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TOLA BEN PUAH: SAVIOR OF ISRAEL

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I. Tola's Narrative

The story of Tola ben Puah is hardly well-known. Indeed, at first glance, the Biblical account barely presents a story at all. Comprising just two verses, there is plenty of room, even in a short essay, to reproduce the entire passage:

> After Abimelech, Tola son of Puah son of Dodo, a man of Issachar, arose to deliver [*le-hoshia*; root: *yud-shin-ayin*] Israel. He lived at Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim. He led Israel for twenty-three years; then he died and was buried at Shamir. (Judges 10:1-2)[1]

Tola is absent from the rest of Scripture. With so little primary source material about him to work with, he garners, not surprisingly, fairly little attention in rabbinic literature and the classic commentaries as well. And yet a close reading indicates there is more here than first meets the eye – starting with at least two noteworthy questions to address. The challenge to answering these queries posed by the dearth of other material about Tola also affords the reader an opportunity to imagine what may have happened, taking clues from the story's text and its context.

Let's start with salvation. While the text states that Tola "arose to deliver Israel," it does not identify from whom – or from what – he rescued them. To be sure, saving the nation from its enemies was a central function of the Judges, as stressed in the Book's introductory chapters, which outline the "cycle" of recurring Israelite behavior during this lengthy period (2:11-23): After the people would sin

[1] Unless otherwise noted, translations of Scripture are taken from the Jewish Publication Society, 1917 or 1985 versions, with adjustments as necessary. Other translations are the author's. Verse references are to Judges unless otherwise noted.

by serving foreign deities, leading an angry God to place them in enemy hands[2] – He, having heard their suffering, "raised up chieftains who delivered them [*vayoshi'um*] from those who plundered them" (2:16).[3] These verses foreshadow to the reader that the Judges whose stories appear in the following chapters (3-16) would bring salvation from Israel's enemy oppressors. This is certainly true of those with relatively longer narratives ("Major Judges"), each of whose opponent the Book of Judges identifies, typically labeling their redemptive efforts with a form of the *yud-shin-ayin* root.[4] And while these markers are missing for most of the "Minor Judges"[5] (with stories of up to three verses), Tola, one of two exceptions to that rule (with Shamgar, who smites the Philistines (3:31)), is the only Judge – Major or Minor – for whom Scripture uses this root without identifying an adversary.

Only Tola saves the people without an explicit enemy. And although some, like *Daat Mikra* (10:1),[6] assume Tola defeated a foreign foe anyway, the absence of an enemy in a salvation story is striking, and leaves us to wonder: might he have saved the people from something else? And if so, from what?

To attempt to answer these questions, we'll need to consider the context in which Tola's tale takes place.

The second query involves our protagonist's lineage. The Hebrew wording at issue is *Tola ben Puah ben Dodo*. According to many commentaries and translations, including the one cited above, much as *ben Puah* means "son of Puah," so too *ben Dodo* means "son of Dodo," with Dodo connoting a person's name. Initially, this approach seems reasonable enough, as the name Dodo itself appears elsewhere in Scripture (II Samuel 23:9; I Chronicles 11:12),[7] which also features the similarly-rooted (*daled-vav-daled*) names Dodavahu (II Chronicles 20:37) and, of course, David.[8]

On the other hand, interpreting *ben Dodo* as a name here would make Tola an anomaly, as the only Judge whose name is recorded alongside both his father's and grandfather's names. (For most, but not all, of the other Judges, the Bible identifies the father's name – but for none, the grandfather.[9]) Moreover, Tola and Puah are "classic" Issachar names, being two of the original tribe-head's children who, with Yov (or Yashuv)[10] and Shimron, often are grouped

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[2] A punishment Divinely forewarned. See, e.g., Exodus 23:32-33, 34:10-12, Numbers 33:55, and Joshua 23:13.

[3] For similar descriptions of the cycle, see I Samuel 12:8-12 and Psalms 106:34-47.

[4] The Major Judges and their specified oppressors (*yud-shin-ayin* references are underlined): Othniel overcomes Aram (3:7-11 (3:9)); Ehud - Moab (3:12-30 (3:15)); Deborah and Barak - the Canaanites (chapters 4-5); Gideon - Midian and others (chapters 6-8 (6:14-15; 8:22)); Jephtah - Ammon (chapter 11); and Samson battles the Philistines (chapters 13-16 (13:5)).

[5] The Minor Judges are Shamgar (3:30); Tola (10:1-2); Jair (10:3-5); Ibzan (12:8-10); Elon (12:11-12); and Abdon (12:13-15).

[6] And perhaps Radak (10:1).

[7] In each case, interestingly, as *ben Dodo*.

[8] As noted by *Daat Mikra* to 10:1.

