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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:

Shiur #27: Sefer Yehoshua – Sefer Yehoshua Chapter 14

Calev and the Journey to Chevron

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## INTRODUCTION

After having briefly outlined the tribal territories of Reuven, Gad and half Menashe that had been assigned by Moshe on the eastern side of the Jordan River, the text now turns its attention to the divisions of Canaan proper. The account begins with the general observation that the lands were distributed by Elazar the Cohen, Yehoshua bin Nun and the tribal leaders of the people, all of whom had been appointed to the august task by God Himself while Moshe yet lived (see Bemidbar 34:16-29). It goes on to provide two critical details concerning the division, namely that the tribe of Levi received no formal tribal portion but rather only scattered cities and their environs, and also that the tribe of Yosef composed of the distinct sub-tribes of Menashe and Efraim was therefore counted as two separate tribes. Thus, in the end, twelve tribes inherit the land.

Unexpectedly, the border delineations that take up the majority of the upcoming eight chapters, are introduced by a passage that again returns us to the debacle of the Spies!

The people of Yehuda approached Yehoshua at Gilgal, and Calev son of Yefuneh the Kenizite said to him: You remember that which God spoke at Kadesh Barnea to Moshe the man of the Lord concerning myself and yourself. I was forty years old when Moshe the man of the Lord sent me from Kadesh Barnea to spy out the land, and I returned with a sincere report. My comrades who went with me melted the heart of the people, but I followed God my Lord. Moshe swore on that day saying 'surely the very land upon which your foot tread shall be yours and your descendents' inheritance forever, for you followed God my Lord.'

## CALEV SURVIVES

Significantly, then, the narratives of the tribal borders are here prefaced by the account of Calev and his role in the mission of the Spies. It will be recalled that of the twelve spies whom Moshe had sent to spy out the land, ten returned with a frightening and disheartening report of a harsh land populated by invincible inhabitants, while only two had the audacity to claim that with God's help the "very good land" could be conquered. These two were none other than Yehoshua bin Nun of the tribe of Efraim, and Calev son of Yefuneh of the tribe of Yehuda.

While the other ten members of the spy mission in consequence perished by Divinely initiated plague and all of the adult Israelites were condemned to die in the wilderness, Yehoshua and Calev were given a pledge that they would survive to one day enter the land: "God said:... 'as surely as I live, the glory of God will fill the world. All of the men who saw My glory and My signs that I performed in the Egypt and in the wilderness – who nevertheless tested Me these ten times and did not listen to My words – they will not see the land that I swore to their ancestors. All of those that blasphemed Me will not see it. But My servant Calev who was of a different spirit and followed after Me, him I will bring to the land to which he arrived, and his descendents will inherit it..." (Bemidbar 14:21-24).

## THE REAPPEARANCE OF CALEV

While Yehoshua continued to occupy a prominent role in the narratives of the wilderness (see Bemidbar 27:15-23; 32:28; 34:17) and eventually succeeded Moshe as leader of Israel, Calev passed from the Torah's pages until this episode in Sefer Yehoshua. Although there are two intervening mentions of him in Sefer Bemidbar (26:65; 32:12), these are both references to the earlier incident of the Spies. How astonishing then to hear from him again, more than forty years after our last encounter!

To be more exact, it had been forty five years since he had embarked on that fateful mission, as he himself relates: "I was forty years old when Moshe sent me...and now, behold I am today eighty-five years old..." (14:7,10). Parenthetically, it is on account of Calev's oblique reference to his age that we can derive the length of the initial period of conquest: the Spies were sent in the second year after the Exodus (see Bemidbar 10:11; 13:20), and the people finally entered Canaan thirty-eight years later (see Devarim

2:14). Thus, when Israel crossed the Jordan and entered the land, Calev was seventy-eight years old (40 + 38 = 78). Now, as the land stood to be formally divided, he indicated that he was eighty-five years old. In other words, seven years had elapsed since the time that the people entered the new land, until the tribe of Yehuda with Calev at its head, now stood ready to press their claim.

