

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:

Shiur # 31: Sefer Yehoshua Chapter 18 – Part 1  
The Tabernacle at Shilo  
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INTRODUCTION

With the completion of the border descriptions of Yehuda and Yosef, the text now turns its attention to the territories of the remaining tribes. That discussion is introduced by an oblique but significant reference concerning the national sanctuary, the Mishkan or Tabernacle:

The entire congregation of Israel gathered at Shilo and there they set up the Tent of Meeting, for the land was conquered before them. There remained seven tribes from among the people of Israel who had not apportioned their territories...Yehoshua cast lots for them in Shilo before God, and there Yehoshua divided the land for the people of Israel according to their tribal divisions (18:1-10).

Recall that until this point, the assembly point for the people, the site of the Mishkan and the locus of their encounter with God, was Gilgal. That area, just west of the River Jordan and opposite the city of Yericho, was the place where they had first encamped after they had crossed the swollen waters of the Yarden on a radiant spring day some fourteen years earlier. At Gilgal, the people of Israel had renewed the rite of circumcision, there they had celebrated their first Passover in the new land, and during the course of the wars of conquest they had always returned to Gilgal to regroup. Now, with the tribal portions of Yehuda and Yosef apportioned, and with the rest of the territories soon to be allotted, an important transition takes place, with the relocation of the Mishkan to Shilo.

LOCATING SHILO

The town of Shilo, located some thirty kilometers northeast of Jerusalem, is within the tribal boundary of Efraim. Its exact location is spelled out with unusual precision in a Biblical verse from Sefer Shoftim 21:19:

They said: Behold there is a festival to God in Shilo every year. It is north of Beit El, east of the trail that goes up from Beit El to Shechem, and south of Levona...

Thus, Shilo is nestled in the highlands, among the rugged hills that form the backbone of the land of Canaan. Though geographically found in a scenic but otherwise unremarkable location, Shilo was nonetheless destined to play a fateful role in Israelite history because of the presence of the Mishkan in its midst. Significantly, the traditional sources see in the relocation of the Mishkan to Shilo an important development, as this lengthy citation from the Mishna indicates:

Before the Mishkan was erected, sacrifice upon the high places was permitted, and the service was performed by the firstborn. After the establishment of the Mishkan, however, the high places were forbidden and the service was performed by the Kohanim (priests). The most holy sacrifices could be eaten only within its perimeter curtains, while sacrifices of lesser sanctity could be consumed anywhere within the Israelite encampment.

When the people came to Gilgal, the high places were again permitted. The most holy sacrifices could be eaten only within the perimeter curtains of the Mishkan, while sacrifices of lesser sanctity could be consumed anywhere.

When the people came to Shilo, the high places were forbidden. (At Shilo) the Mishkan had no ceiling. It was provided with walls of stone below, while the covering above was made of curtains, and it constituted the "resting place" ("menucha"). The most holy sacrifices could be eaten only within its perimeter curtains, while sacrifices of lesser sanctity as well as second tithe could be consumed anywhere within its field of vision.

When the people came to Nov and to Giv'on, sacrifice upon the high places was again permitted. The most holy sacrifices could be eaten only within the perimeter curtains, while sacrifices of lesser sanctity could be consumed among any of the cities of Israel.

When the people came to Jerusalem, the high places were again forbidden and were never permitted again, for it constituted the "inheritance" ("nachala"). The most holy sacrifices could be eaten only within the perimeter walls (of the Temple Mount), while sacrifices of lesser sanctity and second tithe could be consumed only within the city wall (Mishna Tractate Zevachim 14:4-8).

#### THE PROGRESSION IN THE MISHNA

The Mishna here describes a number of related issues that require some elaboration. In pre-Mishkan days, when there was no central sanctuary for the people of Israel, sacrifice could be offered to God at any location. These so-called "high places" were often no more than makeshift altars that would typically be imposingly located upon the summits of hills or other elevations, while the sacrificial service associated with them would entail little in the way of formal ritual or mandated ceremonial. Any family could take an active part in the ceremony through the agency of their firstborn who would perform the requisite rites.

The situation changed dramatically with the completion of the Mishkan about a year after the Exodus, during the beginning of the wilderness sojourn (14<sup>th</sup> century, BCE). This building and its appurtenances, described in exhaustive detail in the second half of Sefer Shemot, ushered in a new period in Israel's religious development. Henceforth, the sacrificial service would be a centralized affair, to be carried out under the rigorous jurisdiction of the Kohanim, or priests who descended from Aharon. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to examine the reasons for this development in detail, suffice it to say that the reformation had the welcome result of putting an end to informal and unofficial sacrificial services that were more often than not devoted to idolatrous worship rather than to the homage of the One True God (see, for instance, Vayikra 17:1-7). As well, the institution of the Mishkan was an important tool for the unification of the desert tribes, who now rallied around a single central sanctuary.

After the people left the wilderness and crossed into Canaan (13<sup>th</sup> century, BCE), the high places were paradoxically again permitted, at least as long as the Mishkan was sited at Gilgal and the wars of

conquest were being waged. The centrality of the Mishkan was nevertheless preserved by the stipulation that certain grades of sacrifices, the most sanctified, could only be offered and consumed within its boundaries.