[9] Apart from, perhaps, Abimelech, son of Gideon son of Yoash, though his status as a Judge is debatable; see below.

[10] Genesis uses Yov; Numbers has Yashuv.

together – alone – as a Biblical foursome (e.g., Genesis 46:13, Numbers 26:23-24, and I Chronicles 7:1).[11] While only Tola and Puah feature explicitly as names here, one might see "he lived at Shamir" [*ve-hu yosheiv be-Shamir*] as an alliterative allusion to Yashuv and Shimron, arguably rounding out the quartet.[12] Regardless, the Bible never identifies another person named Dodo (or something similar) as descending from Issachar, and doing so here, in a passage which otherwise mentions, or alludes to, only characters with the traditional tribal names, might be unlikely.

If *dodo* is not a name, it could mean "his uncle,"[13] with *ben dodo* meaning "his uncle's son," i.e., his first cousin. To whom would this refer? Theoretically, the phrase could be self-referential, to Tola or Puah (e.g., with Puah, in addition to being Tola's father, also related to him as the son of Tola's uncle), but this seems extremely unlikely, since such scenarios could only result from an incestuous relationship. Eyeing 10:1's opening clause, Radak suggests that the phrase "after Abimelech" provides the more plausible antecedent: "And in some versions [of the Targum, *ben dodo* is translated as]: 'son of his father's brother' – meaning, Abimelech's cousin."[14]

Whether or not the text reveals a familial relationship between them, however, our verse makes clear the chronological connection: Tola succeeded Abimelech as leader. To fully appreciate the importance of that transition, we need to understand not only the latter's story, which actually begins with the lengthy narrative of the previous Judge – his father Gideon son of Yoash – but also the nature of Israelite leadership in the Book of Judges overall.

II. Leadership in Judges

Judges opens by highlighting that Joshua, unlike Moses, died without appointing a successor, leaving a vacuum in national leadership (1:1, partly repeating Joshua 24:29). Instead, having grown old and with the conquest west of the Jordan River mostly, though not fully, completed on his watch, he sent the tribes back to their respective territories to finish the job themselves (2:6; Joshua 24:28). Unfortunately, as chapter 1 details, tribe after tribe failed to do so.[15]

This failure characterizes Israelite behavior throughout the Book,[16] and was a principal driver for the cycle noted above. By not totally uprooting

[11] The Chronicles verse, though starting a passage listing multiple Issacharites, still separates this group as a foursome: "The sons of Issachar: Tola, Puah, Yashuv, and Shimron – four."

[12] See R. Yigal Ariel, *Oz Ve-anava: Iyunim bi-Joshua Ve-Shoftim*, 261, alluding to this idea.

[13] As in, e.g., Leviticus 25:49.

[14] Abravanel (10:1) concurs.

[15] Notable exceptions are Judah and Simeon, who cooperated towards conquering their territories, and Issachar, who is absent from chapter 1.

[16] See, e.g., near the Book's end, the Danite advanced-guard's complaint to their brethren for "sitting idle! Don't delay; go and invade the land and take possession of it for God has delivered it into your hand…" (18:9-10).

the land's indigenous idol-worshiping nations, the Jews left themselves exposed to the latter's corrupting influences, repeatedly following their heretical ways and, consequently, incurring God's wrath. Chapter 2's sin-suffering-sorrow-salvation-start-again sequence was thus a natural outgrowth of chapter 1's enduring inaction.

Joshua's failure to select a successor triggered a lengthy era of uncertain continuity of leadership in Israel, which lasted until the advent of the monarchy. In that case, it was the nation's yearning for such continuity that led to Saul's coronation: when the Prophet Samuel himself grew old, the people – facing war with Ammon and remarking that Samuel's sons were unworthy successors – requested a king (I Samuel 8:1-5). Why didn't they ask for another Judge to lead them into battle? Considering perhaps the central difference between the two institutions – automatic and immediate succession – it seems likely they were eyeing the future. With a monarch, the nation would not only get a king to lead them in battle now, but they would also secure assurance that, when he died, another would succeed him automatically.

Contrast the Judges – who also were generally more regional than national leaders: each time a Judge died, no one knew who, or if anyone, would take over for him. The leadership vacuum conceivably opened a space for national doubt and insecurity. When the following oppressor then arose, the people – guideless – were then left to cry out from their suffering, and nervously speculate if and when God would send someone else to save them.

The early Judges era – during which, recurrently, years of affliction followed a Judge's death before the next one appeared – might have been particularly ripe for this phenomenon:[17] The people served Cushan-rishathaim for eight years before Othniel emerged (3:8-9); Eglon subjugated them for eighteen years, and then Ehud arose (3:14-15); Yavin and his general Sisera oppressed Israel for twenty years, and only then God instructed Deborah to call Barak (4:2-6); Midian and its associates victimized the people for seven years before Gideon was tapped to save them (6:1-19).