Calev, the text informs us, does not ask for a general and non-specific portion of land, but instead requests the provision of a very particular location:

"...and now, give me this ridge concerning which God spoke on that day, for you heard on that day that there are giants there, and great, fortified cities. Perhaps God will continue to be with me so that I will drive them out, as God has spoken." Yehoshua blessed him, and gave CHEVRON to Calev son of Yefuneh as an inheritance (14:12-13).

#### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHEVRON

The ancient city of Chevron, located at the southern end of the range of hills that runs the length of Canaan, is familiar to us as the burial site of Avraham and Sarah, Yitzchak and Rivka, Ya'acov and Leah, the patriarchs and matriarchs of the people of Israel. In our passage, Calev maintains that Chevron was pledged to him by Moshe himself: "Moshe swore on that day saying 'surely the very land upon which your foot trod shall be yours and your descendents' inheritance forever, for you followed God my Lord.'" When Moshe recounts the incident of the Spies in Sefer Devarim, he makes clear that the initiative for that pledge came from God himself: "...Calev son of Yefuneh will surely see it (the land) and I will give to him and to his descendents the land upon which he trod, for he followed God" (1:36). This is in fact the implication of the original passage from the Book of Bemidbar, in which God is the speaker: "But My servant Calev who was of a different spirit and followed after Me, him I will bring to the land to which he arrived, and his descendents will inherit it..." (14:24).

Mysteriously, however, the travels of Calev to Chevron that are here understood to be an unassailable fact and the basis of his claim to that territory, are never mentioned explicitly in the original account of the episode of the Spies. There, we are informed concerning the Spies only that

they went up (vaya'alu) from the Negev and he arrived (vayavo) at Chevron, and there were to be found Achiman, Sheishai and Talmai the sons of the giant. Now Chevron had been built seven years before Zo'an (Tanis) in Egypt. They arrived (vayavo'u) at the wadi of Eshkol and there cut a vine with a cluster of grapes that two of them carried on a stave, and took also from the pomegranates and figs. That place they called 'Nachal Eshkol' because of the cluster (eshkol) that the people of Israel cut... (Bemidbar 13:22-24).

In contrast to the other travels that the Spies undertook, the arrival at Chevron is phrased in the singular. While this indicates that only one member of the expedition visited the site, nowhere does the text explicitly state that it was CALEV who traveled to Chevron. The matter is left unstated, obscured by the use of the indefinite pronoun. It is only in our passage in Sefer Yehoshua that the necessary clarification is provided: God and His servant Moshe pledged to Calev that he would receive the very land upon which he trod. That was none other than the place of Chevron, for it was none other than CALEV who arrived at Chevron!

#### THE INTENTIONAL CONCEALMENT

Why would the text of Sefer Bemidbar leave that critical detail unmentioned? Conversely, why does the account of the tribal territories in Sefer Yehoshua begin with that very detail? It is the Midrash, mentioned by Rashi in Bemidbar (13:22) and drawn from the Talmudic tractate Sota 34b, that first alerts us to a possible solution, albeit with its characteristic use of storytelling flourish:

"He arrived at Chevron" – this refers to Calev who went there alone and threw himself down at the graves of his ancestors, imploring God to preserve him from the seductive counsel of his cohorts. Thus it says: "I will give him the land upon which he trod" (Devarim 1:36), and it later states that "they gave Chevron to Calev" (Shoftim 1:20).

