

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)  
Introduction to the Prophets:

Shiur #25: Sefer Yehoshua – Chapter 12, Conclusion  
The Moral War

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## INTRODUCTION

In last lesson, we considered the war against the Canaanites from the broader perspective of the Pentateuch. An investigation of the sources in the Torah that obligated Israel to wipe out all expressions of indigenous idolatrous worship clearly demonstrated that the underlying impetus for their campaign of eradication was moral rather than racial or ethnic. Almost without exception, every Pentateuchal source that commanded the conquest of Canaan also noted the moral degradation of its inhabitants. With Israel poised to settle the land and found their nation state, the menace of its foundations becoming undermined by the adoption of polytheistic relativism was too great to overlook. In our own day, we recognize only too well the inherent danger of granting clemency to dictators or to regimes that refuse to abide by any ethical principles. In the end, such individuals and societies destroy not only themselves but those around them as well.

A careful reading of one of the indicated sources highlights the moral rather than racial nature of the conflict (Vayikra Chapter 18):

God spoke to Moshe saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them that I am God your Lord. Do not follow the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt, or those of the land of Canaan to where I bring you, and do not follow their statutes. Observe My laws and statutes and follow them, I am God your Lord. Observe My statutes and laws, for a person who does them shall live, I am God. Let no man approach his kin to uncover nakedness, I am God...

## A STARTLING CONCLUSION

As we saw last time, the text then goes on to enumerate no less than twenty examples of prohibited sexual partners, including one's mother, step-mother, sister, daughter, daughter-in-law, aunt, and the menstruant, as well as to outlaw adultery, homosexuality and bestiality. Towards the end of the list, the worshipper of "Moloch" is singled out: "Do not give your children to be passed for the Moloch, do not desecrate the name of your Lord, for I am God." But it is the conclusion of that source that proves to be decisive for purposes of our investigation:

Do not defile yourselves by all of these practices, for all of the nations that I drive out from before you became defiled through them. The land became defiled and I punished it for its transgression, and the land spewed out its inhabitants. Rather, you shall observe My statutes and laws and not do any of these abominations, both the citizen as well as the sojourner that dwells among you. The people who dwelt in the land before you performed all of these abominations, and the land became defiled. LET NOT THE LAND SPEW YOU OUT FOR DEFILING IT, JUST AS IT SPEWED OUT THE NATION BEFORE YOU. For whoever does any of these abominable things shall

be cut off from among their people. Keep My observances and do not adopt any of these abominable statutes that were performed before you, and do not become defiled by them, for I am the God your Lord (Vayikra 18:24-30).

The above passage is proleptic, for although it is addressed to the people of Israel on the eve of their entry into the land, it describes the demise of the Canaanites as if it has already taken place. In the end, of course, the people's entry into the land was delayed for forty years due to the debacle of the Spies, thus making the use of the past tense even more unusual. The implication is therefore clear: though the Canaanites had not yet been driven out of the land, they had already forfeited their deed to it. As expected, the Torah indicates that their loss of possession was due to their moral failure. This theme of moral degradation, expressed in the passage as "defilement," is stated no less than five times. Remarkably, though, the trajectory of the text is not to triumphantly enumerate the downfall of the Canaanites and to highlight the superiority of the Israelites. In fact the main thrust of the text is to solemnly declare that Israel will surely suffer a similar fate if they themselves adopt the practices of their nemeses! Just as the land "spewed out" the Canaanites because of their abominable practices, so too will it spew out the Israelites if they follow their example.

#### THE REASON FOR THE CANAANITE EXPULSION

The issue then is not Canaanite versus Israelite, but rather immorality in contradistinction to morality. Israel's deed to the land is no more secure than that of the Canaanites and, practically speaking, is a function of one thing only: their fidelity to God's laws and to the moral absolutes that those laws proclaim. Though God may have extended His oath to the people's progenitors that their descendents would one day inherit and settle the land, their continuing presence in its midst will depend upon their moral choices rather than be guaranteed by the merit of their "forefathers":

When God your Lord drives them out from before you, do not say in your heart: "It is because of my righteousness that God brings me in to inherit this land!" Rather, it is because of the wickedness of these nations that God drives them out from before you. It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you enter to inherit the land. Rather, it is because of the wickedness of these peoples that God your Lord drives them out from before you and in order to fulfill the words that God pledged to your ancestors, to Avraham, Yitzchak and to Ya'acov (Devarim 9:4-5).

