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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:

Sefer Yehoshua – Chapter 23

Yehoshua Addresses the People

By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

It came to pass after many days after God had granted Israel respite from all of their enemies around, and Yehoshua was old, he had lived many days. Yehoshua summoned all of Israel – their elders, leaders, judges and officers – and he said to them: "I am now old, I have lived many days. See what God your Lord has done on your behalf to all of these peoples, because God your Lord wages war for you..." (23:1-3).

The final two chapters of Sefer Yehoshua constitute Yehoshua's parting words to the people of Israel. There are two discrete addresses contained in these chapters, the last offered at a great assembly of the people at Shechem, and ours communicated to the people at an unnamed location. In both, Yehoshua employs the oratorical conventions of encouragement and warning, inspiration and rebuke. God's providential care of the people is recalled, His unwillingness to brook their disloyalty evoked. In many ways, Yehoshua's words mirror those of his mentor Moshe, who also assembled the people of Israel on the eve of his death, in order to impress upon them the great privilege and responsibility of having been chosen by God.

A NOTE OF CAUTION

While Yehoshua indicates the extent of their miraculous conquest – "from the Yarden and all of the peoples that I cut down, until the Great (Mediterranean) Sea where the sun goes down" – he also reminds them that much of the land remains to be settled. It would in fact be many, many years until the entire land was inhabited and the Canaanite menace was wholly removed, for not until the ascent of David to the throne some four centuries later did Israel finally achieve rest. But Yehoshua is not bitter, as if all of his endeavors have failed to yield the promised outcome. Far from it, for he understands that though his own personal role has been limited, it has been nevertheless instrumental, and that the larger Divinely guided process will continue to unfold according to parameters defined by his and the people's choices now. In essence, then, the text here casts Yehoshua in the mold of Israel's other great leaders, inspired people all who could peer beyond their own fleeting lifetimes into a future that they had helped set into motion, but could not themselves merit to see fully realized.

But because Yehoshua knows that so much remains to be done, so much more land needs to be cleared and so many more antagonistic elements need to be overcome, he is cognizant of the dangers that lurk at Israel's door, hostile forces that could insidiously undo all that he and the people have labored so mightily to achieve:

Strengthen yourselves greatly, to observe and to fulfill all that is written in the book of Moshe's teaching, not to turn aside neither to the right nor to the left. Not to mingle with these nations that remain with you, not to mention the names of their gods nor to swear by them, not to serve them nor to bow down to them...(23:6-7).

Yehoshua correctly posits, as Moshe had before him, that Israel's success will be predicated upon their ability to resist the siren call of Canaan's loutish pantheon, the tempting gods of grain and wine, passion and death, sun and storm, fertility and flocks, whose shameless shrines and profligate cults were to be found "on every mountain top and hill, and under every leafy tree" (Devarim 12:2). The military threat posed by Canaan's confederacies may have long passed, but the more serious cultural and MORAL threat posed by their corrupt beliefs continued to live on and to claim new adherents. In order to fully appreciate Yehoshua's fears, one must put the matter in perspective: of all of the ancient world's people, ONLY the Israelites proclaimed the principle of a single and transcendent God, ONLY they declared its corollary of an absolute moral code, ONLY their teachings were consumed with a vision of a just and united humanity striving for the realization of a higher purpose. All around them, in Canaan and beyond its borders, the flutes shrilly captivated while the lyres entranced, as season succeeded season and planting followed harvest, and pagan humanity's greatest achievements were gauged in terms of bloodshed, debauchery, and deceit.

Rather, cleave to God your Lord as you have done until this very day. God drove out great and powerful nations, while no one has withstood you until this very day. One of your men will pursue a thousand, for God your Lord fights on your behalf, as He has spoken to you (23:8-10).

JARRING JUXTAPOSITIONS

Like Moshe before him, Yehoshua juxtaposes conquest with caution, never allowing the elation over their remarkable victories in the land to cloud the vision of their remaining task. In fact, a great deal of the language of this chapter, Yehoshua's impassioned words of reassurance tinged with intimations of doom, bears much resemblance to Moshe's final addresses preserved in Sefer Devarim. But while Moshe could only dream of that future and of its challenges, Yehoshua can already see it clearly taking shape:

Be very careful concerning your lives, to love God your Lord. For if you turn back and cleave to these nations that remain with you, to marry them and to be part of them and them of you, then you must surely understand that God your Lord will not continue to drive out these nations from before you. They shall be for you a trap and a snare, thorns in your sides and barbs in your eyes, until you are lost from upon this good earth that God your Lord has given you...(23:11-13).