The Midrash here links the visit of Calev to Chevron, a city inhabited by a race of giants, with its only other early Biblical association: the burial place of the progenitors of Israel. Recall that Avraham and Sarah spent many formative years as semi-nomadic shepherds in the environs of Chevron, and it was in the aftermath of her death that Avraham first established a more permanent presence there by purchasing the Cave of Machpela as a family sepulcher. The relevant passages in Bereishit (23:1-20; 25:9-10;

35:27-29; 49:29-32; 50:13), however, leave no doubt that in the collective conscience of the people of Israel, Chevron and its cave of Machpela came to not only mark the final resting place of their ancestors, but to signify the latter's intense connection to Canaan as well. The patriarchal desire to be buried in its dark recesses was their last and most moving expression of tying themselves forever to its rocky earth. It was a final, tangible pronouncement of their intense and lifelong trust that God would one day give Canaan to their descendents, who would possess it as a nation and there realize their unique destiny. Calev's visit to that very place, in spite of the danger suggested by the presence of the "giants," was thus understood by the Midrash to indicate more than a reconnaissance mission. Alone among the Spies, he went to Chevron and to the Cave of Machpela seeking to acquire the emotional strength that he would need to oppose them and to refute their fatalistic report. But from that pilgrimage Calev also hoped to draw the inspiration for the people of Israel to remain steadfast in their faith that God's pledge to bring them into the land would be realized.

#### THE VISIT TO CHEVRON RECONSIDERED

If Chevron suggested the encounter with Israel's deepest roots in Canaan, if the progenitors there entombed signified an everlasting love for the land and an absolute trust in God's as-yet unfulfilled promise of nationhood, then the rest of the matter is clear. The tragedy of the Spies preserved in Bemidbar is for the most part an exploration of the limits of trust. On the one hand, God indicated to the people that the land of Canaan was beautiful, bountiful and within reach. On the other hand, the Spies surveyed a land that was dotted by highly fortified cities that were populated by powerful and hostile tribes. How could the people, scarcely freed from the grips of a harsh and prolonged Egyptian bondage that enslaved the body and crushed the soul, persevere against them, except by believing in God's promise to thereby overcome the twin plagues of self-doubt and inadequacy that would otherwise consume them?

The passage of the Spies, their crisis of confidence precipitated by their lack of trust, is no place to highlight the heroism of Calev, who was so obviously filled with a "different spirit". Theirs was the story of downfall and failure, while his was the tale of eventual triumph. They betrayed the traditions of their forefathers who believed God's word in spite of all, while he knew in his innermost heart that His pledge to them would be upheld. Their counsel won the day, that generation was plunged into the abyss, and so Calev's moving visit to Chevron was shrouded in textual obscurity.

The passage in Sefer Yehoshua is therefore Bemidbar's textual antithesis, the ironic reversal of its tragedy. The people of Israel have weathered those forty years of infamy, have traversed the barren wilderness to successfully enter the land and to conquer its powerful Canaanite alliances. They finally stand at the threshold of God's dual promise of land and nationhood being fulfilled. With the process of settlement well under way, they prepare to formally divide up the land among the tribes. What more fitting way to introduce the great undertaking than by emphasizing its necessary underpinnings of an unshakable faith? This is most credibly accomplished with a moving recollection of Calev's visit to Chevron some forty-five years earlier, an expedition that represents not only his personal odyssey and serves as a barometer to gauge his individual mettle but more importantly also serves the people of Israel as a paradigm for the nurture of their own spiritual fortitude. After all, Calev is still alive to recount those ancient events, standing before them with his vigor undiminished and his trust in God undimmed, while his erstwhile comrades and their capricious constituency have perished long, long ago.

This matter is further reinforced by the now-explicable tradition that pins the chronology of the conquest on Calev's passing remark. As we saw above, the calculation of the seven years of conquest, which is to say the successful entry of the people of Israel into the land of Canaan, is predicated upon his seemingly oblique mention of presently being eighty-five years old. In essence, the Rabbinic tradition that saw in his age the key to calculating the duration of the conquest most certainly alludes to more than mere mathematics. It implies that Israel's success in the land will ultimately be a function of adopting not only Calev's lifespan as the chronological anchor of their history, but also his lifelong trust as the foundation of their own spiritual fortitude, in order to complete the awesome task of settlement that God now places before them. "Therefore was Chevron given to Calev the son of Yefuneh the Kenizite as an inheritance until this very day, for he followed after God the Lord of Israel" (14:14).

Readers are requested to study and complete Chapter 15 for next time.