The commentaries have dwelt at length concerning the uniqueness of the land of Canaan/Israel that in accordance with its very nature cannot tolerate the presence of immorality or evil, since it is associated with God's presence. As the Ramban (13<sup>th</sup> century, Spain) explains: "The land that is Great God's possession spews out all those who defile it and will not tolerate those who practice idol worship or engage in sexual immorality..." (Vayikra 18:25). While it is beyond the scope of this essay to investigate the matter at length, suffice it to say in the Torah's frame of reference, possession of Canaan is unlike possession of any other land. All other lands enjoy a reduced measure of God's providence and may therefore be settled by nations that perform acts of immorality with relative impunity. Canaan, on the other hand, is uniquely associated with the manifestation of God's presence that imbues the land with a heightened spiritual potential. Therefore, the person or nation that dwells in Canaan must respect the sanctity of the land by exercising moral caution, irrespective of their racial or ethnic roots.

It is instructive to note that in the end, the reservations of the Torah were realized. Israel entered the land, conquered and settled it, but inevitably succumbed to the wiles of idolatry and became

corrupted. The First-Temple prophets railed against the people's ritual infractions and decried their moral failures, but to no avail. The three cardinal transgressions of idolatry, murder and sexual immorality, the unholy trinity of Canaanite polytheism, were routinely committed. Finally, the Temple was destroyed and the people of Israel were driven into exile by the Babylonians. The very fate that had overcome the Canaanites some eight centuries earlier now befell the state of Judea, thus indicating beyond a shadow of a doubt that possession of the land was a function solely of moral and ethical conduct.

#### HALAKHIC CONSIDERATIONS OF THE WAR – RASHI VS. RAMBAN

The above analysis is reinforced by a striking disagreement among the early authorities concerning the halakhic status of the Canaanites. Recall that in accordance with Torah law, Canaanite cities were to be completely destroyed if terms of surrender were not met:

When you draw near to a city to wage war against it, then you shall first proclaim peace. If they respond in kind and open the gates for you, then all of the people that are in the city will pay tribute and serve you. If they do not surrender peacefully but rather fight against you, then you shall besiege them. When God gives the city into your hands, then you shall smite all of its men by the sword. But the women, the children, the animals and all of the goods that are in the city you may take, for so shall you consume the spoils of your enemy that God your Lord gives you. Thus shall you do to all of the cities that are very far from you, that are not the cities of these nations here. But from the cities of these people that God your Lord gives you as an inheritance, you shall not spare any soul. Rather, you shall completely destroy them, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Canaanite, the Perizite, the Chivite, and the Yevusite, just as God your Lord commands you. This is in order that they not teach you to perform all of the abominations that they do in the service of their gods, for then you shall transgress against God your Lord (20:10-18).

There is an inherent ambiguity in the text of the above passage, and we saw in an earlier lesson (Chapter 9, conclusion) that the commentaries are in sharp disagreement concerning the most plausible reading. Concerning the treatment of the "far-off" enemy city, the text outlines two separate elements: firstly, an overture of peace must be extended. Secondly, in the event of warfare, only the male combatants may be killed. In sharp contrast, the passage then goes on to insist that a distinction must be drawn between these "far-off cities" and the "close cities," between non-Canaanite combatants and Canaanites. What is clear from the text is that in the event of warfare, non-Canaanite civilians are not to be harmed, whereas Canaanites are to be wholly destroyed: "you shall not spare any soul." What is unclear, however, is whether the peace overture that must be extended to non-Canaanites must also be proclaimed to Canaanite cities, or whether in contrast, the Canaanites are not to be offered any possibility of surrender at the outset.

It is Rashi (11<sup>th</sup> century, France) who understands that in fact the overture of peace had been extended only towards those cities that did not lie within Canaan's borders. According to Rashi, the nations that inhabited Canaan were not to be offered any possibility of surrender, but were instead to be wholly obliterated (see his comments to Bemidbar 21:21, Devarim 20:10, as well as his explanation to the Talmudic passage in Tractate Sota 35b).

In contrast to Rashi's explanation, the Ramban (13<sup>th</sup> century, Spain) avers that the overture of peace spoken of in Deuteronomy 20 was in fact extended to all enemy cities, including those of the Canaanites:

...indeed, the passage from Deuteronomy distinguishes between both types [of enemy, but only insofar as combat is concerned]. The injunction to extend an offer of peace, however, applies even to obligatory wars such as those waged against the "Seven Nations" of Canaan. After all, didn't Moshe send a communique of peace to Sichon the King of the Emorites (see Bemidbar 21:21, and Devarim 2:26-30)? Surely, Moshe would not have abrogated the commandments enjoined by this passage of "destroy them utterly" (Devarim 20:17), and "spare not a soul" (20:16)! Rather, there is a difference between the Canaanites and non-Canaanites only when the terms of surrender are refused and battle is joined. In that case, the women and children of "far-off" cities are to be spared, while those of Canaan are to be killed... (Commentary to Devarim/Deuteronomy 20:10).

