

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:

Shiur #19: Sefer Yehoshua Chapter 9
The Duplicity of the Giv'onites
By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

Last time, we considered the second battle at the town of A'i, narrated in chapter 8 of Sefer Yehoshua. In contrast to the first attempt to conquer the town, described in chapter 7, the second attack, in which the Israelites execute their strategic plan in exact accordance with Yehoshua's pre-arranged signal, is eminently successful. The town is captured, its defenders routed, and its ramparts burned to the ground. The King of A'i is taken prisoner, subsequently executed and hanged, but then his body is removed from the gallows as evening falls. The account concludes with a description of the public assembly at Mount Eval, at which the people of Israel offer sacrifices upon the altar of whole stones that are inscribed with the words of the Torah, while Yehoshua reads out the Deuteronomic laws, the 'blessings' and the 'curses.'

By linking the capture of the A'i and the killing of its king to the convocation at Mount Eval, the author highlights the moral dimension of the conflict, emphasizing that Israel's wars of conquest must not be exercises in gratuitous bloodshed, unrestrained plunder and cruel vengeance. Thus, while the inhabitants of the A'i are necessarily put to death in the course of the battle, their king, the symbol of their temporal might and power, is dispatched without recourse to torture, while his body is shortly thereafter removed from the gallows and buried without mutilation, two telling departures from the conventions of ancient warfare.

The final verses of the section (chapter 9, 1-2) describe the response of the kings of Canaan to the above events. All of them, those of "the mountains, the plains, the coast of the Great Sea all the way to Lebanon," determine to battle Yehoshua and Israel with unified resolve. Could it be that the Canaanite kings were discomfited not only by Israel's crushing military victories but also by the moral absoluteness of their Divinely ordained laws? Is it not plausible that the polytheistic foundations of Canaanite society, providing king and subject alike with complete license to shape ethics according to expediency, also began to crack and crumble with the fall of Yericho's buttresses and A'i's bolted gates?

THE STRATEGY OF THE PEOPLE OF GIV'ON

Shortly after the fall of the A'i, we read of a curious diplomatic mission:

"The inhabitants of Giv'on heard about all that Yehoshua had done to Yericho and to the A'i. They also employed clever strategy, and disguised themselves as emissaries. They took faded sacks for their donkeys, and worn-out wineskins that were cracked and mended. They donned old and patched footwear and worn-out clothing, and took bread and provisions that were dried out and decayed. They approached Yehoshua at the

encampment at Gilgal and they said to him and to the people of Israel: 'We have come from a far-off land to conclude a pact with you...we are your servants...who hail from a very distant land and come to honor God your Lord, for we have heard of His exploits and all that He did in Egypt, and to the two Amorite kings east of the Yarden, Sichon king of Cheshbon and Og king of the Bashan who dwelt in Ashtarot. Our elders and the people of our land told us to take provisions for the journey and approach you, saying that we are your servants and wish to now conclude a pact with you.' (9:3-11)

The town of Giv'on and its hamlets of HaKefira, Be'erot and Kiryat Ye'arim (9:17) are situated about ten kilometers north of Jerusalem in the Judean hill country. Geographically, Giv'on is associated with the 'Kings of the South' who rule the cities of Jerusalem, Chevron, Yarmut, Lachish and Eglon (10:3). Jerusalem and Chevron are important centers also located in the Judean hill country, while Yarmut, Lachish and Eglon are situated in the foothills that guard the western approaches to that hill country from the coastal plain. While much of the hill country was sparsely settled at the time of the Israelite conquest, to control this territory was also to possess of a springboard to the fertile and more heavily settled seaboard. Presumably alarmed like the rest of their southern Canaanite brethren at the uncontested Israelite triumphs, the people of Giv'on nevertheless adopt a different approach. While the other Canaanite city-states form a confederacy of convenience in order to militarily oppose the looming threat, the Giv'onites sue for peace. Disguising their messengers as ambassadors from a distant land, they secure an oath of non-aggression from Yehoshua and the tribal leaders, who anchor their pledge with the "name of God, the Lord of Israel" (9:19).