#### ESTABLISHING THE MISHKAN AT SHILO

Eventually, when the people established the Mishkan at Shilo (13<sup>th</sup> century, BCE), a development that corresponds to the beginning of our chapter 18, the high places were again forbidden, and the Shilo sanctuary became the only acceptable venue for the sacrificial service. As well, as the people planted crops in the new land and harvested the produce of their fields, the practice of the second tithe, a portion of the crop (separated every 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> years of the agricultural cycle) to be brought and consumed in the proximity of the Mishkan, began.

In the end, the sanctuary at Shilo was destroyed by the Philistines (10<sup>th</sup> century, BCE), a traumatic event described in the opening chapters of Sefer Shemuel, that ushered in a period of intense instability. Eventually, the sanctuary was reestablished, first at Nov and later at Giv'on, and during this time, the high places were again permitted.

Finally, the Temple was built at Jerusalem by Shelomo (9<sup>th</sup> century, BCE), and worship upon the high places was discontinued forever. Of course it goes without saying that no limitations of location were ever placed upon the worship of God through prayer, for the yearnings of the human heart must not be limited by time or place. The sweep of history concisely described by these Mishnayot then, from the aftermath of the Exodus until the building of the Temple, corresponds to a period of over four hundred years and includes some of the most pivotal moments in Biblical history: the Exodus, the entry into Canaan, the conquest and beginning of settlement, the period of the Judges, and the dawn of the monarchy. According to the traditional chronology, the Mishkan stood at Gilgal for 14 years, at Shilo for 369 years, and at Nov/Giv'on for 57 years (see Maimonides, Hilkhot Beit Ha-Bechira 1:2). When taking into account the 40 years of the wanderings in the wilderness, a total of 480 years therefore elapse from the Exodus until the building of the Temple at Jerusalem ( $40 + 14 + 369 + 57 = 480$ ), just as recorded in Sefer Melakhim 1:6:1.

#### THE ARCHITECTURAL ACCOUNT

Interestingly, the Mishna is not content to simply describe the ritual ramifications of the Mishkan's peregrinations, but describes its architectural progressions as well: "(At Shilo) the Mishkan had no ceiling. It was provided with walls of stone below, while the covering above was made of curtains..." In other words, before Shilo, the Mishkan was exclusively a temporary tent-like structure, as the Exodus narratives describe. Its walls were made of gilded boards of acacia wood that would be disassembled and reassembled at every encampment in the wilderness, and its covering consisted of a series of curtains and animal hides that provided it with a most tent-like quality (see Shemot Chapter 26). Hence, the Torah often refers to it as the "Tent of Meeting" (Shemot 40:2, etc.). Once established at Shilo, however, the temporary pre-fabricated walls of acacia wood, previously fastened together by an ingenious combination of bars and rings, were stored away forever, and the walls of the Mishkan were built out of stone. The cover of textiles and skins, however, was retained. At Jerusalem, the Temple structure was provided with walls of stone as well as with a sturdy roof of cedars, extravagantly covered on the interior with pure gold (See Melakhim 1:6:9, 22).

Considering the architectural narrative carefully, a startling observation emerges: the developments in the building envelope of the Mishkan perfectly parallel the national story of the people of Israel as they experience the process of securing permanent settlement in the land! In other words, as long as the people of Israel were confined to the wilderness, the Mishkan was an exclusively temporary affair that reflected that condition. As soon as they entered the land and embarked on the wars of conquest, a transitional stage of development was introduced, full of national uncertainty and precariousness, and underscored in the life of the tent-like Mishkan by the temporary suspension of the ban on sacrifice at the high places.

Eventually, after Yehoshua completed the initial wars of conquest, the Mishkan was established at Shilo, but this time as a sanctuary taking on the trappings of PERMANENCE. Hence, while the tent-like and temporary cover was preserved, the walls were fashioned out of stone to indicate that the people of Israel had achieved an important milestone in their national development – they had succeeded in entering the land and had started to strike down roots in its fertile red earth. Historically, the period of Shilo corresponded to the rule of the Judges, a tenuous era of transition in which central authority was lacking, external threats were myriad, and tribal unity was still an unrealized dream. But the unstoppable process of securing the land, though plagued by setbacks and struggles, was nevertheless underway.

In the end, the Mishkan at Shilo was destroyed by the Philistines, a technologically advanced but morally primitive coastal people who opposed the Israelite advance at every step. For a time, instability reigned, until the prophet Shemuel arose to guide the people and to later lay the groundwork for the establishment of the monarchy. At this time, the Mishkan was again temporary, now at Nov, then at Giv'on, as first King Shaul and finally David ascended to the throne. In the meantime, the high places returned to vogue, as the provisional character of the era as well as its dangerous instability were highlighted.