One could understand the general public for feeling increasingly anxious as this tiresome pattern repeated. Herein the seeds of national desire for a king, potentially promising the quiet comfort of assured leadership succession, may have been sown. With a king, they may have thought that regardless, perhaps, of their own behavior, there would always be someone in charge to save them from oppressors.

The nation's growing preference for this solution to their recurring problem might also be implied by the path they consistently rejected. As God and His messengers kept reminding them (2:1-5; 6:8-10; 10:11-14), their suffering was directly related to their infidelity. Impliedly, an alternative method of relief

[17] While some, like Abravanel (Introduction to Judges, fifth commonality between judges and kings), believe that "at no time during the Judges era was Israel without a Judge," this seems inconsistent with the Book's emphasis on God's repeatedly "raising up" Judges to save the people from existing oppression.

from – or better yet, for altogether avoiding – foreign oppression, was available: repenting, abandoning idolatry and serving God alone, long-term. Indeed, thus did Samuel later criticize their request for a monarch, as reflecting a lack of faith: "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" (I Samuel 12:12). It was a message the people repeatedly failed to heed, possibly leaving them with a mounting desire for the assured leadership continuity offered by a monarchy.

The populace's longing for, and anxiety regarding, uninterrupted governance will have a significant impact on Tola ben Puah's story, particularly because of critical developments in Israelite leadership occurring in the story immediately preceding his. During the Gideon-Abimelech narrative (the Book's longest), the people will take steps to actualize their yearning – which, by the end of the narrative, will have been briefly fulfilled, and then cruelly foiled – setting the stage for Tola's entrance onto the biblical scene.

III. Gideon

If the above analysis is correct, then by the time Gideon became a Judge, about halfway through the Judges era, such insecurity would have plagued the nation for roughly two centuries.

From the outset, however, Yoash's son showed significant promise that he was not only destined for greatness, but perhaps even a hope to break this wearisome trend. Consider the following parallels with some of Israel's outstanding leaders, from the opening of the Gideon narrative (just a sampling): he is visited by God's angel (6:11-12), who handpicks him to save the people from ongoing enemy oppression – like Moses (Exodus 3). The angel tells him, "The Lord is with you, valiant warrior!" (6:12), employing dual commendations that Scripture couples in describing only one other person: David.[18] Gideon reacts to being appointed Israel's leader with surprise and humility (6:13), recalling Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:11), and – evoking Jacob (Genesis 32:31) – he reflects on his personal encounter with the angel with uneasiness and wonderment (6:22).

Once tapped, Gideon (after seeking and obtaining additional Divine reassurances to calm his initial insecurities) quickly begins acting like a national leader. After destroying, at God's command, his father's idolatrous symbols (6:25-32), he musters a 32,000-strong military force – from four different tribes (6:33-35) – to battle Midian and its allies. Then Gideon's corps, despite God having pared it down to a mere 300 men, nevertheless routed the enemies' 135,000 armed soldiers (!), thereby corroborating the words of the angel (6:12): God truly was with him. Finally, he displayed high-level diplomatic skills, averting an internal crisis by

[18] Saul is told David is "a valiant warrior…and the Lord is with him" (I Samuel 16:18).

crediting the Ephraimites for their significant part in the stunning triumph. Was this a monarch in the making?

From his behavior towards the war's end, it seemed Gideon himself was beginning to think so – and, perhaps, to think too much of himself. Despite having already decimated 90% of the enemy's forces, he continued to pursue the Midianite kings until he captured them – but, apparently, only due to a pair of personal vendettas. The first presented by the text was against Sukkot and Penuel, whose residents had earlier refused to feed Gideon's exhausted crew, mocking him for failing to have captured the enemy kings previously. Returning there later, with these foreign leaders now his captives, he massacred both communities for daring to doubt him – fulfilling his earlier threat and exhibiting brutality characteristic of a betrayed authoritarian king (8:4-17). Indeed, the Midianite monarchs, who witnessed him exact that retribution, appeared to recognize his imperial status. In answering his query, "Those men you killed at Tabor, what were they like?" they remarked, "They looked just like you, like sons of a king." Gideon's response then reveals to the reader the second private grudge, which drove him to hunt down the Midianite kings in the first place: "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" (8:18-19).

Thin skin, nepotism, and ruthlessness are qualities in a man that might make a nation hesitate to coronate him as their leader. But having delivered such an epic victory clearly backed by God, Gideon inspired the people – conceivably yearning finally to establish leadership continuity – to overlook these flaws and offer him a dynasty. "Then 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'" (8:22).

