

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:

Sefer Yehoshua Chapter 6

Shiur#13: The Angel of the Lord and the Battle of Yericho

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## INTRODUCTION

Last week, with our analysis of Chapter 5, we concluded the opening part of Sefer Yehoshua. That first section narrated the various preparations undertaken by Yehoshua and the people of Israel in order to cross over the River Jordan to enter the Promised Land. On the whole, the events of those first five chapters shared a remarkable series of parallels with episodes that occurred four decades earlier at the time of the Exodus and during the beginning of the people's journey through the wilderness. In glaring contrast to the palpable quality of tragic failure that characterized that era, however, the corresponding events of Sefer Yehoshua may be regarded as charting the long-delayed process of national attainment.

Leaving behind the banks of the Yarden, the great national observances of circumcision and Passover, the manna and all of the other 'wilderness' associations, we now turn our attention to the book's second section, the story of Canaan's conquest. In length, this part of the book is roughly comparable to the first, extending from the beginning of Chapter 6 until the end of the famous 'King's List' of Chapter 12. As an investigation of military strategy and heroic exploits, the account is riveting, but as an exploration of moral and ethical issues, this section of Sefer Yehoshua is perhaps the most challenging. We will have occasion to explore both aspects and a good deal more, as we consider the most striking theme of these chapters: the remarkable transformation of Israel from a nomadic conglomeration of disparate tribes into a disciplined and more cohesive settled nation.

## THE APPEARANCE OF THE ANGEL

Having crossed the Yarden, Israel now stands at the gates of Yericho, and their successful campaign against the city is introduced with the appearance of a mysterious phantom-like figure to Yehoshua:

When Yehoshua was encamped at Yericho he suddenly saw a man with drawn sword standing opposite him. Yehoshua approached him and said, 'Are you on our side or on that of our enemies?' He responded: 'No, for I am the Captain of God's Legions and have now arrived.' Then Yehoshua fell upon his face to the ground and said: 'What does my master ask of his servant?' The Captain of God's Legions said to Yehoshua, 'Remove your shoes from upon your feet because the place upon which you stand is hallowed ground,' so Yehoshua did so. As for Yericho, it was completely closed up because of the people of Israel; none came out and none entered. (Yehoshua 5:13-6:1).

Although the figure appears in the guise of a man, Yehoshua quickly comes to realize that he is confronted by something else entirely, for the 'Captain of God's Legions' is none other than an angel! While it is beyond the scope of this article and the expertise of its author to determine the exact nature of such an apparition, let it suffice to say that in the Tanakh, an angel of any sort generally indicates a direct communication from God to man. In our context, the angel appears in the guise of a warrior and grasps an outstretched weapon to indicate might and triumph.

In a similar vein, an angel appeared to Yaacov our forefather and wrestled with him. Yaacov prevailed and was thus strengthened as a result of the occurrence, realizing that his victory over the angel presaged his triumph over Esav (see Bereishit 32:25-30). So too, this angel appeared to Yehoshua with his drawn sword in the manner of a victorious hero. Thus, God says to Yehoshua in the aftermath of the episode, "'Behold, I will give Yericho, its king and mighty men, into your hand'" (commentary of Rabbi David Kimchi, 13<sup>th</sup> century, Provence, 5:12).

According to Rabbi Kimchi, the appearance of the angel is to discernibly indicate to Yehoshua that his forces will prevail against Yericho, notwithstanding the city's vaunted defenses and mighty army. Having noted that this exchange takes place at a transition point in the Book, just as it shifts its focus from the narratives of passage to the account of the land's conquest, we may extend Rabbi Kimchi's comments

to address the entire campaign against the Canaanites. Israel will prevail because God's assistance will be extended to them and to their leader Yehoshua.

#### MOSHE AND THE BURNING BUSH

The dialogue between Yehoshua and the angel is unusually obscure. In response to his query concerning the content of God's communication, the angel cryptically commands him to remove his footwear "because the place upon which you stand is hallowed ground." Of course, this expression immediately calls to mind God's unexpected and mysterious appearance to Moshe at the episode of the Burning Bush (Shemot 3:1-10). After Moshe had been drawn to God's mountain by the remarkable bush that burned but was not consumed, God called to him but bid Moshe to first remove his footwear and maintain his distance in deference to the holiness of the site. That vision of the Divine constituted the beginning of Moshe's calling, for from that point onwards, notwithstanding his mighty protests, to the contrary, God appointed him as His emissary to Pharaoh.

The deliberate association with this event suggested by our context may therefore indicate that Yehoshua as well now stands at the brink of assuming a more comprehensive leadership role. Though he has led the people since Moshe's demise, his unique task, as spelled out by God Himself in Bemidbar 27:15-23, was to "lead the people out (to battle) and to lead them back in." In other words, Yehoshua does not fully assume the mantle of leadership of Israel until they are ready and poised to engage the Canaanites in battle, and that is now, with Yericho's ramparts looming menacingly on the horizon.

