

Setting the Stage:

Judges 1-3 and the Promise of Patterns

Rachel Sharansky Danziger * June 1st 2021 * Storytelling and the rise of Kings lesson #1

Course description:

Over the course of three biblical books and three bloody centuries, the ancient Israelites transformed from scattered tribes led by temporary saviors into a united nation ruled by a king. This course will ask how the Tanach chooses to construct the story of this transformation. How does the biblical narrator handle conflict and character arcs, dialogue, and plot? And what can these storytelling techniques tell us about the ideas and vision that the texts are trying to impart?

This course will follow the rise of the Israelite kingdom through civil wars and failed relationships, and explore the concepts, and the warnings, that the tale conveys.

1: Expectations in storytelling

David M. Gunn and Donna Nolan Fewell, Narrative in the Hebrew Bible, 103:

While they may be structured around real-life experiences, literary plots differ from real life. Whereas, in real life, events often seem random, narrative shapes events into meaningful patterns... Our lives, even particular episodes in our lives, do not have the distinct parameters that we find in literary plots. Nor, for that matter, are they commonly accorded obvious meaning. Consequently, while plots must be similar enough to real life so that we can understand and relate to them... they must also be different in order for us to appreciate them. We see enough disjointedness in everyday life. When we read, we expect to see significance.

Peter Brooks, Reading for the Plot, Design and Intention in Narrative, 21:

Narrative stories depend on meaning delayed, partially filled in, stretched out.

Peter Guber, “The Four Truths of the Storyteller”, HBR:

Every storyteller is in the expectations-management business.

2. A new beginning

Judges 1:1-3

(1) After the death of Joshua, the Israelites inquired of the LORD, “Which of us shall be the first to go up against the Canaanites and attack them?” (2) The LORD replied, “Let [the tribe of] Judah go up. I now deliver the land into their hands.” (3) Judah then said to their brother-tribe Simeon, “Come up with us to our allotted territory and let us attack the Canaanites, and then we will go with you to your allotted territory.” So Simeon joined them.

Joshua 1:1-2

(1) After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ attendant: (2) “My servant Moses is dead. Prepare to cross the Jordan, together with all this people, into the land that I am giving to the Israelites.

שופטים א':א-ג'

(א) וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי מוֹת יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וַיִּשְׁאַלּוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בַּיהוָה לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲלֶה-לָנוּ אֶל-הַכְּנַעֲנִי בַתְּחִלָּה לְהִלָּחֵם בּוֹ: (ב) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה יְהוּדָה יַעֲלֶה הַגֵּיהַנֹּתָנִי אֶת-הָאָרֶץ בְּיָדוֹ: (ג) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוּדָה לְשִׁמְעוֹן אָחִיו עֲלֵה אִתִּי בְּגוֹרְלִי וְנִלְחַמְתֶּם בְּכַנְעָנִי וְהִלַּכְתִּי גַם-אִנִּי אִתְּךָ בְּגוֹרְלֶךָ וַיֵּלֶךְ אִתּוֹ שִׁמְעוֹן:

יהושע א':א-ב'

(א) וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי מוֹת מֹשֶׁה עֶבֶד יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן-נֹון מְשֻׁרֵת מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: (ב) מֹשֶׁה עַבְדִּי מֵת וְעַתָּה קוּם עֲבֹר אֶת-הַיַּרְדֵּן הַזֶּה אִתְּךָ וְכָל-הָעָם הַזֶּה אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי נֹתֵן לָהֶם לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

3: Failure

Judges 1:27

(27) Manasseh did not dispossess [the inhabitants of] Beth-shean and its dependencies, or [of] Taanach and its dependencies, or the inhabitants of Dor and its dependencies, or the inhabitants of Ibleam and its dependencies, or the inhabitants of Megiddo and its dependencies. The Canaanites persisted in dwelling in this region.

