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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:

Sefer Yehoshua Chapter 18 Conclusion and Chapter 19

The Tribal Territories

By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

Last time, we considered the significance of the Mishkan's relocation to Shilo. Recall that after fourteen years of warfare and preliminary settlement, during which time the Tabernacle had been located at Gilgal, the sanctuary was reestablished in more permanent form in the hill country of the tribe of Efraim. The town of Shilo, some thirty kilometers northeast of Jerusalem, became the new national focal point, as the "high places" associated with spontaneous and chaotic sacrifice to God were proscribed. In a more telling development, the temporary and transient gilded building boards of the Mishkan, for fifty-four years associated with either the wilderness wanderings or else the unsettled state of the wars of conquest, were stored away forever. Instead, the walls of the Tabernacle at Shilo were constructed of stone, a reflection of the emerging nation of Israel's achievement of greater stability, increased permanence, and more secure connection to the land of Canaan.

This time, we turn our attention to the delineation and distribution of the remaining tribal boundaries. Remember that Yehuda and Yosef, the two largest and most powerful tribes, received their allotment first (chapters 15, 16 and 17), thus anchoring the nascent state to the south and to the north. The next tribe to merit the attention of the text is the tribe of Binyamin, whose portion of land falls in between that of Yosef and Yehuda! The Yosef clan is of course composed of Efraim and Menashe, the former assigned to the area northwest of the Dead Sea, the latter straddling both sides of the River Jordan to the south of the Sea of Kinneret. More precisely, then, the ribbon of land assigned to the tribe of Binyamin is bordered to the south by Yehuda and to the north by Efraim. In fact, the specific towns and landmarks that the text enumerates in its description of Binyamin's borders correspond exactly to

those spelled out in the respective demarcations of Yehuda's northern and Efraim's southern boundaries, since these lines constitute the margins that are common to Binyamin as well.

THE TRUE IMPORT OF BINYAMIN'S TERRITORY

While Binyamin's territory may have been rather small in comparison with his other brothers, its true importance was not a function of its size or fertility, but of something else entirely: the city of Jerusalem – and the future site of the Temple – was located in its midst. While the building of the Temple was far off in the future, and bound up with the achievement of complete national stability and repose that we described last time, the text nevertheless makes several pointed allusions to that hopeful vision:

The territory assigned to the tribe of Binyamin, according to their families, ascended next, and the borders of their allotment were between the children of Yehuda and the children of Yosef. Their northern border ascended from the Yarden to the SLOPES north of Yericho...and thence passed towards Luz, the SLOPES of Luz to the south, namely Beit El...The southern boundary...descended to the mountain ridge opposite the valley of Ben-Hinnom...to the SLOPE of the Yevusi towards the south...(the line) passed to the region opposite Ma'ale Adumim and then descended by the stone of Bohan ben Reuven. It passed by the SLOPE opposite the Arava northwards and then descended to the plain. The border passed to the SLOPE of Beit Chogla northwards...and extended to the northern edge of the Salt Sea at the south of the Jordan (River). This is the southern border... (18:11-20).

In contrast to the other tribes, the borders of Binyamin are invariably described in terms of "slopes" ("katef" in the original or "ketef" in the construct form, literally "shoulder") because their territory occupied a plateau that was naturally separated from its surrounding geography by inclines. At the same time, however, the term is familiar to us from another context. At the conclusion of Moshe's farewell address at the end of Sefer Devarim, he extends a prophetic blessing to each one of the tribes in turn. Concerning the tribe of Binyamin, which by the way is mentioned after Yehuda but immediately before Yosef, the verse states:

To Binyamin he said: "Beloved one of God, He will dwell securely beside him. He will protectively cover him all the day and between his slopes ("ketaifav") He will dwell (Devarim 33:12).

ANCIENT INTIMATIONS

Describing the tribe as "beloved of God" the verse goes on to relate that God will dwell among them and protect them from harm. The recurring verb in the passage is a variation of "to dwell", or in Hebrew "liShKoN." This root, of course, is the basis of Mishkan ("dwelling place") and Shekhina (God's presence manifest). Taken together, the verse therefore indicates that God's dwelling or Temple will be found among the slopes of Binyamin, who is His beloved. This reading is one that is preserved in early sources, for the Talmudic tradition (Tractate Zevachim 54b) understands the phrase "between his slopes" to indicate that the Temple was to be protectively sited at a slightly lower elevation than the surrounding hills in order to emphasize God's safeguarding presence. Once again, then, Sefer Yehoshua provides us with an important textual cue concerning future events by invariably describing Binyamin's boundaries as being demarcated by "slopes."

