

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:

Shiur #24: Sefer Yehoshua – Chapter 12, Part 2

The Canaanites and Morality  
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## INTRODUCTION

Last time, we began to consider the moral dimension of the war of conquest against the Canaanites. In order to gain a broader perspective, we turned to the relevant passages in the Torah that make reference to the Promised Land and to its inhabitants. While the first section, from the early chapters of the Book of Shemot, made only an oblique and general mention of the tribes associated with the land, the second section began to spell out more specifically the true nature of the threat that they represented.

This week, we will continue our investigation by studying some of the other texts of the Torah that describe the Canaanites. While we will not consider every passage that makes mention of them, the selection that we will cite can be regarded as representative. It is, in fact, in the aftermath of the debacle of the Golden Calf that the Canaanites are next discussed. Having succumbed at that episode to idolatry or at least incarnation, the people of Israel secure God's forgiveness due to Moshe's impassioned intercession. God's promise of concern and assistance are restored, as He spells out to them anew the promise of the land:

...Observe carefully all that I command you this day. Behold I will drive out from before you the Amorite, Canaanite, Chittite, Perizite, Chivite and Yevusite. Guard yourselves from concluding a covenant with the inhabitants of the land that you will enter, lest they be a snare in your midst. Rather, you shall break down their altars, smash their idolatrous pillars and cut down their shrine trees. You shall not bow down to another god, because God is zealous, He is a zealous God. For if you conclude a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, then they shall stray after their gods and sacrifice to them, and they shall invite you to partake of their sacrifices. Then you will take their daughters for your sons, and their daughters shall stray after their gods and cause your sons to stray after their gods. You shall not make any molten images. Observe the festival of Unleavened Bread... (Shemot 34:11-18).

## THE DANGERS OF IDOLATRY

Here again, the directives to, on the one hand, make no treaties, and on the other, to destroy all indigenous expressions of idolatry, are predicated upon the apprehension that the people of Israel will otherwise yield to the seductions of polytheism and become adherents of idolatrous rites. Inter-marriage with the members of the dominant and established culture will spell the end of Israel's unique mission to nurture ethical monotheism in the world. The progression is quite plainly spelled out: military or economic treaties will cement cultural ties, which will invariably foster stronger social bonds and

eventually endogamy. Having married with the Canaanites, it will not be possible to refuse the worship of their gods and the adoption of their practices. In contrast to the prevailing polytheistic worldview that could easily accommodate the introduction of foreign or new gods and their incorporation into the pantheon, the "zealous" God of Israel demanded exclusivity, and therefore rejected the adoption of any Canaanite practices.

While the text again avoids explicit mention of what those idolatrous rites may be, it does make clear that the potentially insidious process of acculturation cannot be arrested midway. Political or commercial ties cannot but breed social intercourse and the adoption of the dominant value system. Therefore, a budding nation that proclaims the novel idea of monotheism and its corollary of absolute morality, but then culturally compromises with the Canaanites, seals its fate for its own extinction.

The "Holiness Codes" of Vayikra

It is in the so-called "Holiness Codes" of Sefer Vayikra (Chapter 18 and Chapter 20) that the Torah finally spells out some of the salient features of Canaanite worship and practice:

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...

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 "Molokh" is singled out: "Do not give your children to be passed for the Molokh, do not desecrate the name of your Lord, for I am God" (18:21).

Here then, we have a fairly exhaustive catalog of Egyptian and Canaanite sexual practices, all of them pointing to a complete disregard of any absolute parameters delineating acceptable moral conduct. Incest and adultery trample upon the sacred trusts that ought to govern human intimacy, while homosexuality and bestiality are rejections of any attempts to reign in the sexual drive and inspire it with sanctity. The mysterious Molokh worship, here only mentioned for excoriation, is more fully spelled out in Sefer Devarim 12:29-13:1):

When God your Lord dispossesses from before you the nations that you go in to inherit, so that you dispossess them and inherit their land, then you shall be careful not to be ensnared by them after they have been destroyed from before you. Do not inquire after their gods saying: "how did these nations serve their gods? I will do likewise!" Do not do likewise to God your Lord, for all of the abominations that God abhors they did for their gods, and EVEN THEIR SONS AND DAUGHTERS THEY BURNED IN FIRE FOR THEIR GODS. Rather, do all that I command you and observe it, do not add to it nor subtract from it.