#### ANOTHER DISAGREEMENT – THE SEVEN NOACHIDE LAWS

Significantly, though, there is a further disagreement between Rashi and the Ramban, and it concerns the contents of the said peace overture. Ramban maintains, based upon the conclusion of the above passage – "This is in order that they not teach you to perform all of the abominations that they do in the service of their gods, for then you shall transgress against God your Lord" – that the harsh decree of obliteration only applies when the Canaanites persist in their corrupt practices, for then the acute danger exists that Israel will learn from their ways. However, in accordance with the Rabbinic tradition preserved in the Halakhic Midrash of the Sifre (Shoftim 202) that "if they do teshuva, then they are not to be killed," the Ramban maintains that if they "abandon their gods" and adopt the other Noachide principals, then they may be permitted to continue dwelling in the land of Canaan in the very midst of the Jewish state.

Rashi, in contrast, insists that such grace is only to be extended to non-Canaanite cities, but concerning the Canaanites, "even if they repent, we do not accept them, for they do so out of fear." Since, according to Rashi, when Canaanite repentance takes place it is insincere and only motivated by dread, the presumption remains that they will return to their depraved ways when the imminent danger of conquest subsides, and then the people of Israel will become corrupted by following their example.

Thus, there are two points of disagreement between Rashi and Ramban. Rashi explains that Canaanite cities are not to be offered any terms of peace, whereas besieged cities beyond Canaan's borders must accept the Seven Noachide Principals or else perish. Ramban, on the other hand, insists that even Canaanite cities can sue for peace as long as they agree to abide by the Noachide laws, but distant cities that surrender and accept tribute can be spared even when they persist to practice idolatry.

The straightforward reading of the relevant Scriptural and Rabbinic texts (including the passage from Tractate Sota 35b) is in accordance with the Ramban, and such appears to be the view of Maimonides as well (see Hilkhot Melakhim U-milchimoteihem/Laws of Kings and Warfare, Chapter 6:4). What emerges from the discussion then, is that Canaanite towns that abandon idolatry and its associated moral deficiencies and instead adopt the Seven Noachide Principals, can continue to dwell in the land unmolested. These principals, of course, are the basic tenets of civilized behavior and can be listed as follows: 1) not to worship idols, 2) not to blaspheme God, 3) not to kill, 4) not to commit adultery, 5) not to steal, 6) not to eat the limb of a living creature, 7) to establish a functional judiciary. We must therefore conclude from this line of evidence that THE WAR AGAINST THE CANAANITES WAS NOT A WAR AGAINST A RACE OR A PEOPLE, BUT RATHER AGAINST A NOXIOUS MORAL SYSTEM THAT REFUSED TO EMBRACE EVEN THE MOST ELEMENTARY EXPRESSIONS OF HUMANE CONDUCT AND CIVILIZED BEHAVIOR.

After all, what functioning society could object to at least the final five of those seven ideas? As for the first two commands that pertain to our relationship with God, in the Torah's worldview they are the necessary basis for the other five, for otherwise even these five would tend to be observed superficially and then jettisoned when convenient.

## CONCLUSION

We have finally concluded our discussion of the war of conquest and now realize that sensationalist readings of the matter are gratuitous and unwarranted. Those that perfunctorily read the first half of Sefer Yehoshua in isolation, as a bloodthirsty account of wanton Israelite conduct, do a disservice to the text and to the ancient traditions behind it. Of course, no one can deny the tragedy of war or its cruelty but that must not blind us to the awful truth that some wars are nevertheless justified and even obligatory.

The nation of Israel was the only people of antiquity to proclaim the existence of an absolute moral code, a revolutionary idea that was the direct consequence of their championing the existence of an Absolute, single and incorporeal Deity. These were ideas that transformed history, that continue to guide humanity towards the good. But they are ideas that could not have survived had they not first been firmly planted in Canaan's fertile earth, to be nurtured by the nascent nation that first proclaimed God's name. Though Israel abrogated its mandate and was eventually exiled from that land, those ideas could not be nullified. Like the people of Israel, they will endure forever to be eventually accepted by all nations.

Next time, we will begin our study of the second half of the Book. Since much of the remainder is taken up with the delineation of borders and the mention of place names, our studies will tend to be more accelerated. Readers are requested to prepare chapter 13.