For someone starting to become full of himself, the answer seemed obvious. And yet, in a stunning reversal of course which marked the spiritual highlight of his career, Gideon set aside his budding monarchic aspirations, not only dismissing the people's offer, but – presaging Samuel – reprimanding them for praising the wrong savior: "'I will not rule over you myself, nor shall my son rule over you; the Lord alone shall rule over you'" (8:23).

Ironically, the deep humility in relation to, and the deference to, God reflected by his retort – vital traits in an ideal Israelite king – may perhaps have made him seem like an even more desirable leader to the nation. Moreover, Gideon quickly confused this unambiguous rejection with further contrary messages about his mindset regarding a dynasty. In the very next verses, he asked his comrades to give him royal booty like "the crescents and the pendants and the purple robes worn by the kings of Midian," as well as golden earrings (8:24-25). They did so unhesitatingly, in a scene which strikingly and repugnantly recalls the Golden Calf episode, especially when, after "Gideon made an ephod of this gold…in Ophrah, all Israel went astray after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his household" (8:27). The last phrase may imply this was not a one-time event. But if so, did the people regularly come to his hometown in the coming

years just to worship the ephod, or perhaps also (or primarily?) to honor – and to reinforce the prominence of – the man, and the family, they wanted to lead them for generations to come?[19]

Fixated as they were on the future, however, the public ignored firm evidence questioning Gideon's fitness to head a dynasty. The biblical narrator underscores it for the reader. When clarifying how "Gideon had seventy sons of his own issue" (!), the text explains, "for he had many wives," (8:30) evoking Deuteronomy 17:17's injunction that a king "shall not have many wives." The same verse, which concludes "nor shall he amass silver and gold to excess," also recalls, in our context, Gideon's golden ephod – and thus highlights not one but two reasons to disqualify him from the monarchy.

On the other hand, the Bible itself appears conflicted about Gideon, (1) capping off his story by noting he "died at a ripe old age" (8:32), using language it reserves for just him, Abraham (Genesis 25:8) and David (I Chronicles 29:28), and (2) castigating the people – who quickly returned to idol worship following his death – for failing to "show loyalty to the house of Jerubbaal-Gideon in return for all the good that he had done for Israel" (8:33-35), using a nickname he received for destroying his father's idols (6:32).

Scripture's criticisms (8:30) and Gideon's own dynastic rejection (8:23) aside, all other signs pointed to the people, and their Judge, craving leadership continuity, with Yoash's son heading the line. Perhaps telling in this context, Gideon, in his last recorded act, is found naming one of his sons *Abimelech* – the same Abimelech who starts off Tola's narrative – which means, literally, "my father is king." And while he never bequeathed his position to any lineal heir, nor ever explicitly endorsed a dynasty, Gideon's repeated hints promoting it, coupled with 40 years of mounting popular expectations, may have led the people to take hereditary succession for granted when he died. The only question was, which of his children would lead?

IV. Gideon's Sons

At first, it seems, 70 sons were recognized as somehow sharing the leadership role. This is evident from the bid by Abimelech – Gideon's only illegitimate child (from a non-Jewish concubine from Shechem;[20] 8:30-31) – to concentrate power in himself alone. Turning to his idol-worshiping relatives in Shechem, he asks: "Which is better for you, to be ruled by seventy men - by all the sons of Jerubbaal[21] - or to be ruled by one man?" (9:2). By implication, the question indicates that Gideon's

[19] Indeed, Abravanel (8:27) suggests Gideon's very aim with the ephod was to remind Israel it offered him a dynasty (and that Israel's going astray after the ephod was to punish Gideon for relying on the people, rather than God, to ensure he would actually get this dynasty).

[20] Ariel, *Oz Va-anava*, 252 n.94, suggests some Shechemites were related to the Hivites from Gibeon, with whom Joshua made a covenant not to destroy (Joshua chapter 9).

[21] In referring to "all the sons of Jerubbaal," Abimelech excludes himself – perhaps to assure his idolatrous kinsmen that he, unlike his 70 half-brothers, was only Gideon's hereditary, but not ideological, heir.

other sons were then governing. At long last, the national yearning for uninterrupted succession of leadership had been fulfilled, potentially giving the populace some relief from doubts and insecurities about continuity.

But not for long. With Shechem's encouragement and idolatry-laden financial support, Abimelech – who, among all his brothers, was singularly left out of their rule-by-committee arrangement – slaughtered them to a man; only Jotham, the youngest, escaped (9:3-5). Would Abimelech, himself a son of Gideon, be accepted as leader?