In other words, the worship of Molokh, a Semitic god popular in the region, was celebrated by the burning of children. Although the Talmudic traditions (Tractate Sanhedrin 64b) dispute whether the offered children were in fact consumed by the flames or only made to pass or jump through them, the

Biblical evidence seems to indicate quite clearly that in at least some of the variations of Molokh worship, the children were actually sacrificed and killed (see, for example Tehillim 106:34-39).

#### FURTHER REFERENCES – BEMIDBAR AND DEVARIM

Another mention of the Canaanite menace occurs towards the end of the book of Bemidbar (Chapter 33:50-56), as the borders of the Promised Land are spelled out. There, the people of Israel are commanded to drive out the inhabitants of the land, and to destroy their idolatrous shrines. The brief passage concludes with a threatening theme: "But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then those that you allow to remain will be as thorns in your eyes and as thistles in your sides, and they will aggrieve you upon the land in which you dwell. What I had considered to do to them I shall instead do to you." Here, the Torah suggests that for Israel to suffer the Canaanites to remain is to risk being beguiled by their corrupt ways, eventually leading to Israel's own exile and doom.

The harshest polemic against the Canaanites, though, occurs in the book of Devarim. In this book, of course, Moshe addresses the new generation poised to enter the land. In measured words, he encourages them to remain strong in their faith, and steadfast in their performance of God's laws. He recalls the trials of the wilderness, the scarcity and want, and God's ever-present concern and love. He reviews the laws and rituals, as well as introducing new legislation that will be needed when the people cross over the Jordan into the new land. While Moshe describes the new land in vibrant hues, often contrasting its verdant promise with his own profound sadness at being denied entry, he also sounds notes of caution. Again and again, he indicates to the people that their success in the land and ongoing prosperity will depend upon their dedication to not only settling its expanse, but more importantly to expunge the Canaanites and their culture of idolatry from their midst:

Be very careful lest you corrupt your ways and fashion idolatrous images of any thing...lest you lift your eyes skywards to look upon the sun, the moon and the stars, all of heaven's host, and you shall stray and bow down to them and worship them. For God apportioned them to all of the nations beneath the heavens, but God took you and extricated you from the iron furnace that was Egypt to be His special nation this day...(Devarim 4:16-20)

When God your Lord brings you into the land that you are to inherit and drives out great nations from before you...utterly destroy them, do not conclude a pact with them nor be compassionate. Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughter to his son or taking his daughter for your son. For then your son will be led astray to serve other gods, and God's anger will be kindled to quickly destroy you. Rather, you shall do thus to them: break down their altars, smash their sacred pillars, cut down their tree shrines and burn their images with fire. For you are a holy nation unto God your Lord, and God your Lord chose you to be His treasured nation from all of the peoples that are upon the face of the earth...(IBID, 7:1-6)

God your Lord will drive out these peoples from before you slowly...burn by fire the images of their gods. Do not covet the silver and gold upon them and take it, lest you be led astray by it, for it is an abomination to God your Lord. Do not bring such an abomination into your house for then you will become banned like it, rather shun it completely and consider it offensive, for it is to be banned...(IBID, 7:22-26)

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...(IBID, 9:4)

If your blood brother, son, daughter, loving wife or dearest friend secretly attempts to lead you astray, saying: "let us go and serve other gods" that neither you nor your ancestors knew, the gods of the nations that are around you, near or far, from one end of the earth to the other. Do not desire his words, do not hearken to him, do not have compassion upon him, and do not conceal his deed. Rather, you shall surely put him to death...for he attempted to drive you away from God your Lord Who brought you out of the land of Egypt from the house of bondage...(IBID, 13:7-11)

For you are about to enter the land that God your Lord gives you, do not learn the abominable practices of these peoples. There must not be found among you one who causes his son or daughter to pass through the fire, one who practices divination, predicts auspicious times, augers, or does witchcraft. Also, not one who uses incantations, inquires of mediums and oracles, or consults the dead. All those who practice these things are abominable before God, and it because of these abominations that God drives them out from before you. Instead, you shall be of perfect faith with God your Lord...(IBID, 18:9-13)