שופטים א':כ"ז

(כז) וְלֹא-הוֹרִישׁ מְנַשֶּׁה אֶת-בֵּית-שָׁאֵן וְאֶת-בְּנוֹתֶיהָ וְאֶת-תַּעֲנָךְ וְאֶת-בְּנֵי-הָאֵת וְאֶת-יִשְׁבֵּי [יִשְׁבֵּי] דוֹר וְאֶת-בְּנוֹתֶיהָ וְאֶת-יִשְׁבֵּי יְבֻלְעָם וְאֶת-בְּנֵי-הָאֵת וְאֶת-יִשְׁבֵּי מְגִדּוֹ וְאֶת-בְּנוֹתֶיהָ וַיּוֹאֵל הַכְּנַעֲנִי לְשִׁבְתָּ בְּאֶרֶץ הַזֹּאת:

4: God's interference

Judges 2:1-3

(1) An angel of the LORD came up from Gilgal to Bochim and said, "I brought you up from Egypt and I took you into the land which I had promised on oath to your fathers. And I said, 'I will never break My covenant with you. (2) And you, for your part, must make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you must tear down their altars.' But you have not obeyed Me—look what you have done! (3) Therefore, I have resolved not to drive them out before you; they shall become your oppressors, and their gods shall be a snare to you."

שופטים ב':א-ג'

(א) וַיַּעַל מִלְאֲכֵי־הַיְהוָה מִן־הַגִּלְגָּל אֶל־הַבְּכִים (פ)
וַיֹּאמֶר אֶעֱלֶה אֶתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם וְאָבִיא אֶתְכֶם אֶל־
הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאֲבֹתֵיכֶם וְאָמַר לֹא־אֶפְרָ
בְּרִיתִי אִתְּכֶם לְעוֹלָם: (ב) וְאַתֶּם לֹא־תִכְרַתוּ בְּרִית־
לְיֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת מִזְבְּחוֹתֵיהֶם תִּתְצֹוּ וְלֹא־
שְׁמַעְתֶּם בְּקוֹלִי מֵהַיּוֹם הַזֶּה עַשִּׂיתֶם: (ג) וְגַם אִמְרַתִּי
לֹא־אֶגְרַשׁ אֹתְכֶם מִפְּנֵיכֶם וְהָיוּ לְכֶם לְצַדִּיקִים
וְאֱלֹהֵיהֶם יִהְיוּ לְכֶם לְמוֹקֵשׁ:

5: The pattern-to-come

Judges 2:10-19

(10) And all that generation were likewise gathered to their fathers. Another generation arose after them, which had not experienced the LORD or the deeds that He had wrought for Israel. (11) And the Israelites did what was offensive to the LORD. They worshiped the Baalim (12) and forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They followed other gods, from among the gods of the peoples around them, and bowed down to them; they provoked the LORD... (14) Then the LORD was incensed at Israel, and He handed them over to foes who plundered them. He surrendered them to their enemies on all sides, and they could no longer hold their own against their enemies. (15) In all their campaigns, the hand of the LORD was against them to their undoing, as the LORD had declared and as the LORD had sworn to them; and they were in great distress. (16) Then the LORD raised up chieftains who delivered them from those who plundered them... (18) When the LORD raised up chieftains for them, the LORD would be with the chieftain and would save them from their enemies during the chieftain's lifetime; for the LORD would be moved to pity by their moanings because of those who oppressed and crushed them. (19) But when the chieftain died, they would again act basely, even more than the preceding generation—following other gods, worshiping them, and bowing down to them; they omitted none of their practices and stubborn ways.

