men is required. [00:41:00] Still he was the leader of the operation. A follow-up question. Who denounced him? Was it one of the 10 helpers?

Let's turn our attention to the city in which the story unfolds. Ophra as a community, as an urban center is not a place of which the inhabitants or their distant descendants could be proud

today. Frequently attacked, robbed, and humiliated by neighboring Midianite terrorists, they seemed to prefer submission to military, political, or even religious resistance. They got used to enmity and danger. Between two invasions life continued as usual, gray and routine. The Midianite cult of Baal was celebrated. An altar to his glory erected with the head of Ophra in charge of its daily upkeep.

It is not that the members of the tribe of Menashe broke their covenant with the God of Israel. They continued to have [00:42:00] faith in Him and recall His miracles on their behalf. One legend has it that the episode in which Gideon plays the first part has taken place Passover eve or the day after. This would explain why both the prophet and Gideon evoke the miracles performed by God in Egypt and afterwards. People think of God because of the past and of Baal because of the present. It's more confidant. In truth, Ophra is not a unique case. The Bible and the book of prophets are filled with tales in which God's wrath is poured over his people for their attachment to idols. If there is one law over which God never compromises it is related to idolatry.

Of course idolatry takes on a variety of forms, that, for instance, of a golden calf, an ox, a tree, or a human being.

David's injunction forbidding idolatry, [00:43:00] *lo yih'yeh be'cha eyl zar* is strangely formulated. For those who know Hebrew it's clear that the words ought to say *le'cha*, meaning to you, not *b'cha*, in you. And this kind of transgression is more subtle for it aims at the individual rather than at this other action.

Its name, vanity. A vain person is an idol worshipper for he or she believes that he or she is superior to others, worthier, more intelligent, more gifted than all of them. In other words, such people are their own slaves and their own idols. In Ophra people are less refined. Their idols are man-made objects. Do they really believe in their divinity as good pagans do? Their sin lies in their complacency in following Midianite customs and practices. Searching for easy solutions [00:44:00] they compromise. They think that God and idols do coexist, why not? If they are enraged by Gideon's deed it is because he imperiled not their happiness -- how could they be happy under foreign domination? -- but their stability.

Actually, they hope that his father will be as indignant as they. After all, isn't he also an idol worshipper? Hadn't he erected an altar for Baal on his own grounds? But they forget that Joash is first a father, a Jewish father, not the half-

assimilated man who confronts the enraged mob. His argument is brilliant, sharp, logical. Listen to the text. "And Joash said to those standing near him, 'Is it for you to avenge Baal that my son destroyed? For you to come to his rescue?'" He goes as far as agreeing with their prosecutorial condemnation of the culprit.

Yes, whoever offended [00:45:00] Baal must die while it is still morning, but if Baal is a god let Baal punish the man who destroyed his altar, not you. In other words, it's one or the other. Either Baal is a god, thus all power and capable of defending his own interests, or he is inept, powerless, not a god. Then what are you crying about? In both cases your anger is misplaced, and your thirst for vengeance is totally misguided. The best thing for you is to go home and leave us alone. That is exactly what happened. (break in recording) man to speak up with courage for the mob to quiet down. One voice of reason can prevent catastrophe.

It was Gideon's moral strength that enabled his father's to surface, father and son now united in faith moved their community to reject bloodshed and idolatry. That day, says the text, [00:46:00] Gideon would receive the surname Jerub-Baal, the victor over Baal, or the one who planted fear in Baal. That

is why he is called that in the book of Samuel. But someone should say what we all say there, that now Gideon is no longer the same. What brought the change in his personality? His encounter with God or his messenger? His faith which he so dramatically recovered? His triumph over Baal and its worshippers? His conviction that he would surely provoke war with Midian? As a matter of fact, it would be a war not only with Midian but with its allies as well, the Amalekites. Again, let's open the text.

