

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:
Sefer Yehoshua – The Book of Yehoshua

Shiur #3: Conclusion of Chapter 1
Yehoshua Assumes Leadership
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Introduction

Last week, we began our study of the first chapter of Sefer Yehoshua. We briefly surveyed Yehoshua's biography as it is revealed in the Chumash, and also considered the significance of his name. We pondered the transitional nature of the first verses of the Book and began to gain some insight into the awesome challenges that faced Yehoshua as he finally took hold of the reigns of leadership. Not only was he called upon to lead the people into the new land, settle them and begin the process of their unification into a nation state, but he was also expected to deftly fill the overwhelming vacuum created by Moshe's passing.

This week, we shall begin to examine how Yehoshua goes about solidifying his leadership and living up to its mandate by instilling the people with direction and confidence. As we do so, let us also bear in mind that Yehoshua's internal struggle to overcome fear and doubt is mirrored in the larger challenge that the whole people of Israel face. They too stand confronted by the prospect of an awesome transition, as they stand to finally and irrevocably leave behind the simple, nomadic and contemplative life of wandering tribes in the wilderness for the complex, settled and concrete life of a settled nation in Canaan. Clearly, their relationship with God must evolve accordingly, and a careful reading of the sources will reveal the first, tentative steps of that progression.

The First Command

"Yehoshua commanded the officers of the people, saying: Pass through the midst of the camp and command the people: 'Prepare your provisions, for in three days time you will traverse this Yarden in order to inherit the land that God your Lord gives to you as an inheritance'" (Yehoshua 1:10-11).

With this brief directive, Yehoshua sets into motion an intricate set of preparations that will culminate in the crossing of the Yarden. In his first interaction with the people as their leader, Yehoshua leaves no doubt that he is in control of the situation and that he has a plan, the people are told what they must do and for what event they must prepare.

Although explicit Scriptural proof is lacking, Rashi (11th century, France) significantly cites an ancient interpretation that maintains that Yehoshua's directive to prepare provisions was stated on the very same day that the traditional thirty-day mourning period over Moshe's death was concluded (see Devarim 34:8-9). In other words, Yehoshua wastes no time at all in solidifying his command and impelling the people towards their destiny. The period of mourning over Moshe's death could have conceivably broken the momentum of the journey

towards the land, and so Yehoshua is careful to avoid that pitfall by seizing the first possible opportunity for going forward. As we shall see, the initiative and alacrity that are evident in this first exploit as leader are characteristic of his entire term.

'In Three Days Time'

Of course, while we consider the text as an account of Yehoshua and his challenges, we must remain cognizant of the larger picture, for the Book of Yehoshua is also the story of the people of Israel. Let us consider, for example, the 'three days time' during which the people are to prepare for their traversal of the Yarden. This particular time period occurs in the Tanakh in other contexts that together may shed light on the significance of the motif here. The following list of parallels should not be regarded as exhaustive:

- 1) 'On the third day, Avraham looked and saw the place from afar...' (Bereishit 22:4).
- 2) 'On the third day, it was Pharaoh's birthday, and he made a feast for all of his servants...' (Bereishit 40:20).
- 3) 'Be prepared for the third day, for on the third day God will descend upon Mount Sinai for all of the people to see' (Shemot 19:11).
- 4) 'On the third day, Esther donned her royal garments and she stood in the inner court of the King...' (Esther 5:1).

The first reference to 'three days time' is taken from the account of the 'Akeida' or 'Binding of Yitzchak.' God had commanded Avraham, in the supreme test of the latter's trust, to take his only son to the land of Moriah in order to offer him as a sacrifice on one of its peaks. Avraham, his heart heavy with anxiety but steeled by steadfast faith, journeys for three days until he reaches the designated location. There, he prepares to carry out God's will, but at the last moment, God stays his hand.

The second example is from the story of Yosef's unjust incarceration at the hands of his master Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's chief ministers. While in prison, Yosef correctly interprets the dreams of the butler and baker, foreseeing that in three days time, Pharaoh will release both of them from prison on the occasion of his birthday. The butler will be restored to his former position, while the baker will be unceremoniously hanged. Yosef implores the butler to bring his case before the King so that he too can be freed.