A WELL-EXECUTED PLAN AND ITS AFTERMATH

The Giv'onites implement their plan brilliantly. Not only do they successfully conceal their true intentions under convincing layers of worn-out garb, they also choose their words with the utmost care. Like Rachav the harlot of Yericho who expressed her sincerity by recalling the mighty deeds of the God of Israel, the Giv'onite ambassadors claim to come in homage to His great name. They freely mention the Exodus from Egypt and the victories over the Amorite kings, events that had taken place forty years earlier, but pointedly omit any reference to the more recent victories over Yericho and the A'i. These glaring omissions only serve to bolster their otherwise questionable claims of having traveled from a far off land. No doubt, while the victories over Yericho and A'i were unfolding, the now-unkempt emissaries were traveling on the road from their distant land and were therefore unaware of more recent events.

In the end, the ruse is discovered. To their dismay, Yehoshua and the people of Israel ascertain that in fact the people of the "far-off land" are none other than the Giv'onites who dwell scarcely 30 kilometers from the Israelite encampment at Gilgal. But bound by their oath, Yehoshua and the elders are prevented from attacking their new but involuntarily-acquired allies, for to abrogate their treaty now would constitute a desecration of God's name by Whom they had vowed. Instead, Yehoshua designates them as "hewers of wood and drawers of water" for the congregation of Israel and the Tabernacle, a sort of manual labor force responsible for the performance of the necessary but thankless daily chores that characterized life in antiquity.

The motivation of the Giv'onites seems straightforward, for they themselves explain their subterfuge when questioned by Yehoshua:

Yehoshua summoned them and said: "why did you deceive us by saying that you were from a place far away from us, when in fact you dwell in our midst?" They responded: 'your servants heard of all that God your Lord had commanded His servant Moshe, to give the land into your hands and to destroy all of its inhabitants from before you. We were afraid for our lives because of you, and therefore did this thing!" (9:24)

Fearing for their lives, aware of God's pledge to Moshe that He would drive out Canaan's inhabitants, and seeing the unfolding fulfillment of His pledge before their very eyes with the fall of Yericho and the A'i, the Giv'onites realize that military resistance would be futile. They therefore attempt to preserve their cities through guile. What is more puzzling is Yehoshua's initial surprise at the Giv'onites' conduct. After all, if the threat of death was indeed suspended over them as ominously as they said, isn't their duplicity perfectly intelligible? Why, then, does Yehoshua wonder about their motivation in implementing their crafty plan?

YEHOSHUA'S SURPRISE AND THE TALMUDIC TRADITIONS

Yehoshua's bewilderment provides circumstantial support for the rabbinic tradition first mentioned in the Jerusalem Talmud (Sheviit 6:1) and adopted by many of the later authorities, that:

Yehoshua sent three proclamations to the inhabitants of the land of Canaan, before the people of Israel entered the land. The first stated: "whosoever wants to leave, let him do so." The second stated: "whosoever wants to conclude peace, let him do so". The third stated: "whosoever wants to wage war, let him do so." The Gergashites decided to evacuate...to Africa, the Giv'onites concluded peace, and the other thirty one kings of Canaan waged war and were defeated.

Contrary to the straightforward reading of the text, which appears to describe the uninvited entry of Israel into the land and their immediate and unannounced embarkation on a campaign of conquest, the above tradition insists that actually the people of Canaan were forewarned about the Israelite incursion and were provided with the opportunity to shape its course. While the reader may very well wish to discard this Talmudic tradition as a fanciful attempt to morally justify the war of conquest, as if the Israelites really offered their enemies, it must be emphasized that support for the tradition can be found in Yehoshua itself. First of all, as we saw earlier, the narrative indicates that in the aftermath of the Israelite victories over Yericho and A'i "all of the kings that were on the (western) side of the Jordan...gathered together to battle Yehoshua and Israel as one" (9:1-2). While not explicitly suggesting that there were other possibilities open to the Canaanites, these verses do make it clear that their prevailing outlook was that engaging Israel in warfare was the most promising approach. Thoughts of evacuation or surrender were seemingly far from their militant minds.