All of the Midianites, the Amalekites, and the sons of the east gathered together, crossed the Jordan, and camped in the valley of Yizre'el. Then without any transition the text reveals Gideon's new role. God's spirit clothed Gideon, [00:47:00] is how it is now described. He blew the Shofar, and the family of Abiezer was with him, the entire family. He sent messengers to the tribe of Menashe who also joined his troops. He then dispatched emissaries to the tribes of Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, and they too became allies and companions in arms against the aggressor.

Clearly Gideon has outdone himself. Overnight yesterday's wheat thresher turned into a statesman demonstrating true qualities of political leadership and military genius. Facing a

multinational and ethnically diverse enemy, he managed to create a multi-tribal army that remained linked by the same past and faithful to the same God, all motivated by the same desire, to ensure the religious and national sovereignty of their people and its land. All things considered, [00:48:00] the situation seems promising. Israel is united. It has a leader. However, in secondary sources quoted by the Malbim, this beginning seems lacks encouraging. A pincer maneuver seems to have backfired, and units of the three armies that came to the rescue of Menashe died on the battlefield.

One source maintains that Gideon's brothers also died there. This would explain Gideon's sudden depression, for he became depressed. His chronic sickness has awakened. He's overcome by doubts that he finds difficult to shake. At every step they grow in intensity. Before it was all so much easier. He threshed wheat by day and slept well at night. He knew how to protect himself and the wheat from the Midianites. The family's hiding places in the mountains were useful, but now things have changed. Ever since God noticed him, placing [00:49:00] growing responsibilities on his shoulders, it is with anguish that he anticipates each event, every decision. He doubts his own judgment. He has doubts about himself. In spite of God's earlier kind words and gesture he, the former laborer, a simple

mortal, son of an idol worshipper, still wonders whether he's worthy of his election of his place in Jewish history.

At the very moment when the drama is realized, before sending his troops to do battle with the powerful enemy for the first time, Gideon again needs to be reassured. For this he challenges God. Granted, other leaders have done so, with heavenly permission, mind you. In the Jewish tradition, as we know, it is permitted to submit certain demands to the king of the universe. God knows both the beginning and the outcome. Man wants to obtain a spark of that knowledge. It is only natural. At times God agrees. He even agrees to be tested. [00:50:00] That too is part of our religious tradition. I believe that what we read in the Akedah, *Elokim nisa Avraham*, God has tested Avraham, I believe, it was a double test. Avraham tested God as well, *kavyachol*.

But in this case doesn't Gideon go a bit far? He addresses God as follows. If you wish to save Israel through my hand, as you said you do, behold. I am spreading out a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there will be dew only on the fleece and the entire ground will be dry, then I will know that you will help Israel through my hand, as you said you would. Once again God obliges him. Gideon arose next morning and squeezed the

fleece. He pressed dew from the fleece, a full bowl [00:51:00] of water. Is Gideon happy now? Free of self-doubt? He has received dramatic evidence of God's favorable attitude towards him. He must be at peace at last with himself. Well, he's not.

Like a child who never runs out of new requests, Gideon dares to go farther. Don't be angry with me, he says to God, but I must test you once more. This time through the fleece of wool let there be dryness on the fleece alone, and let there be dew on the ground all around it. Again God obliged Gideon. On that night there was dryness on the fleece alone, and there was dew on the entire ground around it. What can readers say about such double victory? That of God followed by Gideon's, patience please. The war hasn't even begun yet. And Gideon's anxiety hasn't finished. He's still doubting. [00:52:00]

In light of these events Gideon has had a reason to feel proud, proud of having united his people, proud of being the commander in chief of a vast army, proud of having collected so many promises, so many assurances from God. At this point our general deserves a glass of champagne, kosher, naturally. Not so fast. Please wait. Now it is God's turn to spring some surprises. Just as Gideon and his troops camp at Ein Harod, facing the Midianites in the valley, God tells him that in His

view the army is actually too big. Budgetary reasons? No. With God all arguments are theological.