The third example is taken from the account of the theophany at Sinai. Moshe tells the people to prepare themselves for the third day, for at that time God will manifest His awesome presence to them and proclaim His guiding words, the Ten Utterances.

The fourth reference, the only one of the above that is post-exilic, describes Queen Esther's bold and courageous plan to unmask the evil Haman and undermine his plan to annihilate the Jewish people. After three days of penitential fasting, she approaches the King without being officially summoned, an act that can incur the death penalty.

Contemplative Time

It is quite clear from the above examples and others not cited, that 'three days' in Tanakh often implies a period of intense introspection, spiritual reflection, and concentrated preparation for an anticipated event that is potentially transformative. Thus, Avraham has much to ponder during his three-day journey, for he knows that at the designated time his relationship with his singular and beloved God as well as with his adored and only son will undergo a quantum shift. Yosef, the butler and the baker all anticipate the third day with anxious trepidation: Yosef yearns for freedom, the butler for restoration, and the baker dreads his imminent death. The people encamp at Sinai and begin to keenly prepare for the stated goal of their Exodus, for God had told them that He would make them His own by transmitting His teachings to them. The third day promises to bring in its wake the transformation of their former status and an intimation of their future destiny. Finally, Esther's three day fast, filled with unsettling thoughts and charged with desperate hope, comes to an end as she risks her life for her people by approaching the King unannounced.

Considering our story again, it becomes obvious that Yehoshua's directive to the people to prepare for three days is not promulgated for simply practical reasons. Rather, during that three day period of preparation, the people of Israel will have an opportunity to consider the events of the previous forty years, the abject slavery and the sudden liberation, the despondency of the wilderness and the pledge of a new land, the shedding of complete dependency upon God and the donning of independence and autonomous choice in its place. For three days they will not only prepare their provisions, but also ponder the past that they will soon leave behind, as well as the future that they must embrace.

Here, of course, the climax of this three-day preparatory period will be the crossing of the Yarden. Although we will have opportunity to consider this momentous event in its own right in Chapters Three and Four of Sefer Yehoshua, for now it is sufficient to note that to cross the Yarden represents for Israel the potential for an inner transformation as profound as that experienced by their ancestor Avraham some five hundred years beforehand. When Avraham was first summoned by God to abandon the land of Mesopotamia, his birthplace of Ur and his immediate and extended family of incorrigible idolators, he made that break by crossing the Euphrates River and setting his sites for Canaan. Thus too, in our context, the period of three days is indicative of a process of contemplation and introspection that concludes with a life-altering event.

Reuven, Gad, and the Half Tribe of Menashe

Having issued his directive to the people, Yehoshua then turns his attention to the so-called 'Two and One-Half Tribes' and demands that they keep their word: "To the tribe of Reuven, Gad and half Menashe, Yehoshua said the following:

"Remember the thing that Moshe, God's servant, commanded you, saying – 'God your Lord will grant you repose and give you this land. Your wives, children and flocks will remain in the land that Moshe gave to you on the other side of the Yarden, while all of your mighty men of war shall cross over before your brethren in order to help them. When God grants your brethren repose like you, so that they too inherit the land that God your Lord gives them, only then shall you return to the land of your inheritance that Moshe, God's servant, granted you on the eastern side of the Yarden.'" (Yehoshua 1:12-15).

In language that is almost identical to the Torah's account (see Bemidbar 32), Yehoshua reminds these tribes of their obligation towards the rest of the nation.

Recall that as the people of Israel approached the Yarden from the east in their march towards the land, the two mighty Amorite kingdoms of Sichon and Og, the regional superpowers that controlled the extensive and fertile highlands east of the Yarden, engaged them in battle. Moshe and Israel defeated the two and conquered their territory. At that time, Reuven, Gad and half of Menashe, tribes with extensive flocks, approached Moshe and requested to remain east of the Yarden in order to settle the lands. Initially, Moshe, fearing a disastrous recurrence of the episode of the Spies, expressed great consternation. Only when he was convinced that these tribes would solemnly commit their warriors to cross over the Yarden and assist in conquering the land of Canaan did he accede to their request. These tribes swore a binding oath, and Moshe entrusted Yehoshua, Elazar HaKohen and the remaining Tribal Chiefs with enforcing its provisions (Bemidbar 32:28-30).

