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## Lesson 8: The War of Liberation

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### Text: chapters 13-14

The assembly at Gilgal brought the Israelite king into the public eye. It was a defiant declaration of rebellion against the Philistine rulers, and there was no possibility of going back.

The moment of decision had come. Now that the gauntlet had been thrown down, the people rallied around their new king and prepared for the inevitable struggle.

The first phase of the war of liberation was carefully planned, and the unsuspecting Philistines were surprised. Saul led his army back across the Jordan river south of the Beit-She'an valley. He then pressed forward through the Jordan plain towards Gilgal. Meanwhile, his son Jonathan separated from the army and chose another route, through the hills. Jonathan reached the Philistine garrison in Geba and killed the Philistine governor. The people of Israel assembled in Gilgal for the proclamation of the kingdom. The Philistines heard that the Israelites revolted, and prepared a primitive expedition to subdue the rebels. The scene was thus set for the showdown (13,3):

And Saul blew the trumpet  
throughout all the land, saying:  
Let the Hebrews hear.

וְשָׂאוֹל תִּקַּע בְּשׁוֹפָר בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ  
לְאֵמֹר  
יִשְׁמְעוּ הָעִבְרִים:

When the Philistines amassed a huge army which appeared “as the sand which is on the sea-shore in multitude” (13,5), the Israelites were distressed. Suddenly, while facing a tough and battle-hardened adversary, the Israelites realized their own military inadequacy. For the Philistines had seen to it that the subject people were kept unarmed (13, 19-22):

Now there was no smith found throughout  
all the land of Israel  
for the Philistines said:  
“Lest the Hebrews make them  
swords or spears”  
but all the Israelites went down to the Philistines  
to sharpen every man his plowshare  
and his coulter, and his axe  
and his mattocks  
And the price of the filing  
was a pim for the mattocks,

וְחָרֵשׁ לֹא יִמָּצָא בְּכָל  
אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל  
כִּי־אָמְרוּ פְּלִשְׁתִּים  
פֶּן יַעֲשׂוּ הָעִבְרִים  
חֶרֶב אִו חֶגְוִית:  
וַיֵּרְדוּ כָל־יִשְׂרָאֵל  
הַפְּלִשְׁתִּים לְלַטֹּשׁ אִישׁ אֶת־מַחְרָשְׁתּוֹ וְאֶת־אֲתוֹ וְאֶת־  
קַרְדָּמֹו  
וְאֶת מַחְרָשָׁתּוֹ:  
וְהָיְתָה הַפְּצִירָה  
פִּים לַמַּחְרָשֵׁת

And for the coulters, with three teeth  
 And for the axes and to set the goads.  
 So it came to pass in the day of battle  
 that there was neither sword nor spear  
 found in the hand of any of the people  
 that were with Saul and Jonathan  
 but with Saul and with Jonathan his son was there  
 found

וְלֵאחֲתַיִם וְלִשְׁלֵשׁ קַלְשׁוֹן וְלִהְקַרְדָּמַיִם  
 וְלִהְצִיב הַדְּרָבָן:  
 וְהָיָה בַּיּוֹם מִלְחָמָה  
 וְלֹא נִמְצָא חֶרֶב וְחַנִּית  
 בְּיַד כָּל־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר  
 אֶת־שָׂאֵל וְאֶת־יוֹנָתָן  
 וְחַמְצָא לִשְׂאֵל וְלִיוֹנָתָן בָּנוּ:

When the Philistines brought up chariots and horsemen (13,5) against the poorly equipped Israelite army, the Israelites became anguished. How could they succeed against such overwhelming odds? Many Israelites fled across the Jordan, whilst others hid in caves and thickets. Those who loyally remained with Saul “followed him trembling” (13, 6-7). And then unexpectedly the Israelites experienced a resounding success. What happened that caused the dramatic last-minute turn of the tide?

Years ago, Professor Benjamin Mazar of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, suggested a reconstruction of the war of liberation against the Philistines. In this lesson we shall follow Professor Mazar’s interpretation of these chapters. The key to the story is to be found in a surprising sentence in the middle of chapter 14 (verse 21):

Now the Hebrews that were with the Philistines  
 as beforetime,  
 and that went up with them in the camp  
 round about  
 even they also turned to be with the Israelites  
 that were with Saul and Jonathan.