With all these warriors equipped with best weapons, Israel is bound to win the battle. And what will public opinion say? That they won the war, they, not God. [00:53:00] Therefore, a reduction of human participants is required. To allow Gideon to save face in front of his officers and men, God offers him clever practical advice how not to embarrass soldiers who would want to leave but are worried over criticism. Tell the people that whoever is afraid, let him turn back and depart for Mount Gilead at dawn. Cowards in Gideon's army? No. Family men eager to return to their families, that's another story.

Many thought that no one or very few would heed Gideon's call or that only few would leave their comrades to do battle for them. It's a historic battle willed by God. Wrong. Twenty-two thousand men withdrew, were afraid. Only 10,000 remained. Not bad, as armies go. A few divisions, regiments, brigades. But they were elite [00:54:00] fighters, all volunteers, the best, the purest, the most determined idealists. They knew how to fight valiantly and win. Well, will the war finally begin? At the risk of upsetting lovers of war stories I feel compelled to warn against unnecessary haste. In the eyes of God, who is

after all the supreme commander of all armed forces, Gideon still has too many troops.

He's going to lose many of them not to the enemy but to God, who says that he alone will decide who will let go and who will stay. He asks Gideon to take the remaining troops to the river. New test is awaiting them there. Quote, "Everyone who laps water with his tongue as a dog laps, stand him apart as you will also separate anyone who kneels on his knees to drink." And it happened that the number of those who lapped with their hands to their mouth were 300 men, [00:55:00] and all the rest knelt on their knees to drink water. God then said to Gideon, "To the 300 men who lapped, I shall save you, and I shall deliver Midian into your hand. Let all the others return to their homes."

Poor Gideon. His troops had dwindled to 300 men. And it is with them that he's expected to confront an international military alliance and come out victorious? For once one understands his doubts. Except that now they are less founded since God has unequivocally pledged to him that with these 300 men -- God numbered them, He counted them -- he will be victorious. Of course, you may ask, what is this bizarre story

about lapping water with the hands verses kneeling to drink?
Let's open the Midrash. There everything is simple.

We discover that those who kneel to drink water [00:56:00] have always knelt before idols. They're used to kneel. Therefore their willingness to fight courageously against those same idol worshipers is suspect. But you may argue, since when is water an idol? Actually, water is not an idol. But when one is bent over water, one sees one's own image. It is that image, says the Midrash, that they began to worship. Haven't we already concluded that narcissism is a form of idolatry?

Now, having reached the very end of our curiosity and patience, aren't we entitled to witness at least one battle? If only to see how a few hundred young Jews defeated huge enemy armies? Sorry. We must wait again, wait for nightfall, for the dream of the oncoming night. Without dreams, little is possible.

[00:57:00] That night Gideon has a dream. Really? Gideon will soon shape the destiny of his people, and he manages to fall asleep? Oh yes, he has strong nerves. All military chiefs have iron nerves. After giving the ultimate go-ahead for the largest military invasion of Normandy the allied supreme commander General Dwight Eisenhower went to bed and slept. And I never understood. How could he? But I was never a commander. But

then doesn't Jacob, *l'havdil*, do the same thing the night before his fateful encounter with his brother Esau? Doesn't he, in a dream, see a gigantic ladder whose tip touches the sky?

There is some creative sleeping possible. You can do many things sleeping. In his sleep Gideon hears God ordering him to go down to the enemy camp. Had the dream stopped there it would have been right, all right. But it continues [00:58:00] with God adding the following advice, if you are afraid, Gideon, take with you Phurah, your young aide, and go there together. You will listen to what is being said in that camp. You will come back encouraged. God was right. Gideon, the great hero is afraid. He still has doubts. So he does what God tells him to do. He goes down to the enemy camp with Phurah, and the two men penetrate the Midianite camp, which is teeming with soldiers from all nationalities in the region.

Normally before such a spectacle Gideon would lose courage. But then he hears two Midianites speaking. One tells the other of a dream he recently had. A noise was heard in the camp that was so loud that it made his tent crash. To which the other replied, it is a sword of Gideon, son of Joash, that is responsible. God must have decided to hand over the Midianite camp to him. Hey, God [00:59:00] psychological warfare?