#### REMOVING FOOTWEAR

We must also consider the motif of the removal of footwear in its own rite. In the case of Moshe, the sanctity of the environs was manifest. The site of God's revelation was none other than the mountain in the wilderness of Chorev associated with His presence, namely Mount Sinai, where the people of Israel later stood to receive the Torah. It is unclear, however, how the holiness of a point in space translates into the necessity to shed one's shoes. Although Rabbinic tradition as recorded in Midrash Shemot Rabba (2:13) clearly links the episode of Moshe with that of Yehoshua, it does not appear to shed light on the underlying notion. "Wherever the Divine Presence manifests itself, it is forbidden to don one's footwear. Similarly, we find with respect to Yehoshua, 'Remove your shoes from upon your feet...' and similarly the

Kohanim (priests) who ministered in the Temple at Jerusalem did so barefoot" (see Talmud Bavli Tractate Zevachim 24a).

Perhaps, as some commentaries maintain, the unusual rite suggests that before one treads on holy ground, one must leave behind the mundane and the soiled that both in a literal as well as in a figurative sense adhere to the soles of the shoes. Or, as others maintain, it may be an expression of modesty, as if the person must descend to ground level in preparation for the encounter with the Absolute. Then again, it may suggest the attempt to forge some sort of organic or innate connection with the 'holy ground' itself, as if by standing barefoot on hallowed earth one could transcend the artifice of human convention and its implied superficiality, and experience in its stead the authenticity of the Divine.

Whatever the explanation may be, the injunction to remove one's shoes seems perfectly reasonable in the episode of Moshe, readily comprehensible in the setting of the ministering priests, but quite unintelligible in our context of Yehoshua! What is the hallowed earth that Yehoshua stands upon presently, if not the land of Canaan where he and the people have been carelessly treading for a number of days? Why does the angel appear to him only now, on the eve of Israel's first battle against the city-states of Canaan? How do the emotive words of the apparition relate to his otherwise rather threatening posture?

#### WARFARE VS. THE 'SANCTITY' OF THE LAND

Perhaps the answer lies in our extrapolated reading of Rabbi Kimchi's commentary. Yehoshua and the people are about to embark upon a new phase of their mission, namely the conquest of Canaan. As we all realize intuitively and shall yet have occasion to address, there may be such a thing as a justified war, but there is no such thing as a kind one. In warfare, combatants clash, blood is shed, and innocents cruelly perish. What we euphemistically and with sterile detachment refer to as 'casualty figures' and 'collateral damage' are actually composed of precious, unique human lives nastily cut short, with stunned survivors left to gather the memories from among the charred remnants that painfully endure. The battlefield may crown a victor but it does not ennoble him.

It may be that Yehoshua, who had prevailed against Amalek in his younger years and was therefore no stranger to bloodshed, had been pondering these same tragic truths when the angel

appeared to him bearing assurances of God's intervention and assistance. How would he lead Israel into the battle for their survival while at the same time impressing upon them the dignity of the human being and his inestimable worth? How would the army of the Hebrews be inoculated against the type of gratuitous and sadistic wartime brutality that was widespread in the ancient world, and perhaps even more common today? Enter the emissary of God bearing a drawn sword and a profound message: the land of Canaan, from time immemorial a flashpoint for controversy and conflict, is yet hallowed ground. The empires and civilizations that were forever vying to control its strategic location as land bridge between Africa and Asia and as critical conduit for commerce and culture, playing out their base and petty passions in the process, often strewn its red earth with death and destruction. But the sanctity of the land, its potential to serve as a radiator of God's healing words to a harsh and ruthless world, could not be expunged.

Yehoshua and Israel will prevail, the city of Jericho will fall, and the Canaanites will be defeated. But the people and their victorious armies must never lose sight of the land's sanctity, of a man's inherent worth, of the vision of a better world in which warfare is outdated and killing obsolete. Canaan's city-states, advanced and cultured though they were, never succeeded in advancing that vision even one tiny increment, because it was an idea that was counter-intuitive to their polytheistic minds. The angel of the Lord, however, addressing Yehoshua on Jericho's outskirts, makes it absolutely clear that his mission must be different and his objectives more benign. God may countenance justified bloodshed, but He will not tolerate wanton cruelty in its execution. The concept of Canaan's 'hallowed earth' implies an intimation of the Divine, and a corresponding necessity to tread upon that land with greater care and heightened sensitivity. What is tolerable and considered appropriate in other lands, namely viciousness, violence and cold-hearted cruelty committed in the name of victory, is wrong when perpetrated by God's nation, and out of place when committed in the land that is the focal point of God's concern.

How telling, therefore, that according to the paragraph breaks of the original Hebrew text, the final verse of the section is somewhat unexpectedly the FIRST verse of Chapter 6: "As for Jericho, it was completely closed up because of the people of Israel; none came out and none entered." As we pointed out much earlier in our introduction to the course, the traditional spacing of the Hebrew text is often at odds with the conventional divisions of chapter and verse, which are of much later non-Jewish origin. The discrepancy in this case is particularly telling. If our above analysis is correct, then the angel comes to communicate not only the assurance of Divine assistance but also His demand for responsibility and

decency. If so, then the connection of the episode to the battle of Yericho is highlighted by this 'appended' verse that ought indeed to seemingly serve as the beginning of the next section. Instead, this verse emphasizing Yericho's self-imposed siege serves as the conclusion to the narrative of the angel's visit, to cohesively link God's expectations to the unfolding battle for the land.

Next time, we will consider the curious strategy employed for Yericho's capture, and the extremely harsh 'ban' proclaimed by Yehoshua against its inhabitants. Readers are requested to kindly complete their readings of Chapter 6.