Yehoshua as Successor to Moshe

Yehoshua now enforces the terms of that oath by calling for its implementation. Significantly, in his brief remarks, Yehoshua is careful to refer to Moshe no less than three times, recalling with each mention the original oath. In other words, the Two and One-Half Tribes are called upon to comply because to do otherwise is to reject Moshe's legacy, for it is Yehoshua who now stands in Moshe's place. As we saw last week, the potency of Yehoshua's leadership is predicated upon his ability to successfully take the place of Moshe, and he therefore indicates that the intended objectives of his rule will be the fulfillment of Moshe's words.

Reuven, Gad and half Menashe indicate their readiness to comply, as they also recall Moshe's rule: "We will do everything that you command, and go wherever you send us. Just as we listened to Moshe we shall listen to you, ONLY MAY GOD BE WITH YOU AS HE WAS WITH MOSHE! Any man who rebels against your command and fails to observe your words will be put to death. Be only strong and courageous!" (Yehoshua 1:16-18). Swearing allegiance to his authority, the tribes express the hope that God will indeed give Yehoshua the same degree of success that He granted Moshe before him.

In these opening eighteen verses, Moshe's name is mentioned no less than eleven times, an unusual concentration even for the Lawgiver. Clearly, it is an indication of his enduring memory, and the fervent hopes of the people that Yehoshua will succeed in his stead. The chapter concludes much as it began, juxtaposing Moshe's memory with the charge to be forceful and brave. The daunting challenges that await Yehoshua and the people on the other side of the Yarden will soon have to be confronted, but they can be overcome if the example of Moshe's life – his devotion to God, the Torah, and his people – can be pursued.

The Tension of Transition

An expression of the tensions inherent in the transition of leadership that is the focus of this chapter is captured in a Talmudic source, quoted by Rashi (11th century, France) with some variations: "During the period of mourning over Moshe's death, over three thousand halakhot (teachings and practical laws) that had been communicated by him were forgotten

by the people. Yehoshua enquired of God how to resolve them. God responded: 'Moshe My servant has died, and the Torah is called by his name. To tell you is impossible. Rather, go and occupy the people with warfare' (Rashi, commentary to 1:2). In the Talmudic passage (Tractate Temura 16a), when Yehoshua is unable to restore the lost traditions and must therefore enquire of God, the people of Israel threaten to kill him!

Clearly, this source attempts to capture some of the sentiments surrounding Yehoshua's succession. Moshe was the 'man of God', the ideal leader who was so profoundly connected to the Deity that, during his tenure, how to proceed was never in doubt. His death left a void so vast that it seemed to the people incapable of being filled. Three thousand halakhot, a great number, are already forgotten during the brief thirty-day period of mourning over his demise! In effect, the source intimates that Yehoshua attempts to take Moshe's place and become a lawgiver in his image, but is rebuffed by God. It is as if God says: "Moshe My servant is dead, and you cannot be Moshe. You must be Yehoshua, and the guidance that you provide cannot and must not be the same. Rather than Moshe, you have been chosen to lead them into the land and to inspire them in battle. The necessities of the hour are different, the needs of the people are no longer the same, and the nature of your leadership must be correspondingly distinct as well". In the coming chapters, we shall examine how Yehoshua and the people begin to grapple with the dawning reality that things are indeed different on the other side of the Yarden.

Next week, we shall begin to consider Yehoshua's sending of spies to Yericho in advance of its capture. Readers are kindly requested to study the second chapter of Sefer Yehoshua and to consider the details of the account: timing, setting, and characters. We shall devote the lesson to comparing and contrasting Yehoshua's spies, with those sent by his mentor Moshe almost four decades earlier, as described in Sefer Bemidbar/Numbers Chapters 13 and 14.

Shabbat Shalom