Perhaps. But it was enough for Gideon. And suddenly he realizes that enemy army is demoralized. Quickly he turns to his small group of soldiers and orders the attack.

For amateur strategies I suggest they read the book of Judges, the passage describing the nocturnal offensive with its spectacular aspects. Gideon proves to be a brilliant commander with extraordinary powers. He uses horns, torches, and shouts to terrorize, shock, and paralyze the enemy. He knows how to benefit from the element of surprise, by spreading confusion in the enemy ranks. The Midianites expected an army of thousands and thousands and thousands, not a small brigade of hundreds. They could not have anticipated the mobility of Gideon's officers, the psychological tricks, the secret transfer of some units from Ein Harod to the Hill of Moreh, the mobilization of other Jewish tribes, the swift decisions of whom to send where, with what arms to do what when [01:00:00] the order to disseminate flames of the torches, the pursuit of fleeing enemy troops in total disorder, the decapitation of the chieftains. It becomes hard to follow. Too much is being said in too little.

The running story of this battle reads like more than reportage, an extraordinary reportage of war correspondence. Everything is

there. The intelligence of the commander in chief Gideon, the discipline of his men, the pursuit of the vanquished enemy soldiers. One would think that Gideon had never done anything in his entire life outside the military. Was it his idea to launch his exemplary preventive war? Was it God's? On the battlefields the weapons fall silent. Israel's victory is total. End of story? No. For Gideon, the wheat thresher who overnight became the triumphant savior of his people it is far from being over. The Midianite army [01:01:00] is defeated but not annihilated.

Add to this a new development. We are suddenly informed of a quarrel between Gideon and the tribe of Ephraim. Let's study the context. With the Midianites on the run Gideon asks the people of Ephraim dwelling near the Jordan River to intercept the enemy and finish them off. Mission accomplished. Two Canaanite princes are captured and beheaded by warriors from the tribe of Ephraim who present their heads to Gideon. One might expect to witness a scene of embracing and rejoicing among brothers. Again you are mistaken. Let's read together. The man of Ephraim said to Gideon, what have you done to us, not summoning us when you began the war when you went out to fight Midian? Why do you ask us so late? And they argued with him. *Be'chozka*, says the text, vehemently or violently. [01:02:00]

Really? Safe from death or slavery, Jews have nothing better to do than quarrel? Oh yes, it happened then. It happens these days too. It's human nature and Jewish nature. We are together when facing danger, but we move away from one another when danger is over. Fortunately Gideon is also a diplomat. He flatters them saying, what have I achieved compared to you? You are more courageous. And he uses a poetic metaphor. Are not the gleanings of Ephraim better than the vintage of Aviezer? Into your hands God gave the Midianite leaders Oreb and Zeeb. What could I do that would compare to your heroism?

And though these words could have been interpreted differently, emphasizing God's divine intervention rather than the courage of the neighbors' or cousins' warriors, but they impressed Ephraim. The incident was quickly [01:03:00] closed. There will be others. While pursuing the Midianites, Gideon and his 300 men, none of them fell in battle, safely cross the Jordan and went through the city of Sukkot. To its inhabitants he said give us some loaves of bread, for we are exhausted but still hunting down the two kings of Midian, Zevka [sic] and Zalmunna. Incredibly the leader of Sukkot refused, not only to feed them but also to believe them.

They said, why should we give you bread? Are the kings already in your hands? Furious, Gideon predicted their punishment. When God delivers the two kings in my hand, I shall thresh your flesh with desert thorns and briars. The same thing happened in Penuel, the same skepticism, the same ingratitude, the same insolence. The real end of the war was now imminent. Gideon and his men captured the Midianite army and brought its two kings to Sukkot. Meeting an adolescent in the street, [01:04:00] Gideon asked him for a list of the city's dignitaries. And the adolescent wrote down, which is proof that already then everybody could read and write. The adolescent wrote down 70 names, the same who had denied Gideon help.