God's answer was clear. When Jotham publicly issued a sweeping curse against his half-brother's wicked partnership with Shechem (9:7-20), Divine support quickly followed: "Then God sent a spirit of discord between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem" (9:23), and the ensuing bloody conflict between them – ending in God's fulfillment of the curse – dominates the remainder of Abimelech's narrative (9:24-57).

The people, even if they were otherwise desperate for continuity, concurred. When the citizens of Shechem and a neighboring town "proclaimed Abimelech king" (9:6), no one else joined the coronation. The text describes that, nationally, he "lorded it [*vayasar*] over Israel for three years" (9:22), eschewing the Hebrew roots for both king (*mem-lamed-khaf*) and judge (*shin-peh-tet*), in favor of a rare biblical verb form which seems to convey he ruled with an iron fist.[22] Indeed, after murdering his brothers, he put down a rebellion supported by Shechem; destroyed Shechem and wiped out its inhabitants; burned alive around 1,000 people from Migdal Shechem; and then extended his murderous rampage to Thebez, before he was finally killed.[23]

Moreover, the public's treatment of Abimelech immediately before and just after his ignominious death highlights the contrast between his status and that of a king. Mortally wounded in battle at Thebez, Abimelech commanded "his arms-bearer, 'Draw your dagger and finish me off, that they may not say of me, "A woman killed him!"' So his attendant stabbed him, and he died" (9:54).[24]

The parallels to the death of Israel's first true monarch are striking. Mortally wounded in battle at Mount Gilboa, King Saul instructed his arms-bearer, "Draw your sword and run me through, so that the uncircumcised may not run me through and make sport of me" (I Samuel 31:3).

But whereas with Abimelech, the arms-bearer

[22] See Rashi, Metzudat David, and Malbim to 9:22, among others. Cf. Targum Yonatan, translating *vayasar* with the *mem-lamed-khaf* root, and Radak (10:1) and Abravanel (Introduction to the Book of Judges), counting Abimelech as a Judge.

[23] As such, Abimelech, the product of a union between Israel and the idolatrous nations it left in its midst, was a symptom of the Book's main criticism of the people and a personal embodiment of the disastrous consequences of their failure to complete the conquest.

[24] Ironically, Abimelech would indeed be remembered for being killed by a woman (II Samuel 11:21).

fulfilled his wish and killed the would-be king without hesitating, in the case of Saul – Israel's Divinely-chosen, anointed king – "his arms-bearer, in his great awe, refused" (I Samuel 31:4).

The responses to their respective deaths deepen the contrast. For Saul, "[w]hen his arms-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he too fell on his sword and died with him"; brave warriors swiftly led a mission to recover his and his sons' defiled bodies from the Philistines, arranged for burial, and fasted for a week (I Samuel 31:5,12-13); and on hearing the news, David eulogized Saul and mourned him with his men (II Samuel 1:11-27).

In Abimelech's case, however, the people's reaction is quite different: "When the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, everyone went home" (9:55). No mourning, no state funeral, no eulogies; no honor, no reverence. They simply picked up and left, perhaps reflecting a sigh of relief that his reign of terror was over.

V. Tola

Now understanding the national challenge existing at the time, we return to our point of departure, Tola. To summarize: Lack of leadership continuity plagued the nation for hundreds of years following Joshua's death. Judges came and went, but the people never knew when or whether another would follow. Gideon's formidable, if not perfect, leadership qualities, coupled with Divinely-sponsored military success, produced 40 years of quiet – and led the populace to offer him a dynasty, perhaps in part in hopes of ending the cycle of uncertainty. After initially dismissing the idea, Gideon gave more than mixed messages about endorsing it; and when he died, his 70 sons indeed took over, apparently initiating that dynasty – and with it, the nation's longed-for governance continuity, for generations to come. But those dreams were dashed by Abimelech's butchery, and after surviving his brief, tyrannical rule, the people found themselves back at square one: leaderless and, conceivably, again anxious: who would lead them when the next enemy oppressor – then absent – inevitably struck again?

They didn't need to ponder the question for long – but not because of an enemy. "After Abimelech, Tola… arose to deliver Israel." Again, no subjugator appears here; Tola apparently stepped up to save the people *before* another foe emerged. From what did he save them then? Perhaps from their anxiety regarding leadership. This may be implied by the only meaningful actions he takes in the story: by simply (1) standing up [*vayakom*] and (2) leading [*vayishpot*] – thereby filling the governance vacuum – he rescued them. If this assessment holds true, then underpinning these actions likely would have been a deep sensitivity to the people's plight – suffering more subtle than from an oppressing enemy. Perceiving their problem, Tola had compassion on his compatriots, became proactive, and took charge.