As for the tribe's central position between the Yosef clans to its north and Yehuda to its south, it must surely be indicative of Binyamin's potentially mediating role, through the instrument of the Temple. Recall that earlier we saw how the intense and often tense relationship between the tribes of Yosef and Yehuda, their mutually acknowledged talent and ambition that fostered respect as well as rivalry, was presaged by the struggles that ensued among the eponymous brothers who were Ya'acov's sons. In a similar vein, the notion that the tribe of Binyamin could serve not only as a buffer between them but as a source of national reconciliation through the meeting ground of the Temple, also finds expression in that ancient account. After all, didn't all of the other brothers happily accept Ya'acov's partiality towards him (especially after Yosef's supposed demise) because he was in fact the youngest, while possessed of none of Yosef's enraging hubris? Didn't Yehuda's valiant efforts to preserve Binyamin from the Viceroy's clutches (none other than Yosef himself!) serve as the catalyst for the eventual and complete reunification of the family? Binyamin, it seems, the brother and later the tribe, was destined to play the role of reconciler, just as surely as the hallowed ground of the Temple Mount was slated to one day serve as the source of Israel's national unity and of its ideal vision of a peaceful and harmonious world order.

THE REMAINING TRIBES

The frontiers of the remaining six tribes of Shimon, Zevulun, Yissachar, Asher, Naftali, and Dan, are described in Chapter 19. The text devotes approximately 8 verses to each one of them, not nearly as much detail as accorded to Yehuda, Yosef and Binyamin. Generally, in contrast again to Yehuda and Yosef, the concentration is not on borderlines and boundaries but rather is presented as listings of specific place names, the towns and villages that were inhabited by the respective tribe. It is important to bear in mind that in most cases, the tribal territories that are here delineated represent ideal descriptions of expanse that were most often not attained during the historical period of Sefer Yehoshua.

Significantly, the area assigned to the tribe of Shimon is described as falling within the borders of the tribe of Yehuda (19:1). Shimon, therefore, did not receive an independent allotment but instead was federated with his much larger and more powerful brother. Shimon's portion really consisted of a series of towns found within Yehuda's southern reaches, the arid and mostly barren Negev (literally "dry land"). Again, we are struck by Sefer Yehoshua's fidelity to an ancient account. While earlier, we considered the borders of the tribe of Binyamin against the backdrop of the brothers and especially in light of Moshe's blessing, this time we must return to Patriarch Ya'acov's blessings, extended to his children as he lay on his deathbed, as recorded towards the end of Sefer Bereishit. While each one of the sons merited their father's blessing, that of Shimon was particularly unsettling (pun intended!). Still stung by his sons' Shimon and Levi's unilateral campaign of brutal conquest at Shechem (see Bereishit Chapter 34), Ya'acov pronounced sentence upon them, in words that could hardly be understood as a blessing in the conventional sense:

Shimon and Levi are brothers and weapons of violence are their legacy. Let my soul not be included in their plans, may my spirit not be counted in their gathering, because in their fury they killed men and in their passion they destroyed oxen. May their fury be cursed for it was overpowering, and their rage for it was harsh, I WILL DIVIDE THEM IN YA'ACOV AND I WILL SCATTER THEM IN ISRAEL! (Bereishit 49:5-7).

Thus, Ya'acov's ancient words came to pass, for the tribe of Shimon never receives a clearly delineated portion of land in Canaan, and instead is dispersed among the southern cities of the tribe of Yehuda, all as a result of ancestor Shimon's recklessness some two centuries earlier! For comparison, we may note that the tribe of Levi, whose ancestor was also singled out by his father for censure along with Shimon,

received an even more diffuse inheritance, for the population of that tribe was settled in assigned Levitical cities that were spread out along the length and breadth of the land.

These various border descriptions of Sefer Yehoshua, then, while never explicitly spelling out the matter, provide us with confirmation of a foundation principle in Tanakh: the moral choices made by individual human beings may very well produce repercussions that resonate not only in one's personal lifetime, but far in the future as well. While often the effects of our actions seem to us to become more muted and insignificant with the passage of the years, certainly with the course of the generations, the Tanakh intimates that perhaps in fact it is not the case. The seemingly insignificant seeds that we haphazardly plant through our ethical interactions with others may sprout, take root, and flourish in a most unexpected fashion that only in the end, however, is revealed to be eminently equitable and appropriate. Of course, an appreciation of the matter must escape us because our life spans are so brief, but from the perspective of the Eternal One, which the Tanakh aims to provide, the matter is unmistakably obvious.