The peoples' response to Yehoshua's address is not recorded in the text. How did they react to his message of sobriety? How did they relate to his solemn warnings? Were they moved by his earnest tones or were their minds elsewhere, perhaps lost in thoughts of building their homes or else planting their fields? Surely it must have been difficult for the people of Israel to mark and celebrate their well-earned accomplishments with a speech such as this one! But Yehoshua is unrelenting. His words reverberate across the place of assembly, his warnings carried far by the winds. Completing his exhortation, he exclaims:

Just as all of the good things have come upon you as God your Lord spoke to you, so too God your Lord will bring all of the evil things upon you, until He destroys you from this good earth that God your Lord has given you. If you abrogate the covenant of God your Lord that He commanded

you by worshipping other gods and bowing down to them, then God's anger will be kindled against you, and you will be swiftly displaced from the good land that He has given you! (23:15-16).

TWO OTHER EXAMPLES OF THE TECHNIQUE

This remarkable conclusion, related at a pivotal moment of Israelite history, celebrates the people's triumphs while simultaneously spelling utter doom for Israel in the land should they fail to heed God's laws. It thus presents us with an extreme and jarring contrast of images that is only matched by perhaps one or two other passages in the Tanakh. One of these is in Sefer Devarim, towards the end of the section known as the "Tokhekha" or "Rebuke" (Chapter 28) for it describes in graphic terms the destructive consequences for Israel of abrogating their covenant with God. After enunciating a series of blessings, the Torah then spells out fearsome curses, and completes the description with the following verses:

You shall remain but a few after you had been as numerous as the stars, for you did not hearken to the voice of God your Lord. Just as God had delighted over you to do good for you and to multiply you, just so God will delight over you to destroy you and to obliterate you, and you shall be swept off of the land that you enter to possess (Devarim 28:62-63).

An even more disquieting parallel can be found in Sefer Melakhim Chapters 8 and 9, which describe the completion and dedication of the Temple at Jerusalem by Shelomo King of Israel. For the people, the building of the Temple represented a critical turning point, for its completion signified that united Israel, by embracing their mission as God's chosen nation, had finally achieved rest in their land. In fact, one could persuasively argue that the saga of Sefer Yehoshua came to its idealized conclusion with the building of the Temple some 440 years later. After all, the struggles of that book – to overcome adversity and thus achieve a foothold in the land, to resist idolatry and thereby mature into God's nation – remained painfully unresolved until the era of peace, prosperity and cultural dominance that were ushered in by the ascent of wise Shelomo to the throne and subsequently solidified by his completion of God's permanent abode on earth some eleven years later.

God was pleased with the initiative and responded favorably to Shelomo's prayer that he offered before all of the assembled people of Israel. He later appeared to the sleeping monarch in a vision and expressed His satisfaction. But, most strikingly, His words of encouragement and love were soberly completed with a dire warning:

God said to him: I have heard your prayer and entreaty that you have offered before Me. I have sanctified this House that you have built to place My name upon it forever, for My eyes and heart will be upon it forevermore. As for you, if you walk before Me as David your father did with pureness of heart and uprightness, performing all that I have commanded you, observing My statutes and laws, then I will establish your throne upon Israel forever, just as I spoke concerning David your father that his descendents would never cease ruling over Israel. But if you and your descendents turn back from Me and fail to observe My commands and statutes that I have placed before you, if you instead go and serve other gods and bow down to them, then I will cut Israel off of the face of the earth that I have given them, and the House that I have sanctified I will send away from My presence, for then Israel will become a byword and source of mockery among all of the nations. All that will pass by this House, now supreme, will be filled with wonder and will whistle derisively, for they will say: "Why did God do this to this land and to this House?" They will then answer: "It is because they abandoned God their Lord who had

brought them and their ancestors out of the land of Egypt, and they grasped for other gods, bowed down to them and served them, therefore has God brought upon them all of this evil!" (Melakhim 9:2-9).

CONCLUSION

Yehoshua's address, then, constitutes part of a larger literary paradigm in which Israel's greatest moments of triumph are tempered by solemn words of caution. It would be a mistake to understand Yehoshua's words, like those of Moshe before him or even God Himself, as communicating intimations of inevitable doom, as if Israel's fate was early on sealed for downfall. Rather, the technique of introducing dire warnings precisely at moments of great national success can better be understood as an emphatic and unambiguous statement about the precariousness of the human condition.

So often, people or nations that achieve moments of shining glory are unable to sustain them for very long. The plateau is often quickly vacated for others, and its former occupants fade into oblivion or ignominy. This is because in the life of nations, just as in the lives of individuals, there can be no equilibrium without ongoing effort, for the indolence and apathy that are frequently born out of today's elated moments of triumph often metamorphose into the indifference and carelessness that spawn tomorrow's tragedies. By employing this literary method, of always appending a note of caution to even the most exalted episode, the text makes it abundantly clear that our success as individuals or as the nation of Israel can only be sustained as long as we steadfastly hold on to our principles and remain cognizant of our goals even when it appears that the battle has been won, that hard-earned success and well-deserved victory have been achieved. Triumph of any form, and certainly of the spiritual variety, is always transitory – unless it is informed by a constant and continuous effort to sustain it.

Next time, we will, God willing, complete the Book of Yehoshua. Readers are kindly requested to prepare the final chapter.