Tola's actions would be additionally significant because he took initiative without explicit Divine involvement – in contrast to the preceding Judges: Othniel and Ehud acted only when first "raised up" by God (3:9,15), and each of Barak (4:6-7) and

Gideon (6:12-16) only took the military mantle after receiving Divine orders and assurances. These measures are missing with Tola. The text may hint at the importance of Tola's proactivity in describing his ascendance with *vayakom*, the Hebrew spelling of which (though not the vocalization) is identical with *vayakem*, the term it uses to describe God "raising up" earlier Judges (2:16; 3:9,15).[25]

The timing of Tola's action is of consequence too. The Bible stresses he took over "[a]fter [*aharei*] Abimelech," implying he did so quickly – plausibly to ensure the people's anxieties would not reemerge and fester.[26]

At this point, our question about Tola's lineage, and particularly Radak's suggestion that he was the "son of his [Abimelech's] father's brother" – i.e., that he was Gideon's nephew – takes on extra magnitude. The leadership void Tola plugged itself came about after the people's 40-year hopes for a Gideon-founded dynasty – to resolve two centuries of national yearning – were briefly fulfilled, only to be cruelly dashed. Following Abimelech's horrors, it is not unreasonable to think that, just three years after Gideon died, the people still craved a leader to continue his path, as his 70 other sons originally had[27] – and kinship with Gideon could have uniquely positioned Tola for the task. How much more poignant – and a source of national hope – would Tola's accepting that responsibility have been if he did so as Gideon's very close relative?

And yet, as appealing as this idea might be, Malbim (10:1) questions its viability on practical grounds: how could Tola, a man of Issachar, be the nephew of Gideon, a descendant of Menashe?

For the answer, we return to Gideon's exchange with the Midianite kings. The men they killed at Tabor, who "looked just like" Gideon, "like sons of a king," indeed had personal significance to him. "They were my brothers," he tells them, "the sons of my mother."

Gideon had brothers on his mother's side. If Tola issued from one of Gideon's maternal brothers, he need not have been from Menashe. From which tribe did those brothers descend? Given that the only location information we have about them is that they were killed at Tabor, it's conceivable they hailed from Issachar, of which Tabor is a border town: "The fourth lot fell to Issachar…Their territory comprised: Jezreel, Chesulloth… The boundary touched Tabor…" (Joshua 19:17-22).[28]

If our premise is correct, the picture of Tola's story is clear. Gideon gave Israel 40 years of hope to end two centuries of national anxiety regarding leadership continuity – hope briefly extended by

[25] Alternatively, this similarity may indicate Divine approval for Tola's initiative, or perhaps even Divine inspiration.

[26] See, e.g., Metzudat David to 3:31, explaining *ve-aharav* to mean Shamgar succeeded Ehud in the year the latter died.

[27] Abimelech presumably being viewed as an aberration from Gideon's overall path.

[28] Gideon's loyalty to his maternal brothers, including – per our thesis – Tola's own father, may also have partly inspired Tola to reciprocate that loyalty back to Gideon, by trying to salvage his legacy after Abimelech muddied it.

Gideon's 70 sons – and then Abimelech ruined it, leaving the people leaderless again, and at risk of falling back into despair. Concerned that anxiety might resurface, Tola, as a son of Gideon's Issacharite maternal brother – a man who shared his uncle's mark of royalty, and thus was uniquely positioned to lead – took compassion on his brothers and saved them from their predicament, by stepping up to fill the leadership vacuum.

VI. After Tola

This theory could also fit well with what happens after Tola dies, with our protagonist's focus on leadership continuity possibly setting an example of sorts for subsequent Judges. First, four of the next five (Jair, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon) are, like Tola, introduced with "*aharav,*" implying they adopted his paradigm of swift succession and, with it, perhaps the aim to forestall national anxiety by preventing a governance void.

Second, this approach might help us explain otherwise obscure information given about Tola's successors. Note the outsized role offspring play for three of these Minor Judges – none of whom explicitly defeats an enemy – in their extremely brief narratives. Jair has 30 sons (10:4); Ibzan has 30 sons, 30 daughters, and 30 daughters-in-law (12:9); Abdon has 40 sons and 30 grandsons (12:14).[29] Yet we are told nothing else about these progenies.[30] So why does the Bible mention them at all?

Conceivably, the message is that these leaders arose with longer-term leadership continuity in mind. In each case, they stepped up only after having an unusually large family, a built-in group of potential successors, like Gideon's 70 sons. Indeed, each of these fertile Judges seems to go beyond the previous one in this respect: Tola had no children; Jair took over, buttressed by 30 sons. Adding daughters and daughters-in-law to his own 30 sons, Ibzan exceeded Jair with the potential to produce a third generation to follow him. After Elon, Abdon then arose, with numerous grandchildren already in place.[31] Understanding why none of these offspring actually succeeded their ancestor-Judge requires further study, but at least this thesis raises a plausible basis for why they are mentioned in the first place.