וְהַעֲבָרִים הָיוּ לְפִלְשְׁתִּים  
 כְּאֶתְמוֹל שֶׁלְשׁוֹם  
 אֲשֶׁר עָלוּ עִמָּם בַּמַּחֲנֶה  
 סָבִיב  
 וְגַם־הֵמָּה לָהֵיוֹת עִם  
 יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר עִם־שָׂאֵל וְיֹנָתָן:

Who were those Hebrews who “were with the Philistines as beforetime”? Obviously they were Israelites who were recruited by force to serve in the Philistine army. This explains the juxtaposition of “Hebrews with the Philistines”, versus “the Israelites with Saul”. The huge Philistine army did not consist of Philistines only, but included Hebrews who were forced to assist in fighting their brethren.

The Philistines were confidently awaiting the Israelite attack, but several days passed and nothing happened. The Philistine commanders received encouraging reports: The Israelites are in headlong flight. It seemed the war was over before it had begun, and it now remained only to punish rebels and “teach them a lesson”. The punishment was to be carried out by a special primitive expedition (13, 17-18):

And the spoilers  
 came out of the camp of the Philistines  
 in three companies:

וַיֵּצֵא הַמְּשַׁחֲתִית  
 מִמַּחֲנֶה פִלְשְׁתִּים  
 שְׁלֹשָׁה רֵאשִׁים

one company turned unto the way that leadeth  
to Ophra  
unto the land of Shual  
and another company turned  
the way to Bethhoron  
and another turned the way  
of the border  
that looketh down upon the valley  
of Zeboim towards the wilderness.

הָרָאשׁ אֶתְדוּ יִפְנֶה  
אֶל־דֶּרֶךְ עֹפְרָה  
אֶל־אֶרֶץ שׁוּעַל:  
וְהָרָאשׁ אֶתְדוּ יִפְנֶה  
דֶּרֶךְ בֵּית חֲרוֹן  
וְהָרָאשׁ אֶתְדוּ יִפְנֶה  
דֶּרֶךְ הַגְּבוּל  
הַנֹּשֶׁקֶף עַל־גֵּי הַצְּבָעִים  
הַמְדֻבָּרָה:

The punitive expedition was divided into three companies. Their task was not to fight a war, but to deposit the Israelite settlements, kill and maim, burn down and loot. One company was sent north to Ophra, which is identified with the modern Arab village Taiba (near Beth-El); the other company was sent west towards Beth-Horon; and the third company turned east to the wilderness. The punitive expedition was composed in all likelihood of Philistine warriors and as soon as it had gone the military situation had radically changed: the Philistine main garrison now consisted mainly of the Hebrew slave-soldiers.

It was precisely at this time that Jonathan carried out his daring “commando” exploit (14, 1-14) on a Philistine outpost of the garrison. The success of Jonathan’s attack (verse 14) had a tremendous effect upon the philistine garrison (14, 15-17):

And there was a trembling in the camp in the field  
and among all the people  
the garrison and the spoilers  
they also trembled  
and the earth quaked;  
so it grew into a terror from God.  
And the watchmen of Saul  
in Gibeath Benjamin looked  
and behold the multitude melted away  
and they went hither and thither.

וַתְּהִי חֲרָלָה בַּמַּחֲנֶה  
בְּשָׂדֵה וּבְכָל־הַעָם  
הַמַּצֵּב וְהַמְשֹׁחֵית  
חֲרָדוּ גַם־הַמָּה  
וַתִּרְגַּז הָאָרֶץ  
וַתְּהִי לַחֲרָצֶת אֱלֹהִים:  
וַיִּרְאוּ הַצִּפִּים לְשֵׂאוּל  
בְּגִבְעַת בִּנְיָמִן  
וַהֲגָה הַקְּמוֹן נְמוּג  
בַּיָּלָה וּבַהַלֵּם:

Whilst the main Philistine force was on its way and divided in three sections, the Hebrew slave-soldiers who remained in the encamped garrison were shaken by Jonathan’s bold coup. They were the cause of the “trembling in the camp in the field”, and their “trembling” had a reverberating effect. Inspired by the Israelite prince’s courage they rebelled and easily put down the Philistines who stayed behind in the garrison.

The result was that the huge Philistine army disintegrated. The rebellions Hebrew slave-soldiers were soon joined by the Israelites who had been hiding in the caves (14, 21-22). Meanwhile the main Philistine forces - the three companies of the punitive expedition - were taken by surprise when they suddenly found themselves cut off and surrounded by enthusiastic Israelite farmers

who bore down upon them from all sides. Many Philistines fell at the hands of the Israelites, and the rest beat a hasty and disorganized retreat.

This marked the end of Philistine rule over Israel, and the new independent kingdom was now firmly established.