THE NORTHERN TRIBES

As for the remaining tribes, their territories were in the north. Zevulun was to settle the area west of the Sea of Kinneret, which included the prominent topographical marker known as Mount Tavor. Their territory continued westwards until the coast of the Mediterranean near Akko just north of the Carmel Range, and their implied maritime involvement was a confirmation of both Ya'acov's blessing, as well as that of Moshe. Ya'acov had remarked that "Zevulun will dwell next to the sea coast, where the ships land at the coast, for his margins will be at Tzidon" (Bereishit 49:13), and Moshe had blessed the tribe with "suckling the bounty of the sea and the treasures of the sand" (Devarim 33:19).

Yissachar's territory included the fertile Valley of Yizra'el, that arcs southeast from the coastal Carmel Range and then proceeds towards the Sea of Kinneret and the Jordan River to the northeast. The Valley of Yizra'el (Jezreel Valley) was not only an important agricultural asset but also a prime strategic one. This is because the Via Maris or Way of the Sea, the most traveled route from Egypt to Asia Minor and on to Mesopotamia, made its way along the Mediterranean coast until reaching the wadi of Kane at Yaffo. At that point, the route detoured eastwards and then continued until Afek. From Afek the route went northwards until reaching Megiddo, thus avoiding the impassable Carmel Mountains. At Megiddo,

a fortress town that guarded the approaches to the Valley of Yizra'el, the route branched off westwards towards the maritime trading towns of Phoenicia and eastwards towards Chazor and then on to Damascus and the east. To control the Valley of Yizra'el was therefore to control the trade routes.

The tribe of Asher possessed a huge swath of land along the coast that included some of the most important Phoenician towns including Tzor and Tzidon. It is important to note however, that most of these remained in the hands of the indigenous Canaanites and were not successfully settled. Naftali took their land east of the tribe of Asher, and their territory included what is known today as the Upper Galilee. Included in their possession was the fertile Chula Valley as well some of the headwaters of the Yarden that surge at the foothills of Mount Chermon.

Similar to its wilderness position as the rearguard of the tribes (Bemidbar 10:25), the territory of Dan is enumerated last. Its portion was bordered by Binyamin to the east, Yehuda to the south, Efraim to the north, and the Mediterranean at Yaffo to the west. It thus included what is today the most densely settled area of modern day Israel, namely the so-called "Dan Region" that contains Tel Aviv and its suburbs. At the time, however, the tribe of Dan was either not completely successful at settling its territory, or else (according to a less likely reading) so successful that the land was insufficient. The correct interpretation of the matter pivots upon the ambiguous remark that "the borders of the children of Dan went out from them" (19:47). In any case, at least part of the tribe later journeyed far north of their territory, and staked a claim at Leshem/Layish, located on the eastern branch of the River Jordan's headwaters (bordering the region of the present day Golan Heights) and identified in Rabbinic sources with the Spring of Banias. In this way, Moshe's prophetic remark that Dan would be "a young lion darting forth from the Bashan" (Devarim 33:22) was fulfilled, for it would seem to be a clear reference to the rushing headwaters of the Yarden that shoot forth at Layish, a Biblical synonym for a young lion (see Mishle 30:30, Yeshayahu 30:6). This colony of Dan would in time become identified with the northern extremity of the Israelite settlement, and together with its southern limits at Beer Sheva would henceforward be described by the Biblical proverb "from Dan to Beer Sheva" (Shemuel 1:3:20; 2:3:10; 2:17:11; 2:24:2, 15; Melakhim 1:5:5).

Having now completed the account of the tribal territories, the text turns its attention to one final, and most appropriate, distribution of land:

They completed giving out the land according to its borders, and the people of Israel gave a possession of land to Yehoshua bin Nun in their midst. By God's word, they gave him the town that he had requested, Timnat Serach in Mount Efraim, and he built the city and dwelt in it. These then are the territories that were distributed by El'azar the Cohen, Yehoshua bin Nun and the tribal leaders of Israel, in accordance with the lots cast at Shilo in God's presence at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. Thus, they completed distributing the land.

For next time, readers are requested to study Chapters 20 and 21.