It was David who finally succeeded in both unifying the tribes and neutralizing their enemies, eventually founding the national capital at Jerusalem and initiating the process of building the Temple. Shelomo his son built that edifice, upon sacred Mount Moriah, as the prolonged odyssey of the people of Israel finally came to an end. The national stability, unity of purpose, security from external threats and cultural ascendancy that Israel enjoyed during the brief period of his reign corresponded to the building of the Temple, a building that was structurally permanent in every sense of the term. Again, the fortunes of the people were perfectly mirrored by the fate of their holy place, for rising above Jerusalem, the Temple now told the story of finally achieving immovability and rootedness.

Actually, the connection between the Mishkan and the process of settlement should not be surprising. As the expression of the potential of God's abode on earth among the people of Israel, the fortunes of the Mishkan ought to reflect the travails and triumphs of the Jewish nation. As surely as God's presence is among them and His concern is never far removed, the Mishkan/Temple duplicates their destiny. No wonder that in the Biblical frame of reference, the exile of the nation of Israel from their land and the promise of their eventual restoration are twinned with the destruction of the Temple on the one hand, and the prophetic vision of its ultimate rebuilding on the other.

#### LINKING THE PROPHETS TO THE MISHKAN

To complete the picture, we must note that these epochs of Israel's Biblical history closely follow the chronological outline of the prophetic books of the Tanakh. Sefer Yehoshua is almost entirely transitional, and the narratives told within its pages therefore correspond to the Mishkan leaving the

wilderness, arriving at Gilgal and, towards the end of the Book, finally arriving at Shilo as the settlement drive begins in earnest. The events of Sefer Shoftim, full as they are of the painful struggle to found a nation and unite it around its mission mandated by God, all take place while the Mishkan stands at Shilo, more established and secure but vulnerable nonetheless.

The Book of Shemuel opens with the Mishkan's destruction, as the uncertain and perilous passage from the rule of the Judges to the founding of the monarchy unfolds. Without exception, the events of the book transpire while the Mishkan is temporally located first at Nov and then at Giv'on, all the while as the rival high places enjoy a resurgence – a direct function of the uncertainty of the times.

Finally, the Book of Melakhim begins with the ascent of Shelomo to the throne. Full of capability and spiritual ambition, thoughtful enough to make good use of all of his father David's thorough preparatory work, Shelomo quickly consolidates his reign and then embarks upon the most memorable accomplishment of his illustrious reign: the building of the Temple at Jerusalem. The remainder of Sefer Melakhim, of course, is bound up with the physical fortunes of this edifice, and when the people of Israel are exiled to the rivers of Babylon at the Book's conclusion, the Temple is razed to the ground.

#### A TELLING VERSE

The Shilo-Jerusalem nexus, representing two distinct but linked stages of national consolidation – the beginning of settlement and the securing of permanence – is suggested by an illuminating verse from the book of Devarim. As Moshe prepares to take leave of the people forever, he exhorts them to follow God's commands and encourages them to remain steadfast in the new land:

Do not do as all of us now do here today, everyone as he sees fit in his own eyes. For you have not yet arrived at the state of rest ("menucha") or inheritance ("nachala") that God your Lord gives to you. You shall traverse the river Jordan and dwell in the land that God your Lord causes you to possess, and He will grant you rest from all of your enemies around and you shall dwell in security! Then, at the place that God your Lord shall choose to cause His name to dwell there you shall present all that I command you, your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and dues, and all of your best vow offerings that you shall promise to God...(Devarim 12:8-11).

Moshe tells them that although the process of settling the land will be drawn out and difficult, one day they shall enjoy national peace and tranquility, and at that time they will build a sanctuary to God and serve Him there. One day they will achieve the state of 'rest ("menucha") and inheritance ("nachala")' that will be the natural precursors to the securing of a viable and permanent state, to be reflected in the establishment of an enduring edifice to God's glory, a Temple. Significantly, the early sources identified the state of rest – menucha – with Shilo, and the state of inheritance – nachala – with Jerusalem (Sifre Devarim 66), as spelled out in the Mishna quoted above:

When the people came to Shilo, the high places were forbidden. (At Shilo) the Mishkan had no ceiling. It was provided with walls of stone below, while the covering above was made of curtains, and it constituted the "resting place" ("menucha")... When the people came to Jerusalem, the high places were again forbidden and were never permitted again, for it constituted the "inheritance" ("nachala")...

Returning to our context, then, the oblique mention in Chapter 18 of Sefer Yehoshua that the people repaired to Shilo and there set up the Mishkan in more permanent form, constitutes an important

comment on the process of Israel's consolidation in Canaan. While much remained to be done, tribal territories still remained to be apportioned, Canaanite enclaves still remained to be absorbed and much land remained to be settled, the people of Israel had nevertheless achieved an important objective. They had secured their stake in the land and had struck down roots, attaining a provisional state of "rest" as they paused to embark on the next stage of their national development: the unification of the tribes around a central authority and capital and the building of an enduring empire that would champion their unique mission to be God's chosen. Henceforth, the acute uncertainty over their national future in the new land would begin to dissipate, just as surely as the tenuous wooden walls of the wilderness Mishkan were replaced with much more permanent stone.