#### XENOPHOBIA VS SELF-PRESERVATION

It seems, therefore, that the consistent condemnation of Canaanite culture that underlies every mention of them in the text of the Torah is not a hysterical and unwarranted outburst of xenophobia, the unleashing of a calculated process of demonization paving the way for their future extirpation at the hands of the Israelites, but rather a somber assessment of their morally decadent civilization and its ethical failings. To adopt the ways of Canaan is to fall prey to superstition and magic, to become engrossed in immoral cults and rituals, to display insensitivity and numbness towards human life's sanctity and worth, and to perform every imaginable abomination under the heavens all in the name of the gods. To be God's "chosen," in contrast, means not inherent superiority or unwarranted elitism, but rather the burden and responsibility of adhering to a life of ethical self-restraint and spiritual self-growth. The God of Israel is not appeased by burnt offerings of precious children or placated by mysterious rites and strange incantations:

With what shall I present myself before God and bow low before the most-high Lord? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings or year-old calves? Will God desire thousands of rams or tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn to atone for my transgression, the fruit of my womb to absolve the sin of my soul? Man may have told you what is good, but what God desires of you is nothing more than the doing of justice, love of kindness, and to walk humbly with your Lord (Micha 6:6-8).

It is critical to bear in mind that the great chasm that separates monotheism from polytheism is not solely mathematical, as if adopting the worship of a single deity differs from the worship of many only as an abstract numerical notion. Rather, the revolution wrought by Israel's monotheism fundamentally affects two complementary spheres that together comprise the sum total of human interactions, namely those that take place with God and those that transpire between us and our fellow men. First of all, only if God is One can He be absolute and incorporeal. If there are many gods, then no one of them can exercise complete mastery over nature or his/her peers. If there are many gods, then they must be in conflict and

confrontation, just as the natural forces that swirl capriciously around them seem to be at constant odds. If there are many gods, then they must possess materiality and be limited by it to become nothing more than grotesque reflections of human foibles writ large. If there are many gods, then they cannot be depended upon to hear our prayers, to take an interest in our fate, and much less to intervene in order to save. No wonder that the tribes that inhabited Canaan, though much more technically advanced and accomplished in the plastic arts than their Israelite counterparts, have nevertheless bequeathed to us precious few (if any) texts that could stir the human soul and inspire it to nobility.

#### CULTURAL AND MORAL RELATIVISM.

At the same time, and for our purposes this is decisive, any moral system that develops under conditions of polytheism cannot but be relativistic in outlook and hence non-binding and ultimately irrelevant. This is quite simply because the existence of many gods implies many standards of conduct, many acceptable codes of behavior, and therefore multiple opportunities for human self-gratification and self-gain to overwhelm the gods' feeble and weak calls to act with altruism and magnanimity. Gods that are limited cannot bequeath to humanity a moral system that is transcendent and therefore binding upon monarch and masses alike. Only an Absolute God, all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-present, can demand fealty to an absolute morality that is often at odds with our personal wants and own special interests. To put the matter into perspective, no other ancient people save for the Hebrews ever presented humanity with anything resembling the Torah's oft-repeated and unequivocal demands for justice, righteousness, compassion, kindness and holiness. But then again, how could they? If, by definition, multiples of contentious gods could not possibly come to a consensus in order to craft, impose or even take more than passing interest in a binding moral system, then certainly their human adherents would be unable and unwilling to do so.

As long as Israel dwelt in Egypt and later wandered in the wilderness, the rampant heathenism and idolatry of their surroundings could be brooked. However, finally ready to assume their rightful place among the nations, by entering the land of Canaan and fashioning their own state, Israel now had to adopt a different and less tolerant stance. If it was to survive as a unique entity in the world, God's own "treasure" among the nations, the sole champions in all of antiquity of ethical monotheism – the only creed that constituted an island of moral absolutes in a sea of nasty relativism – then Israel had to categorically reject all indigenous expressions of idolatry and eradicate them from their midst.

Next time, we will conclude our discussion by examining more closely God's grave gift of the land of Canaan, as well as considering a very important disagreement among the commentaries concerning the Canaanites.