VII. Seeds of a Dynasty

"It happened during the age of the Judges…" (Ruth 1:1). The foundation of the Davidic dynasty, Israel's once and future monarchy, is the kindness and compassion of its matriarch, established in the Book that bears her name (*Ruth Rabbah* 2:14). During the same era in which she lived, the seeds of national yearning for leadership continuity took root and then, briefly, budded. If this paper's imaginative

[29] The next Judge, Samson – Divinely picked before his birth, and starting his 20-year term only well into a 40-year Philistine subjugation – broke this pattern.

[30] Under exploration, but beyond the scope of this paper, is whether Jephthah the Gileadite, whose story bears striking parallels to Abimelech's, descended from the similarly-named previous Judge, Jair the Gileadite, and whether Ibzan, possibly from Zebulun (see Joshua 19:15 and *Daat Mikra* to 12:8), begat his successor, Elon the Zebulunite.

[31] The mules – symbolic of kingship (see Zechariah 9:9) – which Jair and Abdon's offspring ride, further connect these Judges to leadership succession.

reading holds, then kindness also played an important role in this first attempt to establish an Israelite dynasty. Descending from the same family matriarch as his nationally-beloved uncle Gideon and the 70 sons who succeeded him, a man of Issachar compassionately arose to calm national anxiety about the leadership vacuum brought about by his cousin Abimelech: Tola ben Puah, Savior of Israel.

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The Talmud's Economic Behavior, and the Study of Behavioral Economics

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INTRODUCTION

A close analysis of Talmudic and Halakhic literature dealing with economic issues can often yield insight into Talmudic theories of economics, a fascinating if underexplored field. Rabbi Dr. Aaron Levine was a trailblazer in this realm, and scholars such as Yisrael Aumann, Guido Calabresi, Yuval Sinai, and Benjamin Shmueli have contributed as well.

The juxtaposition of Talmud and economics provides opportunities for each field to learn from and build upon the other in a variety of ways. *Bava Kamma*, dealing as it does with torts, may be the tractate most associated with economics in the Babylonian Talmud. This essay will examine two issues appearing in *Bava Kamma* that seem to pose a problem from the standpoint of economics and will draw upon developments in recent decades in the field of economics that may assist in solving these questions.

CASE 1: *Zuzei Hu De-Ansuha*

The Talmud has a principle that people do not generally wish to part with their land or possessions, and only do so upon some degree of financial coercion. The Gemara in Bava Kamma 89b and elsewhere (Ketubot 53a, A.Z. 72a) describes the concept of *zuzei hu de-ansuha*, that a person who sells their land presumably does so only due to "the coercion of money," i.e. a particular need for cash. (This principle has ramifications in certain cases, including backtracking on a commitment to sell to one person and then selling to someone else for a higher price.) Absent this financial pressure, there would be no reason to sell one's land, even if offered full price for it, as land is worth more than its cash value. This concept seems to imply that land or possessions are actually worth more than their face value; in other words, all possessions are underpriced.

But this principle seems to contradict the widely accepted economic principle of the efficiency of markets. In general, the presumption is that a price in a free market represents the true value of an item. If the item were worth more than its price, people would be willing to pay more for it, and if its owners were reasonable, they would only be willing to sell it for a higher price, so the price would rise to reach the item's value; if the item were worth less than its

price, reasonable people would not be willing to pay the stated price and the price would thus decrease. If so, how can the Talmud have this concept of *zuzei hu de-ansuha* without running afoul of a basic and demonstrated economic principle?

CASE 2: *Meitav*

Exodus 22:4 rules that one who damages their fellow's field must repay from the "choicest (*meitav*) of his field and vineyard." The Talmud in Bava Kamma 6b-8b analyzes this verse, considering what precisely *meitav*, also known as *iddit*, may mean. It raises the possibility that if one damages a field of a certain size, one must pay the value as if that field were of the highest quality. Thus, if one damages an acre of a field of low quality, one would need to pay not the cost of a low-quality field (for argument's sake, $100 per acre) but the cost of a choice field (let's say, $200 per acre). But the Gemara rejects this option: *akhal kehushah meshallem shemenah?* – how could it be that one does $100 of damage but repays $200? Rather, the Gemara (6b) rules, the one who did the damage must pay an amount of money equivalent to the damage, but he must pay from high quality land (whether this quality is determined based on the tortfeasor or the victim is disputed by Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Akiva). In other words, if he damaged a low-quality, acre-sized field ($100), he now pays back that damage with a half-acre of higher quality field (with a value equaling half of $200, or $100).