A more unassailable reference can be found in chapter 11, which summarizes the Israelite campaign and its overwhelming achievements:

Yehoshua conquered all of this land – the hill country, the Negev, the land of Goshen, the plain and the rift valley, the mount of Israel and its plain...THERE WAS NOT A SINGLE CITY THAT CONCLUDED PEACE WITH THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL, EXCEPT FOR THE CHIVITES WHO DWELT IN GIV'ON. Rather, everything was taken in war. God had strengthened their

resolve in preparation for the war with Israel so that they might be utterly defeated and shown no compassion, so that they might be destroyed as God had commanded Moshe. (11:19-20)

These verses make it absolutely clear that the other Canaanite cities could have followed the example of the Giv'onites (if not their methods) in order to sue for peace. The passage indicates that they instead chose to steel themselves for battle and were therefore responsible for its consequences.

THE SENDING OF THE PROCLAMATIONS

Now, it may be questionable whether the three proclamations were sent simultaneously or one after the other. Perhaps the first, sent while the people of Israel were en route to the Jordan river, called upon non-combatants to withdraw. The second may have been sent when Israel was already encamped on its banks, and invited the remaining Canaanites to surrender peacefully. The third, conveyed as Israel crossed over, made clear that the war of conquest would soon be underway. In other words, as Israel drew closer and closer to the probability of conflict with the cities of Canaan, the tone of the proclamations became more and more categorical.

Then again, perhaps all three communications were sent at the same time and offered the Canaanite city states any one of the three outlined options. This alternate reading of the source is supported by the parallel account preserved in the Midrash:

Rabbi Shemuel bar Nachman explained: "Yehoshua sent a proclamation to every city that he planned to attack, in which it was written that 'whosoever wishes to go, may do so. Whosoever wants to surrender peacefully, let him. Whosoever wants to wage war, so be it...'" (Devarim Rabba 5:14)

Either way, the above Talmudic source and its variants go a long way to explain Yehoshua's surprise at the curious behavior of the Giv'onites. If in fact they had been offered the possibility of surrendering peacefully, he must have reasoned, why did they risk arousing the wrath of their vanquishers by securing their survival through deception?

THE WINDS OF WAR

While the commentators offer a number of intriguing explanations for the Giv'onites conduct, some of which we shall consider next time, a rather simple possibility emerges from the larger context of the above discussion. Recall that the narrative of the Giv'onites is introduced by the assertion that all of the Canaanite kings had decided to battle Israel as one (9:1-2). Recall, also, that the verses in chapter 11 pointedly indicate that only the Giv'onites, of all of the land's inhabitants, sued for peace. Finally, note that the aftermath of their treaty, described in chapter 10, is a concentrated punitive assault by the southern kings against the towns of Giv'on, a blow that is blunted and ultimately repelled only by an unexpected Israelite counter-attack.

The implication of the recurring linkage is clear: the greatest impediment to the adoption by the Giv'onites of more honest methods to secure a pact of non-aggression with Israel was not Yehoshua's intransigence (a possibility itself negated by the Talmudic tradition), but rather the

unified Canaanite front that opposed any compromise with the Israelites. The town of Giv'on was thus forced to adopt subterfuge, not only in order to win over Yehoshua and Israel as allies, but also to avoid arousing the ire of the other Canaanite kings who would have opposed such an overture of peace tooth and nail. Unable to publicly declare their willingness to surrender to Israel for fear of immediate and overwhelming retribution at the hands of their adamant brethren, the Giv'onites instead sent their emissaries secretly and in disguise. Once they were in possession of the precious Israelite pledge of support, they discarded the pretense and no longer concealed their true identity and intent. The Canaanite attack was indeed soon forthcoming, but so was the Israelite defense. Had the Giv'onites sued for peace openly and immediately, they would have been attacked and overwhelmed by their countrymen long before Yehoshua and the Israelites might have tentatively decided to come to their aid.

Next time, we will explore other explanations for the Giv'onites strategy, and consider these against the backdrop of the Israelite war of conquest in general. In preparation, readers are kindly requested to read and ponder an important passage from the Devarim chapter 20, which raises some of the larger issues while at the same time shedding light on our passage.