שופטים ב':י-י"ט

(י) וְגַם כָּל־הַדּוֹר הַהוּא נֶאֱסָפוּ אֶל־אֲבוֹתָיו
וַיִּקְם דּוֹר אַחֵר אַחֲרֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדְעוּ אֶת־
יְהוָה וְגַם אֶת־הַמַּעֲשֵׂה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל:
(יא) וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הָרַע בְּעֵינֵי
יְהוָה וַיַּעֲבְדוּ אֶת־הַבַּעַלִּים: (יב) וַיַּעֲזְבוּ אֶת־
יְהוָה וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתָם הַמוֹצִיא אוֹתָם מִמִּצְרַיִם
מִצְרַיִם וַיִּלְכוּ אַחֲרָיו וְאֱלֹהִים אַחֲרָיו מֵאֱלֹהֵי
הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר סָבִיבוֹתֵיהֶם וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לָהֶם
וַיִּכְעֲסוּ אֶת־יְהוָה... (יד) וַיַּחֲרֵאֲרָה יְהוָה
בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּתְּנֵם בְּיַד־שָׂסִים וַיִּשְׁסוּ אוֹתָם
וַיִּמְכְּרֵם בְּיַד אוֹיְבֵיהֶם מִסָּבִיב וְלֹא־יָכְלוּ עוֹד
לְעַמֵּד לִפְנֵי אוֹיְבֵיהֶם: (טו) בְּכָל וְ אֲשֶׁר יִצְאוּ
יְדֵי־יְהוָה הִיִּתְּהֶבֶם לְרַעַה כַּאֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר יְהוָה
וְכַאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע יְהוָה לָהֶם וַיַּצֵּר לָהֶם מְאֹד:
(טז) וַיִּקְם יְהוָה שְׂפָטִים וַיּוֹשִׁיעוּם מִיַּד
שָׂסִיהֶם... (יח) וַיִּכִּי־הַקִּים יְהוָה וְלָהֶם שְׂפָטִים
וְהָיָה יְהוָה עִם־הַשְּׂפָטִים וְהוֹשִׁיעֵם מִיַּד אוֹיְבֵיהֶם
כָּל יְמֵי הַשּׁוֹפֵט כִּי־יָנַחֵם יְהוָה מִנְּאֻקָּתָם מִפְּנֵי
לַחְצֵיהֶם וְדַחְקֵיהֶם: (יט) וְהָיָה וּבְמֹת הַשּׁוֹפֵט
יָשְׁבוּ וְהִשְׁחִיתוּ מֵאֲבוֹתָם לְלַקֵּת אַחֲרֵי־אֱלֹהִים
אַחֲרָיו לְעַבְדָּם וּלְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֹת לָהֶם לֹא הִפִּילוּ
מִמֶּנּוּ לְלִיהֶם וּמִדַּרְכָּם הַקָּשָׁה:

6: Narrower stories

Michael Waltzer, In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible, 51:

Then the focus shifts again, back to family history. This time the families are dynasties or would-be dynasties, but the conflicts are the same as before... The people fade into the distance... Our attention is focused in both cases on the household.

7: An alarming precedent

Exodus 1:6-8

(6) Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation. (7) But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them. (8) A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph.

שמות א':ו-ח'

(ו) וַיָּמָת יוֹסֵף וְכָל-אָחָיו וְכָל הַדּוֹר הַהוּא: (ז) וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל פָּרּוּ וַיִּשְׂרְצוּ וַיִּרְבּוּ וַיַּעֲצֶמּוּ בְּמֵאֵד מְאֹד וַתִּמְלֵא הָאָרֶץ אֹתָם: (ח) וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ-חָדָשׁ עַל-מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדַע אֶת-יוֹסֵף.

8: And so it starts

Judges 3:7-8

(7) The Israelites did what was offensive to the LORD; they ignored the LORD their God and worshiped the Baalim and the Asheroth. (8) The LORD became incensed at Israel and surrendered them to King Cushan-rishathaim of Aram-naharaim; and the Israelites were subject to Cushan-rishathaim for eight years.

שופטים ג':ז-ח'

(ז) וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-הָרַע בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁכַּחוּ אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיהֶם וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ אֶת-הַבָּעֲלִים וְאֶת-הָאֲשֵׁרוֹת: (ח) וַיַּחַר-אַף יְהוָה בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּמְכְּרֵם בְּיַד כּוּשָׁן רִישַׁתַּיִם מֶלֶךְ אֲרָם נַהֲרָיִם וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ בְנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-כוּשָׁן רִישַׁתַּיִם שְׁמֹנֶה שָׁנִים: