

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets

Shiur #8: Sefer Yehoshua – Chapter 4

Revisiting the Yarden Crossing

By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

Last week, we considered the pivotal episode of the crossing of Yam Suf, an event that forever transformed the Hebrew slaves and propelled them forward on the pathway towards real freedom. We carefully analyzed the textual cues provided in the Torah's description and arrived at the conclusion that at Yam Suf the people of Israel, notwithstanding their abrupt exodus from physical bondage and servitude, were still plagued by a 'slave mentality' that rendered them incapable of making fateful decisions of destiny. God's orchestration of the events at the Sea was a direct function of Israel's existential paralysis, and constituted a subtle form of Divine coercion calculated to shatter the people's feelings of powerlessness and vulnerability in the face of Pharaoh's imperial might.

Tensely descending into the sundered sea, constrained by towering walls of water to their right and to their left, the people of Israel had no choice but to go forward, guided only by their tenuous trust in the God of history Who had just liberated them and taken them as His own. As evidenced by their own frightened outcries, they would gladly have preferred a return to the numbing life of servitude and toil had the opportunity been offered to them. Instead, at Yam Suf, God made it devastatingly clear that no such possibility would be brooked: "Moshe said to the people: 'Do not fear. Be steadfast and witness God's salvation on your behalf this day, FOR AS YOU SEE EGYPT THIS DAY, YOU SHALL NEVER SEE THEM AGAIN...'" (Shemot 14:13). Moshe's response to the people as they stand transfixed by the crashing waves of the Sea before them, and by the whirling wheels and pounding hooves of Egypt's menacing charioteers to their rear, is not only a decisive statement of his faith. It is also a resounding declaration

that they must on no account return to the helplessness and hopelessness felt under the subjugation of tyranny.

DEMONSTRATING CONFIDENCE AND WILL

Although the people will never again deny the intellectual certainty of that truth, it will take a generation for them to grasp its profundity. Raised in the hardship and deprivation of the wilderness, sustained only by their ongoing trust in God's providence and attention to His word, the people of Israel slowly internalize the fundamentals of freedom. For the first time, they must exercise their autonomous will to respond to God's invitation of a higher calling and mission. Occasionally, they embrace His words, more often they refuse, but all the while the inescapable lesson of what constitutes true nationhood 'under God' is patiently borne home. For the slave, nothing is more real than the immediate, and nothing more exalted than pause from toil. For the free man, there is an awareness of past and a notion of future, as well as an instinctive but indistinct drive to find meaning. For the liberated nation, however, that too is insufficient. A nation needs a clear sense of destiny and sustaining purpose, an understanding of its unique place in the world and the spiritual stamina to secure it.

A generation later, the people of Israel again stand at a crossroads. To enter the land is not only to settle it and enjoy its bounty, but more significantly to take on the sacred task of fashioning a nation state committed to the fulfillment of God's teaching. To traverse the Yarden is therefore more than a geographical relocation; it is a spiritual transformation as well. This time, however, in contrast to the Yam Suf episode, the people of Israel are expectant, self-assured and fervent. Yehoshua's announcement of the impending crossing is received not with alarm and consternation but rather with eager anticipation. There are no pursuing hordes pressing the people forward into the swirling waters, no menacing phantoms blocking their retreat and boxing them in. Ardently and enthusiastically, the people enter the riverbed, their sights unequivocally set on the Promised Land.

INITIATIVE AND ENTERPRISE

The constriction of the Yam Suf crossing, the narrow passage through the depths that are buttressed on either side by impenetrable cascades, is here replaced by an expansiveness that is experientially antithetical. "The down flowing waters stood as a single wall, from very far away at the city of Adam that is located next to Zaratan. The waters descending towards the Sea of the Plain, the Salt Sea ('Yam HaMelach' – Dead Sea) ended and were cut off, and the people crossed opposite Yericho" (Yehoshua 3:16). In other words, the River Jordan ceases its downward flow quite far away from the actual point of crossing, since, as we saw last week, the city of Adam is located approximately 25 kilometers to the north! Thus, rather than crossing in a line, the people of Israel can cross the river as a front, entering Canaan along the length of the Jordan. The land beckons to them and they respond, advancing across the dry riverbed without the panic or alarm that is necessarily associated with traversing through a constrained corridor.

The dynamic of national initiative with which the account of the crossing is charged is also indicated by the role of the Ark, as well as by the marked absence of the Pillar of Cloud. Recall that the Ark of the Covenant, borne on the substantial shoulders of the kohanim, proceeds before the people until it reaches the banks of the swollen Jordan. As soon as the feet of the kohanim come in contact with the river's waters, they miraculously cease flowing and thus 'part' to expose its parched and traversable bottom. Incredibly, however, the kohanim bearing the Ark remain rooted to the spot as the people of Israel cross BEFORE them (3:17, 4:10-11). The kohanim and Ark are therefore located on the eastern shore (Transjordan), while the people now find themselves on the western side (Canaan). Again, this order of journey stands in direct contrast to the conventional 'wilderness protocol', in which the Pillar of Cloud and Ark ALWAYS precede the people to their destination (see BeMidbar/Numbers 10:11-28). Here, to complete the contrast, the Pillar of Cloud has in fact disappeared completely from the account, vanishing as a mirage into the void of the barren wilderness landscape.

FROM HELPLESS OBJECT TO EMPOWERED SUBJECT

The implication of the discrepancy is clear. If traversing the Jordan means to exercise true national autonomy, if crossing its waters implies a new status as liberated subjects, if entering the land entails shedding the protective prop of God's constant miraculous intervention in favor of His more subtle but no less real involvement in the prosaic activities of founding a state, then the Pillar of Cloud can no

longer be ever present nor the Ark constantly in front. God will continue to guide the people of Israel in all of their endeavors, and the Ark that is the manifestation of His presence will not abandon them. At the same time, however, during the actual crossing into the land, the Ark must remain temporarily behind, to indicate to the people that settling Canaan will require a higher level of involvement on their part. They have not been guided to the banks of the Jordan only to maintain the helpless object status that characterized them at Yam Suf. Here, they must complete the process of their liberation by demonstrating direction, resolve, and enterprise. Therefore, they must pass before the Ark. Though they enter the land while still under God's watchful gaze, it is by the exercise of their own autonomous will.

Of course, it should be obvious that the evolution from object to subject and from slavery to liberation is a lengthy process over time involving many incremental steps, and often plagued by setbacks. Any student of the Book of Bemidbar will recognize immediately that its narratives trace this progression. No wonder, then, that as the people draw closer and closer to the land, the manifest involvement of God correspondingly decreases in order to inspire the people with the need for greater initiative by them. With Miriam's death, the wondrous well, according to Rabbinic tradition, said to accompany the people during the course of their wanderings, disappears forever (see commentary of Rashi to Bemidbar 20:2). With Aharon's death, the protective Clouds of Glory, including the remarkable Pillar of Cloud that is forever at the forefront of the wanderings, dissipate with the rising dew (see commentary of Rashi to Bemidbar 21:1). With Moshe's demise and Yehoshua's ascent to leadership, the process is accelerated. Poised to enter Canaan, the people must recognize that God has charged them with the responsibility for building a just society in their new land. The Ark will still be with them, but as an expression of overt Divine guidance, it will slowly recede into the background.

THE MOTIF OF HASTE

In essence, then, the true linkage between Yam Suf and the Yarden lies not in their superficial resemblance but rather in their delineation of the process of national maturation. These dual bracketing events trace the long and laborious path from abject slavery to real freedom, from Egypt to the land of Israel. No wonder then that the text draws two other important parallels between the accounts: "The kohanim who carried the Ark stood fast in the midst of the Yarden until Yehoshua finished telling the people all that God had commanded him to speak to them, as Moshe had commanded Yehoshua. Then

the people quickly traversed" (Yehoshua 4:11). Here, incredibly, the confidence of the moment is captured by the fact that the people STAND STILL in the Yarden until Yehoshua completes his address! Marauding attackers do not threaten them, nor are they fearful of being swept away by the raging spring runoff. This stands in glaring contrast to Yam Suf, where the anxious people of Israel expected to be overwhelmed at any instant by either Egypt's chariots and horsemen or else the collapsing walls of water, anyway spelling their sudden and certain doom.

Only after Yehoshua has completed his words, however, do the people pass, but then they move quickly to go across the river. This immediately calls to mind another episode of haste and hurriedness: ""The people of Egypt pressed the people (of Israel) to leave QUICKLY, for they said 'else, we shall all perish!...The people baked their dough that they took forth from Egypt as cakes of matza and not leavened bread, for they WERE DRIVEN OUT OF EGYPT AND COULD NOT TARRY, nor had they prepared any provisions" (Shemot, 12:33-39). Or, as Moshe recounts the event to the people in the Book of Devarim: "Do not eat leavened bread but rather matzot, the bread of affliction, for seven days. This is because you left the land of Egypt in great HASTE..." (Devarim 16:3). The theme of swiftness thus connects the Exodus to the Yarden, but what a different kind of haste it is! At the Exodus from Egypt, the haste of Israel suggested fear and alarm, an anxious escape lest the god king change his mercurial mind to again enslave the Hebrews. How quickly therefore do they press forth from Egypt, driven out by Pharaoh's momentary panic, God's unconditional decree and their own racing heartbeats.

At the Yarden, the people also quickly proceed once Yehoshua completes his words, but this is a rush of anticipation, of excitement, of finally reaching the destination of their long and arduous journey. This time, their speed is occasioned by Yehoshua's impassioned and foreboding address, not preserved in the Biblical text but echoed in the Rabbinic tradition: "While the people were yet in the Yarden, Yehoshua said to them: 'Realize that you are traversing the Yarden in order to drive out the land's inhabitants...if you are prepared to do so, then good. If not, then the waters of the Yarden will sweep you away!'" (Talmud Bavli, Tractate Sota 34a). Here, there is a sense of mission that suffuses the event, a realization that entering the land will entail great effort and no small amount of fortitude. This time, however, the people seize the moment and cross over the Yarden with alacrity, signifying their willingness and desire to undertake the demanding task ahead of them.

THE 'TENTH DAY' AND THE CLOSING OF THE CIRCLE

Finally, there is a temporal connection between the two rites of passage, a seasonal link that draws them unmistakably together. The first Passover of liberation occurred in the springtime, for the Exodus took place in the month of Nissan (March/April). The crossing of the Yarden also takes place as the river overflows with the spring runoff: "When the kohanim who carried the Ark of God's Covenant ascended from the Yarden and their feet touched the dry ground, the waters of the Yarden returned to overflow their banks as before. The people ascended from the Yarden on the tenth day of the first month and encamped at Gilgal to the east of Yericho" (Yehoshua 4:18-19). The 'first month' is of course the month of Nissan, the same month that the people had left Egypt forty years before.

The 'tenth day' is also significant, for on that very day the people of Israel were bidden to take their paschal lambs, to expectantly await the dawn of delivery as Pharaoh's iron resolve finally crumbled with the onset of the final most devastating plagues: "God said to Moshe and Aharon in the land of Egypt: 'This month shall be your first month, the first of all months of the year. Speak to the people of Israel and tell them to take a lamb for each household on the tenth day of this month...'" (Shemot 12:1-3). Thus, we neatly close the circle as the process of the Exodus is finally completed with the entry into the Promised Land. Many challenges still face the people, not least among them to conquer and settle the land. But at least one of the struggles, perhaps the most significant one, is behind them: they have become a people with Divinely inspired direction, meaningful and worthwhile objectives, and the patient resolve and national confidence to achieve them.

Standing now at the Yarden, many among the people of Israel are still old enough to remember all too well the events of the Exodus and Yam Suf. The elation of the Exodus was soon followed by foreboding, as they entered the wilderness and camped at the Sea. Panic and dread seized them as the swirling dust of Pharaoh's whirling chariot wheels was spotted on the horizon, and then incredulity and alarm as the sea opened up and beckoned them to enter. Finally, they felt triumph and jubilation, as they emerged unscathed while their cruel nemeses perished under the waves. What a series of sudden and extreme emotional and spiritual changes to be endured by a people scarcely freed from bondage! How different the situation now, as the people of Israel cross at the termination of three days of preparation and forethought (see Yehoshua 1:11), fully cognizant of the challenges ahead, and wholehearted with

their destiny and mission. "God has caused it to happen, and it is wondrous in our eyes!" (Tehillim/Psalms 118:23).

THE ACCOUNT OF THE BOOK OF TEHILLIM

As we leave the banks of the Yarden behind, it is worthwhile to briefly consider another Biblical reference to this event, composed many centuries later but still infused with its intensity and grandeur. It is of course the famed Song of Thanksgiving (Tehillim/Psalms 114) from the 'Hallel' or 'Praises,' still recited by the Jewish people to this day at moments of great national awakening:

"When Israel went forth from Egypt, and the House of Jacob left a foreign people,
Yehuda was His sanctified one, Israel His dominion.
The Sea saw and fled, the Yarden turned backwards, the mountains skipped as rams and the hills
as young sheep.
Why do you flee, O Sea, why, O Yarden do you turn back?
Why, O mountains, do you skip, you hills as young sheep?
Before the Master, tremble O earth, from before the God of Jacob.
He transforms unyielding rock into a pool of water, and the adamant flint into a living spring..."

In this moving chapter, the sea, river, mountains, hills, earth and rock are personified and described as quaking before God's grandeur and yielding to His irresistible commands. It is noteworthy that although the section clearly describes both Yam Suf and the Yarden, they are nevertheless presented under the single rubric of 'going forth from Egypt.' There is no explicit reference in this Psalm to the entry into the land. This of course, only reinforces our earlier analysis that these two pivotal events, though separated by a span of four decades, are part and parcel of the very same dynamic process. On the most profound level, the proverbial Exodus is not completed until the people of Israel are sincerely prepared to enter the land of Canaan, not only as freed slaves, but as a cohesive nation with a clear and meaningful set of national objectives.

In our mind's eye, we can see the Yarden part before them, as the kohanim enter its frigid waters. Presumably the waters open up at their feet as the text suggests (Yehoshua 3:15), but how can we

reconcile that with the equally unwavering claim of the next verse that "the down flowing waters stood as a single wall, from very far away at the city of Adam that is located next to Zaratan. The waters descending towards the Sea of the Plain, the Salt Sea ('Yam HaMelach' – Dead Sea) ended and were cut off, and the people crossed opposite Yericho"? Where did the waters cease and divide? At the feet of the Cohanim or at the city of Adam? Perhaps the answer is to be found in the above Thanksgiving Song from Tehillim, for it records that "the Sea saw and fled, the Yarden TURNED BACKWARDS." In other words, the waters may have parted at the point of the Cohanim's entry but they then continued to retreat upstream all the way to the town of Adam many kilometers away, and only then stood up as a towering and static wall. Like a proverbial gate being formally pulled open to admit an honored guest, the Jordan River is thus dramatically drawn back to reveal to the people of Israel their inescapable destiny. Traverse it they do, not as a frightened throng pressing single file through a narrow escape, but rather as a confident multitude proudly marching across its exposed expanse to take their rightful place in the world.

For next time, please complete the reading of Chapter Four and consider the rather repetitious account of the 'twelve stones.'