The obvious question emerges: since both fields are worth the same amount of money, what is the special preference for having him pay with the smaller, higher quality field rather than the larger, lower quality field? The standard answer given for this question is based on Rashi (Gittin 48b and elsewhere):

> [One pays] the higher quality land (*iddit*) among the properties of the tortfeasor, because it is preferable for a person to collect a smaller amount of high quality land (*iddit*) rather than a larger amount of low quality land (*zibborit*).

In other words, a smaller, high quality field costing $100 is more valuable than a larger, lower quality field of the same cost. Thus, one would rather have a smaller *iddit* field worth $100 than a larger *zibborit* field at the same cost, and so the Torah penalizes the tortfeasor by making him pay from an *iddit* field.

A basic problem is posed to this approach from the perspective of economics, again building on the concept of efficient markets. If a $100 *iddit* field is worth more than a $100 *zibborit* field, why do they remain at the same price? Shouldn't the *iddit* field's greater value be reflected by a correction in the markets such that it is now worth more than $100? Shouldn't the concept of market efficiency dictate that (at equilibrium) two fields costing $100 are equivalent to one other? If some $100 fields are worth more than others, why wouldn't enterprising businessmen buy up all the *iddit* $100 fields and sell

them for $105!?

BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS

It may be possible to resolve both of these problems on the basis of a revolution in the study of economics that took place over the past half-century. Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, two Israeli psychologists and scions of rabbinic dynasties, earned the Nobel prize in Economics in 2002 (received by Kahneman; Tversky was deceased by that point) on the basis of their research in the 1970s on behavioral economics. Prior to their research, it was generally assumed that people always acted rationally; if something could be shown to prescriptively be the logical way to earn the most money, economics textbooks would present it descriptively as the way that people would function. Kahneman and Tversky, approaching the field of economics from their backgrounds in psychology, took a new perspective on these issues. They pointed to all sorts of irrationalities that are built in to the human psyche and raised the question of their significance for economics. For example, people are loss averse, which means that a person values not losing $5 more than they value earning $5, despite the fact that from an economic perspective these things are equivalent. Kahneman and Tversky suggested that economists should study closely all of the irrationalities of human behavior and incorporate them into economic models. If one is attempting to understand the real world, the models should be based not on fully rational actors but on human actors, with their peculiar mix of rationality and irrationality.

APPLICATION TO THE TALMUD

Against this backdrop, it might be possible to explain the problems posed by economics to the Talmudic passages noted above. Classical economics assumes an equivalence between the objective value of a field and the amount of money at which they will subjectively value it; a person should value a $50 field as much as they value $50 in cash and it should thus be a fair deal to sell one's field. However, on a *psychological* level, on the plane of behavioral economics, there is a discrepancy between these scenarios. Given the psychological principle of loss aversion, people prefer not to give up their field or their object, even if they receive money that is fully equivalent. This is spelled out in the psychological literature as the endowment effect, which dictates that people place a higher value on a good they own than one they do not own.

A similar resolution can be offered to the problem that on an objective plane a field that is *iddit* is no more valuable than one that is *zibborit* at the same price. While this is true from the perspective of classical economics, one might argue that, behaviorally, people would generally prefer to have the higher quality item over a similarly priced item of lower quality. This is for the simple reason that people enjoy having something of higher quality, even if its objective value is equivalent. As some scholars put it, "the consumer's sense of gain or loss is directly related to the usefulness of the goods in question"; it can thus be argued that the item that is subjectively valued at a higher level will generate the greatest loss aversion, regardless of its objective

value. Based on this, when people give up land in payment, the loss aversion is much stronger regarding their higher quality assets than it is regarding their lower quality assets. Therefore, although giving up one's *iddit* field or one's *zibborit* field is an equal cost to the damager's wallet, the cost to their psyche will be greater in the first case.

On this basis, it is possible to explain these Talmudic principles of *zuzei hu de-ansuha* and the preference for *iddit* over *zibborit* on the basis of behavioral economics. These preferences, though irrational, are very much at work in the real world, and the Torah takes into account lived reality for these purposes rather than theoretical value alone. Thus, when assessing why someone sold their field, it is likely due to duress rather than a view of the equivalence between cash and land. And in assessing what would be a more severe punishment for the tortfeasor, imposing the penalty that damager pay from *iddit* is indeed more powerful, but on a *psychological* basis rather than an objective financial one.

This case study has revealed that, by using the approach of behavioral economics, and appealing not to objective but to subjective value, it is possible to resolve both the question of *zuzei hu de-ansuha* and of *meitav*. There may be additional economic conundrums that can be resolved as well using similar methods, as the data of the economic behavior noted in the Talmud and the ever-developing field of economics continue to mutually inform one another.