Gathered at a solemn session Gideon addressed them not without sarcasm. He wished to see the two Midianite kings before feeding my men, here they are. He had kept his word. The 70 leaders, guilty of selfishness and lack of solidarity were punished as were those of Penuel whose tower he demolished. They used to be proud of it, but they no longer were proud of anything. Some inhabitants resisted with weapons. They were killed. Having settled his accounts locally Gideon turned his attention to his two royal captives. He questioned them. "Who were the men you executed in Tabor?" "Princes like you," they replied. "They were my brothers," said Gideon, [01:05:00] "sons

of my mother. I swear before God, who is eternal, that had you spared them I would not have sentenced you to death."

Question. Was it only now that he discovered the death of his brothers, or was it a trick to see if the prisoners would have the courage to tell the truth? Opinions are varied. Anyway, for obvious reasons the kings had to pay with their lives. What follows in the text is a surprise. Gideon said to his oldest son Jether, "Stand up. Kill them." What? He had children? They weren't mentioned before. Where were they? What kind of father was he? Still young, Jether did not draw his sword. He was afraid, says the text. Afraid of whom? Of what? Did his father insist? All we know is that both prisoners, the royal prisoners told Gideon that as a matter of protocol of pride they preferred to be beheaded [01:06:00] by him. That was their last wish. And Gideon granted it.

This time the war is really over. The people of Israel, recognizing what it owes Gideon, urged him to become their king with the promise that his sons' children would inherit his crown. Gideon refused. "Neither I nor my son nor his son will be your king. God alone is our king." Nevertheless he asked one favor. Let the jewels taken from the enemy be his. He did not want them for himself, rather, he made them into an ephod, a

special vestment for the high priest which he hung in his home in Ophra.

Doubtless he wished that people forever remembered its debt to God, but the opposite occurred. People came to see the ephod as if it were an idol, comments Resh Lakish in the Talmud. Three men lived a happy life, a long life, Abel, and David, and Gideon. The first [01:07:00] two deserved it. The third, Gideon did not. For in producing the Ephod he turned the people of God away from God. We are about to reach a denouement of this disturbing story of a man who even when he meant well never succeeded in doing things without being criticized.

What have we learned from Gideon and the story of Gideon? We have learned that we must recognize when Israel is in danger and when we recognize that Israel is in danger we must commit our lives to Israel. And then stop being judges, only being those that we are supposed to be, the allies of Israel. And these days Israel is in danger. Those of us who have been there recently, my wife and I have been there for Sukkot, came back with a heavy heart. [01:08:00] It is inconceivable that a Jew could be living his or her life as if there was no such fear and such sadness in Israel. What to do? I don't know what to do. I can tell you only what not to do, not to turn away. We must,

in our soul, in our heart, in our life, think again and again that what is happening there happens to us as well simply because we are our brothers' keepers.

Granted, thanks to Gideon the country knew 40 years of prosperity and peace again. Gideon could go home and live a normal life with his family. We are told that he had many wives and 70 sons. Listen, in conclusion, after Gideon passed away the children of [01:09:00] Israel again prostituted themselves by adopting the cult of Baal, which replaced their faith in God. They forgot the eternal one who saved them from their enemies, and they showed their ingratitude towards Gideon, who fought so hard for their wellbeing. Like Joshua Gideon died alone and abandoned by the people whose defender he had been with God first against the enemy later.

How are we to comprehend such lack of gratitude on the part of a people who believed in gratitude? One sage comments, "It is by behaving unkindly towards the house of Gideon that the people forgot God." It is not an accident that the generations of the judges are described with such harshness in Talmudic literature. Was it because of their pension for idolatry? Actually, no. Their desire to forget [01:10:00] where they came from, on whose behalf, and for what was worse. Gideon never forgot. And I

love him because unlike all the murderous fanatics of all times,
he was not afraid to doubt because he had faith. Thank you.

(applause)

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